ART REVIEW

Opera for the People: Exploring Artistic Democracy and the Ethics of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion through Jonathan Dove's *Marx in London!* by Scottish Opera

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In February 2024, the UK premiere of Jonathan Dove's and Charles Hart's new opera, *Marx in London!*, offered a unique occasion for both audiences and opera critics to reflect on opera's business ethics and implications on modern democratic societies. This event sparked an extensive dialogue on how the themes and economic underpinnings of opera production intersect with values and objectives upheld by contemporary democracies, inviting a reflective examination on art's capacity in representing people's pluralistic voices beyond systemic inequalities. This opera's narrative unfolds over a single, tumultuous day in London on 14 August 1871, capturing rare moments when the great socialist philosopher Karl Marx (1818–1883) finds himself ensnared by the twin troubles of family dilemmas and financial woes. During the opera's two-hour performance, the expressive voices of Marx and his wife, his youngest daughter, peers, and rivals vociferously unveil the personal turmoil faced by the philosopher, tackling his private struggles on both domestic and socio-economic battlegrounds. In stark contrast, Marx's political aspirations were whimsically deconstructed into oneiric fragments, culminating in a pivotal, yet disjointed, burlesque performance at the Red Lion pub. Uniquely styled as an "operatic farce," this modern retelling of Marx's anecdotes in England offers a refreshingly humorous take on the philosopher's bicentennial celebrations. This light-hearted style tempers the often imperious pronouncements of Marx's own *Das Kapital* and the hyperbolic eulogy prevalent in modern discourses on Marx's legacy, thus motivating a fresh reappraisal of his ideologies in juxtaposition with multifaceted "human" aspects underlying his character.

KARL MARX AS AN OPERATIC SUBJECT

Opera has historically been perceived as an elitist bourgeois pastime. Its ties to economic capital epitomise the very essence of Marx's critique against bourgeois affectations, entangled in a system fraught with social snobbery, cultural imperialism, and fetish iconography. Therefore, portraying Marx as the subject of an opera is inherently ironic, given his reprobation of the socio-economic contexts against

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which the opera community operates. However, Dove's opera diverges from advocating a violent, revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, insinuating instead that the Marxist vision can coexist with the democratic mechanisms inherent in the art world. Thematically, this opera intriguingly eschews a directly proletarian narrative, sidestepping explicit depictions of class conflict or overt socio-political activism in Marx's era. The closest it comes to envisioning Marx's communist utopia is through a worker's chorus right before the conclusion of the first act, which momentarily conjures the egalitarian spirit of the French Revolution in a dreamlike scenario. Ironically, this fleeting utopian vision swiftly dissolves into the grim reality of capitalist exploitation, marked by the theft of Marx's last valuable possession—a piece of silverware, obtained through his marriage to Jenny von Westphalen, a scion of the aristocracy, in a serendipitous twist.

Ideologically, this opera does not serve as a vehicle for cultural populist campaigns comparable to the "proletariat opera" of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, which was a cornerstone of cultural reform reflecting Mao Zedong's nationalistic principles and a radical departure from both Western and feudal Chinese musical traditions (Kraus 1989, 135). During the era of Communist China, the political doctrine dismissed Western classical music as an evil byproduct of capitalism, labelling it "politically unhealthy" and a harbinger of societal decay (Kraus 1989, 135). Diverging from Chinese Communism's repudiation of Western musical influences, Dove's composition reverently draws from the Western classical repertoire: in Act One, Scene Ten, Marx's youngest daughter, Tussi, responds to the confiscation of their piano by following the bailiff, attempting to reclaim and play on it virtuosic musical passages in a style reminiscent of Romantic composers, engaging in a symbolic "love duet" with her would-be "piano teacher." This allusion and homage to male composers of the Western classical tradition such as Chopin and Rachmaninoff—albeit anachronistic, as Rachmaninoff could not have influenced Marx's daughter during his lifetime—not only sidestep the urgency to challenge Western musical canon's supremacy, but also arguably reinforces the cultural hegemony of bourgeois aesthetic practices that Marx might have criticised. At first glance, Dove's "Marxist" opera paradoxically reifies the space of bourgeois cultural–aesthetic production it ostensibly seeks to examine, presenting a controversial portrayal that complicates traditional Marxist analysis. Nevertheless, one could contend that the historical implementations of Marxist principles, particularly in some communist regimes, might have distorted true Marxism through the consolidation of power within a ruling party and the subsequent curtailment of artistic freedom. Hence, the departure of Dove's opera from the traditional "proletariat opera" model most certainly does not imply that its portrayal of Marx is skewed or "politically incorrect."

