

Schaudepot

Ensemble Adapter and Herbordt/Mohren

Research

What can opera (still) do?

#3

Edited by Melanie Mohren and Bernhard Herbordt

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Initiated by Ensemble Adapter and Herbordt/Mohren

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Alia Hamdan, Neo Hülcker, Cheryl Isheya,
Vigdís Jakobsdóttir, Laís Machado, Neto Machado,
Celeste Oram, Olivia Stahn, Asmus Trautsch,
Annika Tudeer, Viktoriia Vitrenko, Armin Wieser.
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Jorge Alencar I'm Jorge. I've been working with Herbordt/Mohren for quite a long time. We've been bridging Brazil and Germany in our projects. I'm very related to the dance field and also did a PhD relating choreographic composition and ethics. And I'm part of a collective in Brazil called Dimenti with which we've been working on performing arts, audiovisual, literature, production. The works I've been doing have something to do with musical theater, with the act of singing and speaking and dancing. But I wouldn't refer to this as opera.

Diego Araújo Hi. I'm Diego Araújo and I work as a director, dramaturg and scenographer. I am working on an ongoing research project that's called *tempo crioulo*. Originally, *crioulo* was a word used for fruits that are born out of the own place. In Brazil after the diaspora *crioulo* was also a word used for the 'mixed people', 'mixed culture', 'mixed technology'. So it's a fruit that was born out of one place but grew with influences from other places. It's a very specific notion about different races that interconnect. Opera was a way to somehow share this research, to make it concrete and a format to show this research; a mixed work.

Deepika Arwind My name is Deepika Arwind. I'm a theater-maker and a playwright. And as somebody who comes from the Global South, our connection to opera is quite distant and it feels inaccessible. But there are several ancient Indian institutions of theater and dance and musical theater that I think bear some resonance to the operatic form.

Arnbjörg María Danielsen My name is Arnbjörg María and I work in many genres. I somehow prefer to refer to myself as an art worker because I feel I'm like an enabler even

when I'm in an artistic direction. In the past I've worked as a director, dramaturg, curator, producer. My background is very strongly rooted in opera. I finished my opera degree at the Mozarteum in Salzburg when I was very young and was a soprano, also focusing on contemporary repertoire and was greatly fascinated with the Renaissance and Baroque. But I haven't sung for many years and that's also sort of a complexity I have to come to terms with, not singing anymore.

Gunnhildur Einarsdóttir I'm Gunnhildur Einarsdóttir. I'm a harpist and one half of Ensemble Adapter. Herbordt/Mohren, Matthias and I started this project because we were really curious about the opera format and wanted to investigate a bit, delve into what it's all about and why everybody is so fascinated by it. And as an Icelander and a bit of a maker maniac, I think I just already made an opera. I composed an opera already. And I didn't become rich and famous, but it was a great experience. And actually, my first job was in opera, too. For several years as a kid, I was a steady member of the Icelandic opera company, as an extra on stage. And so I have a long love for opera.

Matthias Engler My name is Matthias. I'm a musician and performer. Together with Gunnhildur, we are the Ensemble Adapter. We have been working with experimental music for a while and together with Melanie and Bernhard we initiated this research towards opera in which context we're also coming together here now because we have this love-hate relationship to the opera. This may be because we also feel kind of excluded from it, since we've always worked in small settings with music. Opera, on the other hand, is huge, and we never get there and it seems you'll never be

good enough for it and you'll never have enough power, you'll never get the power to do opera. And that's why we wanted to attack it, I think, somehow.

Keir GoGwilt My name is Keir GoGwilt. I'm a violinist and composer working across classical repertoire, improvisation, and experimental performance. As a founding member of the American Modern Opera Company, much of my work has involved working with dancers, poets, and musicians. I have played as a pit musician for many traditional operas and am actively involved in broadening the contemporary understanding of the term.

Alia Hamdan I'm Alia. I'm a fellow at the artist residency Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart. I don't have a direct connection with opera or music. I work in performance theory, aesthetic politics. I mix different things. In my past life I was also an urban researcher.

Bernhard Herbordt I'm Bernhard and I mainly work together with Melanie as Herbordt/Mohren but we always try to gather larger groups around the projects we initiate to collaborate. We work in various contexts, but we always try to perceive what we're working on as theater, or as performance. So our background lies in theater but we rarely work in theater institutions anymore. In fact, we usually work everywhere but on theater stages: in books, in exhibition spaces, in public spaces, in rural areas. And there's one shared interest in most of the pieces and projects we've developed over the last years. And that's the notion of institutions, on several levels. That's also why we became interested in opera. I'm fascinated with opera because it's such an impressive and also powerful apparatus, artistically

and also institutionally. It's one of the rare institutions that are very much intact. At least it pretends to be very much intact and it pretends it in such a performative way. I always enjoy when the audience spaces are darkened, when even the doors to them are closed synchronically and when the music then starts after three seconds of silence. All the other institutions transform – or at least pretend to transform. The opera pretends that it's never changing. I'm very fascinated with this anachronistic performance of the opera as an institution. I'm not even sure whether I want to attack it, per se. But at least I want to try to understand how is it possible for one institutional context to go on, as the world wouldn't change at all.

Neo Hülcker I'm Neo Hülcker. I'm a composer and performer. My background is basically rooted in the world of academic composition. But I moved quite quickly away from that, as I never felt very comfortable there. And now I'm doing performance and music theater and I'm in between the fields all the time. And I never really worked with opera. I always felt a little bit alienated by the term opera and also by opera houses and by this whole scenery of opera. I think maybe it scared me, but I'm very curious – maybe there's a future in another kind of opera, I would be interested in discovering that.

Cheryl Isheja I'm Cheryl Isheja. I'm also known as Binghi. I'm a beatmaker, a singer, a DJane. And I've been experimenting with audio and visual art. Mostly drums and spiritual healing. And I have stories about opera and family and personal stories. And I'm looking forward to listening and sharing with you guys.

Vigdís Jakobsdóttir I think I'm the wild card in this bunch. My background is not music or opera or anything like that, but I'm a theater artist, theater director. But today I'm the artistic director of Reykjavík Arts Festival. So I suppose the closest I've come to opera is to program opera. But I'm fascinated by this subject.

Laís Machado I'm Laís. I'm a performer and visual artist. Diego and I have a platform that's called ÀRÀKÁ and we work with different kinds of works and we also live together. And we came to the idea of an opera because Diego met an artist whose work is very related to Afro-Brazilian diaspora issues, and that's what we're interested in.

Neto Machado I'm Neto and I work together with Jorge. We mainly work in the field of dance or choreography and contemporary dance. But this concept of choreography is very often expanded and greatly associated with this idea of discovering how it's possible to think about new ways of understanding scenes, stage situations, everything. And we're from Salvador, Bahia. And we work together, in different projects, with Die Institution. I actually don't have any direct relationship with opera, like the specific scene.

Melanie Mohren I'm Melanie. I mostly collaborate with Bernhard but also, luckily, with almost everyone who's part of this conversation, which is a huge pleasure. As Matthias noted at the start, this research project is a shared inquiry into what an opera is or what an opera can be for us personally, or what we can be for the opera. And we're taking this opportunity today to actually conduct the first larger collective workshop on this topic. This is also why we started with those very simple questions: What is opera or what is

opera for you? And this is also why we asked you to bring scores. And our hope was that with this idea of the score, we might somehow arrive at very different perspectives of what opera is, or has the potential to be.

Celeste Oram My name is Celeste, and I'm a composer. I am personally quite fascinated by opera, and I've dipped my toe in and out of that world in various ways. There was a time in my 20s I thought I wanted to be an opera director. I confess I do enjoy going to big splashy opera productions a couple of times a year, and I'm a huge fan of any low-budget, weirdo indie production that calls itself 'opera', however experimental and off-the-wall. That said – as a composer, strangely, my own ambitions to ever write an 'opera' of my own are fairly muted.

Sigga Björg Sigurðardóttir My name is Sigga Björg and I'm a visual artist. I work with both figurative and abstract drawings on paper and also directly onto walls. I've created many video works using stop-motion technique, in which every frame of the animation is drawn by hand. In my practice I'm driven by the process of persistent and perhaps relentless drawing. In this process, I explore the pushes and pulls of human emotions and behavior, often in it's most extreme form. I'm drawn to the theatrical nature of opera and strongly connect with it's highly dramatic and sometimes exaggerated narratives. My drawings are a visual dialogue about the countless elements that make us human. Whether it be sad, funny, dramatic or ridiculous, in my work, I always seek to tell some kind of truth about the innumerable facets and highlight the often blurred boundaries of the human and non-human.

