



For many people opera represents (whether this is understood positively or negatively) the very embodiment of “high culture.” Yet lately there have been signs that its status is changing, as opera becomes more and more a feature of everyday cultural life.<sup>1</sup> What I want to explore in this chapter is whether these changes have now made it possible to describe opera as popular culture.

### Inventing Opera as “High Culture”

In order to fully understand what has been happening to opera in recent years, I think it is first necessary to examine something of the history of opera. Traditionally, opera is said to have been invented in the late sixteenth century by a group of Florentine intellectuals known as the *Camerata*.<sup>2</sup> However, according to musicologist Susan McClary,

Despite the humanistic red herrings proffered by Peri, Caccini [members of the Camerata], and others to the effect that they were reviving Greek performance practices, these gentlemen knew very well that they were basing their new reciting style on the improvisatory practices of contemporary popular music. Thus the eagerness with which the humanist myth was constructed and elaborated sought both to conceal the vulgar origins of its techniques and to flatter the erudition of its cultivated patrons. (McClary, 1985: 154–5)

Although there may be some dispute over the intellectual origins of opera, there is general agreement about its commercial beginnings.

Significantly, the opera house was the “first musical institution to open its doors to the general public” (Zelochow, 1993: 261). The first opera house opened in Venice in 1637: it presented “commercial opera run for profit . . . offering the new, up-to-date entertainment to anyone who could afford a ticket” (Raynor, 1972: 169). By the end of the century Venice had sixteen opera houses open to the general public. Interestingly, as Henry Raynor observes, “The Venetian audience consisted of all social classes” (ibid: 171). Bernard Zelochow argues that this remained the case throughout the next two centuries.

By the late eighteenth century and in the nineteenth century the opera played a preeminent role in the cultural life of Europe. The opera was enjoyed and understood by a broad cross-section of urban Europeans and Americans. The opera house became the meeting place of all social classes in society. . . . The absence of the concept of a classical repertoire is an index of the popularity and vigor of opera as a mode of communication and entertainment. (Zelochow, 1993: 262)<sup>3</sup>

By the nineteenth century, then, opera was established as a widely available form of popular entertainment consumed by people of all social classes. As Lawrence W. Levine explains, referring specifically to the US (but also the case in most of Europe), opera was an integral part of a shared public culture, “performed in a variety of settings, [it] enjoyed great popularity, and [was] shared by a broad segment of the population” (Levine, 1988: 85).<sup>4</sup> For example, on returning to the United States in the late 1860s from England, where he had been American Consul, George Makepeace Towle noted how “Lucretia Borgia and Faust, The Barber of Seville and Don Giovanni are everywhere popular; you may hear their airs in the drawing room and concert halls, as well as whistled by the street boys and ground out on the hand organs” (quoted in Levine, 1988: 99–100).

To turn opera into “high culture” it had to be withdrawn from the everyday world of popular entertainment, especially from the heterogeneous dictates of the market and the commercial reach of cultural entrepreneurs. Bruce A. McConachie argues that between 1825 and 1850 elite social groups in New York developed three overlapping social strategies which gradually separated opera from the everyday world of popular entertainment. The first was to separate it from theater by establishing buildings specifically for the performance of opera.

Second, they “also worked to sharpen and objectify a code of behavior, including a dress code, deemed proper when attending the opera. Finally, upper-class New Yorkers increasingly insisted that only foreign-language opera could meet their standards of excellence – standards upheld by behavior and criticism employing foreign words and specialized language impenetrable to all but the cognoscenti” (McConachie, 1988: 182). As he explains,

In 1825 theater audiences from all classes enjoyed opera as a part of the social conventions of traditional playgoing behavior. By the Civil War [1861–5] the elite had excluded all but themselves and spectators from other classes willing to behave in ways deemed “proper” according to upper-class norms. (Ibid)<sup>5</sup>

Levine, however, maintains that it is only at the end of the nineteenth century that opera can be said to have been effectively isolated from other forms of entertainment. It is only then, he argues, that there begins to be a growing social acceptance of the “insistence that opera was a ‘higher’ form of art demanding a cultivated audience” (Levine, 1988: 102). For example, in 1900 the Metropolitan Opera, New York, had completed its season with a production of four acts from four different operas. This had been a common practice throughout most of the nineteenth century. But times were changing and music critic W. J. Henderson, writing in the *New York Times*, was quick to remind his readers of the new dispensation: “There were people who had never heard ‘Carmen’ before. There were people who had never heard of ‘Il Flauto Magico.’ There were people who had never heard ‘Lucia.’ . . . There were people who did not know any one of the three ladies in ‘The Magic Flute.’ This was an audience there only to hear ‘the famous singers.’ What they got was ‘a hotch-potch . . . of extracts . . . a program of broken candy.’” In producing such a show, the Metropolitan Opera had, according to Henderson, removed “all semblance of art in the opera house” (quoted in Levine, 1988: 103). Henderson’s words no longer signaled a threatened elitism, as they might have done fifty years earlier. On the contrary, Henderson was articulating what would become the commonplace attitudes of the culture of twentieth-century opera. Opera was no longer a form of living entertainment; it was increasingly a source of “Culture” with a capital C – a resource of both aesthetic enlightenment and social validation.<sup>6</sup> As Levine explains:

What was invented in the late nineteenth century were the rituals accompanying the appreciation [of high culture]; what was invented was the illusion that the aesthetic products of high culture were originally created to be appreciated in precisely the manner late nineteenth-century Americans were taught to observe: with reverent, informed, disciplined seriousness. (Ibid: 229)

