

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: THE IMPACT OF GENRE FUSION AND  
IMPROVISATIONAL ELEMENTS IN 21<sup>ST</sup>-  
CENTURY OPERAS ON VOCAL PEDAGOGY  
AND PERFORMANCE PRACTICE

**Sequina DuBose, Doctor of Musical Arts, 2019**

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In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, opera composers are expanding beyond traditional boundaries by incorporating improvisatory elements and musical style elements from non-classical genres. The purpose of this study is to point to the impact these trends will have on vocal pedagogy and performance practice. The opening chapters of the dissertation provide historical context by examining the role of improvisation in the Baroque era and beyond, along with details concerning key shifts in audience culture, vocal aesthetic and performance practice throughout history. Chapter two also incorporates narratives from key industry practitioners, voice pedagogue Dr. Rachelle Fleming, and American Opera Projects Artistic Director, Mila Henry. Chapter three consists of a discussion of the research methodology and the key researchers and methodologists that influenced the study. This study is a narrative inquiry that employs an analysis of narrative approach and paradigmatic reasoning in its analysis, inducing themes and relationships between the

concepts that reveal themselves in the data and literature. Chapter four includes narrative research and analysis based on interviews that have been conducted with composers and singers from four innovative operas: *Charlie Parker's Yardbird* (Daniel Schyder), *I Dream: A Rhythm and Blues Opera* (Douglas Tappin), *Blue Viola* (Peter Hilliard), and *The Mile-Long Opera: a biography of 7 o'clock* (David Lang; the composer intentionally uses lowercase script in the titles of his works). Each composer and singer offers a unique perspective regarding the interpretation of and preparation for contemporary operatic works, and furthers the argument that academic voice programs will benefit from an expanded curriculum that prepares singers to meet the evolving demands of the opera industry. The final chapter provides personal testimony from the author and suggested vocal and dramatic exercises for incorporating improvisation in a manner that may be of use in university opera workshops, group voice classes, and voice studios. This body of research documents the stylistic and technical considerations that modern opera singers and teachers take into account in order to branch out and explore operatic works that have genre-bending and/or improvisative elements. Based on the findings from this study it is recommended that voice teachers cross-train by teaching classically trained singers to adapt their singing methods to various styles.

THE IMPACT OF GENRE FUSION AND IMPROVISATIONAL ELEMENTS IN  
21<sup>ST</sup>-CENTURY OPERAS ON VOCAL PEDAGOGY AND PERFORMANCE  
PRACTICE

by

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## Dedication

For Mom, who taught me to dream.

For Dad, who showed me how to live life to the fullest.

## Acknowledgements

I am eternally grateful to my voice teacher, advisor, mentor, and friend, Professor Carmen Balthrop, for investing time, energy, and care toward cultivating my talent and potential. I extend sincere gratitude to Professors Martha Randall and Delores Ziegler and to the entire faculty body at University of Maryland College Park for their enthusiastic and consistent support throughout my matriculation.

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# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

The Oxford music dictionary indicates that opera in its most narrow conception is defined as “a drama in which the actors sing throughout.”<sup>1</sup> While opera, by definition, has remained unchanged over the last five centuries, there are broader methods by which the art form is realized in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Many contemporary composers fuse classical music with non-classical genres, incorporate improvisatory elements, and use technology in ways that were unimaginable ten years ago. With new cultural and social movements, comes new inspiration for the commission of new operas, and with it new demands on the 21st-century opera singer. Singers are expected to have an expanded knowledge of repertoire outside of the classical realm, broadened beyond their traditionally assigned vocal range. At the same time, they must withstand the rigors of more physically and dramatically demanding operatic realizations. In this study, I explore the current musical and dramatic landscape of opera with a special focus on the personal reflections of composers and singers involved with four 21st-century operatic works: *Charlie Parker’s Yardbird*, by Daniel Schnyder, *I Dream: A Rhythm and Blues Opera* by Douglas Tappin, and *The Mile-Long Opera: a biography of 7 o’clock* (Lang intentionally uses lowercase script) by David Lang. Each opera is a unique treatment of classical music and offers its own set of challenges and rewards for the singer.

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<sup>1</sup> *Oxford Music Online*, s.v. “Farinelli,” accessed December 1, 2017, <https://doi-org.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.40726>.

## Purpose of the Study

In addition to identifying and examining the musical and dramatic trends prevalent in 21st-century operas, this study is designed to investigate the impact of these trends not only on singers but on vocal pedagogues, as well. It calls to question current methodology as part of a curriculum that includes opera workshop, private voice study, and voice studio classes. The tradition of teaching singing technique is an oral-based one that is usually passed down from each generation of veteran performers, coaches, and teachers to the next generation of singing novices and career hopefuls. Technical instruction and overall guidance are filtered through the personal reflections, experiences, and training of the teaching artist.

This age-old tradition of imparting the knowledge and advice of seasoned opera singers to future generations of singers is captured well in the pages of Harriette Brower and James Francis Cooke's book, *Great Singers on the Art of Singing*.<sup>2</sup> Wallace Cheatham gives a relevant snapshot of the experiences of African-American classical artists through the transcribed interviews in his book *Dialogues on Opera and the African-American Experience*.<sup>3</sup> Both books have had an enormous impact on me, and in the same spirit, a portion of this study includes narratives from some of the

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<sup>2</sup> Harriette Brower and James Francis Cooke, eds., *Great Singers on the Art of Singing* (Mineola, N.Y: Dover Publications, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Wallace Cheatham, *Dialogues on Opera and the African-American Experience* (Lanham, Md: Scarecrow Press, 1997).

aforementioned 21st-century composers along with those from opera singers who have had extensive first-hand experience with the works in question.

In my own experience as an opera singer, I have found creative outlets that require me to combine both my training as a classical vocalist and my knowledge and adeptness with popular and *vernacular* music. When I was an undergraduate student, I remember approaching my voice teacher with an enthusiastic request, “Can you teach me how to ‘trill’?” I’d booked an engagement singing in the chorus of Handel’s *Messiah* and was determined to master the art of Baroque ornamentation. When I reflect on this, it cements in my mind the idea that the composers’ treatment of the musical material, cultural trends, and industry demands and expectations inform our aspirations, as singers, and our pedagogy, as teachers. Voice teachers are presumably master singers, and as such, are tasked with imparting their knowledge of appropriate singing technique and performance practice to students. However, when the technical demands of the music evolve and the desired aesthetic shifts, how do we, as pedagogues, expand our knowledge and adjust to meet those demands? I would not expect a computer software engineer in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to receive training that only encompasses the use and management of outdated software. As with any field, new developments precipitate and necessitate new and more expanded pedagogical methods.

In our young century, the research surrounding improvisation in higher education music programs is mainly centered on examining instrumentalists or students in the choral and classroom setting. Improvisation, especially in the U.S., is mainly associated with jazz music. This study is a relevant contribution to the field because of its voice performance and pedagogical focus at the university level, and because of its practical

application for the private voice studio, group voice class, and opera workshop setting. It also contains qualitative data and employs analysis of narratives from interviews with active, high-level professionals in the field. It examines, through the eyes of a voice pedagogue, a realm most often explored from a general education, psychological, musicological, and ethnomusicological perspective: the impact of improvisation and genre fusion on how we perform and teach singing.

In reviewing the literature, and in collecting and interpreting the narratives and experiential data provided by the industry practitioners highlighted in this study, the following research questions emerged and have guided the research:

1. How and why has the definition of opera broadened?
2. How does genre-fusion make room for improvisation in opera?
3. How does genre-fusion and improvisation in 21<sup>st</sup>-century operas impact vocal pedagogy and performance practice?
4. How do we best prepare singers for participation in 21<sup>st</sup>-century operas that contain the aforementioned characteristics?

The first two questions focus on and draw from historical and current literature and data. It points to industry trends and the evolution of unique musical elements that emerged in opera. The second question mainly focuses on the connection between the musical style element and the performance element that are the focus of this study. The third question draws further connections by linking the two focus elements that are implemented by 21<sup>st</sup>-century opera composers to current voice pedagogy and

performance practice. Lastly, the fourth question explores the findings of this study and the ways these findings may shape how we train modern opera singers. The research questions from this study arise from a review of the related literature and through a guided analysis of the interviews with participants.

## **Related Literature**

I consulted a number of sources through the course of my research, including relevant articles, and scholarly books and journals that cite opera composition practices in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and the impact of style components on singers and vocal pedagogues. Very few sources detailed the impact of 21<sup>st</sup>-century compositional practices, namely the use of genre fusion and improvisation, on voice pedagogy and performance practice. The sources I found most relevant, however, cover three main categories: 1) literature relating to voice pedagogy and performance practice in opera and popular/vernacular music genres, 2) literature relating to critical improvisation studies, and 3) literature providing general information about multi-genre works and contemporary opera composition trends.

### **Literature Relating to Voice Pedagogy and Performance Practice in Opera and Popular/Vernacular Music Genres**

*The End of Early Music: A Period Performer's History of Music for the Twenty-First Century*<sup>4</sup> by Bruce Haynes, *Romanticism and Improvisation, 1750-1850*<sup>5</sup> by Angela

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<sup>4</sup> Bruce Haynes, *The End of Early Music: A Period Performer's History of Music for the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Esterhammer, *Performance Practice: A Dictionary-guide for Musicians*<sup>6</sup> by Roland John Jackson, *The Castrati in Opera*<sup>7</sup> by Angus Heriot, *Improvisation in the Arts of the Middle Ages and Renaissance*<sup>8</sup> by Timothy McGee, and “Vocal Ornamentation in Verdi: The Phonographic Evidence,” an article in *19<sup>th</sup>-Century Music* by Will Crutchfield are all texts that provide historical context for examining and understanding the role and evolution of improvisation in opera from the Baroque era to the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Books and dissertations relating the history of singing pedagogy and performance practice in opera and other genres include *Vocal Authority: Singing Style and Ideology* by John Potter,<sup>9</sup> *The Cambridge Companion to Singing*<sup>10</sup> edited by John Potter, and A

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<sup>5</sup> Angela Esterhammer, *Romanticism and Improvisation, 1750-1850* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Roland John Jackson, *Performance Practice: A Dictionary-Guide for Musicians* (New York, London: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Angus Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1956).

<sup>8</sup> Timothy McGee, *Improvisation in the Arts of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, Early Drama, Art, and Music Monograph Series 30* (Kalamazoo, MI: The Board of the Medieval Institute, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> John Potter, *Vocal Authority: Singing Style and Ideology* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> John Potter, *The Cambridge Companion to Singing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

*History of Bel Canto*<sup>11</sup> by Rodolfo Celletti. In both of the aforementioned books involving John Potter, he points to the evolution of voice pedagogy in Western classical music, whereas Celletti centers his focus on the era, style, and performance tradition of bel canto. This literature is integral to understanding the progression of vocal pedagogy and performance practice in eras when improvisation would have been prevalent.

*Teaching Singing in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*<sup>12</sup> edited by Scott D. Harrison and Jessica O'Bryan, and *The Vocal Vision: Views on Voice By 24 Leading Teachers, Coaches, and Directors*<sup>13</sup> edited by Marion Hampton and Barbara Acker both offer insight on singing and teaching from important, current, voice professionals. Harrison and O'Bryan's volume consists specifically of research articles from leading international researchers and voice pedagogues alongside emerging academics in the field, and covers topics pertaining to teaching a multitude of musical genres and styles. This literature is relevant to my study because it features current research in the field and is focused on classical vocal training that encompasses musical styles outside of the classical realm. *The Professional Vocalist: A Handbook for Commercial Singers and Teachers*<sup>14</sup> by Angela

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<sup>11</sup> Rodolfo Celletti, *A History of Bel Canto* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

<sup>12</sup> Scott D. Harrison and Jessica O'Bryan, eds., *Teaching Singing in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Springer, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Marion Hampton and Barbara Acker, eds., *The Vocal Vision: Views on Voice By 24 Leading Teachers, Coaches, and Directors* (New York and London: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 1997).

<sup>14</sup> Rachel L. Lebon, *The Professional Vocalist: A Handbook for Commercial Singers and Teachers* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1999).



Lebon examines singing technique, studio considerations, and microphone technique for contemporary commercial music singers. Many of the techniques and technology used in contemporary commercial singing apply to singing in 21<sup>st</sup>-century operas, as well.

### **Literature Relating to Critical Improvisation Studies**

Most of the books and articles I uncovered relating to improvisation studies in higher education music programs focused on instrumental music or vocal music in choral and classroom settings. They include “Transforming Music Study from Its Foundations: A Manifesto for Progressive Change in the Undergraduate Preparation of Music Majors,” published by *College Music Society*,<sup>15</sup> *Musical Improvisation: Art, Education, and Society*<sup>16</sup> edited by Gabriel Solis and Bruno Nettl, “Teaching Improvisation Through Process, Applications in Music Education and Implications in General Education,”<sup>17</sup> and “Pedagogical Applications of Cognitive Research on Musical Improvisation,”<sup>18</sup> in *Frontiers in Psychology* both by Michele Biasutti, and Christopher Azzara’s article

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<sup>15</sup> Ed Sarath, “Transforming Music Study from Its Foundations: A Manifesto for Progressive Change in the Undergraduate Preparation of Music Majors,” *College Music Symposium*, *College Music Society* Vol. 56 (2016).

<sup>16</sup> Gabriel Solis and Bruno Nettl, eds., *Musical Improvisation: Art, Education, and Society* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> Michele Biasutti, “Teaching Improvisation Through Process. Applications in Music Education and Implications in General Education,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 8, no. 911 (June 2017).

<sup>18</sup> Michele Biasutti, “Pedagogical Applications of Cognitive Research on Musical Improvisation,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 6, no. 614 (May 2015).

“Improvisation,” in *New Handbook of Research in Music Teaching and Learning*.<sup>19</sup> This literature provides support for the argument that improvisation benefits musicians. It also points to the idea that a well-rounded curriculum and program of study should incorporate improvisation.

*Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* by Derek Bailey, and *In the Course of Performance: Studies in the World of Musical Improvisation*<sup>20</sup> edited by Bruno Nettl with Melinda Russell provides critical commentary about improvised music. The former incorporates personal testimony and interviews with industry practitioners, much like this study, while the later situates improvisation studies globally. *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies (Volumes 1 and 2)*<sup>21</sup> edited by George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut, and both “Improvised Music After 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives”<sup>22</sup> in the *Black Music Research Journal* and *A Power Stronger*

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<sup>19</sup> Christopher Azzara, “Improvisation,” Richard Colwell and Carol Richardson, eds., *New Handbook of Research in Music Teaching and Learning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> Bruno Nettl and Melinda Russell, *In the Course of Performance: Studies in the World of Musical Improvisation* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

<sup>21</sup> George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>22</sup> George E. Lewis, “Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives,” *Black Music Research Journal* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 91–122.

*Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music*<sup>23</sup> by George E. Lewis offer an ethnomusicological perspective on the practice and evolution of improvisation across a number of genres including jazz, experimental music, and classical music. They also highlight issues in America concerning the resistance to acceptance of African-American vernacular music and improvisation as ‘high art.’

While there are only a few theater games listed and adapted in this study, there exists a large breadth of literature relating to improvisational theater games. Here are a few recommendations for further reading: *Improvisation in Drama, Theater, and Performance*<sup>24</sup> by Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow, *Improvise: Scene From the Inside Out*<sup>25</sup> by Mick Napier, *Improvisation in Rehearsal*<sup>26</sup> by John Abbott, and both *Theater Games for Rehearsal: A Director’s Handbook*,<sup>27</sup> and *Improvisation for the Theater: A*

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<sup>23</sup> George E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow, *Improvisation in Drama, Theater, and Performance*, Third (United Kingdom and New York: Palgrave, 2016).

<sup>25</sup> Napier Napier, *Improvise: Scene From the Inside Out* (Portsmouth, NH: Heineman, 2004).

<sup>26</sup> John Abbott, *Improvisation in Rehearsal* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2009).

<sup>27</sup> Viola Spolin, *Theater Games for Rehearsal: A Director’s Handbook* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1985).

*Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques*<sup>28</sup> by Viola Spolin. They also provided a basis for the adapted and suggested games and exercises listed in this study.

### **Literature Providing General Information About Multi-Genre Works and Contemporary Opera Composition Trends**

A general overview of multi-genre works and contemporary opera composition trends is provided in the following books: *Compositions in the Digital World:*

*Conversations with 21<sup>st</sup> Century American Composers*<sup>29</sup> by Robert Raines, *New*

*Directions in Music*<sup>30</sup> by David Cope, *William Grant Still: The Fusion of Cultures in*

*American Music*<sup>31</sup> edited by Robert Bartlett Haas, *Musicianship in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century:*

*Issues, Trends, and Possibilities*<sup>32</sup> edited by Sam Leong, *The Strange Career of Porgy*

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<sup>28</sup> Viola Spolin, *And Improvisation for the Theater: A Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques*, 3rd ed. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999).

<sup>29</sup> Robert Raines, *Compositions in the Digital World: Conversations with 21<sup>st</sup> Century American Composers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>30</sup> David Cope, *New Directions in Music*, 7th ed. (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 2001).

<sup>31</sup> Robert Bartlett Haas, ed., *William Grant Still: The Fusion of Cultures in American Music* (Los Angeles, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1972).

<sup>32</sup> Sam Leong, ed., *Musicianship in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Issues, Trends, and Possibilities* (Sydney, Australia: Southwood Press, 2003).

*and Bess: Race, Culture, and America's Most Famous Opera*<sup>33</sup> by Ellen Noonan, and *Music in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries*<sup>34</sup> by Joseph Auner. The literature not only illuminates the role of the composer in impacting performance practice and pedagogy, but points to specific trends in 21<sup>st</sup>-century classical composition. The aforementioned literature also highlights the ways popular music and African-American vernacular music have manifested themselves in opera and make room for the use of improvisation and a varied performance practice influenced by style elements.

## **Organization of the Study**

Following this overview, chapter 2 consists of a historical outline tracing the use and evolution of improvisation in opera from the Baroque era to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with focus on the social movements and changes in culture that influenced the direction of opera and, in turn, vocal performance practice and pedagogy. It also traces the emergence of America's musical identity, highlighting the works that first fused classical music with other genres. Chapter 3 consists of a description of the research methodology (narrative inquiry) and the process I undertook to obtain narrative data through interviews with

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<sup>33</sup> Ellen Noonan, *The Strange Career of Porgy and Bess: Race, Culture, and America's Most Famous Opera* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

<sup>34</sup> Joseph Auner, *Music in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013).

industry practitioners. Chapter 4 contains important narratives from the interviews with composers and singers who contributed to this study, as well as, an analysis of the narrative data. Important insights from arts administrator Mila Henry are interwoven with research pertaining to the opera industry in this chapter, as well. Chapter 5 details the unique components in 21<sup>st</sup>-century operas that prompt an expansion beyond the traditional boundaries in classical voice training. Chapter 5 also incorporates additional narratives from interviews with industry practitioners and culminates with a sample set of improvisation exercises adapted for practical use in a voice studio, group classes or opera workshop. Following chapter 5, is a conclusion section summarizing the findings from the study and identifying potential areas for further research.

## CHAPTER 2

### **Improvisation Studies in Early Classical Music**

Czech-born Bruno Nettl is a prominent musicologist and ethnomusicologist who offers a comprehensive survey of global studies in the field in his book *In the Course of Performance: Studies in the World of Musical Improvisation*. According to Nettl, “Ethnomusicologists have dealt with improvised music for over a century, but the study of improvisation as a specific process is a later development...but in the course of the late 1960s and 1970s...a major cluster of publications appeared.”<sup>35</sup> *In the Course of Performance* provides insight into the various discoveries and research approaches of ethnomusicologists and musicologists over the past 80 years concerning musical improvisation in various cultures. Nettl’s research reveals that Ernst Ferrand (1887-1972) was the first known musicologist to dedicate substantive research to the study of improvisation in Western classical music. His *Improvisation in der Musik* along with his encyclopedia articles on improvisation and other literature lay the groundwork for navigating and understanding the historic significance and ethnographic elements of improvisation in Western classical music across a span of musical periods. While distinct musical genres, as we know them today, had not yet been established, there is clear evidence that some form of fusion brought on by cultural and social exchange took place during the developmental stages of Western classical music. When we explore the early

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<sup>35</sup> Bruno Nettl and Melinda Russell, *In the Course of Performance: Studies in the World of Musical Improvisation* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

Gregorian and Ambrosian chants, we are reminded of the influence of the East on Western medieval music. In his article *Improvisation in Music History and Education*, Ferrand states, “The great wealth of ornamentation found in both these bodies of Chant points clearly to Oriental origins and to the plentiful use of improvisation by the singers. The influence of improvisation is demonstrable in most of the forms of Gregorian Chant, principally in the responsorial forms for soloist and choir...It is not until the 11th century that a transition from improvisation to composition becomes noticeable.”<sup>36</sup> Even after the transition to composition, improvisation remained a prevalent part of the musical presentation in medieval church music, mainly in the form of ornamental organum technique. Ferrand notes that the use of embellishment is especially evident in the “upper voices of the organa of Limoges, Compostela, and Paris.”<sup>37</sup>

Examples of improvisation are seen in secular music, as well, in social settings for entertainment purposes and through paid improvisers who served in an official capacity for Italian communities. Timothy McGee notes in *Improvisation in the Arts of the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, that in the 15th century, “the title role in Angelo Poliziano’s *Orfeo* was sung *all’improvviso* by Bacio Ugolini, one of the most famous improvisers of his day.”<sup>38</sup> In the *cantare all’improvviso* tradition which dated back to late Middle Ages

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<sup>36</sup>Ernst T. Ferrand, “Improvisation in Music History and Education,” *Papers of the American Musicological Society*, 1940, 116-117.

