

A PERSPECTIVE ON THE OPERA AUDIENCE OF THE 21ST CENTURY

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SUMMARY. When it comes to contemporary audience of the opera, we have in mind a multitude of individuals with extremely diverse and heterogeneous cultural backgrounds, very different tastes and expectations related to the show and to the artists who perform on stage. Perhaps the famous Italian *loggionisti* who once made up the dreaded galleries, although still present, are no longer as influential as in the past centuries; and the splendid euphoria of the opera lovers from the 1950s and 1960s has faded. The extremely refined and knowledgeable elite is also becoming less numerous. But Opera still incites the interest of the public and arouses passions at the same time. Who is today's audience and what makes them attend and influence the Opera show? What are the managerial strategies for attracting new audience to the auditorium? The social distancing and the restricted access of the public in the performance halls during the recent coronavirus pandemic is also highlighted in the article.

Keywords: Opera Audience, 21st Century, communication, audience reception

Introduction

The opera, as we know it today, is a syncretic artistic genre which brings together the vocal-instrumental music, the dramatic text (libretto), and often dance, in a production meant to be performed on stage (with settings, costumes, props, etc.) guided by a director. During the four centuries of its existence, opera has known a spectacular destiny, extending rapidly to Italy and all over Europe, and from there beyond the borders of the continent. The opera was born from the ardent Italian melody, subsequently integrating in its composition the elegance of the French dance and the German philosophical and rigorous spirit, and then opening to the diversity of colours and essences

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specific to the European national cultures, which formed their own tradition. When we attempt to define the opera phenomenon, born out of the west-European musical tradition, we take into consideration the panoramic image of this *total performance*: from the composers' musical creations to the interpretative ones of singers, conductors, instrumentalists, ballet dancers, choreographers, directors, and scenographers who work together on the show, focusing especially on the public it addresses. The media impact, the record archives, the chronicles, and documents which register the history and the evolution of this complex genre, all contribute to the panoramic picture of the lyrical phenomenon.

During time, the opera audience had its modeling role on the lyrical genre, passionately and actively sanctioning or supporting the artists and the theatrical performance. The audience approval was from the beginning a key to success for any singer, conductor, or director but also for the composers and their works. It is well known that many masterpieces received initially a cold reaction of the audience if not even a vehement rejection. At the time of their premiere, many operas shocked and scandalized their audiences: from Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* to Verdi's *La Traviata*, Bizet's *Carmen*, Berlioz's *Benvenuto Cellini*, Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*², Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, Richard Strauss's *Salome*³ and many others.

For the artists is the same: even the great singers or famous conductors and directors can be confronted with the noisy public dissatisfaction. The tenor Roberto Alagna was booed by the *loggionisti* in the opera house *La Scala* in Milan, in 2006 in the *Aida* production and more recent in *Werther* (Davies, 2014). He is not alone. Luciano Pavarotti, or Renee Fleming and many other extraordinary singers were sanctioned by the Italian *loggionisti* during time. Recently, after a terrific performance of *Macbeth* at *La Scala*, a reporter wrote "Booing is apparently quite common at *La Scala*. Those most sophisticated theatregoers are seemingly a bunch of louts. The tradition comes courtesy of the "hissing hooligans" or *loggionisti* who sit up in the balconies, a small

² "After it's (delayed) premiere, Richard Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* received a significant amount of high-profile criticism. German musician Clara Schumann declared the opera as 'the most repugnant thing I've ever seen or heard'. Composer Brahms claimed just looking at the score put him in a bad mood. Wagner himself knew the opera was shocking. He wrote to his mistress, Mathilde Wesendonck, declaring that the opera was fearful, and that if performed properly was bound to turn people mad – he wasn't wrong. At the first performance, men were said to remove their women from the theatre, and even a priest ran out in horror." (Operas that shook society)

³ "Perhaps the most controversial opera of the twentieth century, Richard Strauss's *Salome* caused dispute long before the rehearsals even began. The Oscar Wilde play that the opera is based on was banned by the then Lord Chamberlain for the blasphemous use of biblical characters. This ban was not lifted for more than forty years." (op. cit.)

but highly voluble group of traditionalists who make their opinions known from high in the gods. From what I could discern during the spluttering 12-minute ovation (another measure of a show's success), the beef was largely with the show's director, who cowered in the wings. They quite liked the main performers, but the staging was a failure. ... As an atmosphere, it felt anarchic — who knew opera could be so punk? And though cruel, it felt cathartic: how refreshing to dispense with normal niceties and po-faced appreciation and embrace one's inner hooligan instead." (Ellison, 2021)

Although booing episodes are also found at Covent Garden or other major opera houses around the world, this reactivity can still be described as extreme, and by no means characteristic of the contemporary opera audience. Such reactions are not very common. The opera audience is generally assertive, manifesting their enthusiasm or disappointment more temperately than in past centuries. But there are exceptions. When you think of the opera audience in general, the first images that come to mind are elegant and cultured people who come together in a distinguished atmosphere to enjoy an elite cultural event. Of course, this image can be a simple cliché. The modern public is heterogeneous and is not reduced to an elegant elite. Although in the seventeenth century when the lyrical genre came into being, it was addressed especially to aristocrats, throughout history the opera has opened to the public of cities, and theaters specially built for these events have welcomed people from all walks of life.