THE DOMESTICATION OF MYTHICAL FIGURES

The transformation of Marx's apparently heroic life story into a domestic farce is emblematic of the late-twentieth-century trend of using opera to explore the intricate

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lives of significant historical figures in unconventional settings, exemplified by Philip Glass's *Einstein on the Beach* (1976) and John Adams's *Nixon in China* (1987). By shifting these quasi-mythical figures into socio-political margins, such operas challenge the earnest narratives that perpetuate the politicised legends surrounding these individuals. Instead, they amplify the emotional expressions of these figures through the operatic form. This amplification renders their personal stories, as articulated through their distinct "operatic" voices, more exposed to the public gaze and susceptible to public scrutiny, thus inviting a re-evaluation of their legacies from contemporary standpoints. Crucially, it celebrates the artistic freedom of post-war democratic societies, a departure from the intensifying mystification of politically significant figures wrought by state-imposed censorship that once hindered opera from presenting an accurate account of history throughout previous centuries. This trend also recalls the late-nineteenth-century opera tradition of substituting the "fantastical" elements with the "domestic," catering to the tastes of the emerging industrial bourgeoisie. It transforms subjects once considered taboo or part of heroic fantasy—like magical potion, exotic beasts, femmes fatales, and biblical characters—into objects of fascination that can be domesticated and showcased in middle-class households, allowing for the "marginalized survival of the 'grand,'" thereby integrating elements of grandeur and myth into the everyday life of the bourgeoisie (Emslie 1993, 167).

In Dove's opera, the depiction of Marx as a figure for bourgeois diversion is nuanced, emphasising his familial struggles in a way that resonates universally, bypassing the need for the audience to possess deep prior knowledge about opera's conventions and the cultural history of Marxist politics. This deliberate divergence from the archetypal white-male heroic narrative aligns with a broader, international movement toward making the performing arts more *accessible* to diverse audiences, not least within the realms of opera, musical, and theatre. This strategy indicates a tacit commitment to overcoming societal disparities stemming from not only class but also gender, racial, and other injustices. For instance, the social suspect Freddy Demuth, Marx's illegitimate child with the family's lower-class housekeeper, emerges as an unlikely hero in defense of Marx when a political adversary seeks to sabotage his residency in London, showcasing valour and loyalty to Marx's family regardless of his lack of traditional birthright privileges. In a remarkable reversal of conventional gender roles, Jenny Marx, embodying the spirit of a Valkyrie, transcends the expected duties of a bourgeois housewife by presenting herself as a divine protector during her husband's legal crises, adopting an all-forgiving demeanour that elevates her role to that of a guardian and saviour. Most vividly, the *coloratura* passages—elaborately ornamented vocal melodies—in Tussi Marx's performance embody the role of a feisty heroine, passionately vocalising her proclivity and propensity for principles of liberty and fraternity deeply embedded in Marx's political philosophy. Overall, Dove's opera reflects and propels a transformative shift in worldwide creative endeavours, promoting a more inclusive approach to artistic representation in opera's stage-world.

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THE CASE FOR DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN OPERA

For the opera to truly transcend the traditional privileges and injustices associated with capitalism, embracing casting diversity is equally indispensable, beyond the manifold transgressions present in the performance. Recent debates around the ethics of equality, diversity, and inclusion have expanded to question whether narratives traditionally seen as "Western" should be depicted within a wider racial and cultural-ethnic spectrum; for example, casting Black actors as American cowboys or Scandinavian Vikings and introducing Afro-Latino elves and mixed-race dwarves into Tolkien's story-world (Batt and Joseph 2024, 43). Admittedly, this shift has sparked controversy, further intensified by the surge of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies—this was highlighted by a recent scandal involving Google's generative AI tool, *Gemini*, which faced reproval for its pro-diversity bias and its alleged reluctance to showcase the accomplishments of White people (Arda 2024, 7; Gautam, Venkit, and Ghosh 2024, 1), thereby arousing a strong backlash against anti-racism efforts in the creative and technological sectors.

As scholars of arts and business ethics, we should envision a future where artistic integrity does not cancel out diverse representation in casting processes. Critics who prioritise "historical authenticity" in the modern reinterpretation of Western myths tend to adopt a purist viewpoint, often omitting the extent to which respect for historical veracity should be weighed against the imperative for diverse representation in the arts. It is often anticipated that adhering to the conventional portrayal of Marx as a "white male" aligns with expectations of "artistic quality" in performance productions, a rationale frequently invoked during casting choices (Lund 2019). Yet, this insistence on maintaining a certain degree of artistic integrity often sidelines the importance of promoting diversity and equality in creative organisations and cultural institutions—in the performing arts, pro-democratic values have gained significant traction, particularly following the #MeToo movement since 2017, which prompted us to weigh the demands for "feminist changes" in drama against the "historically grounded privileges" of the "masculine" in driving meaning construction, thereby exposing the ethical dilemma industries face in balancing inclusivity with artistic integrity (Lund 2019, 27 and 33). Countering binary traditionalist views on artistic integrity and diverse casting, I argue for a more dynamic and inclusive approach to depicting historical figures in opera narratives. Specifically, we should consider the implications of casting Karl Marx with an actor who diverges in race, gender, sexuality, or age from the historical figure. How might such intersectional approaches to casting decisions influence audience demographics and engagement?