<sup>37</sup> Ernst T. Ferrand, “Improvisation in Music History and Education,” 117.

<sup>38</sup> Timothy McGee, *Improvisation in the Arts of the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, Early Drama, Art, and Music Monograph Series 30 (Kalamazoo, MI: The Board of the Medieval Institute, 2003).



and flourished well into the 17th century, a performer would improvise sung lines of poetry and accompany himself on the lute or lyra da braccio.<sup>39</sup> McGee also notes the civic value of improvisation stating, “There was an official post of ‘civic herald’ in many communities that required someone who could improvise. In Florence, civic pay documents record this position from as early as the 1320s. It was the herald’s job to see to all of the official ceremonial details for the civic government including writing and singing poetry as a part of the ceremony.”<sup>40</sup> McGee’s findings help to highlight the cultural significance of improvisation and the prominent titles and positions offered to those who possessed the valued skill set. The development of music printing in 1501 prompted an increase in the interest among the wealthy and literate to learn to read and play printed music and the cosmopolitan Burgundian court atmosphere allowed foreign musicians to interact with and influence one another. This, coupled with the emergence of national musical styles and the popularity of the Italian madrigal, paved the way for Italy to become a dominant musical center for secular vocal music in the 16th century.

## **Castrati and the Bel Canto Tradition**

16th century Italy saw a gradual progression and development of secular vocal music that involved the expansion of the *intermedi* (sung interludes between acts of a drama) and pastoral dramas. Finally, the Florentine Camarata, a group of scholars and art

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<sup>39</sup> Timothy McGee, *Improvisation in the Arts of the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, 31-70.

<sup>40</sup> Timothy McGee, *Improvisation in the Arts of the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, 33.

enthusiasts, was established in 1573. They began a musical experiment that aimed to further humanist ideals and recreate the ancient Greek dramas with music. The meetings, philosophical discussions, and musical experiments of the Camarata resulted in Jacopo Peri's *Dafne* (1598), the first known opera, and the first foray into a bold new form of singing that merged with drama. By 1637, Teatro San Cassiano, the first public opera house, opened and opera became an art form that could be openly enjoyed by the emerging middle class, and not just in court by the elite and noble classes. Venice and Rome became centers for opera, and by the mid-17th century, opera houses competed for public patronage by providing large spectacle performances that involved elaborate pyrotechnics, costumes, and extravagantly large sets. Singers also became more prominent, commanding higher salaries than composers as the century progressed.

In both religious music and the opera world of the 17th century, vocal music was dominated by the *castrati*, male singers who were castrated as a means to prevent puberty and retain a soprano or alto voice. Castrati trained extensively at conservatories in the art of singing and stage deportment from early boyhood. They were known for their superhuman breath control, virtuosic agility, and unique physical stature, possessing large barrel-shaped chests and considerable height.

Many of the first *maestri* or master singer-teachers were castrati themselves. Among them, two of the earliest most famous castrati voice teachers were Pier Francesco Tosi and Francesco Pistocchi. They influenced generations of singers and tastes concerning Baroque opera. These tastes became fully manifest in a philosophy of teaching and singing tradition that was later termed *bel canto* (literal translation:

‘beautiful voice’). Echoes of the bel canto singing tradition still reverberate through the halls of music conservatories and opera houses worldwide, even today.

Unfortunately, we have no way of knowing how castrati voices actually sounded. The only known recording of a castrato occurred in spring of 1902 when Gramophone & Typewriter company of London traveled to the Sistine Chapel in hopes of capturing a recording of the Pope on the newly invented gramophone. When they discovered that the Pope would not be making himself available for the recording they opted to capture the voice of Alessandro Moreschi, instead. Moreschi, a soloist in the Sistine Chapel Choir, is believed to have been the last of the castrati. While some remnants of Moreschi’s former glory are detected in the hauntingly penetrating timbre of the castrato, the recording was done when the singer was past his prime (44-years old) and did him little justice.

In 1914, Moreschi was interviewed by Viennese scholar and singing professor Franz Haböck who noted that while Moreschi’s range during the peak of his career was about two and a half octaves, by the time of the interview, it had shrunk to less than two octaves and was weak in the upper register. Despite this, Haböck remarked, “all my informants agreed that Moreschi’s voice in its heyday had been of a beauty and strength that they had never heard in a male or female voice.”<sup>41</sup> He went on to indicate that what he lacked in his ability to sing coloratura passages he more than made up for in his mastery of  *messa di voce*  (a technique involving a crescendo followed by an immediate decrescendo). Another more entertainingly poetic description of the castrati sound is taken from Martha Feldman’s book, *The Castrato: Reflections on Natures and Kinds*.

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<sup>41</sup> Nicholas Clapton, *Moreschi The Last Castrato* (London: Haus Publishing Limited, 2004), 135.

Enrico Panzacchi waxes nostalgic in his depiction of the castrato voice, “Imagine a voice that combines the sweetness of the flute and the lively mellifluousness of the human larynx, a voice that rises, light and spontaneous, as a skylark flies through the air when it’s inebriated by the sun, and when it seems that this voice must be poised on the highest vertices of the ultra-high range, takes further flight, and rises and rises, always with equal lightness, equally spontaneous, without the least expression of force...”<sup>42</sup>

18th-century musician Mancini gives us more detail regarding the technical feats for which castrati like the great Farinelli were known. “His voice was thought a marvel, because it was so perfect, so powerful, so sonorous and so rich ... The qualities in which he excelled were the evenness of his voice, the art of swelling its sound, the *portamento* [sliding between notes], the union of registers, and a surprising agility.”<sup>43</sup> Farinelli is one example of the highest level of skill to which castrati could aspire. Accounts of his voice and how well it was received help scholars obtain a clearer picture of the primary tastes and aesthetics in Baroque opera.

Naples was one of the first cities in Italy to establish the ‘conservatorio,’ a charitable institution designed to educate young boys, most of whom were poor, orphaned, or both. Musical education gradually became a central aspect of the curriculum and was the sole curriculum by the middle of the 17th century.<sup>44</sup> Teaching methods

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<sup>42</sup> Martha Feldman, *The Castrato: Reflections on Natures and Kinds* (University of California Press, 2016).

<sup>43</sup> Oxford Music Online, s.v. “Farinelli,” accessed December 1, 2017, <https://doi-org.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.09312>.

<sup>44</sup> Angus Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1956), 40.

developed in the four conservatories of Naples would later set a precedent for music conservatories throughout Europe and the world. Conservatorio de Poveri di Gesù Cristo boasted famous alumni such as Nicola Porpora, who would later go on to have an illustrious career as a composer and voice teacher (taught Farinelli and Joseph Haydn among others) and composer Giovanni Pergolesi. The most famous of the four conservatories, however, was the Conservatorio de Sant'Onofrio a Porta Capuana. The conservatory was unique because it was the only conservatory to train young castrati. Castrati made up one-fifth of the student body and were housed separately from the other boys. Heriot notes that the conservatories as a whole eventually began profiting from pupils, lending them out to serve as singers for churches and funeral services. The conservatories also began admitting pupils who could pay to attend, though the duties of those students were usually lessened.<sup>45</sup> The well-known faculty included among others Porpora and Francesco Durante. Castrati trained in the conservatories would often turn to teach at later points in their careers and begin to lay the foundations for the field of vocal pedagogy.

Pier Francesco Tosi's (1653-1732) is best known for his *Opinioni de' cantori antichi e moderni o sieno osservazioni sopra il canto figurato*, the earliest known treatise on singing by a castrato teacher. The treatise, published in Bologna in 1723, offers insight into the teaching techniques that he, and possibly other castrato teachers (whom he recommends in the treatise), adopted. Tosi's designation of vocal registers as *voce di petto* (chest voice) and *voce di testa* (head voice) is still referenced in modern-day

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<sup>45</sup> Angus Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera*, 41.

pedagogy. Tosi believed that it should be the goal of the singer to blend the vocal registers in a manner that allowed the transition from chest voice to head voice to go undetected. The treatise became immediately popular and was later translated into English and German. Tosi, also a composer, offered detailed instructions on the execution of embellishments and referenced a number of technical aspects, as well. His teachings were concerned with vowel placement, vocal agility, breath management, and vocal registration. He encouraged students to practice in front of a mirror for mastery of dramatic presentation and reiterated the popular sentiment that singers should never rely on teachers or composers to write their ornaments. Tosi made a point to hail the castrati as masters of singing and spent a great deal of time bemoaning the contemporary singers of his era. He yearned for a return to the glory days of the castrati. Still, his teachings opened doorways to developing a standard vocal aesthetic and teaching technique that could be adopted by all.

Francesco Antonio Pistocchi (1659-1726) , another influential castrato pedagogue, was considered the founder of the Bolognese school of singing. His most famous student Antonio Bernacchi (c. 1690-1756), was a teacher to Senesino and Carestini. Pistocchi was a child prodigy who began singing at three years old and wrote his first composition at age eight. Although he had a satisfactory career as a contralto in the principal Italian theaters, by 1705, he shifted his focus from performing to teaching. His fame as a teacher ultimately surpassed his reputation as a performer. Among his students were Antonio Bernacchi, A.P. Fabri, Antonio Pasi, Gaetano Berenstadt and G.B. Martini. A master of ornamentation, Pistocchi's ideas were in line with Tosi's, and

through his teachings he encouraged well-articulated trills, shakes, and appoggiatura while maintaining the established tempo.

Although a well-known teacher, singer, and composer, Nicola Porpora was not a castrato. He influenced and was highly influenced by the castrati of his era. Porpora is associated with the Neapolitan School singing tradition which based its methodology in producing ease with singing florid passages, sustained breath control, and creating even vocal registers. In *A History of Bel Canto*, Rodolfo Celletti credits Porpora as one of three composers who “form a bridge between Scarlatti and the period dominated by Vinci, Handel, and Hasse.”<sup>46</sup> The author also recounts Porpora’s impressive list of pupils which included sopranos Gabrielli and Regina Valenti Mingotti along with a number of successful castrati including Giuseppe Appiani, Antonio Hubert (known as Il Porporino), Gaetano Majorana (known as Caffarelli), and Carlo Broschi (known as Farinelli) who according to Celletti is “regarded as the greatest singer in the whole of operatic history.”<sup>47</sup>

Porpora served as the composer for Opera of the Nobility in London, a rival to Handel’s Academy of Music. Like most composers of the period, Porpora fashioned much of his music after the vocal abilities of his singers, especially the castrato Cafarelli who he reportedly favored. Heriot notes that he tended to limit the range of his compositions to the range of no more than an octave even though singers like his student Farinelli were capable of singing far beyond this. The author supposes that “Porpora may

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<sup>46</sup> Rodolfo Celletti, *A History of Bel Canto* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 68.

<sup>47</sup> Rodolfo Celletti, *A History of Bel Canto*, 72.

have been anxious to keep Farinelli within his ‘natural’ register- in so far as his voice was natural at all-which was no doubt stronger and richer in tone.”<sup>48</sup> Celletti points out that the virtuosity prevalent in Porpora’s operas was “bound up with the exceptional abilities of his pupils and other famous performers...the writing is nevertheless a sort of anthology of patterns of great difficulty as well as a set of stylistic guidelines.”<sup>49</sup> Porpora like many composers of the era crafted their compositions in response to both the established aesthetic of the time and the vocal abilities of singers with whom they worked.

As a teacher, Porpora was purported to have implemented a meticulous, rigorous training schedule. Caffarelli described a typical day as follows:<sup>50</sup>

In the morning:

1 hour singing passages of difficult execution

1 hour study of letters

1 hour singing exercises in front of a mirror, to practice deportment and gesture, and to guard against ugly grimaces while singing

In the afternoon:

½ hour theoretical work,

½ hour of counterpoint on a canto *fermo*, (**in other words, practice in improvisation**),

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<sup>48</sup> Angus Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera*, 49-50.

<sup>49</sup> Rodolfo Celletti, *A History of Bel Canto*, 72-73.

<sup>50</sup> Angus Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera*, 48.



1 hour studying counterpoint with the cartella (similar to a school slate),

1 hour studying letters

Porpora placed great emphasis on vocal technique, and improvisation was a standard part of his prescribed practice routine. His collections of *solfege* published in various editions throughout the 19th century set a precedent for regular rigorous practice that is still a foundational aspect of vocal training today. The vocal training supplied by Porpora became internationally associated with the Neapolitan school as it was directly inherited by Porpora during his time as a pupil at Poveri di Gesù Cristo. As a teacher and composer, he came to know and understand the castrato voice very well. Porpora was responsible for having launched the career of a large number of castrati, many of whom carried on his tradition by becoming teachers themselves. In this manner, the oral tradition later pegged *bel canto* became a living, breathing, self-perpetuating entity.

Farinelli composed arias and frequently collaborated with Scarlatti, Francesco Durante, Wolfgang A. Mozart, George F. Handel, and other prominent composers of the period. He studied the singing style of the castrati and worked closely with singers in general, often tailoring arias and entire roles to a singer's specific capabilities. As the *primi uomini* of the Baroque opera scene, castrati were in a position to have the most influence on vocal aesthetic and performance practice. In fact, in March of 1765, Giovanni Manzuoli, a contemporary of Farinelli, even gave the young Mozart (8 years old at the time) a singing lesson during his time in London<sup>51</sup>. Two years later the prodigy

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<sup>51</sup> John S. Jenkins, "Mozart and the Castrati," 58.

would make his first attempts at opera composition. The castrati learned the art and science of composition as part of their training in conservatories and were often composers themselves. As composers and teachers, they had a direct impact on the music that was being created for operas. As singers, they challenged composers and other singers to rise to new heights, incorporating improvisation into both their own singing and into their training techniques. It is clear that without the musical and pedagogical contributions of these Baroque-era superstars, development of teaching standards and the road to the refinement of Baroque opera may have been a longer, more tedious journey.

The agile, virtuosic vocal standard established by the castrati was imposed on other voice types, as well. As late as 1623, there is evidence that mastery of improvisation is a significant indicator of superior vocal technique. McGee recounts details from a letter to the Grand Duke of Tuscany where a dispute over “who was the finest soprano in Rome” was tested through a singing battle that examined and challenged the improvisational skills of both sopranos, L’Adriana (Adriana Basile) and ‘La Cecchina’ (Francesca Caccini, daughter of Giulio Caccini). Poet Gian Battista Morino asserted his preference for L’Adriana “at an evening gathering of notables at the palace of Cardinal Orsino where the singer ‘La Cecchina’ was performing...After some discussion the participants decided that the issue was to be settled by a trial: the poet sent for some of his *ottave rime* and presented them to ‘La Cecchina,’ who was asked to improvise both a melody and accompaniment to them at sight. On the next night, the same verses were presented to ‘L’Adriana,’ and the matter was judged to be settled in favor of ‘La Cecchina.’ The letter states that following the contest, Marino ‘celebrated

throughout all of Rome the ability of Signora Francesca.”<sup>52</sup> Much like today, the established vocal aesthetic of the region and time period placed demands on all opera singers, regardless of voice type. Those who had the aptitude and further developed their skills to meet those demands were the most successful in their career pursuits. Additionally, today, vocal pedagogues continue to adopt many of the singing standards established by Porpora and other master singer-teachers from the Baroque era. However, improvisation has not retained its value and place in classical vocal pedagogy as a regularly prescribed part of a balanced practice routine.

## **Cyclical Trends and Developments in Opera**

Developments in opera were the result of a cyclical and reciprocal relationship between audiences, singers, teachers, and composers. Audiences, which encompassed the aristocracy and social elite, were driven by the cultural trends and artistic movements of the time period. The singers were influenced by society/audiences, and would, in turn, influence composers and other singers who were often also teachers. Newly established aesthetics and developments in performance practice would again impact audiences and drive singers to become more technically advanced, as the cycle continued. It is well known that composers like Handel and Mozart tailored their songs to suit the capabilities of the singer. As Leopold reported, Mozart would always compose with specific singers

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<sup>52</sup> Timothy McGee, *Improvisation in the Arts of the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, 33.

in mind, refusing to compose the arias before meeting the singer in person so as to “fit the suit to the figure.”<sup>53</sup> Singers were well-respected co-creators that collaborated with and inspired the great composers of the period.

As the 17th century progressed, arias began to increase in length “from around a dozen in the 1640s to more than 60 in the 1670s.”<sup>54</sup> The *da capo* (literally ‘from the head’) aria was a musical standard in the *opera seria* of the late Baroque period. Represented by the formula *ABA*, the da capo aria consisted of three sections, and allowed for embellishments in the recapitulation of the first section. Singers had a large role in the creative process. There was a hierarchical ranking of the singers in a production that was indicated by the length of their role and the number of arias they would be allotted. The formulaic nature of both the arias and their function in the operas allowed one aria to be easily exchanged with an aria from another opera. This practice was commonplace, and singers often travelled with *arie di baule* (suitcase arias) at the ready.

During the late 17th- and early 18th-century it was also commonplace for some operas, later termed *pasticcio* (literally ‘pie’ or ‘pastry’), to contain material from more than one composer. Impresarios encouraged the production of *pasticcio* because it likely ensured public favor and helped them to better compete in markets where famous court

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<sup>53</sup> John S. Jenkins, “Mozart and the Castrati,” *The Musical Times* 151, no. 1913 (Winter 2010), 58.

<sup>54</sup> Reinhard Strohm, “Pasticcio,” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie, vol. 14 (London: Macmillan, 1980), 288.

composers with permanent positions could not be contracted to produce original works.<sup>55</sup>

Reinhard Strohm breaks down the concept behind this open-sourced opera system in *Essays on Handel and Italian Opera*: “The concept is defined by two distinguishing features: (1) The individual numbers (mostly arias) of the pasticcio are for the most part taken from their original contexts and put together to form a completely new entity...(2) The pasticcio includes music by a number of different composers. It often happened, even in the case of Handel, that a composer would introduce earlier arias of his own in a new context.”<sup>56</sup>

Because this practice of producing opera patchwork was well-known and widely expected, audiences did not expect to hear the same arias in every production of a particular opera. They also customarily attended several performances of the same opera because of the social draw and expected that singers would ornament their favorite songs differently each night. As the central figures and main draw of the industry, singers were encouraged to provide quite the spectacle and had to compete with talking and socializing during performances. This custom is vividly described by Samuel Sharp, a visiting Englishman in Naples (1767), in his *Letters from Italy*:

“The voices are drowned in this immensity of space, and even the orchestra itself, though a numerous band, lies under a disadvantage...There are some who contend, that

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<sup>55</sup> Howard Mayer Brown, Ellen Rosand, Reinhard Strohm, Michel Noiray, Roger Parker, Arnold Whittall, Roger Savage and Barry Millington, "Opera," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie, accessed February 26, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.40726>

<sup>56</sup> Reinhard Strohm, *Essays on Handel and Italian Opera* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 164.

the singers might be very well heard, if the audience were more silent; but it is so much the fashion at Naples, and indeed through all Italy, to consider the Opera as a place of rendezvous and visiting, that they do not seem in the least to attend to the musick, but laugh and talk through the whole performance without any restraint; and, it may be imagined, that an assembly of so many hundreds conversing together so loudly, must entirely cover the voices of the singers...I had been informed, that though the Italians indulged this humour in some degree, yet, when a favourite song was singing, or the King was present, they observed a deep silence.”<sup>57</sup> To this end, there was tremendous pressure on opera singers to perform the arias that were tried and true favorites, and to perform at a high technical level. As a result, vocal theatrics (improvised ornaments) worthy enough to compete for the Italian theater-goers’ attention was the order of the day.

### **From Gluck to Verdi: Opera is Reformed**

Castrati have been documented as performing well into the early 19th century. However, by then, prominent sopranos, tenors, and basses had already begun to take center stage, and the castrati had begun to fade out, though their trademark bel canto style of singing lived on, especially through the ornate writing style of composers like Gioachino Rossini, Gaetano Donizetti, and Vincenzo Bellini. Rossini expanded the role

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<sup>57</sup> Samuel Sharp, *Letters from Italy, Describing the Customs and Manners of That Country, in the Years 1765, and 1766: To Which Is Annexed, an Admonition to Gentlemen Who Pass the Alps, in Their Tour Through Italy*, 2nd ed. (London: Henry and Cave, 1767), 78-79.

of the chorus and orchestra in furthering plot development in Italian comedic opera. He also incorporated florid singing into both *opera seria* and *opera giocosa* (comic opera) and valued melody and vocalism over prosody. Celletti notes, “His vocal ideal was the castrato, in whom he saw not only a throat capable of prodigies of virtuosity but also, indeed above all, an interpreter of unsurpassable expressiveness. In Rossini’s view of singing, the intrinsic beauty of sound and the impeccable execution of agility passages were elements essential to an expressive rendering.”<sup>58</sup> Rossini valued florid singing where the words always functioned subordinately in service to the melody. Many credit Rossini and his penchant for precisely notated florid passages (mainly toward the end of his career) with leading the movement that pushed Italian opera singers further away from improvisatory singing.

Some scholars argue that Rossini began the practice of writing ornaments out by hand after an incident during a December 1813 performance of *Aureliano in Palmira* where the castrato singer Velluti excessively ornamented while performing the role of Arsace. Despite the well-documented incident, Celletti argues that florid and ornate passages in Rossini’s opera were “a gradual and ongoing process which was only to be abandoned when his move to Paris forced him to adjust his methods to French practice.”<sup>59</sup> As noted in *A History of Bel Canto*, there are passages in *Aureliano in Palmira* such as in the first act aria ‘Se tu m’ami, o mia regina,’ where the invitation to improvise is indicated with the placement of a fermata sign between two notes.

