

OPERA NEWS

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Productive Possibilities

The intersection of movies and opera is changing audience engagement.

By Charles Shafaieh

Illustration by Robert Neubecker

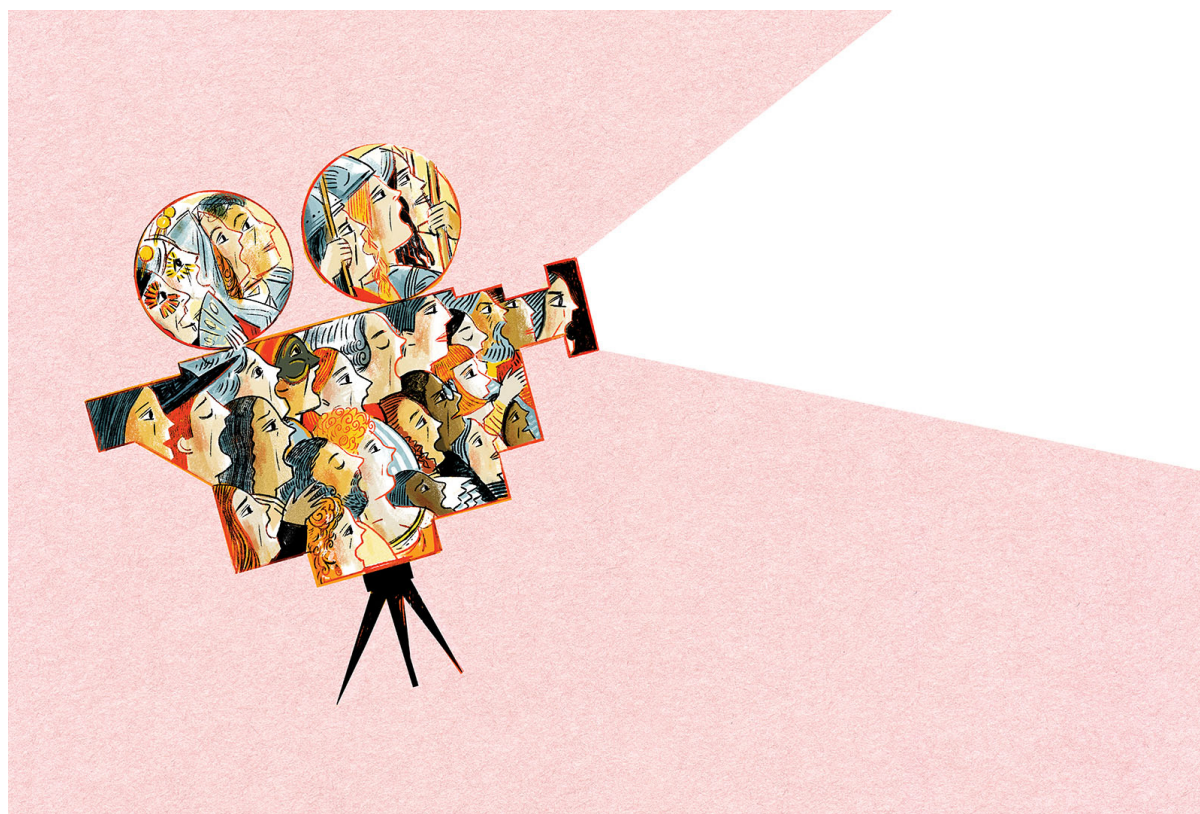


Illustration by Robert Neubecker

OPERA FILMS, almost as a rule, are disappointing. From Ingmar Bergman's staid *Magic Flute* (1975), shot in a recreation of the Baroque Drottningholm Palace Theatre, to Zeffirelli's even more conservative period pieces, such as *Otello* (1986), they often fail to entrance even the most die-hard opera fans. Many reasons have been given for the genre's shortcomings—the oddness of watching operatic singing performed in cinematic close-up, the irritation caused by poor lip-synching to typically prerecorded performances. The most vociferous criticism concerns these films' inability to capture the live experience. A single notion underpins these

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grievances: opera is bound by music, with a perennial privileging and fetishization of the unamplified voice. As long as that belief persists, however, both film and opera audiences will suffer.