Olivia Stahn I'm Olivia Stahn. I'm a soprano. I've been working as a singer for many years now. But a couple of years ago, I founded a solo voice ensemble called **THE PRESENT**. And along with my two colleagues, we are the artistic directors of this ensemble. Increasingly, I am also working as a director. As a soloist, I mainly focus on contemporary, but also historical music, baroque music and everything in between. Good music.

Asmus Trautsch I'm Asmus Trautsch. For several years, I worked as a composer and organizer of projects in contemporary music, before turning my focus more to poetry and philosophy. Many years ago, I started writing an opera based on a libretto that actually was based on Ingeborg Bachmann's radio play *The Good God of Manhattan*. Ultimately, funding from the *Oper an der Leine* in Hanover couldn't be obtained, so it remained an unfinished project, and as such it was exhibited at the Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart in 2011. Ever since, I've been referring to opera in my theoretical work and have worked as a dramaturg on music theater projects. I'm very happy to be part of this discussion.

Annika Tudeer I'm Annika Tudeer. I work with a company called Oblivia. We work a lot in Germany, but we are based in Finland. I founded the company in 2000 and we started out doing site-specific work and then we moved into the black box. That's our real interest. In addition to that, I'm originally a dancer and choreographer, but subsequently studied literature and then I founded Oblivia. That's a mix of all kinds of art forms. Since 2019 we have worked with music, theater or opera, and we developed a five-year strategy with the intention of revolutionizing the opera, music and theater scene, and in doing so, also revolutionizing Oblivia.

We did our first project in a real opera, in 2022, which actually was quite fun in the end, although it wasn't totally uncomplicated.

Viktoriia Vitrenko My name is Viktoriia Vitrenko. I'm a singer conductor specializing in contemporary and experimental music, and I have a lot of experience in opera as well. In 2017 I established an interdisciplinary organization which is called Interact Initiative, where we set up performances. I'm working as a creative director of this institution. And so as part of this agency, in 2019, we conducted our own research on the topic of opera, which we call *Nopera*.

Armin Wieser I'm Armin. I'm a performer and my performance career actually started in opera. And then I changed my profession and studied acting and have worked as an actor/performer in various contexts, also with Herbordt/Mohren, for many years. And I have certain ideas about opera and the opera of the future.

What is opera?

Neo Hülcker Actually, I haven't been to the opera very often in my life. And I tend to forget the operas themselves really quickly. I'm more inclined to remember the audience, rather than the performances. For example, I can recall an elderly lady wearing an incredibly pompous hat. You got the feeling that she really wanted to be noticed.

Annika Tudeer The first thing that comes to my mind is the memory of an opera performance for children. And I never went to the opera as a child. I must have seen it later. Or maybe I never saw it. So it's a memory of something that I've never experienced.

Keir GoGwilt My mom used to work at the Met Opera, so she would take me there when she couldn't find a babysitter. So I grew up going to the opera all the time. And I remember I slept through a lot of the operas.

Cheryl Ishia My dad used to listen to a lot of operas. But as a kid, it's just loud and long and I hated it. I just didn't understand the language. I didn't understand what this thing was all about. But as I spent more time with him, I connected emotionally to the performance.

Armin Wieser When I was 17, I was an extra in *Porgy and Bess* on a big, huge stage. I was blackfaced every evening – it was *Porgy and Bess* in 1972. I'm still a big fan of opera. I go to the opera every other week to watch and be overwhelmed from time to time.

Celeste Oram My most recent trip to the opera was to the Met, and it was to see Poulenc's *Dialogues des Carmélites*. It's the French Revolution, so all the nuns get executed by

guillotine. There's an incredible final scene where they line up one by one, walk upstage, and disappear off the back of the stage. They used this sound effect of a guillotine – and all the rich people in the orchestra seats would jump, like, visibly flinching. And I found it so interesting that there was this transhistorical anxiety, about class, so thick in the air that you could cut it with a knife. Even though the sound effect was actually really bad.

Neo Hülcker Some people say that opera always involves singing. I would suggest that that's nonsense. There's no singing in my opera. Period. I think you can decide for yourself what opera is. The word 'opera' itself is burdened with historical baggage and a very specific context. It immediately conjures up images of opera houses, genteel society and so on. That's why I would perhaps say that opera is musical theater that also has to grapple with this historical concept.

Annika Tudeer For me opera is music and song and a big event. And it's big houses, big stages. But there's something else, too. Some kind of fun and grandiosity, a place where the imagination can grow.

Neto Machado We use this phrase 'this is operatic' a lot, but not to refer to a performance event, but in real life to say like this is an operatic moment, in life. Opera is quite present as a concept of an event that is of great proportions, bigger than life.

Keir GoGwilt The word originally means 'work', right?

Celeste Oram It's an operation.

Annika Tudeer When we (my performance collective Oblivia) started doing music theater, I actually thought that we were just going to call it opera all the time. But there came some resistance from inside the group, from the musicians' side: no, no, no, we can't call what we're doing opera, because of the tradition.

Gunnhildur Einarsdóttir We were once part of an opera at a contemporary music festival where there was no singing and it was booed because of that.

Arnbjörg María Danielsen I've come to be very averse to the idea of opera as something fixed that must have certain elements to be opera. And still the public comes back to the institution, to the institutionalization of the art form. We have these incredibly rigid institutions that come straight out of the conservatory system that feeds into this system. There's no single opera house that I can think of, at least in the German speaking countries, that's completely devoted to exploration and new repertoire. It's always in between *La Traviata* and *La Bohème*. And I think we need institutional critique not to be internal in the institutions, but to come as a more radical pressure from the outside.

Láis Machado For me as a Brazilian, it's interesting to think about this, because here in Salvador, I've never seen an opera. I personally have never gone to a building to watch an opera. So I would say opera is Europe. And that's funny because actually, in Brazil, we have a lot of popular manifestations of something that might be called opera.

Diego Araújo The work I did in Brazil, called QUASEILHAS, was inspired by the Yoruba Folk Opera. In turn, the Yoruba

Folk Opera was influenced by the popular performing tradition of their people, the Alárinjò: a scenic genre that emerged, possibly, at the height of the largest Yoruba city, Òyó – myth has it that this scenic culture arose from the cult of the dead, the cult of the egunguns, and that the first alárinjò was the spirit of an ancestor, an egungum. Alárinjò refers to both the scenic event and the artist of that event, the performer, the artist of the body who sings, dances, acts, narrates, and improvises. They were itinerant groups. The Yoruba Folk Opera, which founded modern Nigerian theater, was influenced by this scenic culture, the Alárinjò, and responded to English colonization by showing that Yoruba culture also had its own poetic productions in this field.

With regard to Brazil, and especially northeastern Brazil, we could draw some parallels between some Afro-Brazilian scenic cultures, many of which are Yoruba-based, and alárinjò; it is a correlation, although very difficult to prove, but possible. Scenic cultures such as Cavalo Marinho, Nego Fugido, Caretas de Acupe, Maracatu Rural and, in a more modern vein, Afro carnival blocks, etc., have an alárinjò characteristic. All of this helped in the creation of QUASEILHAS, which we also call opera. In this case, a contemporary, popular, Afro-Brazilian opera that was consequently connected to its performative ancestor: alárinjò.

Laís Machado And I think it's interesting that in Brazil this manifestation that is very influenced by the Yoruba opera is always huge. But in the street.

Neto Machado Yeah. Events that come from these roots are very common in Brazil, especially in Bahia, and they have this relationship with the African background and history.

Jorge Alencar It's very interesting to think about these origins and the label of opera. And when someone asks us who's doing opera at the moment in Bahia, we say: Laís Machado and Diego Araújo aka Plataforma ÀΡÀΚÁ are doing opera, that's it. We don't ask: 'Oh, are you talking in the European parameters?' So that's also a performative thing: 'Who is doing opera?' and together with that: 'What are we calling an opera?'

Score 1

by Laís Machado

Before we start with the score, we just want to do a small introduction about where it comes from. So that's literally a translation of *Oriki*. It would mean honoring the head and the consciousness. And this consciousness is the relation with another thing and another thing. It's anything. It could be an object, it could be people, it could be a place, it could be histories or memories or narratives even. So this is why there's many kinds of *Oriki*.

We are using this event as an example of a possible event that is constructing a collective consciousness. Like there's something happening here that could become an *Oriki*. So the *Oriki* would be the text that brings out the consciousness of this event, of this encounter, and it should also be a performance. It's a song. It's not a text. It's a text that becomes a song. So it should be sung after that and it should relate to the heartbeat of the person who's doing that. It should be performed with the heartbeat of the person who's putting that in action. The *Oriki* is made to put in action. It's not meant to stay on paper, it's meant to be enacted.