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<sup>58</sup> Rodolfo Celletti, *A History of Bel Canto*, 139.

<sup>59</sup> Rodolfo Celletti, *A History of Bel Canto*, 145.



**Figure 2.1** Outlines a passage from the aria “Se tu m’ami, o mia regina” in Act I of *Aurelia*. This illustration is taken from page 143 of Rodolfo Celletti’s *A History of Bel Canto*<sup>60</sup>.

There are two fermata signs in the example above. The second fermata is placed between two notes, which, according to Celletti, signifies that “at the point in question the performer should insert an invention of his own, in the form of a vocalise.”<sup>61</sup> There are also examples in other operas after *Aureliano in Palmira*, namely *Sigismondo* and *Il turco in Italia*, where there are no noticeable changes in the composer’s writing style. Rossini’s innovative approach was highly impactful throughout Europe, especially in France, where he helped to revive the Italian theater traditions, influenced *opéra comique*, and eventually became the manager of the French Opéra. Ultimately, While Rossini was among the first to explicitly notate florid passages, he also left room for spontaneity and furthered the tradition of virtuosic singing that required a strong technical foundation on the part of the singer.

<sup>60</sup> Rodolfo Celletti, *A History of Bel Canto*, 143.

<sup>61</sup> Rodolfo Celletti, *A History of Bel Canto*, 143.



At the same time Rossini was building on reshaping the bel canto tradition, Christoph Willibald (Ritter von) Gluck was introducing a new, reformed, vision for opera, promoting the subjugation of music in service to the text. Gluck's compositional approach and reforms had a great impact on the next generation of composers responsible for ushering in the Classical era. Mozart and Haydn are among the significant composers who followed in Gluck's footsteps, increasing the size of the orchestra, lengthening arias, and giving ensembles a greater role in furthering the drama. It would not be until the 1790s when Gluck's reforms would really begin to take hold and usher in a budding Romantic era.

With the onset of the Romantic Period, a more declamatory style begins to emerge. The golden age of opera was dominated by composers like Giuseppe Verdi in Italy and Richard Wagner in Germany who respond to the opera audience's desire for art to express the sublime. They precipitate an industry-wide shift in focus from the superstar virtuosic singer to the charismatic composer and conductor. More emphasis was placed on strict adherence to the written notation and interpretive direction of the composer-conductor. In *Vocal Authority: Singing Style and Ideology*, author John Potter quotes historian Barthes' 'Musica Practica' and his observations regarding the impact of printed music on the shifting dynamic in the relationship between performers, composers, and audience members. Barthes theorizes, and Potter reiterates, that Beethoven represented a dividing point where music shifted from being an art form that was accessible and practiced by all, to be the domain of the musical elite. This shift resulted in "the composer becoming the Romantic genius, the performer becoming the interpreter and the

mass of people who could do neither of these things becoming listeners.”<sup>62</sup> As audiences begin to desire music that finds new nuance and color in expressing emotional sentiment, fidelity to the written word and composed notation becomes primary.

## **Genre Fusion: Toward Forming a National Identity**

Both the American and French Revolution gave rise to the burgeoning bourgeois class, and by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the Age of Enlightenment gave way to romantic nationalism throughout Europe. Opera houses run by impresarios were furnished with tiered seating and allowed for increasingly larger audiences. In 1854, Manuel Garcia a Spanish singer, educator, and vocal pedagogue invented the first laryngoscope. This invention along with his treatise *L'Art du chant* opened new pathways for the development of scientific fact-based voice pedagogy. The combination of nationalistic sentimentalities, larger opera houses, and the development of a more scientific approach to voice pedagogy had an impact on singers and the vocal aesthetic of the period. As the middle class became a more dominant presence, opera audiences gradually developed a taste for operas with music and plots that were better suited to their romantic ideals.

Composers saw less use for the florid singing style of the previous eras and singers employed new vocal techniques to meet the demands of singing lyrical, more heavily orchestrated music in larger houses. “It is only in the nineteenth century that the artistic use of the voice acquired the technique which would finally separate it completely

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<sup>62</sup> John Potter, *Vocal Authority: Singing Style and Ideology* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 38.

from every other way of singing. The increasingly powerful middle class, which ensured a change in patronage from aristocratic to commercially dedicated concert halls, created the atmosphere in which a new concept of singer could flourish: the singer not just as artist, but singing as an exclusive art form, which required not just art but artifice.”

Verdi’s German contemporary, Wagner, helped to pave the way for fluid arioso structures where emotional sentiment and poetic meaning were relayed through declamatory passages in more through-composed works. Wagner also pushed the tonal envelope and was such a polarizing force that future generations of composers were defined either by their role as torchbearers of his innovations who continued to push the limits (Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School), or by their desire to defy his influence and forge new paths (Debussy and Impressionists). In America, we would begin to see Europe’s influence, as operas in English and foreign languages became more prevalent and touring concert artists like Jenny Lind (“The Swedish Nightingale”) drew large audiences. European countries became more solidified in their national identities, and an influx of German immigrants to the U.S. during the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century had a significant impact on strengthening the connection between America and the Astro-German classical music tradition. From the turn of the century into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, composers of operas and other classical forms stretched the limits of tonality. In one camp, Strauss, Ravel, Vaughn Williams, and others rooted their music in tonality, while in another camp, composers like Debussy, Scriabin and others incorporated post-tonal elements. Finally, Schoenberg and his protégées left tonality altogether, opting for atonality and the twelve-tone method.

In America, the minstrel show, a vaudeville musical practice which involved white performers adopting blackface in order to portray African-Americans in traditionally stereotyped caricatures, was commonplace. Minstrel shows were usually comedic musicals and variety shows that perpetuated negative stereotypes about African-Americans. Historian Ellen Noonan notes, “Blackface minstrelsy established a baseline for white expectations of how African-Americans would be presented in popular culture and how presentations would be understood as authentic and true, even nationally symbolic...In the 1840s and 1850s, this theatrical form-sometimes referred to as “nigger opera”-was all the rage in the working class theaters of northern cities.”<sup>63</sup>

Blackface minstrelsy set a precedence in America for what would be a longstanding and complicated love affair with African-American music. At the same time, while African-Americans were experiencing discrimination and persecution, their *vernacular* music had an undeniable appeal for composers of more *cultivated* musical forms. Blues, jazz, and ragtime drew from the African-American experience and influenced many composers in the U.S. and abroad. Vernacular African-American music expanded the musical voice and vocabulary of politically-conscious and socially-aware composers worldwide. William Grant Still and Duke Ellington realized the possibilities for African-American music to take on larger forms and composed orchestral symphonies and “symphonic jazz” works that blended the two worlds. Still asserted, “Colored people in America have a natural and deep-rooted feeling for music, melody, harmony, and

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<sup>63</sup> Ellen Noonan, *The Strange Career of Porgy and Bess: Race, Culture, and America’s Most Famous Opera* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 4.

rhythm. Our music possesses exoticism without straining for strangeness. The natural practices in this music open up a new field which can be of value in larger musical works when constructed into organized form by a composer who, having the underlying feeling, develops it through intellect.”<sup>64</sup>

In Germany and later in America, composer Kurt Weill fused elements of classical music with idioms from jazz and cabaret music in Berlin, drawing on themes that reflected the social and political turbulence of the times. Weill’s *Three Penny Opera* opened on Broadway in 1933 to mixed reviews. His collaborations with Ira Gershwin and others resulted in a number of popular music numbers and staged works that defied categorization. Weill historian Stephen Hinton notes, “For Weill [The *Threepenny Opera*] was not just ‘the most consistent reaction to Wagner’; it also marked a positive step towards an operatic reform. By explicitly and implicitly shunning the more earnest traditions of the opera house, Weill created a mixed form which incorporated spoken theatre and popular musical idioms...”<sup>65</sup> Weill was not the only composer to see the possibilities for African-American music and popular music to expand the definition of opera.

In 1934, George Gershwin composed *Porgy and Bess*, an opera that would arguably become one of the most well-known and frequently performed American operas

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<sup>64</sup> Robert Bartlett Haas, ed., *William Grant Still: The Fusion of Cultures in American Music* (Los Angeles, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1972).

<sup>65</sup> *Grove Music Online*, s.v. “Die Dreigroschenoper,” by Stephen Hinton, accessed January 6, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.O006155>.

of the twentieth century. The opera is based on a fictional novel entitled *Porgy* written by Southern aristocrat, DuBose Heyward. The story is set in Charleston, South Carolina and follows the life of Porgy, a disabled black beggar who falls in love with the beautiful Bess, a woman whose notorious reputation as a prostitute and cocaine addict precede her. Infused with classical music and elements of Negro spirituals, jazz, and ragtime, Gershwin dubbed *Porgy and Bess* a ‘folk opera.’ In a 1935 New York Times article Gershwin states, “*Porgy and Bess* is a folk tale. Its people naturally would sing folk music. When I first began work on the music I decided against the use of original folk material because I wanted the music to be all of one piece. Therefore, I wrote my own spirituals and folksongs. But they are still folk music – and therefore, being in operatic form, *Porgy and Bess* becomes a folk opera.”

Gershwin had a highly vested interest in elevating *Porgy and Bess* to the level of legitimate opera. With the exception of a few pieces like *Blue Monday* (Gershwin’s first failed attempt at a ‘jazz opera’ which was performed by white singers in blackface and closed only days after opening on Broadway) *Rhapsody in Blue*, *American in Paris* and *Concerto in F*, Gershwin had primarily gained his fame from being a composer of popular music and jazz. He was not conservatory-trained, and many did not see him as capable of composing ‘serious music.’ Richard Crawford acknowledges this perception of Gershwin by many scholars in his article entitled “A Note on *Porgy and Bess*” where he indicates, “Although he took classical piano lessons with the capable Charles Hambitzer as a boy, he received no systematic training in the theory or technique of ‘serious’ composition, and by his sixteenth birthday he was already a Tin Pan Alley song plugger.” Crawford goes on to defend Gershwin noting that what he lacked in technical

command, he more than made up for in musical instinct and an uncanny ability to craft music with “universal familiarity.” What many deemed as Gershwin’s less ‘serious’ musical background actually allowed him to have the freedom and open-mindedness to think outside of the Eurocentric classical music box and incorporate the different musical styles that would one day inform America’s classical music identity. His use of jazz, show tune, and Negro spiritual elements are what makes the opera distinctly American.

Nearly two and a half decades earlier, African-American composer, Scott Joplin had many of the same goals for his opera, *Treemonisha*, which incorporated a storyline that centered around African-American culture, and fused classical music with spirituals, black folk song, and ragtime. Had Joplin been afforded the same opportunities for distribution, publicity, and public performance of his work as Gershwin, perhaps the general public might have been more prepared to receive a work like *Porgy and Bess* by the time it came along. Like Gershwin, Joplin’s exposure to the rudiments of classical music was limited to the teachings of private tutors and observation of classical works. He similarly made his living composing and playing the popular music of the time. He played ragtime, cakewalks, and black folk songs in churches, dance halls, and brothels. He maintained an interest in classical music and composed smaller forms such as waltzes and marches before venturing into opera with *A Guest of Honor*, a politically precocious work about a fictional dinner between Booker T. Washington and President Roosevelt (the score of which is lost), and later with *Treemonisha*, an equally political fictional work that promoted education as the path to overcoming ignorance and superstition in the African-American community. Both Joplin and Gershwin drew from their experiences, incorporated popular music and black music into their operas, and duly maintained the

fundamental elements of form that distinguish a work as an opera, namely orchestral overtures and interludes, recitatives, choruses, and arias all accompanied by an orchestra. For many, Joplin's *Treemonisha* was ahead of its time. "Not jazzy enough for the Harlem Renaissance...and too popular and crossover for the educated elite...the opera could not find a contemporary home base in the African-American community let alone outside it."<sup>66</sup> Essentially, *Treemonisha* is the ancestor of *Porgy and Bess*, and while the storylines were polar opposites in terms of their political appeal to African-Americans, Joplin helped lay the groundwork for acceptance of black folk music and American popular music as source material for "serious music."

*Treemonisha*'s first fully staged production occurred in 1977 at Houston Opera (later known as Houston Grand Opera), the same year the company debuted its production of *Porgy and Bess*. In press releases and interviews, the company's general director David Gockley was careful to emphasize the musical value of *Porgy and Bess* and asserted that Houston Opera's version was "not a revival, but rather an attempt to stage 'Porgy' as an opera."<sup>67</sup> Through a measured publicity campaign that highlighted the universal message of the opera's love story and compared it to other operas in standard repertoire, the company succeeded in bending public opinion of the work. Houston Opera presented the uncut fully staged version of the opera as Gershwin intended, and received in return the reward of greater public acceptance and appreciation of the work. Lawrence

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<sup>66</sup>Klaus-Dieter Gross, "The Politics of Scott Joplin's 'Treemonisha,'" *Amerikastudien* 45, no. 3 (2000): 404.

<sup>67</sup> Ellen Noonan, *The Strange Career of Porgy and Bess*, 287.



Starr speaks of his own “amazed realization” in a 1984 article in *American Music*.

Twenty minutes into the Houston Grand Opera performance he recalls, “I had lost all consciousness of the fact that the characters in this opera were black, because I was witnessing a pure and compelling human drama whose implications were restricted to no single race or ethnic group...”<sup>68</sup> The Metropolitan took a similar political and artistic stance with its 1985 production, further diminishing reservations about racial representations, and cementing *Porgy and Bess*’s status as an American opera worthy of a place in standard repertoire. Ultimately, Scott Joplin, Gershwin, and others would challenge Americans to accept what Czech composer Antonin Dvořák referenced in the late 19th century.

When interviewed about the Negro folk music elements present in his *New World Symphony*. He stated:

“I am now satisfied that the future music of this country must be founded upon what are called the negro melodies. This must be the real foundation of any serious and original school of composition to be developed in the United States...These beautiful and varied themes are the product of the soil. They are American...These are the folk songs of America, and your composers must turn to them. All of the great musicians have borrowed from the songs of the common people. Beethoven's most charming scherzo is based upon what might now be considered a skillfully handled negro melody. I have myself gone to the simple, half-forgotten tunes of the Bohemian peasants for hints in my most serious work. Only in this way can a musician express the true sentiment of his people. He gets into touch with the common humanity of his country. In the negro melodies of America I discover all that is needed for a great and noble school of music... There is nothing in the whole range of composition that cannot be supplied with themes from this source. The American musician understands these tunes and they move sentiment in him. They appeal to his imagination because of their associations.”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Lawrence Starr, “Toward a Reevaluation of Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*,” *American Music* 2, No. 2 (Summer 1984): 26.

<sup>69</sup> *Boston Herald*, “American Music. Dr. Antonín Dvořák Expresses Some Radical Opinions,” May 21, 1893.

Dvořák's words were proved a premonition. Modern American composers continue to embrace the full wealth of source material that is available to them in the folk idioms and music of not only African-Americans, but of Native Americans and immigrants, as well. The modern performing artist is, in turn, charged with the responsibility of using all of the vocal resources and interpretative tools available to her in order to present best an honest and dignified portrayal of the role set before her.

The impact of jazz and vernacular music on classical music and the elevation and acceptance of vernacular music as 'high art' is a much-debated topic. Ethnomusicologist George E. Lewis makes the case that African-American music has served as a basis for various improvised and experimental music forms, as well. In the 1940s, bebop and later jazz opened the door for the explorations of American and European composers. However, due to America's complex history and relationship with African-Americans, the artistic relevance and value of such musical contributions have not always been recognized. Lewis speaks of the significant impact of bebop and jazz noting, "a strong circumstantial case can be made for the proposition that the emergence of these new, vigorous, and highly influential improvisative forms provided an impetus for musical workers in other traditions, particularly European and American composers active in the construction of a transnational European-based tradition, to come to grips with some of the implications of musical improvisation. This confrontation, however, took place amid an ongoing narrative of dismissal, on the part of many of these composers, of the tenets of African-American improvisative forms."<sup>70</sup> Even today, American composers, despite

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<sup>70</sup> George E. Lewis, "Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives," *Black Music Research Journal* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 91–122.

America's national identity being rooted in African-American music, are pressured to 'pick a side' when their works present elements of the vernacular music. In the eyes of critical authorities in the field, it relegates the work to being defined as something 'other' or 'less than.'

Robert Raines, author of *Compositions in the Digital World, Conversations with 21<sup>st</sup> Century American Composers*, is hopeful, however. According to Raines, "The diversity now evident in this formerly conservative and tight-knit club is striking. Less than a century ago, almost all well-known classical composers were white European males."<sup>71</sup> Given the diverse background and more culturally expansive consciousness of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century composer, new opportunities have emerged for vernacular music and improvised music of diverse origin to have greater value and widespread acceptance as 'high art.' Before examining current vocal pedagogy and performance practice surrounding improvisation in opera, I had first to examine its historical evolution and gain a better understanding of how and why vocal aesthetics and practices have changed. From the beginning, improvisation has revealed itself in many forms throughout classical music and opera's early history, mainly through ornamental organum in medieval church music, the cantare all'improvviso tradition of the late Middle Ages, and through the castrati of the Baroque era, operas first superstars. A review of the literature reveals that castrati like Caffarelli dedicated a portion of practice time to improvisation, as instructed

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<sup>71</sup> Robert Raines, *Compositions in the Digital World: Conversations with 21<sup>st</sup> Century American Composers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

by the renowned pedagogue Nicola Porpora. As singers themselves, and as composers and teachers, the master singer-teachers of the Baroque era were especially attuned to the aesthetics of the period.

The literature also highlights that ‘American opera’ as we know it today is deeply rooted in Western classical Eurocentric ideals and in popular music and African-American vernacular music. The works of composers who paved the way toward acceptance of this blended operatic form are still performed as standard repertoire alongside traditional favorites and new commissions that continue to push the envelope. By looking through a historical lens, we are better equipped to recognize the cyclical and reciprocal relationship between cultural movements, composers, singers, and teachers that impact us, even today.

Consistent with the literature, patterns emerge that point to social and cultural factors which include the rise of the bourgeoisie class, and developments like music printing and the laryngoscope as early major influences on artists (singers and composers) and aesthetics in opera. Then, in turn, master teachers (who were historically also singers and composers oftentimes) responded with the development of new pedagogies and practices to meet industry demand and vocal aesthetics. With the Age of Enlightenment, Gluck’s reforms, and the French Revolution we see a shift away from florid singing to a more *parlante* or declamatory style, as championed by charismatic composers Verdi and Wagner. Shifts in opera composition and aesthetic preferences for larger venues, orchestration, and voices again prompted the development of new singing pedagogies and performance practice.

The image in Figure 2.2 serves as an organizing device and illustrates a conceptual framework representing the meanings I have drawn from the literature and historical data I reviewed. Throughout history, social and cultural movements have impacted the opera industry and the composers and artists who create the content. They and their content influence performance and pedagogical practices. While the circle displayed is unidirectional, it could theoretically flow in both direction, as well, to indicate the reciprocal relationship between each component. However, for the purposes of this investigation, a unidirectional circle is the best suited visual representation of the conceptual framework.



**Figure 2.2.** Highlights the cyclical relationship between society, the opera industry, and composers, singers, and teachers.

In America, the cycle has historically been fueled by the American revolution, slavery, minstrelsy, the rise of vernacular forms/popular music, and through influential

composers like Dvořák. America's desire for a national identity in classical music pushed us in the direction toward fusing Eurocentric classical music with African-American vernacular music and popular music, paving the way for the use of improvisation and free vocal expression. Today, composers have an array of compositional tools and musical styles at their disposal, and they all are still impactful factors that influence the way we perform and how we train the next generation of singers.

## CHAPTER 3

### Methodology

As part of an investigation of 21<sup>st</sup>-century operas that fuse genres and incorporate improvisatory elements, I interviewed composers (Daniel Schnyder, Douglas Tappin, Peter Hilliard, and David Lang) and singers (Lawrence Brownlee, Angela Brown, David Hughey, Jorell Williams, Ian McEuen, and included my own personal narrative) of four innovative works: *Charlie Parker's Yardbird* (Daniel Schnyder), *I Dream: A Rhythm and Blues Opera* (Douglas Tappin), *Blue Viola* (Peter Hilliard), and *The Mile-Long Opera: a biography of 7 o'clock* (David Long). The study also consists of qualitative interviews acquired through email correspondences with vocal pedagogue Dr. Rachelle Fleming and arts administrator Mila Henry of American Opera Projects.

The sampling of industry practitioners was purposefully selected based on their expertise and prominence in the field. They were also chosen because of their accessibility. I'd had some exposure to each of the participants prior to this study, either directly through my own performance experiences or indirectly because of familiarity with their work through colleagues. The industry practitioners impart insightful first-hand knowledge concerning industry trends, performance practice, interpretation, and preparation for 21<sup>st</sup>-century operatic works based on their own lives, experiences, and the stories they tell. I have adopted a methodology based on narrative inquiry in order to best collect, organize, and analyze the qualitative data acquired through my engagement with the participants.

In this chapter, I detail the characteristics and components of narrative inquiry, with special attention to the areas that align the methodology with the purposes of my study. At the same time, I highlight the research and work of methodologists D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, and researchers Jerome Bruner and Donald Polkinghorne, from whom my inquiry and analysis methods are drawn.

