

Interview with Michal Grover-Friedlander

Laura Cesaro

Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia

Professor Michal Grover Friedlander is head of the Musicology Program at Tel Aviv University, and the director and artistic founder and manager of TA OPERA ZUTA specialising in contemporary opera, music theatre and collaborative projects. She has directed in Israel, Italy, Germany and Japan. She has written three books: *Vocal Apparitions: The Attraction of Cinema to Opera*; *Operatic Afterlives*; *Staging Voice*.

Besides several important articles, at least two of your books – *Vocal Apparitions: The Attraction of Cinema to Opera* and *Operatic Afterlives* – can be considered as real milestones regarding the theory of intermediality with specific reference to opera and film. Was there any specific theoretical or artistic work that inspired this research?

My research on opera and cinema has been spread out over many years, but if I think of my initial inspiration drawing me to the subject, it would have to be Carolyn Abbate and Stanley Cavell's writings and the film version of *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925) that starred Lon Chaney. Abbate's work brings out the uncanny nature of voice and singing in opera and shows how such strangeness becomes inherent to the medium as such. One aspect of this uncanniness is elaborated in Abbate's paradoxical claim establishing the presence in opera of 'unsung' voices, unheard song that sings itself and stands for the unattainable in song.

Cavell's ontology of opera has similarly influenced my formulations. It has informed notions such as opera's hovering between worlds; singing as a form of passage, an in-between; and the particular relationship between an operatic voice and the body as the voice's disembodiment within the body carrying it. Cavell's philosophical writings give a philosophical underpinning to the myth of Orpheus and singing's power to cross over to the other world in an attempt to bring back the dead. Cavell's interpretation of the power of singing to cross between worlds holds that singing is the power to revive this world, to show this world as transfigured. Singing has the power to revive the deadness of our world, opening it up to a higher significance.

With *The Phantom of the Opera*, I worked with the idea that in this silent film I can actually hear the operatic voice – but with my eyes, not my ears. This sensual mode of experiencing opera is quite intense, and it is no less “operatic” than what occurs when we listen to opera. The stylistic features, and predominantly the presentation of the figure of the phantom, the plot, and the filmed scenes from Gounod’s opera *Faust*, make the film in fact feel more operatic than opera itself. I came to realize that relating to opera from the outside, as it were, through another medium, can elucidate what opera is all about. In a way, then, I was using film to understand opera.

In the project we are working on, we aim at focussing on under researched case studies that highlight nonetheless the influence of opera or operatic music on film music. Amongst other things, we deal with opera as a medium in relation with cinema as a medium too, which you also address in your writing. What are the points of encounter between the two media and what macro areas you believe is necessary to look into?

Opera today is very different from what it was a few decades ago, and as a result, the points of encounter with film have changed. Opera has become multimedial and employing the latest technological developments. Crucially, it is no longer necessarily defined by the presence of voice and thus doesn’t rely so heavily on the auditory. I think it would be safe to say that, to a large extent, film features such as screens and modes of virtual reality are embedded within recent operatic works.

Take, for instance, Michel van der Aa’s opera *After Life* (2005-06), or any of his operas for that matter. Van der Aa’s style on the whole is hypermedial. He works with and through several media, being fascinated by the possibilities opened up by the questioning of boundaries, by intermedial slippage, passage, and diffusion. He rethinks oppositions, particularly those between the virtual and the real, the live and the virtual. In his aesthetics, audiovisual and musical material are integrated; sound, music, and image permeate one another; screen and stage flow in and out of one another; live music is integrated with prerecorded electronic sound. His experiments with new media and technologies of audiovisual reproduction and remediation have been transforming opera as a performing art and, obviously, bringing it in greater proximity to film.

Marina Abramovic’s opera *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* (2020) is another example of reconfiguring the relationship between opera and film. Films screened on a large scale accompany the onstage singing of arias, the live singers dwarfed by the huge screen. In the compositional process, Callas’s recordings of these arias were used to determine the length of the films. In the performance itself, Callas’s singing was replaced by the performances of live singers. These singers, however, needed to learn to match their performances to Callas’s in accordance with the length of the film. In other words: singing determines film, which then in turn comes to determine singing. Where does the operatic lie in this work? Where is the cinematic located?

There is, however, one scene in *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* in which we hear Callas’ voice. Here there is no corresponding film. Callas’s voice emerges from an onstage turntable. The curtain goes down, and Callas’s voice, extracted from a recording, is reconnected to the live orchestra. Abramović steps in front of the curtain and gestures with her hands, mimicking Callas’s

concert gestures. She abstains from lip-synching Callas's singing: her mouth is closed, her lips are sealed. It is not, though it could have been, a cinematic dubbing scene. The scene exemplifies, once again, the flexibility of the relation of the operatic to the cinematic.

Orlando (2018), by Julie Beauvais and Horace Lundd, is an opera that does not require the voice. The work's open score allows any musician to join in and perform at any given performance. There are seven large screens on which images of seven people named Orlando are simultaneously projected. The performance I attended during Opera Days Rotterdam in May 2019 had no musicians. All in all, there is no singing. *Orlando* is an example of a voiceless opera. In response to your question, then, I would be curious whether, and if so how, the merging of opera and cinema occurring in recent opera bears on the dialogue with cinema.