A performative response to some kind of event or something which is happening. And it should be worth the *Oriki*. So it's not that you do anything. It's a consciousness that's worth *Oriki*.

So this is an exercise of writing an *Oriki* from the pulse, from your heartbeat.

The vibration of the body that brings the text.

We'll start trying to first concentrate on this moment and think about all the things that we discussed about opera, from the beginning of this conversation until now. And then when you think that you are connected with this, you will start a small melody.

And then when the first person does this, everybody will complete this melody. We don't need to follow the first. After the first melody, we can add another layer to the melody one by one. Enter. But who enters does not leave anymore.

Then we choose a nickname for the one who started the singing because they were our first to put it in action. The first one to bring it to life. We will choose some nickname for their song, for them.

The new name could be a phrase of the *Oriki* of this moment. And also it could be used to be in that melody that was created. So it would be a phrase of the lyrics of that song that was created.

Who defines what opera is?

Cheryl Ishia Is it only opera when it's European-validated? Because then, I think it's important to talk about accessibility. If something is important in only one part of the world and let's say some people are watching it on TV or listening to it on the radio, how can they access that world when the things and the codes that have been established do only validate the European concept of this opera world?

Arnbjörg María Danielsen There are theater forms in non-European cultures that certainly are parallel to what opera is, if you break them down into their components. So if we are talking about an art form or a mode of communication or a mode of presentation and then detaching it from the institution then certainly opera exists everywhere in some sort of components of artistic practice. You can find fine art forms in all continents that work with the same elements as opera in its fundamentals. So this reference to opera always goes back to an institutional thinking and I think that's distracting for practitioners to always have to measure against something that is sort of fixed.

Asmus Trautsch I just want to add that there's always a tension and negotiation process between what the institutions define and what the artists produce. This is part of the arts and cultural institutions in modern societies. So, I think in terms of opera, we can assume that it's a struggle that all the arts have to deal with, one way or the other. I think of opera as a kind of umbrella term for artistic negotiations of how many arts work together, how they merge into each other, where the boundaries and relationships are in complex settings that are characteristic of the opera and music theater.

Can opera as an institution be subverted by opera as an art form?

Alia Hamdan

Bernhard Herbordt Somehow opera seems to be one of those institutions which still insist on not changing too much while the outside world is almost falling apart. It seems to be one of the last institutions that inherently has a kind of inflexible stubbornness.

Alia Hamdan I come from Beirut and have a background in aesthetic politics, film, and performance theory. For today, I've prepared a few thoughts on opera as a subversive art form – and by subversive, I simply mean detecting an excessive power and pitting it against itself. To do so, I look at three films that don't exactly tackle a context at the periphery, nor one at the center of capital, but rather engage with the interface between them – their relations and frictions. When I say center and periphery, I'm simply referring to locations with more advanced forms of capitalism and those with less advanced ones. The three films I'm looking at, which each appropriate opera in a subversive way, are *Apocalypse Now* by Coppola, *Circle of Deceit* by Schlöndorff, and *Paradiso XXXI*, 108, a recent film by Kamal Aljafari.

My interest in these three films is in how they depict or subvert the power relationships that inform the relations between center and periphery. In each film, the operatic act emerges as a kind of necessity – to underscore an excess of power, something that surpasses the possibility of addressing the relation through a rational or objective mode. The operatic form comes to stand, in a way, for the impossibility of exhausting power relations through the language of information – that is, through the language of the media or the news.

In *Apocalypse Now*, Coppola detects a coupling between the old disciplinary form of power – let's say the military war machine with helicopters, bombs, and so on – and new

control technologies: the so-called PSYOPs operations and the use of experimental drugs by the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War, aimed at regulating soldiers' behavior; PSYOPs operations also included the use of music to affect the behavior of 'the enemy.' Then there's the operatic scene – the one where helicopters attack the Vietnamese to the sound of Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries*. In this scene, it's no longer about the classical American soldier – someone fighting, let's say, for the American Dream, like in the films of John Ford – but rather someone pressing buttons from a distance, and while doing so, coordinating his gestures into an automated dance. So, there's this coupling that Coppola sees as so excessive that it leads to an intensification of violence, and he resorts to the operatic form to depict it. In other words, the operatic form stands for the impossibility of depicting the situation through the language of information.

Concerning *Circle of Deceit*, set within the context of the civil war in Beirut, Schlöndorff said, 'I was not interested in representing the Lebanese civil war but in showing the feedback loop between the media systems of the center and the situations of violence in the periphery'¹. In a way, he's trying to show how there's a fabrication of the image of peripheral conflicts that gets fed back into the conflict – multiplying the violence and monopolizing the production of the conflict's narratives. In line with Coppola's strategy, Schlöndorff uses the operatic form to sort of criticize the role of media systems in conflicts. He says, 'I wanted to stage the Civil War as an opera using long, elaborate tracking shots,

1 Schlöndorff, Volker: *Circle of Deceit False Witness*. European Graduat School Video Lectures, 2004. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qox3kJqDgnU>

as a counterpoint to the “fake shaky handheld camera” style of television reportage, which claims to objectively document², to expose the feedback loop between peripheral wars and the powerful media systems of the center.

I think the film by Kamal Aljafari, *Paradiso XXXI*, 108, also uses the operatic form subversively. It works with existing footage of the Israeli army produced between the 1960s and 1980s – sort of didactic and promotional videos – trying to look closely at this footage, which the army prepared to showcase the institution through promotional films. What Aljafari is trying to show here is the coupling of a military machine with its own cinematic ambition to portray itself. If you watch his film, you see these military gestures and their mechanical reiterations – in fact, people bombing an empty space, the desert, and finally destroying its landscape. Aljafari uses the operatic form to reveal this excess of ‘soldiers acting out a war in a desert’³ that have no counterpart or countershot. Indeed, in the original army footage, the ‘enemy’ is said to be always hiding – behind hills, among ruins – nowhere to be seen. Or to put it differently, the countershot to the attacks is the wind in the desert; an invisible presence, yet constantly tracked.

My interest in all this is: Can opera as an institution be subverted by opera as an art form? Shouldn’t we try to think about the question of the enemies of opera? Following Deleuze, I think that what opera can resist is the dominant media systems, and in a way, that’s what these three films are showing. A quick side comment on this: when Trump creates

2 Ibid.

3 Cf. Kandalaf, Abla; Couturier, Clatilde: *Interview with Kamal Aljafari, director of Paradiso*, XXXI, 108. <https://mydylarama.org.uk/Interview-with-Kamal-Aljafari-director-of-Paradiso-XXXI-108>

viral posts like ‘Mexican rapists’ the problem with the media world is that by simply parroting these Trumpian tropes, they end up spreading them further. Maybe opera – as a song or a scream directed at someone – is trying to respond irrationally to the highjacking of irrationality by those in power. This is a question that interests me and that I’d like to explore more.

Asmus Trautsch I think this is actually one of the greatest potentials opera has. It’s not just reflecting the power structure of institutions. It always has the capacity to also subvert the very conditions under which it’s produced. The true collaboration is already encapsulated in the very form of an opera despite the social hierarchies embodied in the institution of opera . If you take away the light designers, if they just go on strike, you may still have the great prima donna and the conductor and the composer. But the opera as theatrical performance wouldn’t work. I think opera can be conceptualized as having always the potential to subvert the power structures under which it is formed.

Bernhard Herbordt Perhaps claiming something to be an opera in the center may not matter all that much. Maybe it doesn’t even matter at all. Yet declaring it an opera in a place where something like that doesn’t exist, is another matter altogether. Most of you also refer to the power of it. Maybe then that claiming something to be an opera also includes something of the power within it. And maybe that does change something in a place where it apparently doesn’t belong.

Alia Hamdan The question of opera in the context of the center is different from the question of opera in the context

of the periphery. For someone interested in the relations of both, the question can't be just about making opera more inclusive in terms of representation – that is, including more people from different social classes, genders, and so on. One way to make opera more accessible and more equal is to explore how it can thrive in nontraditional settings, shifting attention away from solely the big institutions. My focus then isn't about thinking about how to make opera institutions more inclusive per se. It's more about how one can make sense of opera as a relevant form in the world today. This is how it becomes my question – a political question or an artistic question.

Melanie Mohren We've been asking ourselves: if we could create multiple entry points to opera, produce it in a less hierarchical way, introduce structural changes in how opera houses operate, approach themes and topics differently, and shift how audiences experience the work, that is, making them feel more included and welcome, would it still be considered opera? How far are those structures of power, of money, of status, of exclusion part of the narrative that constitutes opera? If we would treat all those parameters differently, could one still refer to the result as an opera?