The success of the invention can be seen in Oscar Hammerstein’s confident claim (made in 1910) that

grand opera [is] . . . the most elevating influence upon modern society, after religion. From the earliest days it has ever been the most elegant of all forms of entertainment . . . it employs and unifies all the arts. . . . I sincerely believe that nothing will make better citizenship than familiarity with grand opera. It lifts one so out of the sordid affairs of life and makes material things seem so petty, so inconsequential, that it places one for the time being, at least, in a higher and better world. . . . Grand opera . . . is the awakening of the soul to the sublime and the divine. (Quoted in DiMaggio, 1992: 35)

Like Levine, Paul DiMaggio argues that “The distinction between high and popular culture, in its American version, emerged in the period between 1850 and 1900 out of the efforts of urban elites to build organizational forms that, first, isolated high culture and, second, differentiated it from popular culture” (DiMaggio, 1998: 454). With particular reference to Boston, DiMaggio argues that

To create an institutional high culture, Boston’s upper class had to accomplish three concurrent, but analytically distinct, projects: entrepreneurship, classification and framing. By entrepreneurship, I mean the creation of an organizational form that members of the elite could control and govern. By classification, I refer to the erection of strong and clearly defined boundaries between art and entertainment, the definition of a high art that elites and segments of the middle class could appropriate as their own cultural property; and the acknowledgment of that classification’s legitimacy by other classes and the state. Finally, I use the term framing to refer to the development of a new etiquette of appropriation, a new relationship between the audience and the work of art. (Ibid: 457)

DiMaggio differs from Levine and McConachie in his insistence that although there is clearly a “shift in opera’s social constituency during the nineteenth century . . . issues of opera’s definition, sponsorship, merit, and legitimacy were [not] resolved by the turn of the century” (DiMaggio, 1992: 49). He argues that it is only in the 1930s, when opera adopts “the non-profit educational form” (“trustee-governed non-profit organizations”), that opera’s “legitimacy” as high culture is finally secured (ibid: 40, 37). He cites the head of classical repertoire at RCA Victor, who wrote in 1936: “While in former years [opera] generally attracted large audiences primarily as a form of entertainment, today opera is commanding the attention of both layman and serious musician as an important and significant art form” (ibid: 37).<sup>7</sup>

McConachie, Levine, and DiMaggio do not claim that before the establishment of opera as high culture there had not existed a visible connection between cultural taste and social class. What had changed – and what I mean by the invention of opera as high culture – was the institutionalization of this connection. Removing opera from the heterogeneous demands of the market ensured that differences in taste could be marked by, and be indicative of, clear social boundaries. As DiMaggio makes clear:

as long as cultural boundaries were indistinct, “fashionable taste,” far from embodying cultural authority, was suspect as snobbish, trivial, and undemocratic. Only when elite taste was harnessed to a clearly articulated ideology embodied in the exhibitions and performances of organizations that selected and presented art in a manner distinct from that of commercial entrepreneurs . . . did an understanding of culture as hierarchical become both legitimate and widespread. (Ibid: 22)

Opera as “high culture” is therefore not a universal given, unfolding from its moment of intellectual birth; rather, it is an historically specific category institutionalized (depending on which cultural historian you find most convincing) by the 1860s, 1900s, or 1930s. Although these accounts may differ in terms of periodization, what each demonstrates is how elite social groups in the major American cities began the process of constructing a separate social space in which opera could be self-evidently high culture. Similarly, as Janet Wolff argues,

A parallel process of differentiation had also been occurring in England, where the pre-industrial cultural pursuits, enjoyed on a cross-class basis,

were gradually replaced by a class-specific culture, the high arts of music, theatre and literature being the province of the upper-middle and middle classes, and the popular cultural forms of music hall, organized sport and popular literature providing the entertainment of the lower classes. (Wolff, 1989: 5–6)

The key thing to understand historically about opera, then, is that it did not become unpopular, rather it was *made* unpopular. That is, it was actively appropriated from its popular audience by elite social groups determined to situate it as the crowning glory of their culture, i.e., so-called “high culture.” In short, opera was transformed from *entertainment* enjoyed by the many into *Culture* to be appreciated by the few. As Levine points out, well-meaning arguments (made in the 1980s) that opera might “finally be extended to the masses *for the first time*, betrays a lack of historical memory or understanding of the contours of culture in nineteenth-century America [and most of Europe]” (Levine, 1988: 241).

### “Opera Homework”

The active removal of opera from the world of popular entertainment was not just an organizational accomplishment, it also involved the introduction of a particular way of seeing opera – what Pierre Bourdieu calls the “aesthetic gaze” (Bourdieu, 1984, 1993). Moreover, to redefine opera as art “is tantamount to saying that a certain education is necessary to understand it at all: which is a convenient way of policing culture, and making sure it is kept as the property of an elite” (Tambling, 1987: 108). Although opera once again attracts a popular audience, it now confronts this audience as *art that can be entertaining*. In order to unlock the entertainment in the art, the new popular audience must do its “opera homework.” It should, therefore, come as no surprise that the reemergence of opera as popular entertainment has been accompanied (and no doubt promoted) by the many introductory textbooks<sup>8</sup> which have been published in the 1990s offering to “educate” the reader in what is required in order to be able to appreciate opera (even as entertainment). The fact these books have to exist at all speaks volumes about the success of the project to invent opera as high culture.

In order to reintroduce opera into the everyday world of popular entertainment, all the introductory textbooks I have read deploy three discursive strategies: (1) a welcoming irony; (2) an insistence that opera is a special kind of entertainment called art; and (3) a tactical anti-elitism.