## **Narrative inquiry**

Narrative inquiry is a methodology that falls under the umbrella of qualitative research and is utilized across a wide range of disciplines including psychology, sociology, law, medicine, and education. Qualitative research explores the experiences and stories of individuals. Narrative inquiry as a term and methodology was developed by researchers Clandinin and Connelly who drew from the work of John Dewey concerning the value of experiential knowledge in education. Narrative inquiry is based in the idea that “human beings lead storied lives,” and that “narrative is both phenomenon and method,” with the phenomenon being “story” and method or inquiry being “narrative.”<sup>72</sup> Thus, the researcher is prompted to listen to, analyze, describe, and retell the narratives they encounter throughout the research process.

In Chapter one, I detailed my research questions, as well as, my goals in pursuing this research. The research questions that guide this study are:

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<sup>72</sup> D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, “Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry,” *Educational Researcher* 19, no. 5 (July 1990): 2–14.



1. How and why has the definition of opera broadened?
2. How does genre-fusion make room for improvisation in opera?
3. How does genre-fusion and improvisation in 21<sup>st</sup>-century operas impact vocal pedagogy and performance practice?
4. How do we best prepare singers for participation in 21<sup>st</sup>-century operas that contain the aforementioned characteristics?

Qualitative research in the form of narrative inquiry is the method best suited for this study for a number of reasons. In *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry: Mapping a Methodology*, Clandinin writes of art-based research stating, “According to Dewey (1934), art could be a way to study educational experiences since art expresses meaning instead of stating meaning like science does.”<sup>73</sup> The research questions evolved through a review of the literature and as a result of my own experiences singing and teaching. Given that both voice pedagogy and performance practice are based in traditions that involve the oral transmission of knowledge and information, it follows suit that research in these areas may benefit from orally transmitted narrative data. Thus, interviews and discourse are a central part of this study. For the purposes of this study, narrative data refers to “field texts” or information in narrative form, which includes stories, accounts, transcribed interview responses, and recorded conversations with participants. Voice teachers and teachers, in general, naturally employ storytelling as a teaching tool. Opera

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<sup>73</sup> D. Jean Clandinin, ed., *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry: Mapping a Methodology* (Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications, 2007).

singers and composers have storytelling as a central part of their work. The interviews in this study serve as a vehicle for drawing on the knowledge and experiences of the participants. They apply their natural aptitude for storytelling and communication by giving personal accounts, detailing their hopes and intentions, and by providing forward-looking stories that help us evolve our thinking concerning teaching, performing, and program design.

In this work, the interviewee is positioned as narrator, and I have positioned myself as an interpreter, having listened to, analyzed, and coded the interviews to discover any underlying themes. In my research, themes are recurring or pervasive ideas or concepts that are prevalent in the interview responses as well as the historical and educational research literature I reviewed. In terms of organizing the narrative data, I've adopted Jerome Bruner's functional approach, which is focused on interpreting how each interviewee perceives and makes sense of the world. Bruner asserts, "Our knowledge of the world is not merely a mirroring or reflection of order and structure 'out there' but consists rather of a construct or model that can, so to speak, be spun a bit ahead of things to predict how the world *will be* or *might be*."<sup>74</sup> Bruner's approach necessitates communication and takes a constructivist position on knowledge. I ascribe to Bruner's definition of knowledge as "justified belief" and construct meanings from the information gathered through my interaction and discourse with the interviewees.

Polkinghorne highlights two main types of narrative inquiry: one that employs paradigmatic reasoning in its analysis, *analysis of narrative*, and another that employs

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<sup>74</sup> Jerome S. Bruner, *The Relevance of Education*, The Norton Library (New York: Norton, 1973).

narrative reasoning, *narrative analysis*.<sup>75</sup> This study is a narrative inquiry that employs an analysis of narrative approach and paradigmatic reasoning in its analysis, inducing themes and relationships between the concepts that reveal themselves in the data and literature. Polkinghorne also asserts that qualitative data can be classified into two types: diachronic data and synchronic data. Synchronic data are “framed as categorical answers to questions put by an interviewer,” while diachronic data involves storied narratives that contain a beginning, middle, and end, describing “when events occurred and the effect the events had on subsequent happenings.”<sup>76</sup> Often, both types of data are used in qualitative research, although the analysis of narrative research approach more commonly relies on diachronic data sourced from written documents such as biographies, and oral accounts such as those taken from recorded interviews. For this study, I use a combination of both synchronic data extracted from written responses to emailed interview questions, and diachronic data extracted from recordings of live interviews and conversations with participants. I employ paradigmatic analysis methods, drawing meaning from patterns and themes that reveal themselves in the narratives.

My precise analysis technique involves reviewing transcriptions of each interview line by line using a color-coded highlighting system to identify any of the ‘tags’ or

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<sup>75</sup> Donald Polkinghorne, “Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis,” in *Life History and Narrative*, eds. J. Amos Hatch and Richard Wisniewski, Qualitative Studies Series 1 (London ; Washington, D.C: Falmer Press, 1995), 14.

<sup>76</sup> Donald Polkinghorne, “Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis,” in *Life History and Narrative*, 12.

categories I created. The following tagging structure and questions evolved during the course of my research and guided my interpretation and analysis:

#### TAG Group 1: SENTIMENT

- How do they discuss their work?
- How do they discuss and engage with singers/composers?
- How do they position and identify themselves when discussing their experiences with 21<sup>st</sup>-century operas?

#### TAG Group 2: CONTENT

- What are their own experiences, training, and practices?
- What influential components in 21<sup>st</sup>-century operas are highlighted in their discourse?

#### TAG Group 3: ROLE

- How do they position themselves when discussing the evolution of opera and the opera industry?
- How do they discuss the role of the composer and music in shaping pedagogy and performance practice?
- How do they discuss and interpret the role of voice pedagogues and academia in training singers for participation in 21<sup>st</sup>-century operas?

Each tag helps to provide a framework from which to understand and interpret each interviewees narratives and responses. Sentiment helps to explain their personal motivations and feelings on a topic, event, or circumstance. An examination of the participants' sentiment can also reveal any paradoxes, irregularities or tensions in the narrative. The content reveals information that directly adds to the listeners' knowledge

base and may add depth to the biographies of each participant. The role tag helps to identify responses and narratives that help situate the participant and his or her thought process in a particular setting or concerning a particular topic.

In combing through the qualitative data in this manner, I am able to plot out major storylines and tag the data to reveal a number of linked ideas, themes, and paradoxes. The provided information was validated through triangulation of the data, using multiple field texts and historical literature, including biographies, articles, and other published interviews. Many of the participants also unknowingly reiterated information that was previously provided by other participants. The overall interpretation of the qualitative data was a cooperative process that incorporated both the interviewee's provided interpretations and my own constructed meanings which were drawn from the provided information and from the validated narratives and accounts.

### **Limitations of qualitative research**

As the researcher, I am the filter and instrument through which the data is collected and presented. As such, there are potential biases that place limitations on qualitative research and narrative inquiry as a methodology. One asset I possess is my personal experience as a classically-trained singer and voice teacher who has performed in both traditional and hybrid works, as well as, operatic works that incorporate improvisation. This knowledge and expertise allow me to position myself as an expert in generating and interpreting the research data.

My background also serves as a limitation, however, because of the personal biases that I may have. I have, however, attempted to remain objective in both my

collection and presentation of the findings. Additionally, although I have purposely selected a homogenous sampling of industry practitioners, each person represents a different individual background and offers a unique perspective. All of the participants have a proven affinity for classical music that is hybrid or improvisative in nature, which also presents a notable opportunity for bias.

## **The Interview Process**

As reported by Polkinghorne, “Qualitative studies have used various strategies for locating and recruiting participants who fulfill the data needs of a study. In criterion sampling, participants are selected who meet some predetermined criterion.”<sup>77</sup> My initial list of potential participants was cultivated through a review of my own personal performance experiences and colleagues. I reached out via email and phone to a number of contacts with whom I had a direct relationship or to whom I was referred by colleagues. As a result of this ‘snowballing strategy,’ my initial list of potential participants grew rather large and was eventually narrowed through a criterion sampling strategy.

The criterion sampling strategy involved focusing my research on practitioners in the field of opera whose work was grounded in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I also chose participants who evidenced a high level of experience and notoriety in the field (determined through a review of resumes, biographies, awards, noted commissions, and critical reviews). The

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<sup>77</sup> David E. Polkinghorne, “Language and Meaning: Data Collection in Qualitative Research,” *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 52, no. 2 (2005): 137–45.

last factor involved participants' availability and willingness to participate in the study. While the four composers I selected are all men, they each have widely varied musical and personal backgrounds and have uniquely different approaches to opera composition. The singers were chosen based on their experience performing in lead roles in the chosen operas. The arts administrator and vocal pedagogue were chosen based on their specialized knowledge and high level of notoriety in the field.

The industry practitioners represent homogenous sampling. A random sample is not used in my qualitative research because the expertise and experiential knowledge of the homogeneous sample is a necessary component in conducting the research. Homogeneous sampling is used when the purpose of the study is to focus on a particular subgroup, which in some sense is homogeneous. For example, in a study of teaching practices it may be decided to involve only a sample of beginning teachers.<sup>78</sup>

A brief biographical statement providing background information about the participants and their affiliations was obtained via email request or has been cited and sourced from an official website associated with each participant. The interviewee names, backgrounds, affiliations, and other notable accomplishments are as follows:

- 1) Starting in July 2019, **Mila Henry** will be the Artistic Director at American Opera Projects, as well as continuing as Head of Music for their *Composers & the Voice* program lead by conductor Steven Osgood. From 2010-14, Mila

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<sup>78</sup> William Wiersma, *Research Methods in Education: An Introduction*, 7th ed (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2000).

was AOP's Resident Music Director, where she was Assistant Conductor for *As One* (BAM), *The Blind* (Lincoln Center Festival), and *Harriet Tubman* (Irondale Center). She has served as Principal Pianist with Opera Philadelphia and has been a frequent collaborator with performing arts companies Beth Morrison Projects and HERE. Henry has led projects that range from operatic to legit to pop. She is a native of Philadelphia and holds degrees from The Manhattan School of Music and Elizabethtown College.<sup>79</sup>

- 2) Composer and performer **Daniel Schnyder** has won renown in both the classical and jazz fields. An accomplished saxophonist, he has toured Europe and Australia with his trio, playing the music of Gershwin, Bach, Vivaldi, Wagner and Ellington in addition to his own compositions, which bridge the realms of classical, jazz, and world music. His output includes orchestral variations on themes by such non-classical music icons as Duke Ellington, Jimi Hendrix, and the Rolling Stones, and he designs programs for orchestras outside the mainstream concert format, as played by the Calgary Symphony, the Absolute Ensemble, and at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> "About" on Mila Henry's website, accessed on January 23, 2019, <http://milahenry.com/about/>.

<sup>80</sup> "Opera Philadelphia Presents World Premiere – Company's First in Decades – of Charlie Parker's *Yardbird*," on Opera Philadelphia's website, accessed March 15, 2019, <https://www.operaphila.org/about/news-press/pressroom/2015/yardbird-news-release/>



- 3) **Douglas Tappin** is a writer, librettist, and composer who formerly served as a commercial attorney, practicing as a Barrister in England for eleven years. Tappin earned an additional postgraduate degree from Atlanta's McAfee School of Theology, culminating in the dissertation *That There Might Be Inspiration* – a critical examination and articulation of transformative music-drama, including through the historical and contemporary works of Handel, Wagner, Puccini, Sondheim, Lloyd Webber and Rice, Boublil and Schönberg. He has collaborated with Greg Phillinganes (musical director for Stevie Wonder and the late Michael Jackson) and Grammy-nominated orchestrator Carl Marsh. Tappin currently lives in the U. S. in Atlanta, Georgia with his wife and two children.<sup>81</sup>
- 4) Composer **Peter Hilliard** & librettist Matt Boresi have worked together as creators of new opera and opera-adjacent work since 2001. Matt and Peter have created award-winning crossover work from Off-Broadway's *Don Imbroglia* and *Going Down Swingin'* to the puppet opera *Eat Your Greens: Verdi by Vegetables*. They both hold a Master of Fine Arts degree from the Musical Theatre Writing Program at New York University. Peter lives in Philadelphia. Matt lives in Chicago.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> "The Composer & Librettist" on IDreamOpera.com, accessed February 28, 2019, <http://www.idreamopera.com/the-journey-so-far-2/>.

<sup>82</sup> "Biography," on Peter Hilliard and Matt Boresi's website, accessed March 15, 2019, <http://www.hilliardandboresi.com/home.html>.

- 5) Composer **David Lang** is the recipient of numerous honors and awards, including the Pulitzer Prize (for *the little match girl passion*), an Academy Award and Golden Globe nominations, Musical America's Composer of the Year, Carnegie Hall's Debs Composer's Chair, and the Rome Prize. Lang is a Professor of Music Composition at the Yale School of Music and is Artist in Residence at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. He is co-founder and co-artistic director of New York's legendary music collective Bang on a Can. His music is published by Red Poppy Music (ASCAP) and is distributed worldwide by G. Schirmer, Inc.<sup>83</sup>
- 6) Named 2017 “Male Singer of the Year” by both the International Opera Awards and *Bachtrack*, American-born tenor **Lawrence Brownlee** has been hailed by *The Guardian* as “one of the world’s leading bel canto stars.” Brownlee has appeared on the stages of the top opera companies around the globe, including the Metropolitan Opera, Teatro alla Scala, the Bavarian State Opera, Royal Opera House - Covent Garden, The Vienna State Opera, Opéra national de Paris, Opernhaus Zürich, the Berlin State Opera, the Gran Teatre del Liceu Barcelona, Teatro Real Madrid, Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie, and the festivals of Salzburg and Baden Baden. Brownlee also serves as Artistic

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<sup>83</sup> “Biography,” on David Lang’s official website, accessed March 20, 2019, <https://davidlangmusic.com/about-1>.

Advisor at Opera Philadelphia, helping the company to expand its repertoire, diversity efforts, and community initiatives.<sup>84</sup>

- 7) **Angela Brown**'s Metropolitan Opera debut in the title role of *Aida* captured instant attention from international print and broadcast media and catapulted her onto the world's prestigious opera and symphonic stages. Her early success as *Aida* was immediately followed by world premiere performances of Richard Danielpour's opera *Margaret Garner* in the role of Cilla with Opera Philadelphia, Cincinnati Opera and Michigan Opera Theater. Brown's previous solo appearances include: Metropolitan Opera; National Opera of Paris; Bilbao Opera, Spain; Teatro La Fenice; Hamburg Opera; Vienna Staatsoper; Capetown Opera; Deutsche Oper Berlin; Opera Philadelphia; Cincinnati Opera; Pittsburgh Opera; Opera Pacific; Florentine Opera; Indianapolis Opera and Michigan Opera Theater, among others.<sup>85</sup>
- 8) After making his Broadway debut in the Tony Award-winning revival of the Gershwins' *Porgy and Bess*, **David Hughey** joined the Broadway First National Tour in the role of Jake, and was recently featured on the soundtrack to the Oscar Award-winning feature film, *12 Years A Slave*. A native of

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<sup>84</sup> "BIO" on Lawrence Brownlee's official website, accessed March 10, 2019, <https://www.lawrencebrownlee.com/about-1#bio>.

<sup>85</sup> "About" on Angela Brown's official website, accessed March 2, 2019, <http://www.angelambrown.com/about/>.

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Hughey has appeared both in the U.S.A. and abroad in major opera houses including: San Francisco Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago, Sächsische Staatsoper Dresden, Festspielhaus Baden Baden, and New York City Opera. Dually acclimated to the Musical Theater stage, he has also performed a number of crossover roles including: Sporting Life (*The Gershwins' Porgy And Bess*), Harry Easter (*Street Scene*), and Bernardo (*West Side Story*). David Hughey is currently an off-stage swing in the Broadway National Tour of *Waitress, The Musical*.<sup>86</sup>

- 9) **Jorell Williams** is an American operatic baritone with a wide variety of experience from standard repertoire to premiere pieces. A former resident artist of the American Opera Projects Composers and the Voice series from 2011-2014, Williams is a much in demand interpreter of contemporary opera, and has created roles in several world premieres, notably: Hilliard and Boresi's *Blue Viola* at Urban Arias; Matt Aucoin's *Crossing* with the American Repertory Theater; John David Earnest's *The Theory of Everything* with Encompass New Opera Theater; Anthony Davis' *Lear on the Second Floor* at the University of San Diego; and Ricky Ian Gordon's *Intimate Apparel* (2018) with The Metropolitan Opera.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> "The Artist," on David Hughey's official website, accessed March 15, 2019, <https://davidhughey.com>.

<sup>87</sup> "Biography," on Jorell William's official website, accessed March 15, 2019, <https://www.jorellwilliams.com/about>.

- 10) **Sequina DuBose** has performed as a soloist and ensemble member with Kathleen Battle in *Underground Railroad: A Spiritual Journey* at The Metropolitan Opera House and Kennedy Center (DC). She has also appeared as a soloist and ensemble member in two separate national tours with famed trumpeter Wynton Marsalis and the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra (*All Rise; Abyssinian Mass* with Chorale le Chateau). She debuted at Carnegie Hall as a soloist with classical piano duo The Altino Brothers and has regularly toured with the American Spiritual Ensemble. DuBose has performed as Lady in Blue in *For Colored Girls...* (ArtsCentric), Deena Jones in *Dreamgirls* (Toby's Dinner Theater), 4th Maidservant in *Elektra* (Michigan Opera Theater) and in *Porgy and Bess* with Lyric Opera of Chicago and Royal Danish Opera. Other performed roles include Clorinda in *La Cenerentola* (Opera Memphis) and Rachel in Nkeiru Okoye's *Harriet Tubman: When I Crossed That Line into Freedom* (American Opera Projects).
- 11) Born in Washington D.C., **Ian McEuen**, a lover of new music, he has performed and covered in numerous world premieres, including *Elizabeth Cree* and *We Shall Not Be Moved* with Opera Philadelphia, *Florida* with UrbanArias, *With Blood, with Ink* and *Figaro and the Zombie Apocalypse* with Fort Worth Opera, and *the Lion, the Unicorn, and Me* with Washington National Opera. Most recently, Ian portrayed Remendado in *Carmen* (Annapolis Opera), as Lt. Torasso in Sondheim's *Passion* (Signature Theatre), and as Tobias in *Sweeney Todd* (Atlanta Opera, Baltimore Concert Opera, and
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New Orleans Opera). McEuen has also performed as Goro with the Glimmerglass Festival and North Carolina Opera. He appears in summer 2019 as the Tanzmeister in *Ariadne auf Naxos* with Wolf Trap Opera, where he will be a Filene Artist.

12) **Dr. Rachelle Fleming** holds a doctorate in Vocal Pedagogy and Performance from the University of Miami, as well as, a research Masters in Music Education from Eastman School of Music, and a Bachelors of Music in Voice Performance. Additional coursework includes a voice science Vocology course with Dr. Ingo Titze, and pedagogical coursework in two of the leading commercial vocal music training programs. Dr. Fleming is Associate Professor in the Boyer College of Music and Dance at Temple University. Dr. Fleming's students perform on Broadway, in National Tours, at the Metropolitan Opera, in regional theaters and in film. A versatile performer, she has performed with Cuban ensemble Tiempo Libre (Sony release); multiple Grammy- winning opera star Renée Fleming (Decca/Mercury release); and international jazz pianist and composer Fred Hersch. Theater appearances include the role of Rose in *Enchanted April*, Joanne in *Company*, the New York premiere of Bill Smith's jazz opera, *Space in the Heart*, (Symphony Space in NYC), and the role of Lynn in *Training Wisteria* in the NY Fringe Festival.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> "Biography," The Kennedy Center for Performing Arts' website, accessed on March 9, 2019, <http://www.kennedy-center.org/Artist/A100875>.

Having completed the Institutional Review Board approval process for the University of Maryland, I submitted an approved consent form and obtained an initial affirmative written response indicating each participant's willingness to participate in the study (see Appendix A and B). Next, a list of initial interview questions was submitted to participants via email (see Appendix D and E), and an appointment for a follow-up interview via phone call or Skype was set, when deemed necessary. The time commitment for each live interview was approximately forty-five minutes. The interviews were documented either through written submission or via an electronic recording app and later transcribed for inclusion in the study. Minimal edits were made to the responses, and participants were given the opportunity to review the study and modify or withdraw their responses before the final transcriptions were created.

Many of the responses and conversations included biographical stories and accounts that resulted from natural discourse. The narratives allow us to see beyond the data and offer insights into "what is possible and intelligible within a specific social context."<sup>89</sup> During the interview process, I was able to invite stories and examine not only what the singers and composers said, but how they "storied" themselves. The narratives provided insight into the range of experiences that impact both singers and composers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The findings raise awareness concerning the importance of appropriate

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<sup>89</sup> Chase, S. E. (2005). Narrative Inquiry: Multiple Lenses, Approaches, Voices. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 651-679). Thousand Oaks, CA, : Sage Publications Ltd.

performance practice and the formation of new pedagogies to tackle the demands brought on by the use of certain musical elements in 21<sup>st</sup>-century operas. The chapter that follows will discuss the themes that were revealed through interviews with the participants and the connections between the narratives and information prevalent in the literature.