Annika Tudeer I don't see why it wouldn't be called an opera. The organization would be different, but I don't think that defines opera. It doesn't have to be super hierarchical. That's just some kind of remnant. It's not a requirement. But the question is of course, how to go about opening up the organization, how to provide access to it. Because it's as exclusive as the opera audience. It's not a diverse place. Maybe it has to leave the opera houses. If the core of the idea of opera is joy and pleasure and music and access to greater worlds through music and song and a live action, if this is a definition of opera, then it can happen in other forms of organization too.

Score 2

by Annika Tudeer

For the score, each of us will do a movement, a sound and a movement. Anything that comes to your mind, that is the future of the opera. You can use your body and you can use your voice.

Then we will do everything we saw the others do.

And then we'll put this all together. We do everything we've seen and everything we've done. At the same time. We will try to do as much as we remember. If we forget something, it's fine.

Take a moment to breathe and go.

Here we are having a score for the future of the opera:

- 1 Think of what opera is for you.
- 2 Try to translate this into one simple action or situation.
- 3 Notate it.
- 4 Perform it or read it out loud.

And another score:

- 1 Think of the essence/the irreducible of what opera is for you.
- 2 Try to translate this essence into one simple action or situation.
- 3 Notate it.
- 4 Give this score to someone else. Receive the score from someone else.
- 5 Perform this score by someone else or read it out loud.
- 6 Perform the opposite of this score.

And another one:

- 1 Think of something that is really far away from opera.
- 2 Try to translate this otherness into one simple action or situation.
- 3 Notate it.
- 4 Give this score to someone else. Receive the score from someone else.
- 5 Perform this score by someone else or read it out loud.
- 6 Say: Extract of: The Opera. Stuttgart, March 23rd, 2023

**Where does opera
take place?**

Where doesn't it?

**How can that be
changed?**

Deepika Arwind I'm going to offer you an anecdote about a dance theater form from India and about a fellow theater maker from my city of Bangalore in India who chose to engage with it. We come from a growing tribe of women theater makers who are looking at ways of reimagining storytelling on stage because we are caught in a kind of flux of theater in India from a country where we have several and multiple theater cultures, some ancient, some extremely young, developing from our post-independence era. I think the purpose of this anecdote, if you will, is twofold. One, it will hopefully offer you insights into a form that exists between folk and classical Indian theater that uses movement and voice or dance and song that has some parallels with opera. But I'm always sort of wary of making equivalencies between the Global South and a form in Europe, because then we tend to say that the Indian form, let's say *Yakshagana*, which I'm talking about, becomes Indian opera, because then we are essentially eurocentric. So I'm going to say it just has some parallels with opera. But more importantly, by placing this form next to opera, I hope that we can imagine other possibilities for the opera. I hope that it could offer oppositions to opera that could be seen as more inclusive. The other purpose of this anecdote is to illuminate how an invested, concerned artist can throw open a form in ways that are interesting, that are disruptive, and hopefully even radical. So for some context, let me tell you a little bit about this form. It's called *Yakshagana*. *Yakshagana* is a form of theater in the south of Karnataka, a state that I come from in India. It's a kaleidoscope of realities, certainly in everyday life, but also in art. It's very different from contemporary Indian theater. *Yakshagana*, I would say, is not a classical art form. It exists between the texts and modes of creation between classical and folk. A traditional *Yakshagana* perfor-

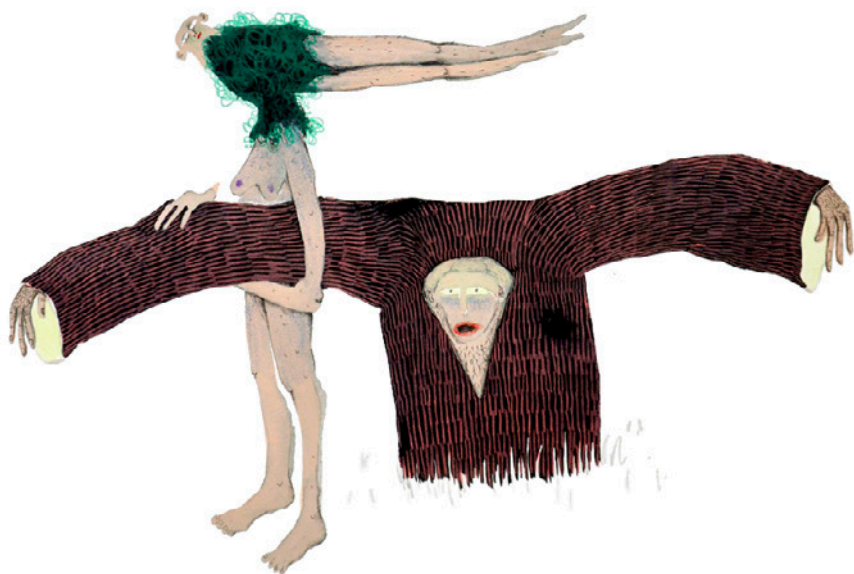
mance begins often at dusk, and then goes on till dawn and it's perhaps 3 or 4 hours long because people are working. The main stories are from the epics of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. But the performers take delightful detours into contemporary politics and use what's present in the environment to kind of riff off of each other. So it's usually done out in a paddy field or a temple yard with tea and snacks from the people of the village in which it's being performed, in whose houses the performers will eventually sleep. Again, it's a truly people owned form. And I would like to point out that *Yakshagana* is learnt by both men and women, but it is only performed largely by men who also play female roles. So I just want to say that a lot of Indian forms have restrictions on who performs them and who doesn't. But it's slowly being opened up to women. My friend decided that she's sick of playing characters called Nora in Indian theater and said, I want to go learn *Yakshagana*. Because she's a native *Kannada* speaker and she wanted to find her feet and her identity in another folk form, which uses the body in different ways. So she went in a village of South Karnataka in what is like a school or a center where the students live and work. But it is performed by people from a more kind of farmer and agricultural background so they don't get the kind of funding that perhaps classical forms in India do, which are seen as more upper caste forms. The center is kept alive by the guru or the teacher and the students they click and they clean and they cook and they do this together. I'm just quoting a little bit of an article around her experience. Her name is Sharana, and this is an article that was written about her practice in *Yakshagana*: What would *Yakshagana* look like if a woman made it? While *Yakshagana* is still a form that is dominated by men, it professes a politics of openness and accessibility, but the form was not at all insecure

that my presence would somehow topple it, she says. In this, very same security in itself allowed her to enter and stay in the tradition. Each day she lived and performed with men. Each day she shared the space with men, and each night she watched these men transform into women and then back into men in the ritual of a man becoming a woman. Just the presence of another bra in the room gave me such a sense of relief. But at the end of the night, he would go back to being a man. But I was still a woman, she says. And it was this dynamic of power that prompted her to question masculinity, gender and power, culminating in her critically acclaimed original play *Akshay Ambra*, which is closed now. Then she brought *Yakshagana* to the city stage where the friction between gender and class was felt. The people from the troupe, they toured with her on this production. They went to London and Hong Kong and several places, which is seen as the societal marker of success. I think I'm interested in how she engaged with what is a form that is old. One of the reasons she was able to do it was because the guru and the Kendra or the center welcomed her. A young woman from the city, despite the fact that they intuited that she wasn't going to be in the institution forever, that she's not going to forever be a *Yakshagana* performer. They knew that, but they still welcomed her to come and engage with this and learn it. I think the guru also had a sense that this woman was going to be critical of their practice because it is a gendered practice and there are problems, even if it's a lower caste practice, it's like there's a lot of patriarchy in this institution. And when she chose to create her work, they could see its politics. They could see the merits in her argument and also the form that she chose to work in. But they opened their minds and institutions to support the work, to collaborate and send their musicians to be part of it,

engage in debate and critique with her. In opposition to opera, which is considered high art, *Yakshagana* is a people's form accessible to anyone who might know the language, and even if they don't, it allows the viscerality of the music and the dance to affect them. Looking at the entry points in which opera remains just a little out of reach, a little inaccessible, they both share in form in some way. So the long narrative, which also uses the passing of time or temporality to unravel plots and stories they are both steeped in history and performative forms require very, very specific skill and training. And I think both these institutions, I imagine, are run by men. But in the accounts that I give you about my friend and colleague, there was a moment in which this rupture is sought and then it's allowed. I'm not saying that the process was smooth. I'm not going into the details, but I'm saying it was made possible right in which a risk was voluntarily taken despite the heavily designed longings and desires of institutions, but also of artists. I sort of wanted to offer you this moment where actually something worked. A young person said, 'I want to go into an institution of theater that may be difficult to access, even though it's very different from opera and there's resonances to opera and then actually learn it, toy with it and come back to bring elements from it that were interesting.'