It would be exciting to follow the history of the opera audience, from the aristocrats of the seventeenth century to the *loggionists* of La Scala, and to the ardent supporters of the various singers of the last century. But what interests us in this article is a perspective on the contemporary audience: who shares this audience, what are their expectations, how does the *live* performance survive among so many digital offers (audio and video recordings, live broadcasts from the seasons of major international theaters and Festivals, concerts broadcast online) and, more recently, after the restrictions imposed by the Covid 19 pandemic.

Who is in the audience?

Is opera an obsolete musical genre which is slowly coming to an end? Is it outdated and does its message still speak to the contemporary public? These questions are perhaps legitimate, in a century of speed, in which culture is made on television, internet or in the mass media, more than in libraries and on stage. We are well aware that we are living in a consumerist society, in which there is not much desire for depth, but for a continuous

external diversity; there is no more time left to enjoy spiritual subtleties or feelings that are “pathetic” in their tension for the absolute, and there is not much interest in stirring tragedies or obsolete romance – which are the main subjects of the classical repertoire of operas... Everyday life – with the crises which affect the entire world, and are strongly exploited by the media – is already an often toxic *show* from which we cannot escape.

In 20th century, the theatres from the Eastern Europe were social shelters. In communism, people escaped from the oppressed reality of their lives to the virtual reality of the performance, be it theatre, opera, operetta, or concerto. The perpetual return of the contemporary public to the theatre houses can be explained, partially, by the same phenomenon: the need of quality and spiritual life through art. The curiosity and thirst for the live performance, different by the one offered by the recordings or the television, revived the public’s expectations to turn towards the opera.

On the other hand, the cultural environment has always been dominated by two major approaches or currents, each with its own audience: an “elitist” path, open to “the great art” and to everything that is authentic in the traditional artistic forms and a “mass” current focused on the accessible and the facile forms (on “*entertainment*”), which often consumes the *kitsch* without reserves. The two paths have always intersected and given rise to many hybrid or transition artistic formulas, because art is a live phenomenon which is often shaped by the public’s requirements and tastes. However, at present, in the artistic world these two directions tend to radicalize and detach themselves quickly, while the cultural institutions, including the opera houses, are fighting to attract the public towards the “great art”. The opera is a musical genre endowed with a certain noblesse, and which requires a certain cultural training to understand and assimilate it. In other words, the public to have previous knowledge of the libretto and of the music.

When we talk about the opera audience, we generally do not mean quite a mass audience. Even if today opera is accessible to a vast number of people thanks to festivals⁴, the outdoors performances and especially radio and television recordings or broadcasts (Holender, 2008), those who opt for an evening at the opera are generally people with a certain background and a more refined aesthetic horizon.

⁴ “We can notice that today, all over the world, opera is more loved than ever, festivals are increasingly numerous, the people’s interest in opera is huge, because today we notice an increase in the interest, curiosity, attraction for everything produced through human talent. One of the presentation factors in the case of operas is the different interpretation from one singer to another. Therefore opera survives.” (Interview with Ioan Holender About the crisis of Romanian music, the meaning of words and the uncertain future of the opera)

Today opera houses are faced with a very heterogeneous public in terms of preferences and expectations, covering a wide and varied range of tastes, tendencies. There are many possible categorizations, who can identify Demographic & Socioeconomic Segmentation, Geographic Segmentation, Behavioural Segmentation, Psychographic Segmentation, Social Media Segmentation⁵ (Segura, 2020). However, here we will follow a more general approach in identifying some categories in the opera audience:

The connoisseurs. Here we speak about the specialized audience, those with an artistic background, a specialized education, and a profession in art: musicologists, art critics, or the artists themselves as spectators. They have a great contribution in monitoring the quality of the show, creating critical references and chronicles and an archive of cultural events. For the artists themselves it is an extremely useful challenge to see the show "from the outside" and to reflect on it through the "eyes of the public". Sometimes it is even an opportunity to offer emergency help to artists on stage in case of unforeseen events. There are situations when artists on stage who are ill or unable to complete a show have been urgently replaced by colleagues who were in the hall that night as mere spectators. Or, as it's in this recent case, when a student at the Conservatorio Giuseppe Nicolini di Piacenza gave the tenor's reply in a Verdi's aria from *La Traviata*, right from the audience, during a recital of his favorite soprano who was giving a recital at the Verdi Festival in Parma, Italy. The soprano's face "was a picture, as her young tenor fan lent his voice to her recital." The performance went viral on internet (Roberts, 2021).