Using the term from the French philosopher Alain Badiou, who defines an “event” (1988; 1989) as something that causes a break in temporal continuity, producing the emergence of a new possible meaning, the voice in cinema often seems to play the role of an agent activating a discontinuous movement able to open up “the space of an event” in the narrative. In the dialogue between opera and film, if we consider more specifically voice and image, we could say that a clash between the two allows for the space of the event to emerge. Is this sense of a clash present in any way in your concept of ‘Orphic death’? What does the visual element represent in your idea? Does it necessarily have a connotation in relation to the survival of the opera?

This is a very interesting angle to reflect on the meaning of ‘Orphic death’. I am not sufficiently well versed in Badiou's writings but let me try to express the way I conceive of the ‘other’ temporality that is at play in the concept of Orphic death. To start with, there is no successive and continuous progression insofar as the Orphic moment is a crossing between worlds. As Cavell puts it: “Such a view will take singing, I guess above all the aria, to express the sense of being pressed or stretched between worlds” (1994, 144). We do not have something merely happening that is determined, causally or otherwise, by previous events. The ‘event’ character has to do with the total shift implied in the Orphic moment, as if from the world of the living to the world of the dead.

Similarly, insofar as we think of the narrative or dramatic time of opera, the Orphic moment (which I call “Orphic death” since it is recognizable in singing in the aria preceding the heroine's death) is not continuous with what has come before: it is not a developmental moment in the narrative. Rather, the death scene creates a pause or a caesura. It is the emergence or eruption of another time, to some extent similar to the tragic time that intrudes, say, in Oedipus's belated recognition of his origins.

Not only does operatic time work against linear sequence, but particularly at that moment it is not the narrative but singing itself that determines how the passage of time is experienced. Opera lets go of narrative logic in favour of the internal time of song. Time manifests itself authentically in moments of dramatic stillness, moments when progressive time is suspended, and everything is incorporated into the ecstatic and self-absorbed singing.

Put slightly differently, the unfolding narrative moves from an initial scene, which serves as a premonition of death (the entrance aria) and the time of its realization (in the death scene). But this continuity does not

determine the authentic experience of time. In addition to the complete halt and the surfacing of an internal emotional time, the death scene is taken out of succession, referring not to what immediately precedes but rather back to the entrance aria, whose significance is recognized only at the end. The death scene is foreshadowed at the outset, and time now appears in terms of what was always there: the fulfilment of a preordained fate. So even though time does not flow forward in any customary sense, forming a break in temporal continuity, what happens here is not some aleatoric, unpredictable occurrence. Rather, the death song signifies the achievement of self-closure, the seeds of which are planted in the very first sounds of singing.

In your analyses, you consider films that thematise the power exercised by opera over film, identifying a certain ‘pull’ toward opera and suggesting that cinema may risk its own ‘cinematicness’ in being so haunted by opera. We are interested in the very idea of ‘risking’, because it hints at a transposition of one medium into the aesthetic field of the other. For example, the comparison of an opera by Poulenc and a Rossellini film, both based on Cocteau’s play *The Human Voice*, shows the relation of the vocal and the visual to be surprisingly affected by the choice of the medium. In this remediation of each medium, do opera or film lose what characterizes them? Or, on the contrary, does the transformation reveal the specificity of each in ways that a consideration of opera or film alone cannot?

With *The Human Voice*, the example you mention from my book, in Poulenc’s opera, as well as in Rossellini’s film, an intense vocal presence is created. And following your interesting question I think we can say that here both opera and cinema are at risk. The voice is employed differently in each work, but the use of the voice undermines the medium in both instances. In the opera, the voice interprets for us what is acoustically inaccessible, and in a sense, it erects an opera with nothing but voice. The film constructs vocal close-ups, rendering claustrophobic visuals and persecuting gazes.

The transformation reveals the specificity of each medium in ways that a consideration of opera or film alone cannot. Saying this, I would stress that each case is specific.

In an interesting recent interpretation of Poulenc’s opera, Barbara Hannigan, known for her rare double gift as singer and conductor – and singing and conducting simultaneously – conducts and sings *La voix humaine*. Clemens Malinowski, responsible for the live video design, positions cameras relaying Hannigan’s performance, i.e. conducting and singing from the conductor’s podium, viewed on large screens facing the audience. One could say that in this example, neither medium holds on to its specificity as medium. The film is created live and is completely derived from the musical performance. There is nothing but the orchestra and singer/conductor in the film. In turn, the opera is bound by the podium, by the need of the orchestra members to be able to see the conductor at all times. The interpretation of the opera moves in and out of entrance cues, how loud or fast to play and so on. The interpretation of the conductor – gestures, signals, bodily movements, facial expressions, in short everything that holds and manages the piece – mixes with and at times merges with the interpretation given to the *dramatis personae*. Hannigan’s performance is an example in which an opera creates a live film, and each performance will create a different film, as if it were an opera performance. The film embodies the belly of the

opera, the view from within – from the conductor’s position. Both the opera and the film are a kind of choreography, something just beneath the surface of each of these mediums, waiting to be exposed.