## CHAPTER 4

### **Opera and Industry in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

In the first fifteen years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, opera companies have seen a significant decline in financial viability due to dwindling numbers in attendance and philanthropic giving. Regional companies like Baltimore Opera Company, Connecticut Opera, Florida's Orlando Opera and Southern California's Opera Pacific have all closed their doors in recent years. New York's second largest opera company, New York City Opera, filed for bankruptcy in 2013, sending shock waves through the industry. Major companies like Lyric Opera of Chicago, seeing a shift from subscription sales (a long-time financial staple) to single-ticket purchases, attempted budget cuts which resulted in musician strikes that furthered the company's financial woes. Recently, *The New York Times* noted, "Lyric retains one of the strongest subscriber bases in opera; it still sells twice as many tickets to subscribers as to single-ticket buyers. But the number of tickets it sells to subscribers has fallen to less than half what it sold two decades ago... The change has been even more dramatic at the Metropolitan Opera, which now sells fewer than a fifth of its tickets to subscribers."<sup>90</sup> Desperate to attract new audiences, larger opera companies have adopted new business models that incorporate newer, culturally-relevant and politically-charged works, non-traditionally directed works, smaller chamber works in offsite venues, and musicals and works that fuse classical music with other

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<sup>90</sup> Michael Cooper, "Opera's Phantom Fans," *The New York Times*, December 22, 2018.

genres. Major urban centers have seen an upswing in new opera companies that are pushing the envelope in terms of content, venue possibilities, and aesthetics.

In a 2015 independent blog, cellist and composer Jon Silpayamanant, began the massive endeavor of compiling a comprehensive list of 21<sup>st</sup>-century opera companies, organizations, and new music ensembles in the U. S. As of 2016, Silpayamanant's list boasted 260 U.S. opera performance entities that have been formed since the year 2000.<sup>91</sup> According to New York City Public Radio's *Operavore* blog, New York City was home to approximately 80 new opera companies as of 2016. "Opera no longer exists exclusively in the domain of grand theater. It lives and is flourishing in spaces such as churches (Vertical Player Repertory), subterranean cocktail lounges (Opera Upper West), Brooklyn bars (Opera on Tap), school playgrounds (also Opera on Tap) and even a basketball court in East Flatbush (Ardea Arts),"<sup>92</sup> writes *Operavore* authors Merrin Lazyan and Amanda Angel in an article highlighting the companies featured in the inaugural New York Opera Fest. The festival, which began in 2016, is produced by members of The New York Opera Alliance in partnership with Opera America, the national service organization for opera and the nation's leading advocate for American opera. According to its official website, the festival "showcases the breadth and diversity of opera in New York City through events ranging from virtual reality to improv

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<sup>91</sup> *Mae Mai*; "Opera Companies Formed in the US Since 2000," by Jon Silpayamanant, in *Mae Mai*, a blog about contemporary classical music.

<sup>92</sup> *Operavore*; "What We Learned from the First New York Opera Fest," by Merrin Lazyan and Amanda Angel, in *Operavore*, a WQXR blog about opera.

opera...”<sup>93</sup> It is a testament to the rising demand for smaller more intimate venues and chamber opera works that expand the possibilities of what an opera is and how it can be performed.

My interview with Mila Henry of American Opera Projects echoes these findings. American Opera Projects (AOP) is a New York-based company specializing in contemporary opera. Founded in 1988, AOP is at the forefront of the contemporary opera movement through its commissioning, developing, and producing of opera and music theatre projects, training programs for students and emerging composers and librettists, and community engagement. Henry has worked with contemporary arts organizations in many facets and will serve as Artistic Director for the company beginning in July of 2019. Henry identifies contemporary operas that fuse classical music with other genres as “hybrid operas” and asserts that the demand for such operas is based in the layman’s desire for “good story-telling” and in the innovation that results from smaller chamber works and works presented in unusual spaces. “I am most drawn to works that fuse musical styles and cross the boundaries of what an opera is ‘supposed’ to be,” remarks Henry, who plays piano and grew up with dreams to play on Broadway. “I want to prove to theater-goers and opera-goers that we’re all looking for the same thing– good story-telling– and I am especially intrigued by chamber-size pieces that bring the story to the audience (as in a black-box theater, where singers and audience members are practically

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<sup>93</sup> “About the New York Opera Fest” on New York Opera Fest’s website, accessed November 22, 2018, <http://nyoperafest.com/2017/>.

side by side), or the audience TO the story (i.e. a site-specific space that plays into the story).”<sup>94</sup>

The spike in new opera realizations provides new career avenues for singers who are brave enough to seek artistic experiences outside traditional norms. As an arts administrator with a performance background, Henry has a unique perspective. She made her Opera Philadelphia debut as Principal Pianist (doubling on synthesizers) for the hybrid opera *We Shall Not Be Moved*, and is a frequent collaborator with Beth Morrison Projects and HERE, two producers of innovative contemporary performing arts works. Henry was AOP’s Resident Music Director, where she was Assistant Conductor for several productions and Head of Music for their Composers & the Voice program led by conductor Steven Osgood. She has performed on cabarets, musicals, and her website boasts that “she’s played Godspell as many times as The Rape of Lucretia (four, to be exact).”<sup>95</sup> Her versatility informs her perspective and expectations for the singers who audition for American Opera Projects. She affirms that the ideal singers “not only have a solid vocal technique and classical foundation, but are versatile too— performers that switch between multiple styles, that have strong dramatic instincts, and that are willing to experiment and play.”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Mila Henry (Artistic Director, American Opera Projects) in emailed correspondence with the author, January 2019.

<sup>95</sup> “About,” on Mila Henry’s official website, accessed April 23, 2019, <http://milahenry.com/about/>.

<sup>96</sup> Mila Henry (Artistic Director, American Opera Projects) in emailed correspondence with the author, January 2019.

In her correspondence, she also shares the story of her experiences as a young graduate student in the collaborative piano (vocal emphasis) program at Manhattan School of Music, and emphasized that she played for a lot of voice lessons during that time. Her “aha” moment came during spring break of 2009 when serving as a Manhattan School staff pianist assigned to cover a visiting AOP workshop of the hybrid opera “Love/Hate by Jack Perla. Henry describes that experience as the day that she was first introduced to both AOP and the concept of fusion opera.

Henry notes her observations in the early days of accompanying voice lessons, recounting, “What I remember is that aspiring singers were told they could sing opera or musical theater, and not both— unless they wanted to include some legit musical theater on a recital, perhaps. But most teachers (not all) did not encourage them to balance both genres, but rather to choose one. More modern techniques rarely came up, unless the singer had a specific question, and using smaller vibrato and straight-tone was a big no. There were some contemporary arias that came up, but always those written in a traditional operatic style. I would be curious to know how that’s changed, if at all, especially with the addition of the Contemporary Performance program and the Musical Theatre programs, but my understanding is that there are specific teachers within those programs and the Classical Voice program, and not much crossover.”<sup>97</sup> As a former MSM graduate student, I can attest that Henry’s assessment of the curriculum structure at Manhattan School of Music is accurate. This structure is still reflected today at MSM and in most voice programs in the U. S. While the structure allows for a concentrated focus

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<sup>97</sup> Mila Henry (Artistic Director, American Opera Projects) in emailed correspondence with the author, January 2019.

on building classical technique, which Henry and others deem crucial, it does not leave much room for exploration and application of other musical style elements.

Genre fusion is prevalent component in 21<sup>st</sup>-century operas, as companies are commissioning works that appeal to a younger more diverse, socially-conscious, and politically active base. In the 2018-2019 season, New York City Opera will feature the world premiere of two operas *Dear Erich* and *Stonewall*. *Dear Erich* is a jazz-opera set in wartime Germany and Chicago that was inspired by the composer's family's own compelling true story and over 200 letters written in Germany between 1938 and 1941 by his grandmother, Herta Rosenthal, to his father, Erich, a Jewish scholar who escaped to the United States. The opera *Stonewall* commemorates the 1969 "Stonewall Riots" in Greenwich Village, an event that helped spark the gay liberation movement. The premiere is being rolled out along with a string of LGBTQ-focused community engagement events and promotions.

In the 2018-19 season, The Metropolitan Opera for the first time in history has commissioned works by women composers (Jeanine Tesori and Missy Mazzoli). Opera Philadelphia has two commissions planned for their 2019 season, of which, Philip Venables' *Denis and Katya*, is being billed as "an immersive multi-media chamber opera. This follows the success of Opera Philadelphia's shift to a season that consists of mainstage works alongside a festival platform that regularly showcases new commissions and smaller chamber and concert works. Their commissioned opera, *We Shall Not Be Moved* by Bill T. Jones, a work that has elements of gospel, jazz, music theater, hip-hop, and dance music, premiered to sold-out audiences in the 2017-18 season. Both the Metropolitan Opera and Washington National Opera have installed commissioning

programs as part of a commitment to regularly introduce new opera to their audience base. With Washington National Opera's program, the commissioned works are typically one-hour in length and are presented in their smaller Terrace Theater. The list of opera commissions that reflect a trend toward smaller, 'genre-bending,' and more diverse realizations is growing annually. With each new addition to the canon comes an expanded view of the possibilities for opera in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

New commissions that combine elements of classical music with elements from other musical genres also make room for the use of more free musical expressions. In 2012, I had the opportunity to work with Henry and AOP in their production of composer Nkeiru Okoye's biopic opera *Harriet Tubman: When I Crossed That Line to Freedom*. The work incorporates elements from African-American vernacular music, and the composer encourages vocal freedom in specific areas of the work. Henry notes this recalling that Okoye "would often write 'freely expressive, optional ad lib' for vocal cadenzas and *melismas* as well as rolled piano chords, even encouraging the character of Rachel to improvise a melody when she was dancing over an instrumental break."<sup>98</sup>

As a rehearsal pianist for *We Shall Not Be Moved*, Henry excitedly observed that the hybrid work naturally allowed for improvisation. She recalls, "Daniel Bernard Roumain would encourage singers to riff over repeating choruses that built in intensity. Other repeats were designated 'freestyle second time,' and the opera always ended with an improvised solo by one of the dancers, who didn't read music— he often gave full permission to anyone that wanted to try anything different than what was on the page,

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<sup>98</sup> Mila Henry (Artistic Director, American Opera Projects) in emailed correspondence with the author, January 2019.

especially for those performers who learned by rote, and singers were encouraged to just let the music lead during their arias...depending on how comfortable the performer was with improvisation. This sometimes meant largely sticking to what was on the page but making it sound improvisatory, or improvising an embellishment all together!”<sup>99</sup>

There are a number of themes that emerge from Henry’s commentary that connect with the research to address two of the research questions which are reiterated here:

1. How and why has the definition of opera broadened?
2. How does genre-fusion make room for improvisation in opera?

The new business model for opera reiterates the previously discussed cyclical model that highlights the influence of socio/cultural influences on the opera industry and on composers, singers, and teachers. The findings provide insights that address the research questions. Opera is broadening its musical identity in response to shifts in audience behavior, which is based in socio-economic and cultural factors. As Henry asserts, hybrid operas help fulfill the modern patron’s desire for good-storytelling, while at the same time incorporating a variety of popular and vernacular musical styles along with culturally and socially relevant content.

Genre fusion serves as a vehicle for improvisation in 21<sup>st</sup>-century operas, especially when improvisative music genres such as those from the African-American vernacular tradition are incorporated. Singers are given the freedom to express where indicated by the composer, or discover areas where the score and context allow for

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<sup>99</sup> Mila Henry, January 2019.



improvisation through the rehearsal process. While previously elements like genre-fusion and improvisation have not been a consideration or influencing factor in directing singer instruction, the findings here suggest that a new, more inclusive academic model may open up career opportunities for singers who are equipped to interpret modern works.

## **The Composer's Perspective**

In this section, I retell the personal accounts, stories, background, and insights of composers Daniel Schnyder, Douglas Tappin, Peter Hilliard, and David Lang. I organize the narrative data around each central theme that emerged from the interviews and link the narratives to each other and to the related larger narrative that emerged from the literature review. This section is followed by an analysis section wherein I reflect on the meanings I've drawn from the narratives.

### **Musical Identity and Desire for Artistic Freedom**

Set in New York City on March 12, 1955, the day Parker died, *Charlie Parker's Yardbird* is a 90-minute opera inspired by the jazz saxophonist's real life. In the opera, Parker sets out to write his last great musical work. The famed New York City jazz club Birdland becomes his personal limbo, where he revisits the inspirations, demons, and women who fueled his creativity.<sup>100</sup> Daniel Schnyder was commissioned to compose the

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<sup>100</sup> "Opera Philadelphia Presents World Premiere – Company's First in Decades – of Charlie Parker's *Yardbird*" on Opera Philadelphia's website, accessed March 15, 2019, <https://www.operaphila.org/about/news-press/pressroom/2015/yardbird-news-release/>

work by Opera Philadelphia and found special inspiration in the bel canto virtuosity of tenor Lawrence Brownlee. Schnyder heard Brownlee in concert and noted the similarities between the flexibility in Brownlee's voice and that of Charlie Parker's virtuosic playing. Schnyder collaborated with African-American librettist, poet, playwright Bridgette A. Wimberly, contending that her background and familiarity with African-American vernacular traditions best suited her to help tell the story.

While Schnyder, accepts the 'opera' label and refers to the work as such, he acknowledges that it is atypical in terms of aesthetics and performance practice. When he discusses the classical music aesthetic and standard, he uses the term 'schoene Musik.' Schnyder spoke with me via Skype from Zurich in his native country, Switzerland. "...what it means is 'beautiful music' of the 19<sup>th</sup> century," explains Schnyder. "In my opera, you have to sing a little bit grittier, using your voice in different ways that aren't always fitting into the 19<sup>th</sup>-century aesthetic ideal of singing. If you have a certain flexibility, you can do a lot of things with your voice that don't fit into that square, cold, 'schoene Musik' way of singing."<sup>101</sup> Schnyder's description of 19<sup>th</sup>-century classical music as 'square' and 'cold' is very telling. It reveals not only his sentiment toward the classical music aesthetic but offers some insight into how he may view his own music and modern music, in general, as a contrasting entity.

Douglas Tappin's work, *I Dream: A Rhythm and Blues Opera*, opens its narrative in Atlanta April 3, 1968, the day before Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. The work explores King's activism, background, and possible final thoughts and mindset

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<sup>101</sup> Daniel Schnyder in a Skype interview with the author, October 2018.

leading up to his death. It incorporates elements from rhythm and blues, blues, and gospel music. Tappin's first inspiration for composing the opera came while having a conversation about another piece he'd written called *King*, which is about the clash between the lives of King Saul and King David. Tappin recalls, "People were talking about another 'king,' Martin Luther King Jr., and who he was, and that struck a chord with me."<sup>102</sup> Tappin notes that the history of Dr. King was distant to him while growing up in the U.K., but while living in Atlanta, he began the long process of reading, researching, and interviewing people about his life. Tappin shares the origin story of his piece from his office in Atlanta during a Skype interview. He notes that the work was initially "straight and classical with no frills." However, this didn't lend itself to being authentic, and he eventually purposefully infused the work with elements from African-American vernacular music. "This story, because of its roots in African-American culture, requires a particular type of music to tell it."<sup>103</sup> Recalling the origin story of his work and his motivations for fusing classical music with other genres, Tappin remarks, "I like the challenge." He speaks of the importance of bringing the strengths of opera and musical theater together, and in doing so evokes in my mind the image of a musical explorer.

Still, not everyone commends the composer for his explorations into genre-fusion. Critics are often rebuffed to accept or acknowledge the quality of hybrid works, especially those that combine classical music with African-American vernacular music,

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<sup>102</sup> Douglas Tappin in a Skype interview with the author, January 2019.

<sup>103</sup> Douglas Tappin, January 2019.

and *I Dream* is no exception. “Unfortunately, people are asking me to choose. It’s irritating when you get a critic who says ‘it’s good, but it’s not opera,’” remarks the composer. While his sentiment reveals he is perturbed by the limited vision of onlookers, his personal outlook is clear and realistic. “You almost have to say, ‘What are we? Are we an opera, or are we a musical theatrical drama?’ Because some people will say you absolutely cannot sit in the middle. You’ve got to be one or the other because audiences are confused by it, critics are going to complain about it, your tech and casting approach is going to be more complicated, and then this comes into play with people who want to invest in it or put it on, who want to know what it is they’re dealing with. So, those are real issues.”<sup>104</sup>

Ultimately, the composer resolves that, for the diligent, persistence will pay off and ideally lead to two results: 1) acquiring the boldness to pursue one’s dreams regardless of criticism, and 2) obtaining the financial support of opera companies and/or theatrical producers who are willing to invest in your vision. He contends that he and his team are working through the identity challenges associated with his hybrid opera and acknowledges the difficulty that comes along with the path he has chosen. Tappin is careful to leave the labeling and categorization of his work open for interpretation. “I can see it fitting in different formats. I can see it being more operatic in approach and I can see it being more musical theatrical in approach. I would like to press on to find that absolute middle ground. But, that’s not easy, and it hasn’t been easy.”<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Douglas Tappin, January 2019.

<sup>105</sup> Douglas Tappin, January 2019.

The challenges with musical identity expressed by Tappin are not foreign for modern operatic works. Peter Hilliard echoes this sentiment when discussing his work *Blue Viola* and the mindset of opera critics. “Critics are very behind the eight ball on this whole topic. They’re still asking a lot of questions about whether it’s vernacular or whether it’s highbrow enough. Those issues do not occur to the audience members. They either enjoy it or they don’t.”<sup>106</sup> Again, the sentiment here reinforces the idea that modern composers may view themselves as part of a marginalized and criticized group.

Hilliard also iterates the financial challenges that opera companies have when betting on the success of lesser-known works, while at the same time attempting to balance the budget. He and his librettist, Matt Boresi, had concerns right before the 2008 financial crisis that their opera-composing days were over. However, the door opened for regional companies to point the way forward, producing works like Hilliard and Boresi’s *Blue Viola* and others with smaller budgets in more intimate chamber music productions. I note Hilliard’s enthusiasm when he mentions Prototype, a New York festival co-produced by Beth Morrison Projects and HERE that encourages new opera-theatre and music-theatre works with multi-disciplinary elements. He contends that the festival is demonstrative of a new trend towards regionalism in opera. “...what Beth Morrison is doing with Prototype in New York is a business model that works very well in New York and in Los Angeles. However, those operas are not going to connect in the same way to the heartland of America or the South or West, even...It should sound like the community it’s based in. It should sound like the people of those communities, their

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<sup>106</sup> Peter Hilliard in a Skype interview with the author, February 2019.

stories. So, hopefully it results in a big broad diversity of ways of expressing story in music. Now we have opportunities that we didn't have before, so, that's awesome. I'm excited about it!"<sup>107</sup>

Hilliard also points to the idea that part of the challenge with America's acceptance of hybrid operas is rooted in the country's unwillingness to acknowledge the role African-American vernacular music has played in helping to define 'American opera.' "We don't think about music being American until it gets black," asserts Hilliard. "If America doesn't start to engage those ideas, it's not really reflecting America. It's reflecting a kind of white, very European version. Money makes a lot of the decisions in opera, and I think what especially people in urban areas are finding out is that if they want opera to survive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond, they're going to have to break out of the whiteness of the standard repertory."<sup>108</sup>

In Hilliard's view, the ideal situation is one where money is not the driving force, and "where the passion and the excitement of the writing team meets the passion and excitement of the producing team and the audience. I think that's best driven by letting the writer tell you what they love and what they care about."<sup>109</sup> Hilliard's comments reaffirm his optimistic view that the new business model and trend toward smaller regional-focused operas will offer more artistic freedom and opportunities for a broader

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<sup>107</sup> Peter Hilliard, February 2019.

<sup>108</sup> Peter Hilliard, February 2019.

<sup>109</sup> Peter Hilliard, February 2019.

array of stories and musical approaches. Ideally, the model will allow modern composers to reach audiences with whom their message and music can resonate.

Composer David Lang speaks similarly about the desire for artistic freedom and a less limiting musical identity. His work *The Mile-Long Opera: a biography of 7'oclock* (Lang intentionally uses the lower case) defies category. Conceived by Lang alongside architects Diller, Scofidio and Renfro, the text was adapted (by Librettist Anne Carson and essayist Claudia Rankine) from one-on-one interviews with New York residents who were asked, “What does 7:00 pm mean to you?” The portion of the text compiled by Ms. Rankine (her contribution to the libretto was spoken, while Ms. Carson’s was sung) involved interviews with residents about their tables. The interviews resulted in a series of intimate moments that are encapsulated in the text.<sup>110</sup>

Lang has carved a niche for himself by thinking outside of the box. Many of his works involve unusual orchestration, performance spaces, and multi-discipline integrations. “I really am trying to go through a catalogue in my mind of all the different places where opera can go – all the different things that opera is capable of without having to go into an opera house where I think the expectation is that you’re going to do something traditional,”<sup>111</sup> contends Lang. For him, it’s important that he not only freely explore his own artistry, but that he provides a space for others to do so, as well. “As a composer you wake up every day thinking, ‘I have to do the thing I’m curious about. I

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<sup>110</sup> Joshua Barone, “For One Opera, All the High Line’s a Stage,” *The New York Times*, September 29, 2018.

<sup>111</sup> David Lang in a Skype interview with the author, March 2019.

have to do the thing I'm interested in...the thing that moves me.," remarks Lang. He asserts that Bang on a Can, a New York-based music collective of which he is co-founder and co-artistic director, is designed to "support musicians from every world who are crossing the boundaries of their genre, because people who don't fit neatly into a category oftentimes don't have a good place to go." He adds, "We try to be supportive of people who are trying to ask questions about what their limits are and are trying to push over them."<sup>112</sup>

Lang asserts his observation that the opera industry is moving toward smaller venues and out-the-box performance spaces. He reveals his theory about the motivation for this, stating, "I think there are a lot of financial reasons why people are looking for smaller more alternative venues. I think part of it, from the composer's point of view, is this sense of more freedom with doing smaller projects or more alternative projects."<sup>113</sup> Lang's own inclination toward unusual opera performance venues was sparked by his experience in the 1990s while working on a large scale opera with a company in Santa Fe. He recounts that the score had everything from ballet, to a chorus, and a large cast of characters. Having experienced these extremes, made possible by a large production budget, he realized that something was missing: human connection. Lang's remarks and sentiment align with those of the other composers. His desire to expand his artistry beyond traditional boundaries informs both the artistic content and the ways in which the art is realized.