### *Irony*

The cover blurb of *Opera: A Crash Course* asks: “Is the word opera always preceded by the word soap to you? Have you an uneasy suspicion that *La Donna e Mobile* does not really mean “my girl’s got a cell-phone”? . . . Opera: A Crash Course is for you”. Similarly, the cover blurb of *Opera for Dummies* asks: “Do you have trouble telling the difference between a tenor and soprano or a mezzo and mozzarella?” Under a section called “Who You Are” the book observes: “For starters, you’re an intelligent person. We can sense it, and we’re never wrong about these things. After all, you picked up this book, didn’t you?” (Pogue and Speck, 1997: 1).

### *Art*

*Opera: A Crash Course* alerts readers to the difficulties ahead: “One word of warning. Don’t expect opera simply – or always – to entertain you. Opera, like all art, should provide a way into the human spirit. If a work seems difficult and long, try your damndest not to walk out. Tell yourself that someone out there – the composer – has agonized long and hard about how to say something. Try to enter this world, a world that is also an important corner of yours” (Pettitt, 1998: 9). *Teach Yourself Opera* suggests that “An opera is rather like a beautiful painting. Each time you return, you should find something new to enjoy” (Sutherland, 1997: xii). *Getting Opera: A Guide for the Cultured but Confused* declares: “It takes work to appreciate an opera – work that many aren’t willing to put in given the fact that watching TV or going to a movie is so easy. Well, this book is intended to give you all the workout you need to start getting opera. . . . You don’t need a degree in musicology to appreciate opera. All you need is to do the basic groundwork” (Dobkin, 2000: 8–9).

*Anti-elitism*

*Opera: The Rough Guide* is aware that “opera remains off-putting for too many people. Partly this is due to the social exclusivity cultivated by many opera houses” (Boyden, 1999: ix). *Opera: A Crash Course* promises “to help you penetrate the miasma of social snobbery that envelops opera everywhere except Italy.” It also reassures the reader: “And you will find out how to comport yourself in an opera house.” According to the cover blurb, “*Teach Yourself Opera* opens the door allowing *everyone* to step through and follow the fascinating path leading from 1600 to the present day” (my italics). Inside, the reader is told: “This is not intended to be an exhaustive, or an exhausting study, but a tasty appetizer that leads you *confidently* into the world of opera” (Sutherland, 1997: ix; my italics). The cover blurb of *Opera for Dummies* promises: “Attend a live opera in style with tips for sitting in the right place, wearing the right clothes, and more!” The authors acknowledge that opera can be “intimidating” and can make people feel “insecure” (Pogue and Speck, 1997: 7). To illustrate the point, they offer the following scenario: “You’re at the opera house. You open the program book, or you’re listening to opera snobs talk – foreign words are flying like bullets. Quick, what do they mean?” *Opera for Dummies* will help secure the reader against such intimidation. But more than this, the book challenges the reader to refuse to be excluded: “In fact, plenty of opera snobs are perfectly *happy* that you don’t understand. They’d love opera to be an exclusive club, an elite corps, a sacred order. They’re *glad* that opera strikes many as the world’s most obscure art form” (ibid: 1). They know that opera has not always been the exclusive preserve of high culture. But they insist that it is not opera which changed but how people used opera socially: “Opera is just as entertaining as it ever was. But these days, it has become much less *familiar*. That’s all. After you become familiar with this art form, you’ll be amazed at how entertaining it becomes” (ibid: 9). The cover blurb of *Getting Opera: A Guide for the Cultured but Confused* also speaks of potential consumers of opera being “a little intimidated.” To overcome this the book promises that it “brings the elusive concepts down to earth, making it accessible to [enable] . . . the opera-shy reader . . . to embark on a thoroughly delightful and *instructive* operatic journey” (my italics). Inside the author elaborates:

My point is, essentially, screw the whole struggle between high and low. And certainly don't be afraid of opera because some force has foolishly built it up as the ultimate in refinement. Opera has historically been a popular art form that aimed to entertain ordinary people. Don't let that bother you, and don't let some uptight classical geek tell you any different. (Dobkin, 2000: 17)

Some of the books also offer advice on recorded opera.<sup>9</sup> In the *Collins Opera & Operetta* each entry includes a recommended recording. *Opera: The Rough Guide* is aware that looking through a CD catalogue of recorded opera can be very "perplexing." It therefore presents itself as "the essential guide through this mass of music," offering "definitive surveys of the recordings" (Boyden, 1999: ix). Similarly, *Teach Yourself Opera* also provides recommended recordings. The cover blurb of *Opera for Dummies* promises to help you "build a great collection of opera recordings." The cover blurb on *Getting Opera: A Guide for the Cultured but Confused* also promises information on "where to begin your CD collection."

There are also currently available a number of CD collections explicitly aimed at the newcomer to opera.<sup>10</sup> Their titles, and how they are advertised, on television and on billboards, are indistinguishable from the marketing techniques used to sell pop music. Similarly, opera singers are increasingly marketed in much the same way as pop stars. Luciano Pavarotti is only the most obvious example.<sup>11</sup>

## Resistance to Opera as Popular Culture

The reemergence of opera as popular entertainment has certainly not gone unresisted. There are those, like tenor Jon Vickers, who claim that opera is "being invaded by those techniques that are corrupting our society – big PR, the personality cult, techniques which create hysteria but do not elevate man. They degrade our art. . . . We cannot compromise. . . . We mustn't smear the line between art and entertainment. . . . You cannot bring art to the masses. . . . You never will" (quoted in Levine, 1988: 255).