High educated audience. Here we meet music lovers passionate about the lyrical phenomenon, some of them extremely well documented, who frequented for a long time the opera houses and concert halls. They are generally high educated persons with a good cultural training also. Some of them have appreciable record collections and do comparative auditions; or even write music chronicles, performance reviews and have blogs on the internet where they talk to other lyric enthusiasts. "Opera is one of the most aesthetically complex of art forms, often portrayed in the popular media as cultivating an 'élite' audience with high cultural capital and socioeconomic status." (O'Neill, Edelman, Sloboda, 2016). But the reality of artistic live reveal the fact that the audience is far more dynamic and diverse.

Loyal audience. We are including here the most highly engaged opera-lovers. Among those who make up the loyal audience are both intellectuals (physicians, teachers, and so on) and people who may not have a solid cultural background, some of them may have not graduated from

⁵ Segura, Paz, 2020, *Types of Consumer segmentation*, Audience Intelligence, Audiense.com <https://resources.audiense.com/blog/types-of-consumer-segmentation?hsLang=en>

college but love the lyrical genre and constantly attend opera seasons, festivals, and other performances in the open air. “These audience members clearly feel that they receive substantial benefits from attending the opera” (O’Neill, Edelman, Sloboda, 2016). Because to enjoy the opera you need a preparation first, most of them are generally connoisseurs of the shows they attend. They consistently contribute to the existence of the opera genre, being equally involved in the vitality of the show with their presence, their reactivity and with their financial contribution (generally this audience pay season tickets). From this faithful opera lovers, there is a considerable number who regularly attend opera performances in different theaters in their hometowns, or travel all over the world great distances to be able to watch *live* certain representations, rarely performed repertoire or certain interpreters (the music tourists). A recent article is shedding light on the characteristics of this type of traveller and their travel habits⁶ (Friel, Segre 2021). In this regular audience of the opera, there are those who are passionate about voices, who are supporting fans of certain artists and come to the opera to follow the evolution of this or that singer⁷ (Till, 2012). In the attraction for opera stars. the public comes, first, to listen to extraordinary voices and charismatic artists. This audience includes both people passionate about lyrical theatre (which watch several times the same masterpiece in order to assimilate a new interpretation or to follow a great singer giving life to a beloved role), and the large public who follow the ample tournaments of stars (based on successful formulas, such as the famous concerts of the *Three tenors*, Luciano Pavarotti, Placido Domingo and Jose Carreras, or *Pavarotti and his friends*, which also included personalities of the pop or rock music). In the loyal audience category, we can also identify the ones who are passionate about a certain repertoire they follow (see the traditionalists versus modernists). There are also young people who debate on the topic of the modern opera phenomenon on internet forums. All of these show a vivid interest in this genre whose existence unfolds with ups and downs, but also with the rare brilliance of its past glory.

⁶ “A cluster analysis identifies 4 clusters with significant differences in terms of attitudes toward music-related journeys and the results are discussed in order to advance some strategic suggestions for the development of destinations and for promoting innovative collaborations between the tourism and performing arts sectors.” (Martha Friel & Giovanna Segre, *Are music lovers promising tourists? attracting classical music and opera aficionados into the tourism loop*)

⁷ “Modern cultural activities are often work focused: many people attend performances because they are more interested in singer x, conductor y or director z than in the work being performed.” (Till, Nicholas, *The operatic event, opera houses and opera audiences*, The Cambridge Companion to Opera Studies, Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 70-92)

Heterogeneous audience with episodic presence in concert halls.

A significant part of the public of the opera performances is indisputably extremely heterogeneous, difficult to fall into a certain category. With varying degrees of understanding or interest in the phenomenon of the opera itself, in the performance hall there are always individuals from different social categories, from an elite eager to socialize and be seen in a "noble" setting, to various characters mundane, going all the way to completely uninformed individuals, who are out of pure curiosity or by chance in the performance hall. "People also attend theatrical or musical performances as a social activity: to celebrate an event in their lives; as the occasion for a date; to identify themselves as part of a particular community; to participate in a social or political ritual."⁸ (Till, 2012)

Contributors and sponsors. Opera houses, well known as big consumers of financial resources, do not produce as much money as they spend, so they are in great need to be supported by the state or through sponsorships. Fortunately for this art, there are still many wealthy individuals and private companies around the world who sustain it financial. However, these contributions are sometimes fluctuant, and the management of opera houses are often struggling for financial survive. "The democratization and cultural subsidies are prompted by anxiety about the future of this marvellous, unique, magnificent and absurd art form, in the hope that those in charge of it will appreciate the importance of current social change in time and will know how to adapt its structure to the needs of our age."⁹ (Liebermann, 1978) The different contributors and sponsors are always welcome to support opera business. But is a fact that sometimes they also influence the decisions regarding the way of the traditional lyric repertoire is staged during the performances of the season. An example of this is the New York Metropolitan Opera, which for years followed a conservative line of its productions, because the main sponsors who financially supported the theater did not tolerate too avant-garde productions.