This statement neither dismisses nor derides music. Rather, it asks that we remember that *dramma per musica*, whether onstage or onscreen, involves more than *la musica*. “The Lord gave us eyes and ears, and what we see is as important as what we hear. [The set] should not be decoration,” says director Robert Wilson, who has long sought to equalize the aural and the visual. That we need reminding of the image’s importance today is a paradox, considering the screen’s ubiquity in society. Yet, perversely, nowhere is the misguided hierarchy in which the visual becomes secondary more evident than in film. “All film writers should be shot,” film and opera director Peter Greenaway says. “For eight thousand years we’ve had lyric poetry, for four hundred years we’ve had the novel, [and] theater hands its meaning down to text. Let’s find a medium whose total, sole responsibility is the world as seen as a form of visual intelligence.” Examining opera and film’s convergence in particular, it’s clear how far we remain from realizing Greenaway’s dream of an image-based cinema.

This need not have been the outcome. Considering that both media embrace the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or “total work of art,” that is most associated with Wagner’s aesthetic goals, opera seems an ideal seed for inspiration and innovation in film. Yale professor of music Gundula Kreuzer argues that Bayreuth was proto-cinematic through its unique architecture, which focused sight lines on its proscenium, its then-novel envelopment of the audience in darkness, and the “invisible” orchestra, all of which together help create an “illusionist overall appearance” of a single plane onstage. Kreuzer quotes a rehearsal score for *Das Rheingold* that notes Wagner’s desire for “a ‘picture of life’ [that] shall unfurl everywhere before us,” akin to the “movable canvases” popular at the time, and which he used at the 1882 *Parsifal* premiere. This inspiration, she argues, “betrays ... a two-dimensional conception of spatial representation.” “Wagner’s concept of the single evolving [picture of life] points to a perceptual kinship with cinema: that of the flat surface facilitating life-like moving images—a surface akin to both the painter’s canvas and the cinematic screen, whose material identity is rendered obvious in German, where *Leinwand* is a term used for both,” she writes.

Only a few years after the *Parsifal* premiere, early filmmakers worldwide embraced opera. George Méliès shot an adaptation of *The Barber of Seville* in 1904. Arthur Gilbert directed scenes from *Il Trovatore* and *H.M.S. Pinafore* in 1906. At least seven *Carmen*-inspired films were produced before 1914. Like his peers, Thomas Edison was canny in using opera to endow this new populist entertainment with prestige. He declared in 1910, “We’ll be ready for the moving picture shows in a couple of months, but I’m not satisfied with that. I want to give grand opera.”

Composers in the first half of the century also relished cinema’s potential. Berg saw film as a means to expand opera’s possibilities and considered a *Wozzeck* movie. Vaughan Williams acknowledged that “film contains potentialities for the combination of all the arts such as Wagner never dreamed.” Among these was the “utmost unreality” that Schoenberg understood cinema could manifest in ways impossible in live theater, which fueled his desire for an (unrealized) abstract film of *Die Glückliche Hand*.

Schoenberg’s prescience, sadly, has not been shared by most who put opera onscreen. Rather than unreality, directors too often focus on the heightened verisimilitude and grandeur of shooting at historic sites. Examples of this and other misguided capitulations to realism are numerous. In Joseph Losey’s *Don Giovanni* (1979), for example, singer-actors in period dress move throughout Venice and its environs. The undeniable opulence of the sets and stellar musical performances are overshadowed, however, by Losey’s clueless cinematic treatment of the arias. Overcorrecting the “park-and-bark” blocking that characterized much of the last century’s live performances, his cast roams aimlessly through palatial estates and gardens for no apparent reason except to avoid stasis.

Different solutions are possible though—solutions that employ cinema’s unique capabilities rather than the perpetual failure of transposing the theatrical experience to film. Take Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger’s *Tales of Hoffmann* (1951). Unlike the aforementioned examples, as well as the simulcast

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screenings from opera houses that jump hurdles to perpetuate the fantasy that audiences are at the opera and not in a movie theater or their own homes, *Tales* constantly makes the audience aware of its status *as a film* through its Technicolor phantasmagoria, overlaid imagery and special effects. These facets also help to dispel the belief that we must always see singers and/or actors lip-synching in opera films, therefore liberating audiences to experience the music as just one facet of many. A case in point is the opera's vocal pinnacle, the automaton Olympia's aria, "Les oiseaux dans la charmille." Rather than spotlight actress/ballerina Moira Shearer miming Dorothy Bond's vocals, the camera frequently pulls back to showcase Shearer's masterful dancing, with no attempt to align body with sound or acknowledge the mouth at all. Such choreography, which would be impossible for anyone singing, in turn heightens Olympia's uncanniness and thus the operatic spectacle.