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<sup>112</sup> David Lang, March 2019.

<sup>113</sup> David Lang, March 2019.



In terms of musical identity, Lang sees no need for categorization and forming a distinction between opera and other types of music-theater productions. He points to pieces like Kurt Weill's *Threepenny Opera* and *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, and to a more recent production of Marc Blitzstein's (who was the first English translator of *Threepenny Opera*) *Cradle Will Rock* as examples of music-theater works that walk the tightrope between musical theater and opera. "Why should I be forced to make a distinction? When we say that something is operatic, usually it's not a compliment. We say that things are operatic meaning that the emotion is overblown and cartoony, and we say that voices are operatic when we imagine that they're large and unnatural. I'm not necessarily sure that we gain anything by saying that our music should be separated by category...I think it's interesting to judge pieces, not by where they fit neatly in the category, but by where I think the composer intends for your emotional reaction to go."<sup>114</sup>

### **The Desire for Versatile Singers**

When asked whether all aspiring opera composers should invest in learning to sing, Peter Hilliard exclaims, "Yes!" Hilliard grew up playing piano in an evangelical church in rural Northern California. He paints a vivid picture, describing how his church would meet every Sunday in a school gymnasium and he would play on an upright piano with the praise team. They had no sheet music, only chord sheets. So, flexibility and improvisation became a natural part of his musical development. Then, in high school, he met an opera singer who'd heard him sing and connected him with his voice teacher. This

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<sup>114</sup> David Lang, March 2019.

led Hilliard down a path that eventually resulted in his participation in a summer voice program at the University of California Santa Barbara. “I was singing a lot,” notes Hilliard. “I spent a year and a half as a voice major at Peabody [Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore] before I realized I didn’t have a voice that was going to give me a career, and that I really loved writing and playing the piano.”<sup>115</sup>

Hilliard recalls his time studying with composer David Conte and highlights the impact of that experience on his personal outlook and approach. “I was in a couple of his operas when I was switching over and becoming a composer, and there were a few times I was singing a role, and we’d be in rehearsal, and I would sing a wrong note. He wouldn’t always correct that. He would sometimes correct his score to what I had sung. He would say, ‘my accompaniment was telling you to sing that note and not the one I wrote. You’re right, and the music is wrong!’”<sup>116</sup> Experiences like this one and the fact that he currently serves as a theater professor (Villanova University) uniquely positions Hilliard as a modern composer with insight into the experiences that impact singers.

Hilliard is an adjudicator for an opera competition in Philadelphia and hears sixty to seventy singers every year from some of the best schools in the region, including Juilliard, The Academy of Vocal Arts, and The Curtis School. On the one hand, he lauds the singers’ training, noting their command of languages, technical proficiency, and flexibility, and citing, for example, their ability to switch back and forth between the French style and the bel canto style. However, on the other hand, he points out that

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<sup>115</sup> Peter Hilliard, February 2019.

<sup>116</sup> Peter Hilliard, February 2019.

singers rarely venture into lesser-known repertoire. “You hear Bolcom every now and then, and you hear Bernstein a lot, and ‘No Word from Tom’ from *The Rake’s Progress*.”<sup>117</sup> Even at times when he has coached singers or participated in the casting process for his own works, he observes that the singers resolve to ‘play it safe.’ “In general,” remarks Hilliard, “I feel like a lot of times I’m watching somebody who is afraid to do it wrong.”

The phenomenon of the ‘play it safe’ singer is not foreign to Douglas Tappin either. He tends to be involved at every step with his operas, from casting to production. He shares a story of a recent audition process in New York City. A woman interested in the role of Dr. King’s grandmother entered the room and sang a traditional aria in the traditional manner. When she left the room, Tappin expressed his disappointment to the opera company’s Artistic Director. When prompted for more details, he remarked, “I wish I could ask her to sing it a different way.” The Artistic Director encouraged him to do that, so Tappin went after the performer and asked her to return to the room. He relays the dialogue between them stating, “I went out of the room and said ‘Can you come back in?’ She said, ‘...and do what?’ I said ‘Sing it as if you were...?’ She said, ‘...in church?’ I said, ‘Absolutely. That!’”

When the artist returned to the audition room, she proved herself to be very versatile, using her classical technique, but singing as prompted, in a style appropriate for a gospel church setting. He had to give her permission to tap into her knowledge of other

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<sup>117</sup> Peter Hilliard, February 2019.

styles so that she felt comfortable displaying it in a formal opera audition. Tappin says that finding versatile artists at that level has been “very rare and very hard to find.” Often times he encountered singers who could only recreate a practiced interpretation of a specific song, as opposed to having the versatility to move in and out of a variety of musical styles regardless of the piece.

Tappin allows for some free expression in his work in very specific places where the context of the scene deems it appropriate. He describes a typical black church experience where a preacher will speak, and someone will play on the B3 Hammond organ, following along as they speak. He recreates this experience in the opera and acknowledges that there is a desire for moments of the piece to ‘feel improvised,’ without necessitating the actual use of improvisation. One challenge he runs into is that oftentimes singers are not always skilled enough with the style and with improvisation to achieve the desired effect without over-embellishing. “Some singers can and cannot do it, and my experience has been that throughout the evolution of the piece when you ask singers to improvise, it tends to get out of control and they take it too far...over the years, I’ve eventually written every single line and wanted sung what’s exactly on the page, but the ‘feel’ should be improvised.”<sup>118</sup> Tappin’s claims highlight the tension and paradox that he and other modern composers must navigate. While he values versatile singers who have a clear understanding of musical style across a broad range of genres, he is resigned to believe, based on his experiences, that this type of singer doesn’t generally exist. Thus,

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<sup>118</sup> Douglas Tappin, January 2019.

although there are moments for free expression in the opera, the trust to allow singers to create freely without extensive intervention has not been established.

In rehearsals with singers, he has had the opportunity to work with them on stylistic interpretation. Much of the time is spent helping the singer to test the limits and find a balance between the use of their pre-established classical technique and an appropriate style and vocal delivery for the work. It's clear, based on Tappin's assessments, that in most cases a knowledge of the appropriate style elements of genres outside the classical realm is not typical. "They don't get the style. So I would ask them to go listen to how Mahalia Jackson or Aretha Franklin would approach a song, or if they were male, how Stevie Wonder would approach a song. Then, ask the question, 'How do I add my technique to that?'"<sup>119</sup>

Daniel Schnyder has had less involvement in the casting process with his works. However, he often works with singers in rehearsals and has influence regarding any interpretive decisions. Because his piece is centered on Charlie Parker, a well-known jazz musician and masterful improviser, there are jazz idioms in the piece that are meant to give the impression of improvised material in the opera. Schnyder admits, however, that none of the music is ever actually improvised. Still, there were specific decisions made during the rehearsal process that led to a more relaxed and free interpretation of rhythms and phrasing. Schnyder attributes much of the discovery in this regard to the African-American singers who were comfortable drawing from their personal backgrounds and

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<sup>119</sup> Douglas Tappin, January 2019.

previous experiences with commanding style elements from African-American vernacular music. He lauds the approach of soprano Angela Brown who originated the role of Addie, Charlie Parker's mother. "Technically, she came up with ideas that are already implied in the music...it was really inside the structure of the music and became totally natural to her," states Schnyder<sup>120</sup>

Still, Schnyder is keenly aware that many singers who audition for his work will not have the same level skill set as Angela Brown. Like Tappin, he expresses skepticism that classically-trained singers are equipped to improvise in an operatic work. "...that would be a completely new genre. You'd need opera singers that can improvise and scat on harmonies... You need a very good classical training, a top-notch singer to deal with that. Then, to find somebody on top of that who can improvise, you'd probably have two or three people on earth that can deal with it."<sup>121</sup> Similar to Tappin, he has opted to write out most of the material that is meant to sound and 'feel' improvised.

The setting for the world premiere performance of David Lang's *The Mile-Long Opera* was New York's High Line (A 1.5-mile-long elevated linear park) where 1,000 singers and actors from across New York were charged with the task of presenting the stories of hundreds of New Yorkers for six consecutive nights in October of 2018. Each musical number features improvisation as a primary element in the work, allowing performers to present individual interpretations of the music and text throughout.

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<sup>120</sup> Daniel Schnyder, October 2018.

<sup>121</sup> Daniel Schnyder, October 2018.

Audience members experienced the opera by walking along the High Line and taking in the individual presentations of each performer.

Lang asserts that the grand opera model is centered in a desire to have voices and spectacle that meet the aesthetic demands of large venues. In doing so, the collateral damage tends to be our ability to connect intimately with the artists on stage. Lang illustrates this when discussing his preference for the HD Metropolitan Opera broadcasts over the live experience of going to the Met. “When I can go see the Met from the seats that I can afford to buy, I can’t actually see the singers as well as I see them on the HD broadcasts, and I miss that. I miss the connection of seeing the expressions on their faces – and that’s a big tool for how emotion is conveyed in theater. It’s something that I think a lot of composers are looking for – ways to try to get that kind of personal theatrical relationship back into the art form.”<sup>122</sup> His work lends itself to encouraging co-creation with the singer, and as such, challenges traditional ideas about how singers should sing and perform in operas.

Lang has been involved with the casting process for his operas and shares a story of a particularly intense casting process involving his opera entitled *the difficulty of crossing a field* (Lang prefers the use of lowercase script). The casting process lasted several days, and a number of people auditioned who were all great singers. Then, one day a woman came in to audition, and the first thing she did was accidentally drop her notebook on the floor and thousands of paper scattered all over the floor. It was complicated to get all of the papers back together, and the woman was visibly flustered.

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<sup>122</sup> David Lang, March 2019.

To Lang and the casting team, it proved that she was a true embodiment of the character. The piece called for a character who was funny, ridiculous, and a bit lost. The character has an existential dilemma and loses her identity throughout the course of the piece. Of the audition incident, Lang comments, “We realized that’s what the character would do, you know? So, the fact that she had done this really embarrassing thing and had done that exactly the same way this character would have done that sort of proved to us that she was the right person for the job, and she was fantastic. Sometimes what you’re looking for is not a vocal type. You’re looking for a connection to a person who is going to be a character.”<sup>123</sup>

For Lang, beautiful singing is a given. A rarer find is a singer who is grounded in the dramatic interpretation and embodies the character in a work. Lang’s story sheds light on the idea that many modern operas rely on the storytelling abilities of performers in a way that has been traditionally relegated to works labeled as ‘theater’ in the past.

### **Views on Voice Pedagogy and Performance Practice**

In contrast to the other works identified in this study, David Lang’s piece, *The Mile-Long Opera*, is designed to encourage improvisation. The work involves repeated monologues and sung material. With each iteration, the singer is invited to adopt a different interpretation (see Figure 4.1) and interact with audience members who walk along the High Line to experience the opera. “I wanted everyone to be an individual,” states Lang. Part of that was because of this power music has to make an emotional

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<sup>123</sup> David Lang, March 2019.



connection between strangers. If someone is singing something, then maybe you will

## the mile long opera – 9

incantatory, very flexible rhythms and timings  
singers sing independently of each other

text by anne carson  
music by david lang

*very expressive and emotional  
you can sing out  
vary the lengths of all the held notes on each repetition*

The musical score is written for two voices, Treble and Bass, on a grand staff. It consists of three systems of music. The first system (measures 1-4) features a long, continuous melodic line across the top of the staff, with lyrics 'no we don't talk' underneath. The second system (measures 5-8) continues the melodic line with lyrics 'but peo - ple get to know each o - ther'. The third system (measures 9-12) concludes the phrase with lyrics 'just by walk - ing past each o - ther all the time'. The score includes a dynamic marking of *mf* at the beginning of the first system. The notation includes various note values, rests, and a long slur over the first system.

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**Figure 4.1.** Page. 11, no. 9 of *The Mile-Long Opera: o biography of 7 o'clock* by David Lang<sup>124</sup>. This page of music was sung by participants who occupied Area 22 on the High Line. As indicated, the singers are instructed to sing each line independently in an improvisatory fashion.

<sup>124</sup> David Lang, *The Mile-Long Opera*, libretto by Anne Carson (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 2018).

make eye contact with them passing through, and you will have this bond with them that the music makes possible.”<sup>125</sup> Lang observed that many of the singers who were initially hesitant and shy when asked to engage passersby and add a personal interpretation to the music, were complete ‘hams,’ actively seeking audience engagement by the end of the run.

The impact of Lang’s work on pedagogy and performance practice stems from the philosophy that drama is an essential and driving force in 21<sup>st</sup>-century operas. “The performance really generates the pedagogy,” asserts Lang. He launches into a story about his time living in Italy in 1990-91. While there, he had a revelation about the importance of dramatic expression after attending operas in different parts of the country. One experience that significantly impacted him was a performance of *Tosca* starring Raina Kabaivanska, a leading lirico-spinto soprano who’d long since stopped singing in the United States because as she aged her voice was no longer well-suited for filling the larger American opera houses.

In Lang’s story, he encountered her at a small Italian opera house, a venue that didn’t require her to project very far. He recounts the details of that transformative experience noting, “You could see her face, and you could see her emote. And I found the intimacy of it to be so much more powerful than being in a place where all I can do is see a little speck in front of me and hear their voice. So, the tradeoff was really well worth it to me...the acting really became preference over just the voice.”<sup>126</sup> Lang advises

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<sup>125</sup> David Lang, March 2019.

<sup>126</sup> David Lang, March 2019.

that aspiring participants in modern opera immerse themselves in live theater. In doing so, a new world of expressive possibilities opens up. “You have to be completely immersed in what a theatrical experience can be. It’s not just people singing. It’s not oratorio. People are moving around, and they’re accomplishing tasks, and they’re using what they look like and how they move to express things. The music is only a part of what they’re trying to express.”<sup>127</sup>

Daniel Schnyder recommends that singers immerse themselves in a variety of musical styles in order to perform in his work. He describes his opera saying, “the vocal range is very wide, and it goes from scat singing to *parlando*, and from vocalise to falsetto and everything in between. There is, for a modern opera, a lot of advanced ensemble singing...The rhythms are often African-American influenced jazz rhythms or Latin rhythms...unusual for opera. The opera is an American opera.”<sup>128</sup> When asked about the best way to prepare singers for participation in his operas, Schnyder advises, “Start to learn rhythms that do not exist in classical opera. Sing the music of Antonio Carlos Jobim in Portuguese. Sing jazz standards for the fun of it. Sing Latin music, and try to be expressive and situation-oriented. Do not go for the Italian 19<sup>th</sup>-century thing (which is great). It might narrow your aesthetic output and narrow your artistic impact.”<sup>129</sup> Schnyder’s recommendation reflects a paradox. There is an obligatory

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<sup>127</sup> David Lang, March 2019.

<sup>128</sup> Daniel Schnyder, October 2018.

<sup>129</sup> Daniel Schnyder, October 2018.

manner in which the composers pay homage to the institution of classical music, yet they also criticize its limitations with regard to training the modern singer.

We discuss the benefits of improvisation and ways that singers can develop the skills and confidence to learn to respond to musical prompts in real time. Schnyder feels that the best way to learn improvisation is to incorporate some limitations and make small decisions that can increase progressively with comfort level and skill development. He is concerned that improvisation classes geared toward classical singers may have the singers jump into an improvisation activity without setting any limits, instructing participants to just “do whatever you want.” By starting with the embellishment of small phrases, making small decisions that gradually become more complex, singers are able to manageably become more comfortable with improvisation.

This method may parallel Schnyder’s discovery process with jazz and improvisation. He recounts how as a youth his first introduction to music was through the study of classical music. “My parents didn’t have jazz records. It was classical music. I played all classical concerts first before I knew jazz. I had no clue. I also didn’t know that jazz was improvised music. I heard it on the radio and thought it was fantastic, great music that I wanted to play. Then, I went to the shop and wanted to buy the music. At that time, you couldn’t buy transcribed solos. They said, ‘Hey, this is improvised music. You have to invent it yourself.’ I thought, ‘Wow, you must be kidding.’”<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Daniel Schnyder, October 2018.

Douglas Tappin advises singers to learn and understand the style elements of other genres. He recommends immersion. “The way to sing authentic gospel is to go sing it in front of a church or to someone else who has grown up doing that. I found the singers who were able to do this effortlessly had done it at some point in their lives. They’d sung in church or had sung blues or sung jazz, or had tried to put out a jazz album and were familiar with those things. Go do those things. The only way to do it is to say, ‘Today I’m not an opera singer. I’m going to sing in a jazz club.’”<sup>131</sup>

Tappin also echoes the sentiment of David Land and advises singers to develop their acting skills. “The most important thing about the music is that it is not just sung. I know that you have a lot of experience with opera, but for me, one of the hardest things has been to find people who are competent actors, as well. The story-telling is more than just vocal performance, or vocal range, or vocal style...it is communicating emotion, as well, an ability to communicate whatever it is whether, stylistically, you are singing in a way that is rhythm and blues, gospel, or otherwise, compelling, not just as a matter of music.”<sup>132</sup>

Tappin has some formal training but is mostly self-taught. His own musical influences span from Puccini in opera to Miles Davis and B.B. King in jazz and blues, to Aretha Franklin, Stevie Wonder, and Michael Jackson in R & B, soul, and pop music. The 21<sup>st</sup>-century opera singer may need to take a page out of the book of these

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<sup>131</sup> Douglas Tappin, January 2019.

<sup>132</sup> Douglas Tappin, January 2019.

composer's musical lives and be open to musical influences that expand beyond classical music. To this end, academic environments that move from a philosophy of limited specialization to broader more inclusive music education can benefit singers. David Lang echoes this saying, "I think that when we categorize things, we make it easier to find them and understand them and commodify them. It also means it makes them easier to not be paid attention to and easier to misunderstand and limit. I think that if we imagine all singers and all musicians and composers should begin each day by thinking 'I am not limited. Today I wake up, and I am fresh, and I can do whatever I want to do,' then maybe we won't want to have the boxes that define us."<sup>133</sup> Lang became interested in music at nine years old, composing and playing in a jazz band. He explains that he thought that his interest in music gave him a natural connection to anyone in any discipline or country who made music. It wasn't until his later foray into academia and the music industry that he learned differently. "Our world is built so people specialize, and then they forget their connection to everybody else," says Lang.

Peter Hilliard feels that the composer has a responsibility to allow room for co-creation with the singer. He references the bel canto tradition and mentions Rossini as an example of a composer who knew how to write in a manner that indicated his intentions but also invited embellishment. According to Hilliard, Wagner and composers that emerged after him tend to take back more of the control and orchestration doesn't always leave room for singers to add to the musical commentary. He evokes the image of a pendulum that swings back and forth between the composer and singer. "That pendulum

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<sup>133</sup> David Lang, March 2019.

used to swing back and forth a lot in opera. The bel canto movement starts with the composer in charge and by the end, it's really the singer that's in charge, writing their own cadenzas and riffing everything, basically. But, then the pendulum got stuck, right after Wagner, where the composer was in charge, and they didn't let go."<sup>134</sup>

Hilliard also references his experiences coaching singers saying, "I feel where they are and try to go further with them in places depending on how the musical conversation is going. And then a lot of times, I will wind up giving permission to the singer to do something that's not on the page. So, it's a conversation."<sup>135</sup> His philosophy is steeped in a belief that singers and composers can work collaboratively to inform performance practice.

### **Analysis: The Composer's Perspective**

All of the composers in this study convey a sense of challenge-seeking enthusiasm, as well as, slight defiance when discussing the hybrid nature of their works and the varied views of those who encounter them. In this manner, the 21<sup>st</sup>-century composers portray themselves as a marginalized group, often misunderstood and criticized for pushing the limits of traditional opera. In spite of this, the trend toward regional-focused operas, and the new business model centered on smaller, more affordable productions, gives modern composers opportunities for exposure. The larger

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<sup>134</sup> Peter Hilliard, February 2019.

<sup>135</sup> Peter Hilliard, February 2019.

narrative is the overarching idea that 21<sup>st</sup>-century operas respond to and are influenced by the cultural and social spectrum of the time period.

In academic voice teaching, the influence of this genre is demonstrated by the emergence of new pedagogies that are discussed in further detail in the next chapter. Resistance to accepting this influence stems from a lack of acknowledgement for the artistic value of vernacular forms and improvisatory elements as representative of ‘high art.’ Three of the four composers incorporate African-American vernacular music in their works, and remark on their desire for singers that have received well-rounded training, more inclusive of vernacular musical forms.

The composers report a general expectation that singers ground their singing approach in a traditional classical technique and at the same time explore the vocalisms and style elements of other genres. Many of the works incorporate improvisation, extremes of range, and a ‘grittier sound’ (as reported by Daniel Schnyder). In audition settings and in academia, in general, singers are not often encouraged or given the permission to explore other styles of music. If they are in a traditional music conservatory or similar academic training program, the knowledge and skill they’ve acquired outside of classical music are often sourced from their own personal background and experiences outside of school.

While on the one hand, composers desire more versatile artists; on the other hand, they are not conditioned to relinquish the reigns and allow singers to serve as co-creators in opera. They also note that opera singers often lack the dramatic skills and story-telling abilities more commonly found in musical theater. These findings support the case for a more progressive academic music program with expanded curriculum options for singers



wishing to go beyond a specialized classical focus. The recommendations from the composers are consistent with the noted industry trends and reflect a movement toward a more holistic view of voice pedagogy and performance practice. The composers propose a training program that keeps classical technique at its core while acknowledging and implementing a hybrid of vocal techniques and musical styles that meet current industry demand, as well.