At this point, we can notice a distinction between the **traditionalist** public and the one open to the new and the avant-garde. In general, the opera audience is considered conservative, very focused on the traditional repertoire and classical productions. New creations of the opera genre often encounter refractory attitudes, and theater directors avoid programming the contemporary works in current seasons. I talk about all this in more detail in the chapter dedicated to the expectations and preferences of the public.

⁸ Till, Nicholas, *op. cit.*

⁹ Liebermann, Rolf, *Opera and the Public Today*, The Musical Times, Vol. 119, No. 1619 (Jan. 1978), Musical Times Publications Ltd., p. 29.

The age of the audience attending the opera show is also worth mentioning. In a 2013 Deloitte studio, the audience profile was noted: “The Opera European spectator profile is a 54-year-old woman with higher education residing in the same city of the theatre, and who attends the theatre by car and is usually accompanied by her partner (36%). The average audience expenditure per person is 159 eur” (Losada, 2013). There is a preconception that has been partially verified in artistic world, that classical music attracts older audiences. “The average age of the audience at the Metropolitan Opera last season was 57, the same as at the New York Philharmonic. About 62 percent of the Philharmonic’s audience was 55 and older. (By contrast, the average age of the Broadway audience has hovered between 40 and 45 for the past two decades.) The relative scarcity of younger people is discouraging. Especially the fact that just 24 percent of the Philharmonic’s audience was younger than 40, people who may well have developed habits around the culture they do (and don’t) consume that could last the rest of their lives.” (Tommasini, 2020). I will address the topic of strategies to attract young audiences to concert halls in the dedicated chapter below.

The expectations and preferences of the opera audience

Several studies that have investigated the public's expectations regarding cultural events and the motivations to attend them, have indicated intrinsic functions of art, like development of new understandings; joy at a beautiful play of forms; allowing a group to imagine and reflect on new ways of being and making these perceptions available for communication. And the extrinsic functions, where arts serve the personal and social needs and desires of the audience, including socializing, entertainment, the building of social cohesion (Van Maanen 2009). But the audience engagement with the arts is complex, multivalent and is difficult to reduce it to simple generalisations. In a recent study, the authors conclude: “We suggest that three key factors pervade the experience of highly engaged opera-goers: Emotion, Truth, and Other People.”¹⁰ (O’Neill, Edelman, Sloboda, 2016)

Many people from the audience confess they have a strongly emotional relationship with opera. The beauty of the singing voice, the skill and charisma of performers, the powerful impact of the music itself, the complexity of the show – all of this create desirable strong emotions in the auditorium. (O’Neill, Edelman, Sloboda, 2016). There are people in the audience who come to the

¹⁰ O’Neill, Sinéad; Edelman, Joshua; Sloboda, John, *Opera and emotions: The cultural value of attendance for the highly engaged*, Participation Journal of Audience & Reception Studies, Volume 3, Issue 1, 2016, p.45.

opera house for well-defined reasons. One of them are attracted by the promise of a highly complex show – a syncretic show which combines several arts: music, theatre, ballet, painting, and more recently modern technologies of image projection, sound effects. Opera is not an easy musical genre, but it is more accessible than other classical genres (symphonic, vocal-symphonic, chamber music), through the high presence of the visual and theatrical elements.

Then are the music lovers, the ones who come firstly to listen to the music of great composers who have delved into the life and aspirations of the human soul, creating masterpieces of great beauty and dramatic tension. Opera can create a great emotional impact on its audience, sometimes not so much through the dramatic force of the libretto, but especially through the expressive force of the music. The identification of the singer actors with their roles, their expressive power, and the ability to convey in their singing true and authentic feelings are aspects highly appreciated by the opera audience who “have a strong desire to believe in the narratives portrayed. [the public] make qualitative judgments of productions and performances according to whether those aspects interrupt or enhance the believability of narratives. Believability is often expressed as a ‘truth’ effect. Respondents use opera narratives to explore and reflect on human relationships and dilemmas, and they are better able to do that when they are captivated by the music.”¹¹ A major expectation of opera-lovers regards the performers. We can ask what do modern audiences expect from opera singers? Unlike in previous centuries, when a magnificent voice was enough to excite the audience, nowadays an artist does not win the support of the public without being a credible actor. The requirements even go towards a physical fit adapted to the embodied character (overweight divas are increasingly rare in opera houses), and the vocal performance is expected to be doubled by expressiveness in interpretation and a phrasing with emotional impact. In short, the audience expects personality and uniqueness from opera performers. The pressure of cinematography and television has set a precedent in the audience's expectations for artists and directing.