Directors Greenaway and the late Andrzej Żuławski have both expressed doubts that opera can be filmed, and perhaps because of their skepticism their attempts are more rewarding and enlightening than most. Both eschew realism in favor of heightening our awareness of opera's inherent artifice through, as one example, their use of the camera. But they achieve their goal in diametrically opposing ways. In his impressively overwhelming and irreverent *Boris Godunov* (1989), Żuławski's camera moves almost in disorienting perpetual motion, with its cadences and editing echoing those in the music. Greenaway argues that the edit's "cut" creates an interruption in time and space that is antithetical to opera, so in his BBC commission with composer Louis Andriessen, *M Is for Man, Music, Mozart* (1991), he favors long-duration wide shots predominately featuring physical movement. He then overstuffs the screen with myriad overlaid materials, including the libretto, drawings, and close-up footage of singers. In doing so, Greenaway evokes, not replicates, the beautiful excesses that define live opera through a synergy of image and music. By extension, he lets us appreciate better all facets of the opera-house experience.

LIVE OPERA REMAINS LARGELY CANCELED due to the coronavirus pandemic, but as multiple international directors and producers have realized, film production resumed as early as last summer. Requesting funding for film operas—which create paychecks for performers and technicians—has therefore become easier than for live events. Amsterdam-based composer and director Con-stantine Koukias recently discovered this when he sought support from Screen Australia for his and librettist Biasino William Pezzimenti's *Shaped by Trees*. Never intended for live performance, *Trees* features the protagonist, Eva, at three stages of her life and her tumultuous love affair with a seminary priest. "It can't be done effectively onstage, because of the time periods we cross, sometimes in quick succession," says Koukias, who appreciates film's "ability to tell parallel stories clearly, with proximity, intimacy and subtlety like no other medium." The film will also feature live singing, with the performers wearing an earpiece through which the orchestral recording will play, as well as any sounds that permeate the performance during shooting. "I don't want the unrealistic sound world that you have when you mime to musical backing, nor do I want to lose the essence of each space, whether it's a church, nursing home or lake."

The pandemic's productive possibilities were noticed by director Kevin Newbury, too. "I don't want to watch people who don't know how to direct film make something in an opera house and film it, to keep donors engaged," he says. "This moment in classical music and live performing arts is akin to the MTV generation, when all these musicians learned how to visualize their music for the first time and collectively invented a new art form. It's a time to revolutionize opera!" Driven by that goal, and with the help of Beth Morrison Projects, last September he and a coterie of performers from different disciplines formed a Covid bubble in rural New Hampshire, where they created *Up Until Now*, a "music-driven film," in Newbury's words, set to the Prelude from Gregory Spears and Kathryn Walat's *Paul's Case*. While completely inspired by the music, the film contains only soundtracked music, with no miming, which frees the performers and camera to accentuate elements of healing, intimacy and connection that Newbury describes as the film's core.

Director James Darrah has been among the most ardent proponents of this genre in recent years. Rather than seeing the pandemic as merely a pause, he believes it occasions a unique chance for opera companies to change their demographics. "Every U.S. company talks about bringing in young audiences and making

opera exciting, to which I say, ‘Look how TV and film work,’” he argues. “For the most part, there’s interest in what a director you like creates and in new releases, not iterative things recycled over and over. With everyone watching screens right now, we have an opportunity to shift a company’s DNA quickly in a way we couldn’t before, when they would have been less likely to take these risks.” To that end, in 2020 Darrah became creative director of digital content for the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, with whom he started an innovative digital series. He also directed multiple opera films, including Francis Poulenc and Jean Cocteau’s *Voix Humaine* with Opera Philadelphia and Philip Glass and Arthur Yorinks’s *Fall of the House of Usher* with Boston Lyric. As Boston did not dictate that its singers appear onscreen, the latter is comprised of three types of animation edited together, with music soundtracked. “If you’re putting things onto a screen, it’s ‘visual first,’ but that doesn’t mean the content can’t be based in music,” he says. “To use music as a foundation to create something visually is as respectful of the music as doing a stage production.”

This conviction echoes Robert Wilson’s perpetual goal with his *mise-en-scène*—“to help us hear music with our eyes open.” Schoenberg, too, understood the power of visual/aural counterpoint and knew cinema could facilitate it in unparalleled ways. Whether opera companies will continue denying all those qualities that make opera blissfully overwhelming remains an open but urgent question. ■

Charles Shafaieh is an arts journalist whose work has appeared in The New Yorker, The Irish Times and other international publications.