Other "resisters" focus on particular examples. For instance, the widespread introduction of "surtitles" (equivalent to subtitles) into opera houses in the late 1980s and early 1990s to make opera more

accessible, was quickly dismissed by those for whom access is always a problem because it usually means access for “other” people. Although the main line of attack was aesthetic (surtitles are “theatrical condoms”; “a catastrophic gooseberry in the vital act of theatrical intercourse”), it was mostly argued that they were being introduced for mainly three reasons: (1) to accommodate tourists (“celluloid messages for tourists”); (2) to justify higher government subsidies (part of the aim of which is to broaden the class base of the audience); and (3) to attract corporate sponsorship (as such they are a device “to keep uncommitted flippant audiences quiet” – “the growing army of tax-relieved super-rich”) (see Evans, 1999: 53, 66, 67).<sup>12</sup>

In 1990 Pavarotti’s recording of “Nessun Dorma” (from Puccini’s *Turandot*) became a number one hit in the British music charts.<sup>13</sup> Such commercial success on any “quantitative” analysis would make the composer, the performer, and the song, popular culture.<sup>14</sup> In fact, one student I know actually complained about the way in which the aria had supposedly been devalued by its commercial success. He claimed that he now found it embarrassing to play it for fear that someone should think his musical taste was determined by the fact that the aria had been used as “The Official BBC Grandstand World Cup Theme.”

Something similar, telling much the same story, happened four years later at Glyndebourne.<sup>15</sup> According to Kate Saunders, writing in the *Sunday Times*,

Last Sunday [July 10, 1994], when Deborah Warner took her bow as director at Glyndebourne on the first night of her provocative new production of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, certain sections of the audience erupted in boos and catcalls. . . . This is not the kind of behaviour one expects at Glyndebourne, the rarefied musical hothouse set in a manicured picnic-park of Sussex downland. . . . Sunday’s incident was only the latest manifestation of a feisty new phenomenon, the British opera-lover with attitude. . . . The common thread that unites these incidents is a fear of innovation . . . [expressed by] an element of toffee-nosed, conservative stick-in-the-muds who are terrified that innovation will somehow tarnish the glittery snob value of the Glyndebourne experience. (Saunders, 1994: 4)

It appears that fear of innovation is only the surface expression of a much deeper, more troubling fear. As Saunders explains,

The explosion of popular interest in opera in the 1980s worried people who were attracted by its elitist aura. These are the types who threw away their CDs of *Turandot* and complain when they heard the plumber whistling “Nessun Dorma.” I cannot help suspecting that the boosers at Glyndebourne were also objecting to the cheap standby seats now available in the gleaming new theatre, though the opera’s management vigorously denied this. . . . [It is the people in] the most expensive seats that cause the trouble. They can moan about daring directors and designers, but their real grievance, I suspect, is the increasing democratization of an art form reserved for the rich. (Ibid: 4, 6)

That much deeper, more troubling fear that cannot quite speak its name, had found cause for concern three years earlier in London’s Hyde Park. On July 30, 1991, Pavarotti gave a free concert in the park. Some 250,000 people were expected, but due to heavy rain the number who actually attended was around 100,000. The obvious popularity of the event would appear to threaten the class exclusivity of opera as high culture. It is therefore interesting to note the way in which the event was reported in the media. All the British tabloids carried news of the event on their front pages. The *Daily Mirror*, for instance, had five pages devoted to the concert. What the tabloid coverage reveals is a clear attempt to define the event for popular culture. The *Sun* quoted a woman who said, “I can’t afford to go to posh opera houses with toffs and fork out £100 a seat.” The *Daily Mirror* ran an editorial in which it claimed that Pavarotti’s performance “wasn’t for the rich [it was] for the thousands . . . who could never normally afford a night with an operatic star.” When the event was reported on television news programs the following lunchtime, the tabloid coverage was included as part of the general meaning of the event. Both the BBC’s “One O’clock News” and ITV’s “12.30 News” referred to the way in which the tabloids had covered the concert, and moreover, the *extent* to which they had covered it. They also covered the “resistance” to the event – the attempt to introduce the “traditional”<sup>16</sup> cultural certainties: “some critics said that a park is no place for opera” (“One O’clock News”); “some opera enthusiasts might think it all a bit vulgar” (“12.30 News”). Although such comments invoked the specter of high-culture exclusivity, they seemed strangely at a loss to offer any real purchase on the event. The apparently obvious cultural division between elite and popular culture no longer seemed so obvious. It suddenly seemed that the cultural had been replaced by the

economic, revealing a division between “the rich” and “the thousands.” It was the event’s very popularity which forced the television news to confront, and ultimately to find wanting, old cultural certainties.