Another significant aspect in the success of an evening at the opera, from the perspective of the one who goes in public, is also the presence of the other people in the auditorium. It's not just about the social aspect but also about the euphoria that amplifies when you experience an event with a strong emotional impact, along with a large audience. Opera-going can be an intensely social experience, even for those who attend the performance on their own; their experience of live performance could be disrupted or enhanced by the behavior of other audience members (O'Neill, Edelman, Sloboda, 2016), but in sum the effect can be downright electrifying.

¹¹ idem

Ranging from curiosity, permissiveness, revolt, or indifference - the contemporary audience has a wide range of reactions to the current opera performances. Audience reactivity is an important barometer of artistic life. I wrote in the introduction about how the public has influenced cultural productions over the centuries, through enthusiastic support or on the contrary through disapproving reactions. Questions have always arisen should the taste of the public must determine artistic creation or, on the other hand, how independent can be the creativity and visions of composers in front of the tastes and tendencies of certain epochs or of various political censorships. Richard Wagner traced the subject in his theoretical writings in favor of creators: the composer polishes the taste of the audience and not the other way around. However, artistic practice shows that the public's reaction has a certain significance. The reactivity of the opera audience today is mainly addressed to the performances of artists or to the exaggerations of modern directors. We talked about this in detail in the *Regietheater*¹² article.

Another sensitive topic is the fact that opera audience does not seem to love contemporary creations of the lyrical repertoire. The traditional repertoire and even the traditional directing and classic style of sceneries are preferred by the conservative (majority) public from all over the world. The constant repertory of opera houses comprises around 70 titles and some rediscovered works, brought to light from the Baroque era or from other times, creations which are more rarely performed, belonging to famous composers, etc. However, there are not many new creations, and the few new compositions are not staged very often. There is a backlash against modern and contemporary opera creations, and theater directors are reluctant to schedule new titles this season. "Despite the increasing number of music compositions by living composers, non-profit opera houses are often reluctant to include modern and contemporary operas in their repertoire. The audience pressure is a major obstacle to artistic renewal in programming."¹³ (Cancellieri, Turrini, 2016) This phenomenon began in the twentieth century with the composers' increased appetite for experimenting with a new musical language, with novel forms and sonorities. Among the remarkable stylistic novelties brought about by *modernism* in the opera, it is worth mentioning the evolution of the concept of *atonality* (foreshadowed in Wagner's operas and exploited by Schönberg and Berg), as well as the new challenges resulting from the vocality of *Spreschstimme* and *Sprechgesang*.

¹² Radu-Giurgiu, Cristina, *Regietheater - The big challenge for the opera of our times*, in STUDIA UBB MUSICA, LXVI, 2, 2021 (p. 179 – 192), DOI: 10.24193/subbmusica.2021.2.12

¹³ Cancellieri, Giulia; Turrini, Alex, *The Phantom of Modern Opera: How Economics and Politics Affect the Programming Strategies of Opera Houses*, International Journal of Arts Management, 2016, volume 18, Issue 3, page 25-36

The 21st century has continued these directions and the spraying of the lyrical genre in a multitude of forms, from the most radical-avant-garde to forms closer to the "entertainment" area such as musicals or pop-opera. In this context, the modern crisis of the opera was often brought into discussion, set against the background of "the crisis of the music of the 20th century" and of the difficulties of the reception by the public of the new sonorous languages and experiments used by contemporary composers. "The critical reservations of the public of modern art, in its great diversity, have multiple causes. From enlarging the aesthetic spectrum towards the area of ugliness, cultivated by generalizing the dissonance, up to conceptual aspects concerning the melody, the themes, the clarity of the structure of morphological units, the symmetry, the constructive balance, etc., there were mutations that were adverse to a pleasant, simple and easy musical perception. Largely, modern art lost its entertainment quality. The art of composition was greatly exacerbated or minimalized unconsciously. (...) Time passes, the requirements change, are renewed; there is always a 'Damocles' sword' above the creator's head, there is the danger to move away at one point from the practical requirements of the interpreters or from the public's acceptance."¹⁴ (Voiculescu, 2006)

Live or recordings? When it comes to audience preferences in our century, we cannot ignore the binomial of *live performance* versus the large industry of recordings, video or audio and the high-performance technological possibility of broadcasting shows via radio, television, or the Internet. During the recent Covid-19 pandemic, the show has moved almost completely into the online environment, with social restrictions and quarantine imposed. But there is and will always be an audience of live performances, just as there is also a large audience of recordings, which facilitates their access to reference productions with the best artists, or the audience that watches TV or goes to the cinema to experiment a new way of receiving the opera performance, filmed with details of the artists' gestures and facial expressions, inaccessible perhaps from the performance hall. The text is also translated and displayed on the screen, making it easier to understand the action and the characters' lines. These are advantages for the spectators, but they come with many changes and challenges for the lyrical theater itself.