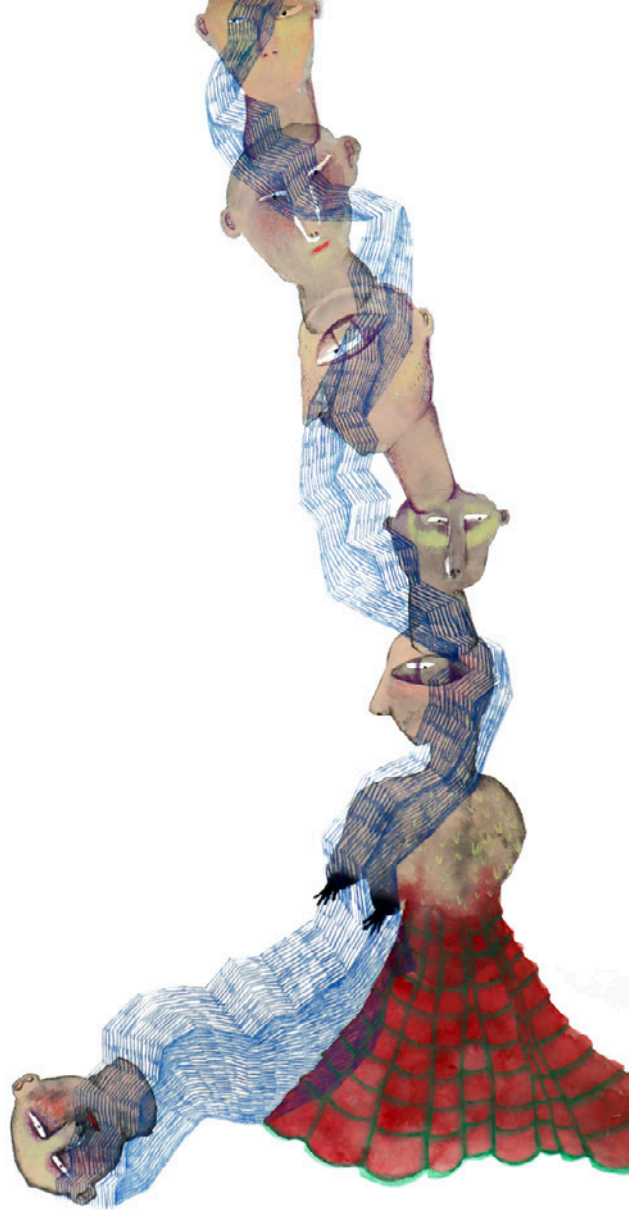
Operas

Drawings by Sigga Björg Sigurðardóttir











**Who is opera
aimed at?**

**Who is it not
aimed at?**

**How can that
be changed?**

**Or: Who has
the right to
have a full
experience?**

Lais Machado

Celeste Oram I think at the very least, opera requires a witness. Which is to say an audience, or a listener or a spectator.

Neo Hülcker I think exploring the social environment of opera, or this sociotope, is exciting. Why does opera still exist? Why are there these huge, opulent opera houses? What fascinates people with this particular museum-like quality? And what does that say about the values that exist in society? It's mostly old, large, historic, magnificent buildings that are very elegant and also require a certain code of conduct. The exterior of the building usually says, 'You need money if you want to come in here, and we have certain expectations of you.' That can be quite daunting for many people.

Laís Machado Maybe opera is that big because of this huge mixing of components: music, scenography, theater or whatever. Or is it big because it's related to big emotions? Or is it big because it has to do with the narrative of people, of a community or even this kind of problematic idea of narratives of origins?

Bernhard Herboldt I think it's a very interesting question asking when it comes to those emotions and stories and the interdisciplinarity of that event. What's the necessity of preserving that cultural practice? Addressing emotions in an 'operatic' way is no longer as effective as it might've been a few hundred years ago. Or the narratives that are presented on opera stages don't speak to that many people anymore as they might have in the past. So the reason why this is still going on might be down to politics. Because someone decided: this cultural practice has to go on. With all means necessary.

Laís Machado Yes. It's about appropriation of the elite because rich people like to collect things. And if you collect something, that thing shouldn't change anymore. Opera changed, yes, the power structures changed also. But opera is still not the best place in the world. We have a lot of work to do to change the structures of opera. But you can't change something that was collected, a piece of art that you keep in your safe. That's why I think it's interesting to think about appropriation by the rich in that context. It cannot change because they don't allow it to happen.

Annika Tudeer It's a capitalistic remnant from another time and that's why it's preserved. Marx says that economy is about relationships between people and not things. So for me, opera would still be about taking this very seriously. And that economy is about people. But also then think about urbanity and our life at the moment. What can an opera house be? My vision, what I see in front of me, is some kind of spread. How it spreads out of the building and in the building, also I don't think it's very difficult to open doors, but you have to do a little work to get people from different communities to feel involved. But I'm sure it's possible. The opera just needs to do the work.

Laís Machado In my research, I found the idea of the opera could provide a full experience. The connection of the elements, the text, the song, the performance, the dance, the place, the darkness. A kind of attempt to create an immersive experience. So we discussed the idea of coloniality of the opera in South America. But now I'd like to propose to think about the kind of appropriation of the elite, about the idea of the experience. Who has the right to have a full experience? I'm not trying to liberate the opera itself, but

there is a kind of artistic desire that is appropriated by the elite: Only we have the right to have this full experience. The way to change this could be to create a massive experience, another full experience, even with another name or using the name, claiming a kind of new origin.

Score 3

by Neo Hülcker

We need a dark space and torches. We split in three groups. Someone of the first group turns on a torch and does one specific action and then switches the torch off again and then switches the torch on again at the same time and does another specific action. And you can choose between different actions. One action would be to just let the light shine into your face and do nothing. Then the other action would be that you have to open your mouth as much as you can and you shine directly into your mouth. Another action would be that you open your mouth and you start to bubble. Like whatever comes into your head as a thought. You will speak it and you will not think. You will just talk, talk, talk, talk, talk without a break. So the first group of people does this. Turn on the torch. Do one action. Turn off the torch. Turn on the torch. Do another action. Turn off the torch.

Another group of people at the same time will sing extremely quiet that your voice is almost breaking into nothing. And try to sing with a vibrato or with a tremor so that your voice is shaking a little bit and you can sing little fragments of melodies, but it's almost nothing. So it's on the border of being audible. And then at the same time you're adopting different opera poses. So you can choose what you like to do.

And then another group, can do different emotional expressions with their faces. one after the other. And they are moving. They are transitioning from one expression to the next expression. And while you're doing that, your head is moving as well. So it's like all the different emotions that you can think of, like anger, fear, happiness. And then you're moving your head at the same time.

And you can choose which group you want to be. The group that sings very quietly with this shaking vibrato melody voice. Or if you want to do the emotional expressions that are transitioning from or morphing from one to the next, or if you want to do the thing with the torch.

Bernhard Herbordt So Gunnhildur, why did you call your piece – *Das Ohr*, which premiered 2021 at Festival ‘rainy days’ in the philharmonic hall in Luxemburg – why did you refer to this piece as an opera?

Gunnhildur Einarsdóttir Well, my piece was an exercise in questioning success. It arose from this thought that the curriculum of a composer kind of always goes from writing small solo pieces and then for three players and then for string quartet and then maybe chamber orchestra. And then you might get into orchestra and if you’re really successful, you will write an opera, and then you write the opera and then you post on Facebook, ‘Oh, I finished my opera.’ And everybody goes like, ‘Whoa. Amazing, amazing.’

Matthias Engler This Facebook post is actually an opera in and of itself.

Gunnhildur Einarsdóttir And then even more funny was the aftermath. They want to know, is it a real opera? Did you really make an opera? And then I had a fun time saying, ‘Yes, I made an opera, I composed it and I stand by it. It is an opera.’ And why is it an opera? Because it includes many things. It’s a performance on stage. There are also costumes. There is a stage setting actually. There is music, there is sound. So yeah, I can really honestly call it opera. And that was my fascination with this.

Arnbjörg María Danielsen Like your magnum opus.