An editorial in the UK magazine *Opera* (October 1991) wondered out loud: “Is Pavarotti the greatest known ambassador for opera, bringing untold thousands to its heady delights, or is he just a slightly unconventional but decidedly cuddly pop star?” This uncertainty was not shared by a reader’s letter published in the same issue of the magazine:

I had the misfortune to attend Pavarotti’s concert in Hyde Park. . . . I moved to various spots searching for a place from which he could be heard to best advantage. In every place the majority reaction of the audience was the same – they talked, joked and laughed and occasionally jumped up and down to see if they could see Pavarotti on the stage, pausing only to produce thunderous applause at the end of each aria. It became clear from all this that a Pavarotti event has very little to do with opera as such, but everything to do with Pavarotti as a phenomenon. Through continuous hype, he has now become so famous that it is imperative to see him when he appears, much as one visits Madame Tussaud’s on coming to London, or goes to see the three handed man at the fairground. . . . The argument that Pavarotti is a man of the people bringing opera to the masses is a load of tosh, since the masses at Hyde Park showed little interest in listening. At the end he was vociferously applauded. Clearly the audience loved him; whether they like opera is something else again. (Quoted in Evans, 1999: 355)

Situating Pavarotti in the company of waxwork figures and unusual fairground exhibits is to threaten to undo what was done so successfully in the late nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century – the institutionalization of opera as high culture. The very thought that an audience might have talked, joked, and laughed and occasionally jumped up and down at the performance of one of the great tenors of all time would be enough to make the elite of Boston and elsewhere turn despairingly in their graves.

### Learning From History

Sociologist David Evans makes an interesting distinction “between opera (commodified cultural artefact in performance) and ‘opera’

(commodified entertainment fragments outside the opera house)” (ibid: 236). In this way, Evans seeks to indicate a difference between opera in the opera house and opera as experienced in television commercials, film soundtracks, sporting events, CD compilations, celebrity concerts by opera “superstars,” opera holidays, etc.<sup>17</sup> Although I think this is an interesting distinction, it seems to me to carry with it a certain essentialism – an uncritical residual distinction between art and entertainment. I am not convinced that it is really possible to sustain such a distinction.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps a more productive way to understand what is happening to opera is not to see it in terms of commodities but in terms of social practices of consumption.<sup>19</sup> In other words, it is how and by whom opera is consumed which determines whether it is art or entertainment. This is because the difference between what counts as elite and popular culture is never simply a question of the material qualities of particular commodities. As we have already noted, what counts as popular culture in one historical period can become elite culture in another (and vice versa). What really matters are “the forces and relations which sustain the distinction, the difference . . . the relations of power which are constantly punctuating and dividing the domain of culture into . . . dominant and subordinate formations” (Hall, 1998: 448–9).<sup>20</sup>

Opera has become once again what it was for most of the nineteenth century – a cultural practice that is understood as both art and entertainment – an integral part of a shared public culture, but one which can be articulated to different pleasures and for different social purposes. In the nineteenth century, whether it was art or entertainment depended on who was consuming it and in what context. As Levine perceptively observes, “opera was an art form that was *simultaneously* popular and elite. That is, it was attended both by large numbers of people who derived pleasure from it in the context of their normal everyday culture, and by smaller socially *and* economically elite groups who derived both pleasure and social confirmation from it” (Levine, 1988: 86). To see opera as a cultural form (consisting of many different texts and practices) that is simultaneously popular and elite, it seems to me, is an accurate description of contemporary articulations of opera.

What I think is happening with regard to the popularity of opera is therefore *almost* like a return to the cultural relations of nineteenth-

century Europe and the USA. However, there is one crucial difference between then and now. In the nineteenth century, despite the fact that opera could be consumed by different social groups in different contexts and as part of different cultural practices, there was, nevertheless, a very real sense in which those who consumed opera consumed in effect the same opera. Although most of what now counts as opera – and it is a much broader range of texts and practices than existed in the nineteenth century – is an integral part of a shared public culture, there is one key part which is still as socially exclusive as it was intended to be when opera was first institutionalized as high culture: opera in the opera house.

Since 1946, when opera in the UK first received government support (via Arts Council subsidies), opera houses have talked about reducing seat prices in order to make opera more accessible to a broader social mix.<sup>21</sup> In 1983 the then Chairman of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, Sir Charles Moser, claimed that “we are desperately trying to widen access” (Moser, 1983: 191); and “if we get more money [government/Arts Council funding], we will reduce seat prices. That’s our top priority at the moment, and to widen access” (ibid: 200). In 1995 Sir Angus Stirling, Chairman of the Royal Opera House, repeated the aim to make opera more accessible, claiming “we are doing everything we can to bring seat prices down” (quoted in Evans, 1999: 140). Five years later the *Guardian* (January 22, 2000) quoted a UK government source who said that senior management at the Royal Opera House had been told to “get a better social mix, particularly in the stalls, so it doesn’t feel so snooty. . . . They [senior management at the Royal Opera House] must do something to demonstrate they are committed to access.” A letter published in the *Guardian* a month earlier made much the same point, if in a somewhat more robust fashion. The letter is a challenge to the current chief executive of the Royal Opera House, Michael Kaiser:

All this talk of access is bullshit. Access doesn’t just mean opening foyers to the public, the odd free concert, the cheap seats that you wouldn’t dream of suffering (if you want to prove me wrong on that, sit in the cheapest seats for the next five performances you attend). It means enabling people of modest means who love opera to attend performances in the house their taxes pay for. The reality is that it’s easier than ever to buy your way into Covent Garden.