From the 20th century, the technological explosion revolutionized not only the scientific domains, but it also brought more vitality and a tense challenge to the lyrical art. The pace of the world has increased, information travels much faster, and the public is avid for novelty, diversity, and originality. All of these have pushed opera directors and scenographers to experiment massively and to uncover new tendencies, often extreme, which came to

¹⁴ Voiculescu, Dan, *Drama muzicii moderne (The drama of modern music)*, în „Aniversările muzicale 2005-2006”, Ed. Universității „Transilvania” din Braşov, 2006, pag. 4, 8.

replace older staging, and sometimes were considered incompatible with the taste and expectations of the contemporary public. However, because these language innovations are not applied to contemporary operas (except in rare cases), but to the same masterpieces which are scheduled in each lyrical season and were composed decades or even centuries ago, the modern staging of these directors and scenographers is only a sort of a inspired “aggiornamento”. This updating oscillates in permanence between revelation and imposture, and sometimes it turns into an abstract work, difficult to assimilate by the opera audience.

However, all these tendencies and innovations have their public. For example, in Germany and in Great Britain, the public taste for modern staging is well known, and perhaps no other European space is the scene of so many experiments, both in the case of contemporary music and of the classical one. Often the freedoms and the fantasies of the show creators give rise to huge scandals, amplified in the press, a phenomenon which clearly shows that lyrical theatre is in the public’s attention. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that the scandals in opera theatre are not only a reaction but, often, a premeditated policy to cause false earthquakes and, thus, attract a part of the audience who loves the cancan, the extremist controversies, and experiences. These performances, transposed in modern times, seems designed both to discover new nuances and meanings of classical works, but also to amaze or even to shock the audience, and can be considered managerial strategies to attract more audience for the contemporary visions of opera performances.

Managerial strategies for attracting the public to the performance halls

Today, the opera performance benefits from the most modern elements of artistic management: “private or public funders; idealistic artists or intrepid entrepreneurs; individuals or consortia: these are the players with the power to shape the way opera is made. Nor is it a story with a straightforward chronological progression from a primitive example to the complex model(s) of today. At different times during opera’s four centuries and in different places, different practices may be contrasted. Sometimes they are locked in combat, at others one or other is in the ascendant. While there is no blueprint of best practice, judgements may be made as to how well the opera business adapted itself to the needs of its creative forces. And questions may be asked about how the opera has been moulded to the needs of the business.”¹⁵ (Payne, Snowman, 2012)

¹⁵ Payne, Nicholas; Snowman, Daniel, *The Cambridge Companion to Opera Studies (The business of opera)*, Cambridge University press, 2012, p. 53-69.

To attract the public, the managers of great opera houses have implemented in recent years various formulas meant to ease the understanding of this complex phenomenon by the general public, by launching educational programs, festivals, performances in unconventional spaces, Opera balls. Christmas or New Year's Eve Balls, which try to address to the tastes of a very diverse audience, have been organized in opera houses (the famous Vienna Ball, but also in Romania at the Bucharest, Cluj, Braşov or Iaşi National Opera Houses), bringing together different musical genres (opera, operetta, folk, rock, popular music, disco, Latino music) and various personalities from the cultural life (theatre, ballet, cinema). More than ten years ago, Romanian director Cătălin Ionescu-Arbore revealed some of the modern marketing and publicity recipes implemented to attract more people to performances: more focus on image (websites, the design of posters, modern staging) and famous guests invited in the performances of the theater (both world famous singers and directors, fashion designers to make the costumes). Another phenomenon worth mentioning, because it indirectly attracts the audience to the opera house, is represented by the frequent collaborations of opera singers and rock or pop bands, for example, Monserrat Caballé and Queen. Recent strategies are made public for audience by the international opera houses on their webpages or different published research. In twenty-first century, the audience may be looking for a more interactive or participatory experience. "In response, inventive organizations are trying to share their art in ways that help their mission and resources dovetail with the preferences and lifestyles of potential audiences"¹⁶

In the effort to popularize opera and make it more accessible to the general public, we should also mention another cultural management strategy practiced by many theatres in Europe and abroad: the investment in the young audience which can be educated, through shows for children (Vienna State Opera), evenings of musical education (within the famous Opera Festival at the Arena of Verona), as well as attracting the younger public to the opera houses through innovative projects. "Opera companies across Europe have been asking themselves challenging questions. *How can we engage with and build new, curious, and open-minded audiences? How can we foster alternative creation and renew the artform of opera?* An increasing number of opera organisations are turning to productions for young audiences, as a means of attracting audiences to opera at an early age. Children are curious and open to novelty; their habits and expectations

¹⁶ Harlow, Bob; Alfieri, Thomas; Dalton, Aaron; Field, Anne, 2011, *Cultivating the next generation of art lovers. How boston lyric opera sought to create greater opportunities for families to attend opera*, Wallace Studies in building Arts Audiences, Bob Harlow Research and Consulting, LLC. ISBN 978-0-9847287-0-1.

offer no barrier to the discovery of the new”¹⁷. Because many productions for young audiences suffer from a lack of visibility, there are publications like RESEO who from 2013 try to provide an overview of this productions heled by its members across Europe.