## **The Singer's Perspective**

In this section, I retell the stories and personal insights of singers Lawrence Brownlee, Angela Brown, David Hughey, and Jorell Williams, with special attention on their experiences preparing for and performing in the operas highlighted in this study. I also incorporate my own experiential knowledge and recount my experience performing in David Lang's work, *The Mile-Long Opera*. I organize the narrative data around each central theme that emerged from the interviews and link the narratives to each other and to the related larger narrative that emerged from the literature review. This section is followed by an analysis section wherein I reflect on the meanings I've drawn from the narratives and relate the major and sub-themes to the larger narrative.

## **The Challenges and Rewards of 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Operas**

Lawrence Brownlee created the role of Charlie Parker in the Opera Philadelphia world premiere production of *Charlie Parker's Yardbird*. Brownlee's comments on the experience are noted in a press release for Opera Philadelphia where he states, "Taking

on this role is a challenge that I have greatly enjoyed. It is a step outside of the Rossini, Donizetti, and Bellini roles that I have been singing for many years. I am a great appreciator of jazz, gospel, classical, R&B, and Latin music, and I think this opera has elements of all of those genres of music. Some of the riffs that are associated with Charlie's jazz virtuosity are reflected in Daniel's music. Charlie's life was filled with hardships and trials as well as successes, and I think this opera will bring people an even greater appreciation for the man behind the music that we all love so much."<sup>136</sup> I interviewed Brownlee via Skype while he was on a break from performances of Bizet's *Les Pêcheurs de Perles* with Houston Grand Opera.

Brownlee contends that one of the significant benefits of singing in 21<sup>st</sup>-century operas is the opportunity to work with a living composer who has the ability to tailor a piece to the specific capabilities of the singer. "The thing that was a benefit for me, was that I could actually speak to the composers," remarks Brownlee, recalling his experiences performing in Lorin Maazel's 1984 and Daniel Schnyder's *Charlie Parker's Yardbird*. He continues, "When you look at the roles that we sing today, from Bellini to Rossini to Donizetti, if you think about this, these roles were written for specific people. The role may be 98% good for you, but there are two pages where you're like, 'Man, if he had just raised this a half step, or put this on a different word or changed the vowel...'"<sup>137</sup> In contrast, with modern operas, singers have the benefit of being able to

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<sup>136</sup> "Opera Philadelphia Presents World Premiere – Company's First in Decades – of Charlie Parker's *Yardbird*, on Opera Philadelphia's website, accessed May 4, 2019, <https://www.operaphila.org/about/news-press/pressroom/2015/yardbird-news-release/>.

<sup>137</sup> Lawrence Brownlee in a Skype interview with the author, February 2019.

converse with composers. “You can talk to the composer and say, ‘This doesn’t work for me. Can we try something else? Can we modify something?’ I think we have a fair amount of artistic license to change some things.”<sup>138</sup>

One of the challenges Brownlee recalls is the taxing nature of the role of Charlie Parker. Moments of the opera called for him to emulate the saxophone and use the full span of his range. “If you think about jazz musicians they use the extremes of the instrument. They span as high and low and as fast and as slow as possible. So, when a composer writes for the voice, he wants to try and use the voice as an instrument... I felt like the challenge was it taxed the voice in a way that I wasn’t used to. The way he wrote it, he didn’t mind that I was singing in my lower and middle voice where there was a lot of orchestration, and I got tired singing it that way... The challenge was for me to pace myself.”<sup>139</sup>

According to Brownlee one of the biggest differences between his approach to singing this modern opera and his approach to singing in more traditional operas is that there was room for more freedom of expression. Although the bulk of Brownlee’s expertise is in bel canto opera, a historically improvisatory genre, he is not expected to actually improvise beyond the occasional cadenza or section of the piece where the composer notes this intention. With the role of Charlie Parker, he notes a more relaxed approach to rhythms stating, “If I adopted anything, it was built on my technique but with a sense of abandon where I could be a lot more relaxed in how I did things... I had a lot

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<sup>138</sup> Lawrence Brownlee in a Skype interview with the author, February 2019.

<sup>139</sup> Lawrence Brownlee, February 2019.

more freedom just to kind of be open with the interpretation. He wanted it to swing and that type of feel.”<sup>140</sup>

Angela Brown originated the role of Addie, Charlie Parker’s mother. Like Brownlee, she contends that extremes of range are a challenging aspect of the role. “Daniel Schnyder wrote at every end of the vocal spectrum for everybody and he was thinking very much of the saxophone when he wrote,” says Brown. She feels that the role evoked images of all of the mother figures she’s encountered in her own life. As the originator of the role, Brown is able to add her own unique flair to the role and to the musical and dramatic interpretation. “Even with him writing this piece in the classical genre, I was able to put everything that is me into it. I was able to make the world sparkle. Then, you know, Addie is a momma. So, I drew from all of the mommas that I’ve had in my life, especially the momma that bore me, and I try to bring like to Addie in that way.”<sup>141</sup>

Jorell Williams details his experience with the 21<sup>st</sup>-century operas *Hatuey: Memory of Fire* and *Blue Viola* by Peter Hilliard. In *Blue Viola*, he portrayed the role of a junk a dealer named Vernon. The role was one of Williams’ first explorative ventures into the world of hybrid opera. Williams workshopped the piece in 2015 at Arena Stage in Washington D.C. He references the piece as ‘an opera with a blues ‘feel’ and undertone. He feels that the biggest positives from his experience were the tremendous creative freedom he was given artistically. Referring to the dress rehearsal period during

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<sup>140</sup> Lawrence Brownlee, February 2019.

<sup>141</sup> Angela Brown in a written correspondence with the author, March 2019.

preparations for the premiere, he states, "...the entire musical team gave me liberty to explore the musical intricacies that could blend both the operatic and blues genre together with improvised blues scales and harmonies. Every performer was different, and to be able to have the support from the team to 'succeed by failure' was huge in my continued development as an artist with a voice."<sup>142\</sup>

Williams narrates his challenging experience performing as the Priest in the Afro-Cuban Yiddish opera *Hatuey: Memory of Fire*, as well. About a month before opening, the choreographer and director created a space where performers could each share something about themselves with the use of body movement and storytelling. "We were tasked with telling the story of an ancestor who has influenced our lives." Using movement, the choreographer demonstrated, moving a performer in the space to tell the story of an ancestor's influence and eventual passing. Williams expresses that while witnessing the exercise he had the realization that learning the art of 'letting go' would be the last step toward completing the transformation to full artistry. The rewards of being pushed to connect dramatically carried over into performances. Williams relates, "Every time I had to run off stage post fire, I could feel the audience hold their collective breaths and the outpouring of love during bows was incredible. I feel as though I was part of something bigger than myself..."<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Jorell Williams in a written correspondence with the author, February 2019.

<sup>143</sup> Jorell Williams, February 2019.

David Hughey expresses a similar sentiment when discussing the challenges of portraying Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in *I Dream*. In a scene at the end of the opera, there is a moment of mental anguish for Dr. King. “It was always a challenge for me to find a balance between portraying this authentically the way a method actor might, and being emotionally reserved enough to finish the piece musically and vocally.”<sup>144</sup> In a contemporary opera where dramatic realism is the general aesthetic and expectation, maintaining vocal stamina and control is a challenge. Hughey defaulted to what he felt were the authentic aspects of the character. His interpretation of King was reserved and conservative. As such, Hughey limited his use of improvisation, even in moments when free expression was permitted. “I didn’t always find it appropriate to do a lot of improvisation with that role musically because I was tying it in with the dramatic....there were times where I would do it slightly different each time and add some gospel riffs, but other than that, musically, I sang it pretty much ‘as is.’”<sup>145</sup>

Hughey feels that while many modern operas may have components that demand extremes of range and unique vocalisms, *I Dream* is rewardingly appropriate for him, vocally. “I think that it was well-written for what we call a musical theater ‘bari-tenor,’ which I think describes my voice,” proclaims Hughey. He also feels that, while challenging, exploring the dramatic range and arc of his character made for a rewarding experience. “You see him struggle with his wife and you see the weight of what he had to do start to crush him, and by the end of the piece, he really was in a completely different

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<sup>144</sup> David Hughey in a Skype interview with the author, March 2019.

<sup>145</sup> David Hughey, March 2019.

place,” recount Hughey.” I think that was a positive attribute of the role. In opera, we don't always get to see that range of character because the emphasis is so much on the voice. Sometimes it's not written in there, and sometimes, even when it is written, artists don't take the opportunity to go as far dramatically as they can because the emphasis is on the music.”<sup>146</sup>

I can attest to both the challenging and rewarding attributes of my experience performing in David Lang's *The Mile-Long Opera*. I learned of the opportunity to perform in the opera through my association with a well-known nonprofit opera collective known as Opera Noire of New York. I'd lived in New York for about ten years and still maintained a residence there. Once I was able to obtain leave from school, I commuted for a few rehearsals and then stayed there the entire week of the tech and performances. The rehearsal process in itself was a huge undertaking and involved a quarter of the group at a time (about 250 singers).

I appreciated that our collective was largely diverse and represented the wide spectrum of cultures present in everyday life in New York City. This inherent diversity was mainly accomplished because of the wide variety of choral ensembles and professional and community groups that were engaged for the project, such as Coro Hispano de Nueva York, Edison Chinese Chorus, Harlem Japanese Gospel Choir, Opera on Tap, Opera Noire of New York, and others. We would meet in large school auditoriums and in the gigantic lot of the Brooklyn Army Terminal. Rehearsals were always catered, and several stage managers and assistants were in place to make sure that

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<sup>146</sup> David Hughey, March 2019.

plenty of breaks were provided, and that a cohesive rehearsal flow was maintained. It was the most massively orchestrated rehearsal experience I'd ever had.

There were no pianos and rows of singers with heads buried in their music score, only pitch pipes and huddled circles where Musical Director Donald Nally walked moved from circle to circle coaching singers on blending their voices and on singing the assigned lines as a unified force before having them practice breaking into individual lines at once, as a sort of organized chaos. Because the passages we were assigned were so short, most participants were able to relieve themselves of dependency on the score pretty early on in the process. We were divided into areas that would occupy different portions of the High Line, and by the second rehearsal, we received stage direction, choreography, and tips on ways to embody a character who would be still or moving the entire time. I was in Area 22, and my lines were pretty succinct: "No we don't talk, but people get to know each other just by walking past each other all the time."<sup>147</sup> In my mind, this would be the easiest gig I ever had. However, it proved to be much more challenging and rewarding than I'd initially thought, and in ways I hadn't begun to imagine.

The biggest challenges regarding participation in the opera mainly concerned the physical stamina required to sustain repetitive movement for the full two and a half hour-long presentations. In my section, about eighteen singers were positioned on both sides of a raked ramp that had lower walking paths on both sides. We were directed to split into

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<sup>147</sup> David Lang, *The Mile-Long Opera*, libretto by Anne Carson (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 2018).



two groups with both groups walking the lower paths on opposite sides and then crossing up the center ramp creating a zipper-like pattern, where the two circles would link together before separating again. This allowed audience members to either stand on the center ramp and experience each singer as they walked past, or walk in step with an individual singer and experience that moment of connection before moving on to the next area on the High Line. In our rehearsals, we practiced walking our path and standing for longer and longer increments of time. However, we didn't experience what it would be like singing and walking for the entire two-and-a-half-hour performance until tech week. One thing that helped to offset the aches and pains that eventually crept into our bodies was the self-regulated break system that our stage management team implemented. We would signal our need for breaks to the stage manager stationed nearby, and he or she would help to regulate a queue that ensured someone was always walking and singing on the path at any given time while others rested or drank water.

Another challenge and interesting feature of the work was the use of technology. Given that the performances took place in the evening, singers needed to have supplemental lighting on their faces. The lighting design was very creative and innovative. In some areas, singers had small lights that were carried in Styrofoam cups. Some had battery-lit visors and reflective jackets, while others were given small stations to stand in that shined a directed a spotlight on them. In areas where singers needed to receive a cue in order to enter a musical passage at the same time, lighting prompts that were connected to an app on one singer's cell phone replaced the traditional conductor. Participants in my area were given white bags of varying sizes and shapes that held white lit orbs inside. While the orbs were not particularly heavy, after the first hour of walking,

they began to feel heavier and constant adjustment was needed in order to offset the discomfort of carrying the bags. I realized after the first few days of tech that I needed to invest in a good pair of shoe insoles and thick socks to sustain the physical demands of the work. Still, I was grateful to have to be one of the singers who had to remain still, standing on apple boxes during the entire performance. That seemed a much harder a task.



**Figure 4.2.** Features the author, Sequina DuBose, standing on the raked ramp in Area 22 of the High Line carrying a prop for the performance (*Mile-Long Opera* by David Lang), a white bag with a lit orb inside. Personal photo.



**Figure 4.3.** Shows singers on apple boxes wearing lit visors performing in *The Mile-Long Opera: a biography of 7 o'clock*. Photographer credit: © 2018 The Mile-Long Opera.



**Figure 4.4.** Shows singers wearing reflective jackets and jumpsuits suits standing at stations with built-in spotlights. Photographer credit: © 2018 The Mile-Long Opera.

Vocally, I found myself relying greatly on my technique. Singers in my area were all unamplified, and singing in an outdoor space like New York City provides a unique set of challenges because the city is generally loud and unpredictable. I had to pace myself and discover ways to either project over the surrounding sounds or interject my singing in the opportune quieter moments. It was also challenging to sing the same line repetitively, maintaining the same tessiture for such a long period of time. The passage was written in a vocal range that was comfortable for me, and the improvisatory element ensured I could give myself plenty of time for rests. I maintained a classical aesthetic throughout, varying my dynamic levels as well. I never sang to loud, and found that the audience members who walked near me seemed to have an easier time understanding my words when that was the case. The combination of the different vocal timbres and all the different singers' interpretations happening at once created an immersive sound wash effect. I found ways to interweave my voice with the sea of voices around me. I became more intuitive and responsive to others, and it was exciting having the means to create new ways of saying the same thing over and over. The phrase took on new meanings for me with each incantation and the responses I received from audience members varied in kind.

At first, I was very intimidated by the idea of someone walking right up to me to watch me sing. However, because the audience members were moving and weaving themselves in and out of our group, they became as much a part of the performance as we were. It felt as though we were creating something in collaboration with them. As I became more comfortable with making eye contact, I began to elicit smiles and a few

heartfelt “thank you” expressions from passersby. Some would walk the same path several times in order to connect with more than one singer or simply stand in the midst of everyone and let the energy of all our voices wash over them. It was a transformative experience for both the performers and the listeners. In each moment that I connected with another human being, I felt like a vessel for something greater. I didn’t think about my aching arches. I didn’t worry about the quality of my tone. I simply expressed and allowed that expression to evolve organically through the exchange. Ultimately, I can say that the rewards of participating in *The Mile-Long Opera* far exceeded the challenges. It helped me to better understand the value of my ability to be flexible and spontaneous as an artist. It also helped to define my research focus and further fueled my passion for helping the next generation of working singers to acquire skills that will benefit them in pursuing a versatile career as classical vocalists who can confidently contribute to 21<sup>st</sup>-century operas and vocal works.

### **The Intersection of Background and Training**

Jorell Williams affirms that a classical foundation is the key to success in any style of singing. He also contends that his adeptness at singing in various styles has afforded him unique career-affirming opportunities. His advice to singers regarding technical preparation for 21<sup>st</sup>-century operas is this: “Sit at a piano and learn how each pitch intertwines with each pitch. I can’t really say how much time to put into learning how to memorize pitches (I developed perfect pitch at age 4) but by coming more familiar with the overtone series, you open yourself up to both better sight-reading skills, as well as a deeper understanding of how a composer can hit or miss with an emotional

moment in their orchestration.”<sup>148</sup> He adds, “My upbringing and musical background is classical, jazz, funk, blues, etc., and I truly believe that this, in addition to the amount of time I would approach a musical score, allowed me to bring my portrayal of a new work to life like none before.”<sup>149</sup>

David Hughey also acknowledges the benefits of a strong classical foundation. As a singer who performs in both operatic and musical theater works, he’s found that his classical training gives him an edge. Hughey notes, “It provided the basic foundational approach to vocal technique that I think is helpful across the board: breathing techniques, voice support, being on your breath, even the practice of warming up before performances...” He juxtaposes the Broadway experience stating, “...on a Broadway schedule you’re performing eight shows a week...it also helped having the training in music theory and aural skills. Those skills aren’t expected as much in musical theater so fewer people have them...Music directors and conductors tend to find you very valuable if you can read music...”<sup>150</sup>

While Hughey appreciates the privileges afforded him because of his classical training, he also notes that some of the philosophies inherent in his classical training have inhibited him in some ways. “There is a belief that all other styles of singing are unhealthy and wrong, and psychologically that can interfere with your process when

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<sup>148</sup> Jorell Williams, February 2019.

<sup>149</sup> Jorell Williams, February 2019.

<sup>150</sup> David Hughey, March 2019.

you're trying to navigate new vocal spaces and figure out the new vocal assignment that you've been given."<sup>151</sup> Hugheys's sentiment is not uncommon. Classical singers are often conditioned to believe that singing in a style outside of classical music will lead to vocal problems.

In addition to singing on Broadway and with regional opera houses, Hughey's background includes singing gospel and jazz with his father who was a jazz trumpeter. He also was heavily influenced by the hip hop and R & B music that surrounded him growing up as a youth in his hometown Pittsburgh. "These were all things that informed my musical landscape," he recalls nostalgically. Hughey advises the modern opera singer to follow suit and learn to draw from a vast array of musical experiences while keeping classical vocal training as a fortifying central force. He also recommends that singers work with a master teacher that is well-versed in a variety of musical styles. "In terms of training, your common denominator would have to be classical training because you can't perform classical music without being classically trained. You can perform other types of music without being trained vocalists in those styles...I would say it's important to get in the hands of a teacher who has experience with different styles that can guide you in a safe way as you navigate each one."<sup>152</sup>

"I started out singing gospel. So, gospel is where my background was and so, I had that flexibility." remarks Lawrence Brownlee. The Rossini tenor goes on to add, "Then, I sang pop and jazz, a little bit of jazz – not with scatting, but popular songs. I've

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<sup>151</sup> David Hughey, March 2019.

<sup>152</sup> David Hughey, March 2019.

been versed in various styles, so it's something I knew."<sup>153</sup> He emphasizes that once he began to study classical music formally, he had to break away from other styles, as a ballet dancer would, in order to solidify the classical technique. He also explains that he relied on his classical technique in order to sing the role of Charlie Parker, but that he was able to use the knowledge of his previous experiences and exposure to other musical styles in order to inform his interpretation.

Brownlee advises modern opera singers to learn music theory, be adept with rhythm, and cultivate their musical ears. He asserts that in contrast with traditional opera, modern operas may reflect a musical style that is less familiar to the singer. It is the singer's job to become more familiar with those styles, and I would add that it is the teacher's job to help facilitate that journey. "I'm thankful for my background and musical education because I think it has informed who I am as a classical singer. I believe I'm very solid in my technique, but I think all these things that I've learned in the past have helped me, and I've used elements of them in my classical singing. So, if you're going to pursue a role that is outside what you normally do, I think it would be a disservice if you didn't have a very good grip on other styles or what this composer would want you to try to execute. I think if you want to come and sing a jazz opera and you're singing the way you sing Purcell all the time, it doesn't quite fit the style. So, I don't think you should be pursuing that. Often times, people will hire you because they know you have the ability to do something. People will stretch you and say, 'Ok. I need you to be more relaxed on this. In the rhythmic section I need you to have more swing.' With all of these things, a

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<sup>153</sup> Lawrence Brownlee, February 2019.



consummate professional should be flexible enough and know themselves to say ‘Ok. I’m capable of doing this.’ If not, there are other people who will be ready and prepared to do it, if you can’t.”<sup>154</sup>

In a traditional career trajectory, a singer ideally attends a music conservatory, then transition to a Young Artist Program (YAP) at a regional house before advancing to YAPs at summer music festivals and larger opera houses. The next level involves acquiring recognition through a reputable singing competition, in hopes of catching the eye of a talent agency. While participating in summer programs and YAPs, singers develop a network of supporters and advocates, namely conductors, directors, teachers, and coaches who all play a role in not only the development of the young singer but who may propel their career by putting in a good word or making a recommendation to an agent, opera house, director, or program.

Ultimately, however, the traditional career path leaves little room for risk-taking in developing one’s personal artistry. In my own experiences as a working singer for over a decade, I’ve found some of my most rewarding experiences have come about as a result of my versatility as an artist. I have taken a less traditional route, creating my own opportunities by designing recitals, touring with vocal collectives and ensembles, and developing and working for my own theatrical production company.

Although my formal training is as an opera singer through traditional training at universities and a conservatory, I first began to sing in church and school as a youth. My fondest memories are of singing in the choir and obtaining my first solo in my church’s

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<sup>154</sup> Lawrence Brownlee, February 2019.

youth choir. When I began to receive voice lessons and study classical music in music institutions, it was repeatedly expressed that one has to essentially ‘pick a side.’ It was not and is not generally encouraged that those who wish to pursue a career in opera sing anything other than classical music. However, in the professional world, I’ve found that my versatility has afforded me opportunities that my classical training standing alone could not. I have had the opportunity to participate in and premiere a number of innovative 21<sup>st</sup>-century works and operas.