Moreover, as a correspondent to the magazine *Opera* (December 1990) observed: “[In 1962] as an articulated clerk on £17 a week, I could afford, and sat regularly in the balcony stall sides [in the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden] at 10/6d [about 52p]. Today at £48, such a seat would require a gross salary of £80,820. Some articulated clerk!” (quoted in Evans, 1999: 139).<sup>22</sup>

In the UK, opera houses have seen a huge increase in box office income massively disproportionate to the small increase in attendance. Opera attendance in the UK increased from 1.475 million in 1981 to 1.515 million in 1990. During the same period, however, box office receipts rose from £8.3 million to £22.3 million.<sup>23</sup> It is not surprising, then, that in a survey, carried out in 1990 by the British Market Research Bureau, in which people were asked to rank their consumption of opera in order of frequency of mode of access, attending an opera in an opera house is only placed fourth.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, data produced by the UK Office for National Statistics (1990) shows that in 1986 only 5 percent of the UK population aged 15 and over attended the opera (within this figure professionals, employers, and managers outnumber semi-skilled and unskilled manual by almost 5 to 1).<sup>25</sup>

Although it is true that there is an increasingly shared public culture of opera, which includes opera on CD, on video and DVD, on television, in advertising, in films, on radio, and in books, together with other forms of popular culture with which there is considerable overlap (opera stars performing with pop stars; opera stars hosting variety shows; opera stars performing at the opening of major sporting events), significantly – and running counter to all this – there is little sign of growth in the audience for opera as it is experienced in the opera houses in most of Europe and the USA.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, to return to the question with which I began this chapter: it seems to me that to describe opera as popular culture is to identify only part of what has been happening to it in recent years. I think to see the whole picture is to see that opera is now, as it was for most of the nineteenth century, available for consumption as both elite and popular culture.

Notes

- 1 The increasing availability of opera is illustrated by the fairly extensive use of opera in advertising and on film soundtracks. Opera used in advertising includes:

Bellini: <i>Norma</i>	Ford Mondeo
Delibes: <i>Lakmé</i>	British Airways
Delibes: <i>Lakmé</i>	Kleenex tissues
Delibes: <i>Lakmé</i>	Basmati rice
Delibes: <i>Lakmé</i>	Ryvita
Delibes: <i>Lakmé</i>	IBM Computers
Gluck: <i>Orfeo ed Euridice</i>	Comfort Fabric Softener
Handel: <i>Serse</i>	Rover
Mascagni: <i>Cavalleria Rusticana</i>	Kleenex tissues
Mascagni: <i>Cavalleria Rusticana</i>	Stella Artois
Mascagni: <i>Cavalleria Rusticana</i>	Baci Chocolates
Mozart: <i>The Marriage of Figaro</i>	Citroen ZX
Mozart: <i>Così fan tutte</i>	Mercedes Benz
Offenbach: <i>Orpheus in the Underworld</i>	Bio Speed Weed
Offenbach: <i>Tales of Hoffman</i>	Bailey’s Irish Cream
Puccini: <i>Madame Butterfly</i>	Twinings tea
Puccini: <i>Madame Butterfly</i>	Del Monte orange juice
Puccini: <i>Gianni Schicchi</i>	Phillips DCC
Puccini: <i>La Bohème</i>	Sony Walkman
Puccini: <i>Tosca</i>	FreeServe
Rossini: <i>The Barber of Seville</i>	Ragu Pasta Sauce
Rossini: <i>The Barber of Seville</i>	Fiat Strada
Rossini: <i>The Barber of Seville</i>	Braun cordless shavers
Verdi: <i>Aida</i>	Diet Pepsi
Verdi: <i>Aida</i>	Michelob
Verdi: <i>Aida</i>	Egypt
Verdi: <i>Nabucco</i>	British Airways
Verdi: <i>Il trovatore</i>	Ragu Pasta Sauce
Verdi: <i>Rigoletto</i>	Ragu Pasta Sauce
Verdi: <i>Rigoletto</i>	Little Caesar’s Pizza
Verdi: <i>The Force of Destiny</i>	Stella Artois

Opera used in film soundtracks includes:

Bizet: <i>The Pearlfishers</i>	<i>Gallipoli</i>
Bizet: <i>Carmen</i>	<i>Trainspotting</i>
Catalani: <i>La Wally</i>	<i>Diva</i>
Delibes: <i>Lakmé</i>	<i>True Romance</i>
Delibes: <i>Lakmé</i>	<i>The Hunger</i>
Donizetti: <i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i>	<i>The Fifth Element</i>
Donizetti: <i>L’Elsir d’amore</i>	<i>Prizzi’s Honour</i>

Dvorak: <i>Russalka</i>	<i>Driving Miss Daisy</i>
Giordano: <i>André Chénier</i>	<i>Philadelphia</i>
Handel: <i>Serse</i>	<i>Dangerous Liaisons</i>
Korngold: <i>Die tote Stadt</i>	<i>The Big Lebowski</i>
Leoncavallo: <i>I Pagliacci</i>	<i>The Untouchables</i>
Leoncavallo: <i>I Pagliacci</i>	<i>Moonraker</i>
Mascagni: <i>Cavalleria Rusticana</i>	<i>Jean de Florette</i>
Mascagni: <i>Cavalleria Rusticana</i>	<i>The Godfather III</i>
Mozart: <i>The Magic Flute</i>	<i>Amadeus</i>
Mozart: <i>Così fan tutte</i>	<i>Sunday, Bloody Sunday</i>
Mozart: <i>Così fan tutte</i>	<i>My Left Foot</i>
Ponchielli: <i>La Gioconda</i>	<i>Fantasia</i>
Puccini: <i>La Bohème</i>	<i>Moonstruck</i>
Puccini: <i>La Rondine</i>	<i>A Room with a View</i>
Puccini: <i>Madame Butterfly</i>	<i>Fatal Attraction</i>
Puccini: <i>Gianni Schicchi</i>	<i>A Room with a View</i>
Puccini: <i>Turandot</i>	<i>The Witches of Eastwick</i>
Puccini: <i>Turandot</i>	<i>The Killing Fields</i>
Rossini: <i>The Barber of Seville</i>	<i>Mrs Doubtfire</i>
Verdi: <i>Il trovatore</i>	<i>A Night at the Opera</i>
Verdi: <i>La Traviata</i>	<i>Pretty Woman</i>
Wagner: <i>Die Walküre</i>	<i>Apocalypse Now</i>
Wagner: <i>Tristan and Isolde</i>	<i>Excalibur</i>