Regarding the innovative projects, we must notice the famous *New York Metropolitan Opera* which launched several years ago live radio broadcasts of its *live* performances of Saturday evening – listened by many music lovers, on all the continents – and in 2006 proposed another extremely attractive formula: the series "*The Met: Live in HD*", video transmissions of its performances in cinemas! This formula received an Emmy Award (for technology and engineering, for uninterrupted transmission in HD in cinemas all over the world, technological development, and innovation in transmission technology) and had more than 935,000 spectators in the season 2007–2008 via satellite, in cinemas in the United States of America, Canada, Mexico, Costa Rica, Argentina, Peru and Dubai. Since 2006, many major European opera houses and festivals (*La Scala* in Milan, Royal Opera in London, *La Fenice* in Venice, the Salzburg Festival, or the *Maggio Musicale Fiorentino* in Florence) have also broadcasting their productions in cities all around the world.¹⁸

The call for digital technologies is increasingly being used in opera houses, not only to broadcast live events via radio, television, film, or the Internet, but also for advertising and access to young audiences who use digital media in particular. “Digital technologies today are seen as a powerful driving force of creative industry growth. Increasingly more attention is paid to promoting theatrical product. Despite the fact that the eliteness of operatic art and loyalty to tradition poses restrictions on implanting new instruments of theater branding, active digitization of the opera product is the only plausible means of attracting the attention of the new generations who are used to this format of representing cultural content.”¹⁹ (Trubnikova, Tsagareyshvili, 2021) Concern for Opera and the Media of the Future²⁰ has generated research initiatives, such as the Glyndebourne-hosted conferences, where the event was aimed at both academics and opera or media professionals (opera administrators, educators, composers, media artists, directors, performers, and media theorists and researchers). Arts companies are increasingly

¹⁷ Heid, Katherine; Joly, Isabel, 2013, Amaze Me, Opera for Young Audiences in Europe, RESEO, https://www.reseo.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/RESEO-AMAZE-ME_EN.pdf

¹⁸ "Where to See Opera at the Movies", The Wall Street Journal, 21–22 June 2008, sidebar p. W10.

¹⁹ Trubnikova, Nina; Tsagareyshvili, Severyan, 2021, *Digital challenges for creative industries: case of opera*, SHS Web Conf. Volume 114, 2021, VIII International Scientific Conference New Trends, Strategies and Structural Changes in Emerging Markets (NTSSCEM 2021)

²⁰ Opera and media of the future: <https://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/omf/about/>

interested in producing digital content, using online materials such as trailers, interviews, and rehearsal footage, that should help audiences know what to expect from a production, and encourage them to feel anticipation about attending. (O'Neill, Sinead; Wise, Karen; Sloboda, John, 2016)

Covid Time and the opera audience

Recently, in the last 2 years, the Covid-19 pandemic has paralyzed the entertainment industry worldwide. The picture of the operatic life looked distressing: canceled many performances, artists singing in empty halls and the audience watching the event online... confusion, anxiety, job insecurity, readaptation of artists to the recorded show and of the theaters to move exclusively their activities in the virtual environment. "Due to the recent communicational lockdown the theaters that used to regard direct live interaction with the spectator as their main channel, now have found themselves under the threat of a financial and HR collapse. In consequence, they have been forced to urgently adapt opera products to digital placement. Online resources, which were normally just a complementary means, have suddenly become the only channel of communication with the consumers." (Trubnikova, Tsagareyshvili, 2021). In result, as recent studies confirm, 21st century affirm a new category of audience, the "digital opera audience" which consumes mainly the digitalized artistic productions. "The research has shown that the role of the virtual space is almost as equally important as the physical space of the theater, although characterized by significant differences and specific shortcomings. It also seems that the audience accepts the reality of opera broadcasts taking place in the virtual space, as evidenced by the high interest, motivation, and expectations. In this case, tearing down spatial and temporal boundaries shows the potential for expanding audience categorization with a new category – digital opera audience."²¹ (Brgles, M.M.; Škender, D., 2020)

The imposed social distance and the numerous periods of quarantine or stopping the public access in the performance halls led to the cancellation of many concerts and opera performances or to their transfer in the online environment. The "consumer" of art has been offered a virtual alternative, which cannot fully replace the live presence in the concert hall. For artists, the pandemic has come with many tragedies, from job insecurity or even job loss, to lack of training and of musical rehearsals. Also, the lack of an audience can

²¹ Brgles, M.M.; Škender, D., 2020, *Opera audience in the digital environment and online streams during COVID-19 lockdown*, Medijska Istrživanja 26 (2), pag.125-144.

be a major distress in a musician's career because people in the audience make the shows come to life: they share emotion and feedback in real time.