Notably, should *Marx in London!* be produced by a non-Western opera company, it might feature a more racially subversive cast. This idea touches on broader debates surrounding interracial casting, a topic that has sparked both interest and controversy in theatre, film, and opera within Western cultures since the early twentieth century. Critics and scholars like Abrams (2022), Pao (2000), and Hornby (1989) have extensively discussed these controversies, noting the challenges and innovations

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it brings. Such practices contrast sharply with the imperative for "identity casting"—a facet of "identity aesthetics" which mandates that actors must embody the identities they portray on stage. Beauchamp (2016, 313) criticizes this as placing the burdens of identity politics onto the arts, demanding that the representation need not necessarily align with the actor's essential identity. Building on initial discussions on interracial casting, Galella (2019, 194) further distinguishes between "colour-blind" casting, where people of colour gain parity with white narratives by crossing racial boundaries in their roles, and "colour-conscious" casting, where non-white actors deliberately exaggerate "white" traits to denaturalise the privilege of white individuals in racially unmarked zones.

Beyond mere considerations of glocalised tastes and customs, I contend that adopting a performative approach to re-envisioning opera's narrative landscape can propel a vehicle for challenging and dismantling the perceived cultural "essence" or "foundations" underlying opera. Despite many scholars' belief in opera as quintessentially European, the historical inclusion of non-Western musical elements challenges this notion, as seen in Puccini's and Saint-Saëns' integration of Oriental motifs in their operas. Regrettably, this incorporation is still sometimes designated by historical musicologists as a folk-music-oriented approach, implying a hierarchical dichotomy between Western art music and its colonial "others" (Born and Hesmondhalgh 2000)—this viewpoint deems necessary the extraction of the latter from their contexts of indigenous origination, attempting to assimilate them into the "imaginary museum" of sacrosanct Western operas merely as ornamental embellishments. Hence, Western opera's sidelining of "world music" influences, be it Arabic microtones or sub-Saharan African pentatonic scale, forecloses the possibility for opera to serve as a potent medium for disorienting and reconstituting entrenched discourses on race, gender, class, and other exclusionary ideologies entrenched in global cultural and economic history. Against this backdrop, the opera communities in East Asia and Africa have begun to systematically present a contrasting narrative, having embraced interracial casting of operatic roles for some time. In doing so, they deconstruct the core notion of identity casting and reinvent opera's colonial legacy, transitioning from a "survivalist" approach that inherently launches a "political attack" on Western art forms to one that promotes the *co-survival* of Western opera and indigenous aesthetics (Muller 2023).

This discussion is germane to proliferating debates in business ethics, particularly within the sphere of Critical Diversity Studies. In the creative and cultural industries operating in democratic contexts, the principles of equality, diversity, and inclusion represent both a boon and a bane: they are valorised for fuelling creative inspiration and new idea reformation, yet often find themselves at odds with the ostensibly antithetical democratic values of artistic freedom and autonomy (Johansson and Sol 2022, 812). Intriguingly, a perspective rooted in Marxist ideas may offer a potential resolution to this ethical conundrum—that a truly democratic art world hinges upon the reduction or outright eradication of economic inequalities perpetuated by class, gender, racial, and other forms of discrimination. Without mechanisms to foster economic democracy in the creative industries (namely, ensuring equitable control

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over artistic processes and productions in line with principles of equality and social welfare), the concept of artistic democracy remains superficial, vulnerable, and predominantly advantageous to the capitalist elite. Furthermore, envisioning artistic democracy entails empowering the collective creative agency of the people, unfettered by state censorship, in a society devoid of class divisions. On the whole, although Dove's Marx-inspired opera eschews explicit mention of Marx's political life, it establishes a proto-Marxist framework for both art critics and business ethicists to scrutinise systemic disparities through the prism of the evolving ethics of equality, diversity, and inclusion in global creative economies. The opera's humorous tone further aids in deconstructing cultural and class stereotypes associated with Marxist ideologies, offering a light-hearted yet insightful take on the critical challenges faced by democratic cultural citizens today.

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