In *Vocal Apparitions: The Attraction of Cinema to Opera* (2005) you state: “Paradoxically, cinema at times can be more operatic than opera itself, thus capturing something essential that escapes opera’s self-understanding”. Initiating a dialogue between cinema and opera understood as media places the outcome of this dialogue in a very fluid landscape, full of shifts and experiments. Also, in the same text suggest that such an operation allows cinema to look beyond itself, beyond the more canonical horizon, so to speak. Does the same apply to opera? And to the *personae* populating opera as a medium? (i.e. Maria Callas depicted by Zeffirelli).

I understand the question to be asking whether there is a symmetry of sorts: Can opera at times be more cinematic than cinema itself, and thus capture something essential to cinema that otherwise escapes cinema’s view of itself? Just as cinema can be more operatic than opera itself and capture something essential that eludes opera’s self-understanding.

In the last few decades opera has changed so dramatically that we must acknowledge that ‘opera’ refers to many things. Today, as you observe, the media are fluid, and so is the dialogue between them. What is considered ‘less’ or ‘more’ operatic, what opera entails and signifies, is quite open. Operatic singing, or any kind of singing, is no longer necessarily the mark of opera.

And yet, however true all this is, Maria Callas remains an exception, even today. Her figure crosses into film as well as cinematizes opera. Even the fact that she modelled herself on the beauty ideal of a movie star, Audrey Hepburn, is significant. Following her death, Callas has been depicted over and over again in film, by film stars, but she has rarely been depicted as a character in opera! An odd take is Zeffirelli’s film, *Callas Forever*, in which the character of Callas refuses to sing in a film-opera, which will use a past recording of her voice. To create the film-opera, her present body is aligned with her past voice. In other words, Callas is to be re-created using cinematic dubbing; there will be no live singing. It is precisely this – what Callas in Zeffirelli’s film calls a trick, dishonesty, a sham – that she refuses to take part in. Ultimately, the project of reviving Callas on film fails in this film. Zeffirelli portrays an unbridgeable abyss between opera as a live medium and film as a mediated technological media. But he does so by calling out both opera and film’s shortcomings with regard to the singing voice.

A *Return to the Voice* has become even more evident with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, a watershed event that plays a key role in this particular context as well. In the absence of live bodies, over the past two years, voices played a key role into triggering our nostalgia to feel close to others, including from whom we were so frighteningly distanced. In the theatrical realm, for example, the voice served to supplant a stage presence that was impossible at that time – think of the radio dramas broadcasted by artists and later diffused in the empty spaces of theatres; or the television projects of major opera houses where the stage space was reimagined through the dramatization of the vocal space. The nostalgia for bodies has transformed into a recovery of a haptic dimension of the voice, which was already imposing itself in the domains of everyday communication even before the virus. With this in mind, do you

foresee any potential new avenues opened by the exchange between opera and cinema? Let's think, for example, of the reading of *After Life* you recently proposed: which aspects of *After Life* make it an innovative production?

Let me say first that the operatic voice is already from the start in some sense 'disembodied' within the body of the singer. Hearing its presence does not give us the sense of a unity of voice and body, as we would say occurs when we listen to and see someone speaking. It is almost as though the singing voice is a foreign presence in the body. In recent opera, this separation of the voice is intensified. Let me return once again to Michel Van der Aa's opera *After Life*. The opera is based on Hirokazu Kore-eda's film *After Life*, which spans one week in a way station between zones of death and eternity. Here the dead, rather than being judged, are each tasked with reviewing their lives and choosing a single memory that will remain with them for all eternity. Apart from this memory their lives will be consigned to utter oblivion. Every Monday, newly deceased individuals arrive in this liminal Limbo and are given a few days to select which memory to preserve. Toward the end of the week of their stay this memory will be staged and filmed to be dispatched with them to the afterlife. Kore-eda reflects on the power of film to constitute an afterlife, in the form of the memorable moment that encapsulates a life and remains one's sole memory for eternity. Van der Aa's opera takes this series of transfers out of life and into an afterlife one step further when he translates the cinematic into the operatic space.

The film's climactic scene is a vertiginous sequence of shifting gazes that includes five cuts over two minutes: one moves between the present of the character in the way station, their memory moment, and the cinematic re-enactment of that moment. In the corresponding scene in the opera, each of the live singers in the scene (they have a live presence but are not alive) has three onscreen virtual singing selves. The film's multiplicity of gazes is converted, as it were, into splintering singing selves in the opera: an onstage singer and his multiplied reflections on a screen/mirror. Onscreen selves are singing simpler melodic phrases and long-held notes together with the more fluid melodic lines of the live singers. At times, the music is more evenly distributed among the onstage and virtual singers. The characters sing with themselves and one another in an odd duet resonating across media. The scene is the high point of the opera: a duet between two characters singing live, simultaneously, with their multiple virtual selves. The scene refigures images and voices and transforms them into the new place or medium that we call opera.

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