The coronavirus pandemic poses a grave challenge to all the performing arts. There are few ways to mitigate the risk from packing performers and audiences tightly together without fundamentally altering the experience of these art forms, which thrive on crowds (Tommasini, 2020). Measures have been taken in all theaters around the world to prevent the virus from spreading among artists or in the audience. The focus of the many opera houses shifted toward digitization and innovation, translating the opera experience and cultural vision to the digital realm, and rebranding itself, searching for feedback from the audience²². Among the objectives of the opera institutions during the pandemic were: to stay connected to the audiences, supporters, and participants; to continue to make music and to replace the lost income of live performance.²³ Among the concrete measures applied were developed their websites extending and improving the “watch online” platforms; interviews and podcasts with artists and opera lovers.

Also, when it was possible to resume the performances, drastic measures were taken to access the auditorium, such as those announced by the New York Metropolitan Opera House on its official website: “Our top priority is the safety of the Met's audiences, artists, orchestra, chorus, and staff. In consultation with medical and public health experts, the Met has implemented a mandatory vaccination policy for audiences, who must show proof of vaccination upon arrival at the Met. All artists, orchestra, chorus, and staff are required to do the same.”²⁴ Similar measures have been taken by all opera houses around the world.

Conclusions

This article tried to display the image of the contemporary opera audience, identifying the possible categories of opera lovers, their expectations but also their reactivity, as well as some of the current strategies for attracting the public practiced by the managers of the opera houses.

²² Barnhart, Brent, 2022, *How audience insights helped a world-famous opera house succeed in the digital age*, Audiense.com <https://resources.audiense.com/blog/case-study-how-audience-insights-helped-a-world-famous-opera-house-succeed-in-the-digital-age>

²³ COVID-19 Community Story | Opera North, <https://www.theaudienceagency.org/bounce-forwards/community-stories/covid-19-community-story-opera-north1>

²⁴ The New York Metropolitan Opera House: Our Commitment to Our Audiences, 2022 <https://www.metopera.org/information/our-commitment-to-our-audiences/>

The article postulates the idea that a cultural background is needed to fully enjoy the opera show, which is a complex art form. Refining the audience's taste and increasing its demands by constantly attending both the live show and the reference recordings creates a wider waiting horizon at the same time.

In 2022 we are living again times of war in Europe, which follows the terrible period of the pandemic that has so strongly impacted the artistic environment. These are difficult times for both artists and for the public, and the perspective of an extended war is extremely threatening to all of us and to art. During the war, cultural and artistic events are the first to be sacrificed, the focus is transferred on the self-survival of individuals and the economic, social, and political survival of states. In the twentieth century, after two world wars, the opera shows survived and even flourished, the audience reunited with their beloved lyrical masterpieces and wonderful artists. As lovers of the lyric genre, we hope to perpetuate the interest in opera in the 21st century, which is more technological and confronted with new health and military challenges.

The Romanian Mircea Albulescu supported in his last years of life, in some interviews, the idea of “the two halves of an apple” in the reality of a show. From his perspective, the stage actors, the directors, the scenographers, and all the people involved in a show (creators and interpreters) are only half of the apple. The other half of the apple is the public, which is heterogeneous in terms of taste and background. The show is not *what is produced on stage* and “emitted” to the public, but the live and unique *exchange of energies* between the artists and the audience in the house. Mircea Albulescu went even further by saying that this mysterious dialogue between the stage and the public creates and conditions the success of the show and even the artists’ performance. Moreover, the “formula” of the public of each evening creates a *different show*. In other words, the same representation in successive nights with a different public is always a *different show*, because the public strongly influences the actors’ performance through their expectations, tastes, reactions, and energy flow. In conclusion, even if I appreciate the indisputable innovations and benefits of technology, as an artist but also as a spectator, I strongly support the live show and the direct experience that the audience has in the performance hall. The audience will enjoy at a higher level of intensity and authenticity a live show compared to one recorded or broadcast through the media.

The audience’s contribution to an opera show is an essential element. Therefore, not only the managers of artistic institutions, eager to attract more and more people, are interested in researching this heterogeneous entity, not only the sociologists who perform studies and surveys, but also the artists involved in the show are interested in learning *who* their audience is

(elements which are scientifically researched by musical pragmatics). If there is a public, there will be a show. And if the opera, this fascinating “*imago mundi*”, will continue to expose its important treasure of human and artistic values, appealing to people’s sensitivity and consciousness – the public will continue to be attracted to the performances, being continuously renewed, and enriched by this dramatic musical genre.

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