Matthias Engler I’ve recently had several conversations with composers who have written ‘real’ operas, who have successfully been commissioned by opera houses to write

for their ensemble and orchestra. Several of them have described a disappointment. Whereas Gunnhildur has described this sort of a high, a couple of those composers talked about a disappointment because they didn't have all the power. Actually it turned out, they had very little power because there's the director, there's the house, there are all these departments. Everybody tells them what to do and how they have to do it. Especially as a young composer you have no power whatsoever. And that's a very disappointing experience, apparently. But on the other hand, if you think of operas from the past and repertoire, wouldn't you always refer to those as the composer's work? Like, 'Oh, the Wagner Opera', or 'Oh, the latest opera by Jörg Widman' to name a younger person. But if you then talk to those composers, they will actually say: 'Yeah, but I mean it's not at all what I wanted. It's what those people want.' You know? So it's like a complete disaster, isn't it?

Why is there a need to call something an opera?

Vigdís Jakobsdóttir

Vigdís Jakobsdóttir Opera in recent times is closely tied to power – through its audiences, its patrons, even the grandeur of its spaces. It's such a Western, European tradition, and from a post-colonial perspective it remains deeply political. Maybe that's part of the fascination: to call something an opera is to step into that history of power and cultural authority. But I do wonder whether it's always necessary, or if sometimes the label hides more than it shows.

Gunnhildur Einarsdóttir The question would be: can you create this experience of something so big, something so concentrated, something so expensive without calling it opera? And if I think of something like that, I have to think of big shows by pop stars. A Beyoncé show or a Björk show, you could easily call those shows operas. But why don't they? Did they even think of calling it opera? If they had called their work an opera, would it have been put in a different category? I actually do think so. I think it may also have been performed in an opera house and would have had access to other buildings. It's actually quite interesting, what the label does, does it harm or does it bring something?

How does opera become a status symbol?

Neo Hülcker The opera also always is a little bit about the performance of the audience. Everyone is dressed in very good clothes and is looking very fabulous. And it's also the act of going to the opera house that is kind of a special performance in your everyday life. I'm wondering if that part of the opera – not the actual stage part, but the part where you are coming to the opera as an audience – if that could be staged in a new way, for example, as an opera parade, as a dressing up for the opera parade or something. I also really like the word 'drag show' in that context.

Jorge Alencar Where does opera take place? Opera takes place very much in the codes. The status, the imaginary thing and the performativity. And yes, it has much to do with this dragish thing. The tails, the clothes, the coats. It has to do with a scene not only on the stage, but in the audience as well.

Keir GoGwilt Yeah. There are also spectacular displays of wealth, right? So there's an element of power involved in that and it's kind of purposefully extravagant to show off wealth. For example, in New York, if you're on the board of the Met Opera, you're a very powerful person. It's a very powerful, potent status symbol.

Matthias Engler But the people who are presenting the opera, are they actually in that same status? Do they want to be in that status?

Jorge Alencar There are those who can perform it and those who cannot perform it. It's like in ballet, you were chosen to be the étoile (star). You don't decide, you have to be chosen

to be someone special. You were better than the others, with their ordinary bodies, their ordinary skills.

Armin Wieser Actually you work a lot to do that. It's not only that you were chosen. You really have to study to sing 'Isolde' on a particular evening for four long hours. You have to study a lot.

Jorge Alencar But to become the first one, it's not only about working and studying. It has to do with a sort of 'profile'. Of course it's related to the skills and studying and working and that someone sings incredibly, but there is something else that makes you a diva or an étoile, a star, or something like that.

Celeste Oram There are a lot of cases in the opera world in which people exercise power over singers and their bodies, and over their artistic subjectivity. And that's certainly a hot topic in the classical opera world. Singers are pushing back against this dynamic, that they're expected to just show up and the director's going to tell them where to stand and what to do with their arms – and they're just there as a prop, basically, as a puppet to be manipulated by people who have more authority than them. I think that's always a power dynamic that's being negotiated. Certainly, these days people are more aware of it, but that dynamic is still implicit in how things are done.

Annika Tudeer For me, one thing that is a very important part of opera is that it raises emotion. Small emotions and big emotions. And with whom do we share these emotions? Is it only those who have enough money to pay for the tickets?

Diego Araújo And if all this defines the narrative – as the event itself and the dramaturgy of the opera – we should ask: What is the message of the opera to the world?

Jorge Alencar ... to keep it as it is?

Score 4

by Jorge Alencar and Neto Machado

What if we take the notion of 'opera' as a situation or a metaphor related to intensity and large scales?

In this perspective, an 'operatic/operistic situation' would provoke intense affections either in our subjectivity and/or in the contexts that we inhabit/dynamize.

We invite each of you to remember (perhaps also to sing) a song that – even if it is not an opera aria – you connect to some 'operatic/operistic situation', either in your context – community, city, country – or in your subjective experience.

notes

**What might
opera look like
in the future?**

Neo Hülcker If we were to make opera now with the means we have, and somehow, together, express what's really moving us right now, what would that look like? For some, it might be a protest opera they perform in the street. I might make an opera at home, invite three people into my small basement, watch a tiny little scene together, move small things around, and make some sounds myself. It might also be exciting to see what happens when the opera is simply about the place where it is staged. That is, about the people who are there, and about engaging with a social space.

Olivia Stahn We still want to change opera. We still want to reach everything possible in this art form. We still want to develop it further. So we are still in a cycle. On the small stages of the opera houses, they do experimental stuff, but the main thing is still this very, very narrow repertoire written by famous white European men. So I think there is this gap between avant garde opera and very traditional opera. And maybe the missing link is what the singers do in all of this. I mean, the singers are the main, well, mostly the main instrument in opera. And I think this could be a key to maybe breaking these cycles. That we change the education of singers. And we have this in the institutionalized education, but also later at the opera houses during auditions. The most important thing is the voice and the beauty and the loudness of the voice. And so many more aspects that should be treated equally when it comes to opera – like acting and thinking and understanding the subject of the piece, the ideas of the directing team – all these kinds of things come on such a lower level of education and also in the auditioning processes. I think this is something where a change could be made. The instruments, if I may say so, need to be changed. And I think that singers

should learn much more about theory, about contemporary discourses of theater, politics, and everything. And during auditions, not only the loudness and the beauty of the voice should be judged.

Viktorii Vitrenko It's been the norm for centuries that when people go to the opera houses, they expect someone to sing. Singing and the voice are still a main feature of the genre. But I'm curious: when will this genre evolve to a point where there are no singers at all? So when singing, per se, is not required anymore? I'm talking about the evolution of the genre. It's really about the question, what is an opera? Is it defined by the sound of singing voices, or is it more about listening and the feeling it creates? Last year we researched within my initiative – INTERAKT Initiative Stuttgart – on the topic of how we can bring the aesthetics of German Sign Language into the context of music and dance. So we worked from the perspective of Deaf culture, with its visual language, and tried to merge that with movement and singing in a music theater piece. I think there's still a lot of work to do in creating cross-cultural opportunities and more visibility for artists with disabilities. Opera can be a genre that unites us – and that could be an inspiring future, a step towards balance and equality.

Olivia Stahn I think this dogma of the use of the operatic voice is just the tip of the iceberg of the whole cliché idea of opera. And I think if more singers can step back from this idea about their voice, only then we can break out of this cliché. And it also comes back to the question of representation in opera, the use of the voice is just one element of this. What people are accepted on an operatic stage?

Neo Hülcker In any case, there will be no bel canto singing in the opera of the future; it's simply out. It's banned. Everything else is allowed. Or maybe everyone will just go 'Uaaaaah' on stage.

Score 5

by Asmus Trautsch

I've prepared a text, according to which I would like to invite everyone to a small exercise.

In the following, I make seven rather bold assumptions about the medium-term future of the opera.

They are based on phenomena that are already noticeable in present times.

- 1 More multimedia and modality: Opera will incorporate even more arts, new media and technologies such as VR or gaming, in addition to music, literature, acting etc. and address all sensory modalities and the body schema through different modes of communication. Regarding current social discourses that try to make hidden social, economic and cultural enabling conditions visible, opera as an institution will probably also incorporate and show more of its generating techniques, material and social structures, e.g. the backstage work or organisation. Since its Florentine beginnings, opera has always also been a negotiation of the relationship of the arts, media and aesthetic practices. As they will renegotiate and reflect their relationship and social and material conditions in new operas, they may also change the institutions, their practices and hierarchies.
- 2 Open processes of creation: We will see flatter hierarchies and more open collaborative relationships like in the more experimental practices

- of music theater: The conception, experiments or rehearsals will be understood more as part of the process of creating and transforming operas, instead of just continuing to repeat the sequence writing plot/libretto – composing the score (the main thing!) – staging – realization in rehearsals.
- 3 Pluralization of the genre: The diversity of what can be called opera is far greater today than in the so-called heyday of opera in the 19th century: cycles lasting several days such as Stockhausen's *Licht* stand alongside full-length operas with large orchestras, many roles and choirs such as Olga Neuwirth's *Orlando*, alongside chamber and short operas with small casts and few participants, alongside opera-like music theater productions such as those of the Neuköllner Oper (for example Ulrike Schwab's *GIOVANNI. EINE PASSION*) or the Opera Lab Berlin and alongside quasi-operas such as Alexander Kluge's cinematic *minute operas* – the setting, media, cast and duration of operas will vary enormously in the future.
 - 4 Increase in diversity: A) Themes: operas will also broaden their thematic focus: perhaps there will be operas featuring only children and educators in a day-care center, operas about cobalt mine workers in the Congo, operas by indigenous groups in the Amazon. B) Performance venues: Operas will move even more from the main stage into foyers, workshops, off-spaces,

clubs, schools, industrial sites, hospices, landscapes. Hybrid formats may continue to develop, also in the cyberspace. In addition, more modular opera houses could be built, such as the Opéra Berlioz/Le Corum in Montpellier. C) Audiences: There will be, indeed must be, more socially open and barrier-free access, including educational formats for children and young people especially from non-privileged backgrounds, broader addresses of audiences, free performances, different performance times etc.