- 2 The Camerata were a group of Florentine intellectuals. The key members (as named by McClary) were Jacopo Peri (1561–1633), composer of the first opera, *Dafne* (1597), and Giulio Caccini (1551–1610). Other leading figures included Vincenzo Galilei (1520–91) and Giovanni Bardi (1534–1612).
- 3 If our historical starting point is the classical repertoire performed in the vast majority of contemporary opera houses, it could be argued that opera begins with Mozart in 1780 and ends with Puccini in 1926. It is this way of seeing the history of opera which leads to the accusation that it is in effect a “museum culture.” Interestingly, the dates fit quite nicely with the idea that opera was invented by the class who reaped the principal share of the rewards of nineteenth-century industrialization. Opera gave them both pleasure and social identity – a sense of being a “class for themselves” (Marx, 1963: 195).
- 4 The integration of opera into popular entertainment can be demonstrated in a number of ways. For example, one can point to the way in which it was common practice for a night’s entertainment at the theater to include stage melodrama, farce, and opera (see Levine, 1988: 90). In this way, the promiscuous mixing of forms of entertainment on the nineteenth-century stage is very similar to what we have come to expect from contemporary television.

Significantly, it was the circus entrepreneur P. T. Barnum who in 1852 organized and successfully promoted the first major concert tour across the US by the soprano – the so-called “Swedish Nightingale” – Jenny Lind (perhaps opera’s first superstar). The *New York Home Journal* referred to “the quiet ease with which the music of the exclusives – Italian music – has passed into the hands of the people.

... Now it is as much theirs as anybody’s! ... Opera music has ... become a popular taste” (quoted in Levine, 1988: 97). The following year *Putnam’s Magazine* suggested that P.T. Barnum should become manager of the New York Opera. The terms of their argument point to a popular attitude towards opera: “He understands what the public wants, and how to gratify that want. ... He comprehends that, with us [the American public], the opera need not necessarily be the luxury of the few, but the recreation of the many” (ibid: 100–1).

- 5 On the Metropolitan Opera’s opening night on October 22, 1883 a contemporary newspaper estimated that the boxes were occupied by people whose wealth was in the region of \$540,000,000 (Kolodin, 1936: 5). The following evening the *New York Evening Post* commented: “From an artistic and musical point of view, the large boxes in the Metropolitan are a decided mistake. But as the house was avowedly built for social purposes rather than artistic, it is useless to complain about this” (quoted in Kolodin, 1936: 12).
- 6 In 1916 the *Atlantic Monthly* carried an article which claimed that “Opera is controlled by a few rich men. ... It does not exist for the good of the whole city, but rather for those with plethoric purses. ... [Opera houses] surround themselves with an exotic atmosphere in which the normal person finds difficulty in breathing ... they are too little related to the community” (quoted in Levine, 1988: 101).
- 7 In 1914 the *Atlantic Review* published an article in which it was hoped that the increasing popularity of cinema might bring about a situation in which “the art of the stage may escape from the proletariat, and *again* truly belong to those who in a larger, finer sense are ‘the great ones of the earth’” (quoted in Levine, 1988: 207; my italics).
- 8 The following are examples of books which seek to introduce opera to a new audience.

1990 *How to be Tremendously Tuned into Opera*  
 1991 *An Invitation to Opera*  
 1993 *Get Into Opera: A Beginner’s Guide*  
*A Beginner’s Guide to Opera*  
 1994 *Opera 101: A Complete Guide to Learning and Loving Opera*  
 1995 *The Penguin Opera Guide*  
*Who’s Afraid of Opera? A Highly Opinionated, Informative and Entertaining Guide*  
 1997 *The Good Opera Guide*  
*Opera for Dummies*  
*Teach Yourself Opera*  
*Collins Opera & Operetta*  
 1998 *Opera (Crash Course Series)*  
*Opera: A Crash Course*  
 1999 *Opera: The Rough Guide*  
 2000 *Getting Opera: A Guide for the Cultured but Confused*

- 9 There are also a number of books which introduce the newcomer to recorded opera available on compact disc:

- 1993 *The Metropolitan Opera House Guide to Recorded Opera*
- 1996 *Classic CDs: Opera Greats*
- 1997 *Gramophone Opera Good CD Guide*
- 1999 *Opera: 100 Essential CDs, The Rough Guide*

- 10 The following are some examples of CD compilations which aim to introduce opera to a new audience:

- The Only Opera Album You'll Ever Need
- The Best Opera Album in the World . . . Ever!
- Opera Hits
- Opera Favourites
- The Ultimate Opera Collection
- The Ultimate Opera Collection 2
- Simply the Best Night at the Opera
- 50 Great Moments in Opera
- The Reader's Digest Magical World of Opera
- The Greatest Opera Show on Earth
- Essential Opera
- Opera Spectacular 1
- Opera Spectacular 2

- 11 The following are some examples of the "pop marketing" of opera composers and performers:

- The Greatest Tenors of the 20th Century
- Great Tenors of the Century
- The Essential Pavarotti 1
- The Essential Pavarotti 2
- The Greatest Pavarotti Album Ever!
- The Greatest Puccini Album Ever!
- The Three Tenors in Concert 1990
- The Three Tenors in Concert 1994
- The Three Tenors in Concert 1998
- The Three Original Tenors [Enrico Caruso, Beniamino Gigli, and Jussi Bjorling]
- A Soprano in Red [Lesley Garrett]
- Baroque Opera Highlights
- Best of Kiri Te Kanawa
- The Verdi Centenary Album [Jose Cura]