- 5 Inclusion of non-human or post-human agents: animals, plants, landscapes, planets, technical interfaces, AI, robots will play larger roles in operas, because they belong to the connected world in the Anthropocene. It fits with multi-modal opera that movements generate sound via digital technologies (e.g. the 'Conductor Suit' of the Einstein Center Digital Future) or that the audience co-determines the music via sensors (see www.oper.digital). We need operas that tell a story of the disturbed nitrogen cycle, that are set in the intestines of a human being, operas in which mushrooms produce sound or the weather conditions of an open-air performance participate as form elements. We need operas in which Large Language Models perish because they cannot fall in love, operas in which everyone is included so that there is only one festive-being-in-the-opera, no separate audience.

- 6 Living history in the here and now: the repertoire since Peri and Monteverdi will and should remain the reference point for the ongoing transformation of operas. The existing opera ensembles must therefore be preserved, especially because they do not build on cultural capital of a leading class anymore ('opera' has become a genre for its true lovers in the phase of the dying-out of cultural bourgeoisie for which it counted as cultural capital). In continuing to perform operas from the past, their mediating formats and practices of production will continue to change in a more inclusive and democratic way.

- 7 Powerhouse: In the future, operas will sound various ways. How? Let's listen, feel, sense and see. The only thing that seems certain to me is that whatever opera does, it sounds. No opera without the energy that musical sound can generate.

Exercise: I ask you all to think of a word or phrase that comes up when you ask yourself what fascinates you about opera. I will give a cue, then please convey that word or words as song, as spoken language, through facial expressions, gestures, a drawing, an object or in some other way. We will thereby form a multimedia 'opera choir'.

Melanie Mohren Can one have a memory of the future? Probably not. But one can have an imagination of a future situation. Is there a specific sound or a specific atmosphere or a specific image or a specific scene where you feel this is what people will experience on the opening night of a future opera house?

Annika Tudeer I mean, fun, pleasure and listening. Very keen listening. I think that would be a common thread. Very high-quality listening. We need to listen. Listen to each other. So it would vibrate from listening and attention. That would be the opening act. And then warmth, beauty, pleasure and joy. Humor.

Melanie Mohren Reducing it to listening is interesting, because that's touching the structure – in terms of how we work together – as well as the aesthetic of opera. I think many of those core structural problems that one faces in the institution of an opera could already be altered to a large degree through careful listening. Sometimes the small changes are so effective, or they seem so small, but are actually so huge.

Neo Hülcker I would probably tend to focus more on the very small things, on the incidental, the things that are always overlooked, the things that aren't the big, important ones, but are perhaps connected to them.

Annika Tudeer Yeah. It's time to bring the opera into the 21st century.

Score 6
by Armin Wieser

Imagine an Opera
From the perspective of a performer

A possible opera for the future will be:
EVERYTHING has to be performed by EVERYBODY
for EVERYBODY.

The Opera of the future will not be based on a
libretto or an external narration.

Music composition will no longer be an instrument
of power by a single person.

It will encompass various desires and needs, such
as inner and external conflicts of all participating
elements, including people, things, nature, build-
ing elements, constellations between persons.
Persons and already existing sounds will produce
thrilling moments and dramaturgical suspense.

Failing will be a very important and defining ele-
ment and will be considered as a possibility for
the final result.

The respective constellation of space, nature, light, air, the biographies of the involved people and the skills of all elements involved to produce sounds will be concisely presented and contribute 100 percent to the whole. This requires the highest levels of concentration and all performing persons should be fully focused for the best results.

From black box and opera house to alpine panorama and glacier edge to rain forest to 1 square meter table top – everything can be conceived and used as a performing space. The idea of scenery extends beyond borders and limits both in the smallest and in the largest.

The organisation of sounds (or music composition) arises from the ability to listen and perceive of the performers as well of the audience. Hereby, silence is an essential starting point. And there will be no definitive, overarching power who defines or confirms hierarchies.

The tradition of conventional opera works as we know it from past times, namely the will to overwhelm and to experience opera as ‘Powerhouse of feelings’ (‘Kraftwerk der Gefühle’) should be retained in any case. However, a complete revision and re-evaluation of the terms ‘overwhelm’ and ‘feelings’ is absolutely necessary.

Biographies

Jorge Alencar is a Brazilian artist with a PhD in dance, conducted between Brazil (UFBA) and Germany (JLU Giessen). His works include the choreographic installation *Dance Library*; the feature film *Pinta*; and the IC Encontro de Artes festival. He has been creating several projects in partnership with Neto Machado, Ellen Mello, Larissa Lacerda, Melanie Mohren, Bernhard Herborcht. He is a member of Dimenti Produções (since 1998) and Conexões Criativas, both dedicated to artistic creation, curation, education, and art and culture publishing.

Diego Araújo is based in Salvador-BA, Brazil. He works as a director, set designer, writer, playwright and screenwriter. His media are scenic-performative, visual, literary and audiovisual. With the artist Laís Machado, he founded the ÀRÁKÁ Platform, studio and territory of creation and connection with Afrodiaspora. He is currently a master's student in the Postgraduate degree in Performing Arts from the Federal University of Bahia. (PPGAC-UFBA) with the research *CRIOLLAGE - counterpoetic scene*, where he is developing the work *OSSALITRES - 2nd crioullage*.

Deepika Arwind's work often looks at etching an emotional map of the social, political, the lived and the unsaid. She is a writer/performer and transdisciplinary artist based in Berlin, and her work has been presented/published in several continents. While her practice is expansive, it often begins with the written word and its possibility of myriad inhabitations. Her upcoming work includes her debut novel *Good Arguments* (Simon & Schuster India) and *Phantasmagoria* (previously produced in London) in Bern in 2026.

Arnbjörg María Danielsen is an artist, theatermaker and curator working in the cross-sectional oasis between music, performance and visual arts. As a director, she has developed interdisciplinary music theater productions on the intersection of contemporary and classical music, visual arts, performance, literature, and historical research, working with international symphonic orchestras, theaters and festivals. She has been dedicated to artistic practice in the Arctic, especially developing artistic collaborations between Iceland, Greenland and international collaborators. In 2023 she founded the Reykjavík based creation nebula and music label marvaða.

Gunnhildur Einarsdóttir is a harpist, performer, lecturer, composer and project manager. Exploring and expanding the harp as an instrument has been at the core of her diverse career. Her dissertation has become a widely used encyclopedia of contemporary harp techniques and notation worldwide. Einarsdóttir's artistic practice is increasingly shifting toward improvisation and composition, both solo and in collaboration with other artists and disciplines.

Matthias Engler works as a musician, curator and producer. He studied classical percussion and contemporary chamber music in Amsterdam and Frankfurt am Main. In 2004 he co-founded the Ensemble Adapter with harpist Gunnhildur Einarsdóttir in Berlin. His artistic interest has developed far beyond the role of a music performer over the years. He focuses on independent and collaborative work in the field of contemporary music and art – in the form of compositions, installations and stage works.

Keir GoGwilt is a violinist and composer who was born in Edinburgh and grew up in New York City. His work combines his historical & musicological research with collaborative experimentation. He has soloed with groups including the Sinfonieorchester Basel, Orchestra of St. Luke's, Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra, Chinese National Symphony, Orquesta Filarmonica de Santiago, the Boston Modern Orchestra Project, and the La Jolla Symphony. A founding member of the American Modern Opera Company (AMOC), he has composed and internationally performed original, collaboratively-devised music, dance, and theater works. GoGwilt earned his PhD in Music from UC San Diego in 2022.

Alia Hamdan is a researcher in aesthetic politics and a practitioner in performance and video, with a particular interest in Lebanese aesthetics and Deleuzian visual theory. She completed her studies in France, earning a Master's Degree in Philosophy from Paris I-Sorbonne, a Master's Degree in Urban Research from Paris X-Nanterre, and pursuing a dance curriculum at the CCN of Montpellier. Back to Beirut, where she was born, Alia worked as an urban researcher while developing and presenting performance projects. Until 2021, she taught art theory at the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts and Saint Joseph University. Since 2023, she has been based in Berlin. Her latest performance, *The Body Is Here, Offscreen* (2025), was recently presented at the Alkantara Festival and at the Kaaistudios in Brussels.

Neo Hülcker is a composer and performer. Their compositions evolve as situations, performance-installations, actions and interventions, and deal with digital subculture (like ASMR), childhood, human-animal-relations, queer practice and cultural hacking. They are a part of the Y-E-S collective. Neo Hülcker created compositions, performances, music theaters and installations in various collaborations. Hülcker's compositions have been performed in several international contexts.

Cheryl Isheja, also known as Binghi, is a Rwandan singer/songwriter, actress, spoken word artist, music producer and DJ active since 2017. She also experiments with audio visual installation and shows her work at exhibitions. Isheja embarked on her artistic career in 2011 as a Neo-Soul singer and has performed in live shows in different locations in Kigali and collaborated with different bands and musicians based in the city, as well as touring artists and performers. As self-taught music producer since 2018, she is passionate about experimental music/electronic/deep-Techno and Spiritual drum patterns, and is also a DJ and member of the group disco titties.

Vigdís Jakobsdóttir is a theater director and cultural leader based in Reykjavík. She served as Artistic Director and CEO of the Reykjavík Arts Festival from 2016 to 2024, where she curated across disciplines, including opera and contemporary music theater. Her work focuses on access, inclusion, and the social role of the arts, exploring how performance can open spaces for dialogue, imagination, and meaningful collective experiences.

Laís Machado is a transdisciplinary communist artist, with a BA in Performing Arts from the Federal University of Bahia. Black and non-binary, they also work as a researcher and science enthusiast, as well as an amateur astronomer. Their artistic practice unfolds in multilingual projects at the intersection of performing arts and other art forms. By reconstructing, destroying, or reconstituting political and individual experiences of violence, they invite the audience to immersive experiences and collective pacts of memory and intimacy. In 2017, together with artist Diego Araújo, they founded Plataforma ÆRÁKÁ.

Neto Machado is an artist with multiple connections to the ideas of choreography, scene, body, memory, psychoanalysis and childhood. Some of his works are: *Paper Choreographies* (a collection of dancing books for children) and *Dance Library* (performance that gathers artists as books of a living library). Neto is part of Dimentí Produções Culturais and the Conexões Criativas (BA), both collective platforms from Salvador-Bahia-Brazil.

For over twenty years, **Melanie Mohren** and **Bernhard Herbordt** have been developing interdisciplinary works together in the crossover realm of the performing arts: Their space and sound installations, audio pieces, performances, music theater works, exhibition and publication projects are featured internationally and have been awarded numerous prizes (e.g. the German Theater Prize Der Faust, 2022). Since 2012, Herbordt/Mohren have been exploring and updating institutions in various formats and media. This artistic work has resulted in three publications with the Berlin-based Alexander Verlag (e.g. *Vorgestellte Institutionen / Performing Institutions*, 2014). In addition, Herbordt/Mohren conceive, curate and stage discursive format series, congresses and festivals, are active in various juries and have been teaching regularly for over ten years at art colleges and universities in German-speaking countries and beyond.

Celeste Oram is a composer and musician, originally from Aotearoa New Zealand, now living in New York City. Celeste's work often revisits historical musical repertoires with an experimental ethos. Recent projects include works for vocal and chamber ensembles, symphonic scores for dance-theater productions, live musical radioplays, and performances with live electronics and improvisation. As a conductor and lifelong choral musician, Celeste has served as musical director for various community and student choirs, operas, and musical theater productions.

Sigga Björg Sigurðardóttir lives and works in Reykjavik. Her works have been exhibited widely abroad and in all major art museums and art spaces in Iceland. Sigurðardóttir's works are featured in the collections of all major art museums in Iceland as well as in art collection in the Nordic countries, Belgium, England, Switzerland and Germany. Sigurðardóttir graduated with an MA degree from the Glasgow School of Art (2004) and a BA degree from the Iceland Academy of the Arts (2001).

Olivia Stahn is a music theater performer, concert singer and artistic director of ensemble THE PRESENT. She is particularly interested in pre-classical and contemporary music. She has worked with Pierre Boulez, Lucia Ronchetti, Beat Furrer, Helmuth Oehring, Christoph Schlingensief, Hans-Werner Kroesinger, Reiko Fütting, Frank Hilbrich and Saar Magal and made guest appearances at the Staatsoper Unter den Linden Berlin, Staatsoper Hannover, Staatstheater Stuttgart, ZKM Karlsruhe, Dresdner Musikfestspiele, Bachfest Leipzig, Schwetzingen Festspiele, Thüringer Bachwochen, Bregenzer Festspiele, Schlossmediale Werdenberg, Wiener Festwochen, Münchner Opernfestspiele and at Kampnagel Hamburg, among others. For THE PRESENT, she designs conceptual concert programs that intertwine historical and contemporary music, and stages scenic event formats.

Asmus Trautsch is a philosopher, poet and former composer from Berlin. After graduating in composition and music theory, he did a PhD in philosophy at Humboldt University Berlin. He has taught at various colleges and universities in Germany and the US and developed music theater projects such as *NACKT*. He worked as a dramaturg and conductor in new music projects and as a curator of interdisciplinary exhibitions and events. He has published five books with philosophy, essays, commentaries and poetry.

Annika Tudeer is a performance artist, artistic director and co-founder of Oblivia. After working as a dancer and choreographer, Annika Tudeer graduated in literature from the University of Helsinki. She then worked as a dance and performance critic until 2004, writing extensively about new trends in the performing arts. She has received several awards for her pioneering work in the field of performing arts in Finland. She is currently interested in the possibilities of new music theater, how to communicate and how to create a better and more enjoyable world. She currently works on her PhD at MUK in Vienna.

Viktoria Vitrenko is a singer, conductor, and curator. She studied conducting and contemporary vocal techniques in Kyiv and Stuttgart and co-founded INTERAKT, a transdisciplinary collective in Stuttgart. Her work explores contemporary and cross-genre music, inclusive music theater, accessibility, and community art. She has performed at leading festivals and opera houses, including the National Opera of Ukraine, Opéra national de Lorraine, and ECLAT Festival.

Armin Wieser was trained as an actor at the University of Music and Performing Arts, Graz. From 1990 to 2000 he was a member of the Vivienne Newport Company, Frankfurt/M. Since 1989 he worked as a freelancer in productions at the Sophiensælen Berlin, HAU Berlin, Gorki Berlin, Radialsystem, Mousonturm Frankfurt, Kampnagel Hamburg, Frascati Amsterdam, Staatsoper Stuttgart, Staatstheater Dresden, among others. Since 2000, he has also done numerous works for film and TV in Germany and Austria. Since 2009 he has worked continuously with Herboldt/Mohren. Since 2019, he has been working with Neo Hülcker.

All titles of the series

Herbordt/Mohren (Eds.): *Schaudepot Research #3: What can opera (still) do? Initiated by Ensemble Adapter and Herbordt/Mohren.*

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About the series

The Schaudepot is a library of performances. It not only provides a space for browsing, borrowing and live experiences, but also functions as a neighborhood meeting place.

The Schaudepot is shareable, and is an art project and a theater institution. And much more. Research is continuously conducted on extending common forms of theater, the interweaving of digital and analogue spaces, and interactions between the practices of institutions and those of art. All this takes place in the middle of a residential area in Stuttgart, in a 52 square meter-space on the premises of a former tiling workshop. And all in a model format, with children and adults alike. It involves a team of regional and international artists, researchers and activists. Work is collaborative, with changing role attributions and participatory formats. The *Schaudepot Research* series are published lecture notes, the results of conferences and workshops organized by the first Schaudepot for the Performing Arts and edited by Melanie Mohren and Bernhard Herboldt.

The common theme of all issues in the series is the question of the artistic expansion of theater vernaculars, along with the de-hierarchization of different forms of perception and knowledge. In this way, the Schaudepot can become a Schaudepot, a space that can not only be watched and observed, but also a vehicle for implementing a multifaceted contemporary space in the everyday life of a Stuttgart residential district with all its sensitivities and contradictions.

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www.das-schaudepot.org