- 12 The third motive is illustrative of the division in the dominant class between those rich in "cultural" as opposed to "economic" capital (Bourdieu, 1984). As David Evans observes, "Throughout the opera world there is the assumption that opera knowledge is distributed in inverse proportion to wealth, that the second of these two status group formations is physically as well as materially to be found in the upper reaches and in standing room where they make their presence and status

as ‘knowledgeable’ felt through loud bar chat, cheers, boos, catcalls and flung flowers, fruit and vegetables” (Evans, 1999: 96–7). Similarly, an editorial in the UK magazine *Opera* described the audience at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden as “Rich audiences, sponsor’s audiences, audiences whose interest in opera may be marginal . . . champagne louts” (quoted in Evans, 1999: 139).

- 13 Two of Pavarotti’s albums (Essential Pavarotti I and Essential Pavarotti 2) achieved the same feat in the British album charts.
- 14 For different definitions of popular culture, including the “quantitative,” see Storey (2000).
- 15 As Evans observes, the opera festival at Glyndebourne “exists for one of the most elitist audiences in the world” (Evans, 1999: 416).
- 16 As Stuart Hall points out:

Tradition is a vital element in culture; but it has little to do with the mere persistence of old forms. It is much more to do with the way elements have been linked together or articulated. . . . Not only can the elements of “tradition” be rearranged, so that they articulate with different practices and positions, and take on a new meaning and relevance. It is also often the case that cultural struggle arises in its sharpest form just at the point where different, opposed traditions meet, intersect. They seek to detach a cultural form from its implantation in one tradition, and to give it a new cultural resonance or accent (Hall, 1998: 450)

- 17 At the more unusual end of opera as popular culture, in November 1999 I attended an evening of eating fish and chips and listening to members of Opera North performing excerpts from famous operas (plate 1.1).
- 18 Although opera does not exist outside the realm of commercial culture, it is not entirely incorporated into it. What I mean is this: opera, like much of “high culture,” is artificially protected from the full force of having to make its way in the marketplace by various financial sources – grants, sponsorship, individual and corporate donations.
- 19 On different social practices of, and different theoretical approaches to, consumption, see Storey (1999).
- 20 Pierre Bourdieu argues that cultural distinctions are used in this way to support class distinctions. Taste is a deeply ideological category: it functions as a marker of “class” (using the term in a double sense to mean both a social economic category and the claim for a particular level of quality). For Bourdieu, the consumption of culture is “predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences” (Bourdieu, 1984: 5). He describes opera as “the occasion or pretext for social ceremonies enabling a select audience to demonstrate and experience its membership of high society in obedience to the integrating and distinguishing rhythms of the ‘society’ calendar” (ibid: 272).
- 21 An example of how little has changed at the core of opera in the UK can be gathered by considering the Board of Directors of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden (1992–3): it consists of eight Sirs, a Lord, and a Baroness. Similarly, the Board of Directors of English National Opera contains five Sirs, one Earl, and five Lords (Evans, 1999: 150–1).

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- 22 Evans notes that “In 1984 a centre front stalls seat averaged £37, by 1994 £104, a 75 percent rise taking inflation into account” (Evans, 1999: 139).
- 23 Figures quoted in the *Guardian*, December 11, 1990.
- 24 Survey results (quoted in Evans, 1999: 403):

- 1 Opera on CD and audio cassette
- 2 Opera on radio
- 3 Opera on TV and video
- 4 Opera at the opera house
- 5 Opera at the opera house while on holiday
- 6 Books on opera

- 25 For most of the 1990s opera attendance stood at 6 percent of the UK population aged 15 and over. In 1996–7 it rose to 7 percent. Opera attendance in the UK, 1986–98 (based on *Social Trends*, 1990, 1998, 1999, 2000):

- 1986–7 5%  
 1991–2 6%  
 1995–6 6%  
 1996–7 6%  
 1997–8 7%

- 26 There have been false dawns before. In 1936, in the foreword to Irving Kolodin’s history of the first 52 years of the Metropolitan Opera, W. J. Henderson refers to “the present efforts to democratize the institution [of opera] in order to keep it alive” (Kolodin, 1936: xii). Following the first television broadcast of a complete opera performance (the Metropolitan Opera’s production of Verdi’s *Otello* on November 29, 1948), the *New York Times* wondered “What the acquisition of a mass following may mean for opera almost exceeds the bounds of the imagination in its challenging and provocative implications” (quoted in Graf, 1951: 222). Writing in 1951, Herbert Graf argued that opera in the cinema and on television has “social and economic implications of tremendous import. The privileges of wealth and education, formerly preponderant in the world of opera, are being negated by the new inventions” (ibid: 207). Instead of a performance reaching 3,000 it can now reach an audience of millions. Sir Claus Moser, former chairman of the Royal Opera House, described opera in Britain in the 1920s and 1930s as “very much an upper-class activity, the icing on the cake of glamorous living” (Moser, 1983: 187). He then claimed that after World War II “the scene was totally transformed” (ibid). More recently (the 1980s) there has taken place “a fantastic cultural transformation in this country, which has come from a gradual spreading of love for . . . opera throughout the population. . . . The great operatic stars have become pop names . . . they are seen and heard by millions” (ibid: 188).

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