In *The Mile-Long Opera*, my classical training helped to sustain me during long performances while singing in a vocally taxing manner. However, my artistic versatility is one of the factors that helped me to be recommended for the engagement. The piece requires singers who are flexible or at least open to being both responsive and present. For singers who don’t possess these skills naturally, it will require a personal effort on their parts to find supplemental training. The findings from this study reveal that as we progress further into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, academic music programs will need to adjust in order make room for and respond to the demand and desire for more versatile opera singers.

Angela Brown is best known as an opera singer who has sung at the Metropolitan Opera and in major opera houses worldwide. In order to portray the role of Addie in *Charlie Parker’s Yardbird* she had to call on her previous knowledge and experiences with a myriad of musical genres. Brown relies on her classical technique and has mastered the art of balancing her singing technique with her interpretive skills as a multi-faceted artist. “I would say I had to think differently. I’ve always sung in the jazz genre, opera, classical, spirituals, gospel, blues, and in R & B. I’ve sung all of these genres

before, so I just had to think differently when it came to Addie because Charlie Parker was a saxophonist. I had to think a little lighter when it comes to some of the melismatic passages that went really fast. I had to think of a different style but was still singing in a very operatic classical way. You have to stay on the breathe and use technique in order to sing Addie,”<sup>155</sup> Brown enthusiastically contends.

Brown suggests that singing in modern operas requires a singer to bring all of what they have to offer to the table. “I just throw everything into the pot...you have to bring your authentic self to the role...Even when I sing spirituals, I bring my experiences along with whatever I am singing. I totally use everything. I sing with all the colors on my palette,” remarks Brown. She continues, advising, “You have to have a good foundation in singing...a 21<sup>st</sup>-century opera is going to be more inclusive of everything that is part of the American quilt. You will have some jazz. You have some blues. You'll have gospel and R & B. You'll have touches of everything in 21<sup>st</sup>-century operas. Those are things that you can pull from now that wasn't so encouraged in the generations before in teaching. They wanted you to just clean your slate and it was, ‘You sing classically and that's it. Don't bring any of that crooning in here and none of that ‘gospelizin’ and all of that!’ Well, honey, it's totally different and changed now. So, I would say have a good musical foundation. Know how to breathe. Know how to support. Know how to project and resonate, but with all of that, still keep some of the gospel, some of the jazz, some of the blues, and some of whatever it is that brought you to want to sing classical music in your back pocket, because you never know when you're going have to pull it out and use

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<sup>155</sup> Angela Brown, March 2019.

it. Just use it as a flavoring, not the whole opera because we are still singing (well, in the 21st century, who knows?) for the most part in front of orchestras and we have to sing over them. So, you still have to have, like I said, good vocal technique, but always lean back and throw in some of the stuff you have. Why not use leftovers to make a better soup?"<sup>156</sup>

### **Analysis: The Singer's Perspective**

Angela Brown's views sufficiently round out this portion of the study and emphasize a significant and consistent theme. The modern singer must rely on a foundation of a strong classical vocal technique despite the multiple styles and musical genres they may encounter while performing a 21<sup>st</sup>-century operatic work. The singers I interviewed share a common sentiment that their classical training has given them an advantage in the professional world. However, they also share the common experience of having drawn from personal experiences outside of their classical academic training in order to fill the gap in professional settings that called for more versatility.

The singers all report the benefits of working with a living composer, as well. Composers engage with singers collaboratively to discover areas where the singer's vocal attributes, training, and background can all intersect to bring about the best interpretation possible. At the same time, there are acknowledged challenges related to singing in 21<sup>st</sup>-century operas. Some of the composers push the boundaries by composing in a style that is vocally challenging and taxing. Contingencies also have to be made concerning

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<sup>156</sup> Angela Brown, March 2019.

performances in unusual spaces. These are factors that are not typical considerations in traditional realizations of traditional works.

Analysis of the participants' narratives reveals that 21<sup>st</sup>-century operas incorporate genre-fusion and contain elements that allow for more freedom of expression and improvisation (as is the case with *The Mile-Long Opera*). In response to these elements, a multi-layered approach to singing in modern operas is recommended. Singers must 1) root their singing in a solid classical technique that will allow them to sing over any orchestration; 2) bring a certain dramatic presence that is grounded in realism, and 3) be equipped and prepared to incorporate vocalisms and stylistic elements from popular and vernacular music into their delivery.

## CHAPTER 5

### **Training the 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Opera Singer**

The impact of societal and cultural shifts on composers and singers is recognizable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as opera companies are influenced by and seek to address social/political issues through the works they commission and produce. Composers are prone to genre-fusion by virtue of the fact that they have progressively diverse musical and personal backgrounds. As a result of the blending of musical genres and due to the incorporation of elements such as improvisation in modern operas, singers and teachers are prompted to expand their knowledge of new performance practice and pedagogical techniques.

The classical singing tradition has relied on music conservatories and the master-apprentice pedagogical model since the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. As the literature reveals, conservatories in Italy such as the Conservatorio de Sant'Onofrio a Porta Capuana in Naples developed out of the desire to musically train and educate youth. The modern conservatory model that focuses on the musical training of adults did not become a standard model until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, prompted mainly by the model set forth in Paris at Conservatoire National de Musique et d'Art Dramatique in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Despite the many adaptations to the conservatory model, the master-apprentice pedagogical model where expert singers pass on information to singing novices still applies today and remains at the core of the classical singing tradition.

In the following section, I share research findings that emphasize the benefits of using improvisation as a jump-off point for expanding singing technique and performance skill. While the case is made for an expansion of curriculum offerings in academic music programs, curriculum design is beyond the scope of this study. Instead, the focus is placed on exercises and techniques that can be easily adapted and incorporated into a single voice lesson or in rehearsals with a group voice class or opera workshop. I also highlight current pedagogical practices that are a direct response to the new demands placed on singers of 21<sup>st</sup>-century operatic works. Lastly, I restate the research questions that guide this investigation and indicate the meanings I have drawn from the highlighted aspects of this study.

## **The Use of Amplification and Technology Integrations**

Continuing in the traditions set forth by Weill, Gershwin, and others, lines are commonly blurred between musical theater and opera. One controversial and common point of discourse is centered on the use of amplification. When opera composers experiment with elements from other musical styles, it often leads to a change in orchestration and instrumentation that may render even the well-trained opera singer inaudible. On the other hand, some fear that the use of amplification signifies a diminishing of artistic integrity and that opera singers won't get to put their hard-earned technical skills to use.

One voice pedagogue that has had experience working with students in a variety of musical styles and genres is Dr. Rachelle Fleming. In an emailed correspondence, I prompted Dr. Fleming to explain her methods for teaching students who wish to sing in a

variety of styles. In her response, she references her 2018 *Journal of Singing* article, co-authored alongside Dr. Ingo Titze and opera singer Renée Fleming, entitled “The Flemingo Stance: Is Operatic Voice Production a Style or an Acoustic Requirement?” The authors note the challenges inherent in works that incorporate contemporary elements, yet require unamplified singing stating, “In contemporary singing, extreme range, complex melisma, improvisation, and variable vocal sound qualities are frequent. However, when it comes to the acoustic challenges of singing unamplified, as in opera, can all of these extremes and complexities prevail with the demands of getting enough sound to the listener?”<sup>157</sup>

The authors emphasize that ‘cross-training’ has become a standard practice for some voice teachers working with music theater and contemporary vocalists whose focus is “to build a strong, versatile, and balanced voice.” Other teachers choose to ground their approach in traditional techniques referenced in the article as “classical unamplified training.” The authors assert, “There are teachers who refuse to train voices from the perspective that amplification is part of the instrument, believing that voice training should not be specifically tailored for amplified performance. However, the professional demands of contemporary genres, such as sustaining an eight-show-a-week performance

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<sup>157</sup> Rachele Fleming, Renée Fleming, and Ingo Titze, “The Flemingo Stance: Is Operatic Voice Production a Style or an Acoustic Requirement,” *The Journal of Singing* 75, no. 2 (December 2018): 172.



schedule, call for a training regime that considers the load reduction with amplification as part of the training.”<sup>158</sup>

Composer David Lang is one of two composers highlighted in this study who comment on the use of amplification. He emphasizes, “I like mic-ing everywhere. I like mic-ing even with a traditional audience in a traditional experience. I really like amplification everywhere, not just because I like things to be loud. That’s not always the case, although, I do like things to be loud. The reason why is because everything in our world now is mediated by electronics, even when we hear acoustic music. I certainly have plenty of acoustic music that’s performed acoustically all the time. However, I think our ears are much more used to hearing things that are balanced and amplified now, even if they’re not loud. We’re used to hearing things which are going through a system. I feel like that’s just another tool that we have as composers, and we have to decide whether or not we’re going to work with them.”<sup>159</sup> Composer Douglas Tappin adds, “You are faced with issues of opera singers who don’t want to wear microphones or don’t know how to sing with a microphone. You are faced with blending amplified instruments with unamplified acoustic instruments and it’s very difficult, particularly when you factor into

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<sup>158</sup> Rachelle Fleming, Renée Fleming, and Ingo Titze, “The Flemingo Stance: Is Operatic Voice Production a Style or an Acoustic Requirement,” *The Journal of Singing* 75, no. 2 (December 2018): 172.

<sup>159</sup> David Lang, March 2019.

that the typical process of an opera company. They're not used to spending a lot of time on tech, which is, nevertheless, important to get right."<sup>160</sup>

Media, Music, Communications, and Cultural Studies expert Diane Hughes has ideas for how singers can begin to become more comfortable with amplification technologies. She recommends that singers start by "...engaging with sound engineers and technicians, and developing an understanding of the sound frequency spectrum. Teaching about vocal processing and treatment includes effects such as graphic equalization, compression, and reverb. It also involves microphone technique, monitoring sound, an appreciation of room acoustics and knowledge of the equipment being used."<sup>161</sup> I can personally attest to the benefits of familiarization with recording and voice amplification technology. I've performed in both traditional operas that were amplified due to the special considerations needed for specific venues, as well as, in 21<sup>st</sup>-century operas that bordered on musical theater.

In May 2019, I will have the opportunity to create the role of Philomena in Ojai Youth Opera's world premiere of *Nightingale and the Tower*, an electronic chamber opera by groundbreaking classical composers Jason Treuting, Beth Meyers, and Grammy

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<sup>160</sup> Douglas Tappin, January 2019.

<sup>161</sup> Diane Hughes, "Contemporary Vocal Artistry in Popular Culture Musics: Perceptions, Observation and Lived Experiences," Scott D. Harrison and Jessica O'Bryan, eds., *Teaching Singing in the 21st Century* (Springer, 2014), 298.

Award-winning musician Mikael Jorgensen (Librettist Rebecca Comerford co-writes much of the music, as well). The opera's neo-classical score features adult singers, a children's ensemble, orchestra, synthesizers, and a long-string harp coined "Sonic Butterfly" by artist Andrea Brook (see Figure 5.1). Jorgensen has a background in engineering and will also serve as Technical Director incorporating over forty LED panels into the lighting and set design, and computerized vocal effects using a TC Helicon vocal processor. The production is demonstrative of the movement toward technology integration in 21<sup>st</sup>-century operas. All singers will be amplified to allow for the technology integrations and balance with the work's unique instrumentation.



**Figure 5.1.** Features artist Andrea Brook playing “Sonic Butterfly,”<sup>162</sup> an acoustic, chromatic, long-string chromatic harp designed by Brook. The resonating chambers with butterfly wing shaped projection screens, “projection wings,” or LED wings, have 2 full

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<sup>162</sup> Andrea Brook (@sonicbutterfly\_andreabrook), “Saturday, March 9, the Ojai Cocoon presents Andrea Brook / Sonic Butterfly in collaboration with Chrysta Bell and Mike Jorgensen for a wonderful night of music,” Instagram photo, March 3, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BujPGdMHED5/>.

octaves and the strings are at minimum 60ft long. All 26 strings expand out over the audience, creating a full sensory experience.<sup>163</sup>

Beyond the ‘learning on the job’ approach, voice teachers can help facilitate singers becoming more comfortable with using microphones by working with singers to master vocal repertoire that necessitates the use of amplification in live performance. For example, singers can learn songs from the jazz standard canon and perform with a jazz trio or quartet in a recital. Assuming amplification technology is available through the academic institution or through rental services, preparation for the live performance would ideally involve familiarizing the student with the proper method for handling and singing with a microphone, with special attention paid to articulation and breath management.

Oftentimes the novice singer will mistakenly assume that balanced breath management and vocal projection are not necessary considerations in amplified singing. On the contrary, “...a sound reinforcement system can only amplify what already exists. If the performer is not producing, energized, articulate, and supported communication, no [sound] operator or equipment can make the delivery better. Reinforcement cannot enhance quality. It only amplifies the existing quality,” remarks Bill Brandwein, Theater Technical Supervisor for the University of Maryland’s Clarice Performing Arts Center and Speech and Voice Specialist Kate Ufema in their article “The Pros and Cons of Voice Amplification in the Theatre and Technology’s Effect on Voice/Speech

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<sup>163</sup> “Sonic Butterfly,” on Andrea Brook’s website, accessed March 25, 2019, <http://sonicbutterfly.com/about/>.

Training”<sup>164</sup> Singers benefit from being trained to adjust their singing technique to amplification and from academic programs that attune them to voice amplification and recording technology. Virtually every book focused on commercial music singing covers microphone technique. *The Professional Vocalist: A Handbook for Commercial Singers and Teachers*<sup>165</sup> by Rachel Lebron, listed in my bibliography, is a good starting point for grasping microphone technique, as well as, *The Contemporary Singer: Elements of Vocal Technique*<sup>166</sup> by Anne Peckham.

## **Meeting the Physical and Dramatic Demands of Opera in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

In modern opera productions and in 21<sup>st</sup>-century operas, singers are expected to be more physically active than ever before. As the lines between musical theater and opera become more blurred, directors and producers are finding new ways to challenge the traditional ‘park and bark’ approach. For instance, Lawrence Brownlee comments that when his affinity for salsa dancing was discovered during one production, he was

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<sup>164</sup> Marion Hampton and Barbara Acker, eds., “The Pros and Cons of Voice Amplification in the Theatre and Technology’s Effect on Voice/Speech Training,” *The Vocal Vision: Views on Voice By 24 Leading Teachers, Coaches, and Directors* (New York and London: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 1997).

<sup>165</sup> Rachel L. Lebon, *The Professional Vocalist: A Handbook for Commercial Singers and Teachers* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1999).

<sup>166</sup> Anne Peckham, *The Contemporary Singer: Elements of Vocal Technique* (Boston, MA: Berklee Press, 2000)

asked to use it as part of his portrayal. I also endured the extensive physical demands of David Lang's work, *The Mile-Long Opera*, walking up and down a raked ramp for two hours. Rachelle Fleming affirms, "The more versatile a singer is, the better. Most American opera companies today produce musicals, and often hold separate auditions in order to find classically trained singers with training well-suited to the specific show, presenting a wonderful opportunity for those singers with cross-training. New works such as *Figaro 90210*, and modern adaptations of traditional works require different skill sets, some of which include dialogue, stronger acting and movement abilities, and dance. Nudity is also utilized more often. In Europe, the music is often used as a landscape, to which increasingly avant-garde ideas are attached, having little to do with the original plot of an opera. There are a growing number of new works that blend opera and theater."<sup>167</sup> In response to the demands for physical stamina and in an effort to promote overall health-consciousness, many academic music programs incorporate movement, dance classes, and health workshops.

Although opera has traditionally been associated with larger physiques (a presumable justification for larger voices), the opera world has begun to take its cues from the theater world. Beginning in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, we started to see a trend toward directorial visions that favored a more fit physique. In a 2015 Washington Post article, two examples are cited where opera singers were criticized for being overweight. One example involves the much publicized firing of soprano Deborah Voigt who was set to begin a run in Strauss's "Ariadne auf Naxos" at London's Royal Opera House in 2004.

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<sup>167</sup> Rachelle Fleming in an emailed correspondence with the author, March 2019.

The other example involves a 2014 production of *Der Rosenkavalier* starring mezzo-soprano Tara Erraught who was criticized by five British critics as “dumpy,” “stocky,” “a chubby bundle of puppy fat,” and “unbelievable, unsightly and unappealing” (“Criticized for her weight, opera singer Deborah Voigt speaks up,” *The Washington Post*, February 20, 2015).

Musical theater has traditionally maintained strict body-type-specific standards for casting, and these considerations must also become a consideration for the modern opera singer, as well. “Although the primary focus of voice lessons continues to be developing vocal technique, when needed, I help students and clients understand what they can do to improve their opportunities to be hired more consistently. Beyond being vocally versatile, I ask them to understand their physical type, to develop their image, and to look at branding toward the end of their academic career. These are not to box them into a narrow range of work, but to help the entry-level performer where they are the strongest and most likely to be cast/hired. As performers become more established, they will often have more opportunities to stretch themselves in areas that interest them,” contends Fleming. “I suggest singers should place a strong emphasis on musicianship skills, including ear training and sight reading, in addition to vocal versatility. The ability to sing in multiple styles and to work on transitioning from speech to singing and back are also recommended. Beyond musical and vocal training for 21<sup>st</sup>-century opera, it would support vocalists to incorporate acting coursework, dance training, physical fitness, and stage combat training.”<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Rachelle Fleming, March 2019.

## Meeting the Vocal Demands of Opera in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

In the classic pedagogy text, *Basics of Vocal Pedagogy: The Foundations and Process of Singing*, Clifton Ware highlights the primary elements in a comprehensive vocal pedagogy that is based on “an eclectic integration of both scientific-mechanistic and holistic approaches.”<sup>169</sup> Some of the primary elements outlined in the book including respiration, phonation, registration, resonance, and articulation are also indicated in Scott McCoy’s fundamental textbook, *Your Voice: An Inside View*. While this study does not serve as a how-to guide, I will broadly discuss the impact of 21<sup>st</sup>-century hybrid operas and operas that incorporate improvisation on voice pedagogy and performance practice using the aforementioned primary elements of pedagogy as a guiding rubric.

In my own experiences working with musical theater singers and crossover artists with little classical training, I have found that there is a tendency to either overblow the voice by applying an action that pulls the abdominal muscles in towards the body and causes excessive subglottal pressure, or a tendency to apply a shallow clavicular breathing approach that offers little opportunity for efficient breath management. In both cases, musical theater singers venturing into the world of classical singing benefit from learning to adopt an energized, balanced approach to breath management and singing that is based in classical singing technique.

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<sup>169</sup> Clifton Ware, *Basics of Vocal Pedagogy: The Foundations and Process of Singing* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998).



Scott McCoy describes this process as twofold, involving both the pulmonary function of breathing, controlled by the lungs, and breath management, controlled by the glottis which “serves as a valve that regulates airflow through the larynx.”<sup>170</sup> Successful classically trained singers who have mastered the art of muscle antagonism typically apply a combination of thoracic and abdominal breathing that engages the diaphragm and regulates air pressure for optimal breath management. In an opera that uses amplification and requires speech-to-singing methods, the amount of air pressure needed may need to be adjusted in order to execute a resonant sound and clearly articulate the text.

Karen Hall, the author of “So You Want to Sing Music Theater,” references the differences between musical theater belt singing and classical singing in her dissertation entitled “Music theater vocal pedagogy and styles: an introductory teaching guide for experienced classical singing teachers.” She compares studies by reputable voice scientists, researchers, and pedagogues including Popeil, Sundberg, McCoy, and others noting that in belting compared to classical singing, “the larynx is higher, the pharynx tighter and the vocal folds is longer.”<sup>171</sup> While classically trained singers performing in 21<sup>st</sup>-century operas may not have to adopt a belt singing technique throughout, there may be moments depending on the style elements and vocal range where a use of chest

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<sup>170</sup> Scott Jeffrey McCoy, *Your Voice: An Inside View* (Delaware, Ohio: Inside View Press, 2012), 88.

<sup>171</sup> Karen Hall, “Music Theater Vocal Pedagogy and Styles: An Introductory Teaching Guide for Experienced Classical Singing Teachers” (Dissertation, Columbia University, 2006).

resonance in a higher, more extended part of the vocal range is appropriate. Chest resonance is more closely associated with belt singing and speaking.

In “Take My Hand: Teaching the Gospel Singer in the Applied Voice Studio,” Trineice Robinson-Martin cites, “the singer should be able to aurally identify and kinesthetically produce chest register (thyroarytenoid dominant registration), head register (cricothyroid dominant registration), and a mix or blended register, with the least amount of manipulation to the vocal tract to produce the resulting sound.”<sup>172</sup> The same can be said for classically-trained singers incorporating gospel vocalisms while performing in a hybrid work. Robinson-Martin emphasizes that a functionally free voice is the ultimate goal, claiming, “...a female should be able to, if they so choose, comfortably sing A4 [A above middle C], with a brassy belt vocal quality, light chest-mix, bright head voice, rounded traditional classical sound or whatever they choose.”<sup>173</sup>

In my own teaching, I’ve worked with singers to comfortably master singing in the various vocal registers before moving them through a series of vocal exercises that include “sighs,” “sliding vocalisms,” and scales designed to assist with executing vocalisms that are appropriate for a variety of musical styles. Rachelle Fleming uses melismatic vocal phrases to teach both classical and popular music styles. She claims, “I incorporate varying melisma [and runs] in vocal exercises and ask students to develop their own and to listen to and learn professional artist’s melismas. I will guide a more advanced student to use sounds and vocalises more freely and on how to modify them to

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<sup>172</sup> Trineice Robinson-Martin, “Take My Hand: Teaching the Gospel Singer in the Applied Voice Studio,” Scott D. Harrison and Jessica O’Bryan, eds., *Teaching Singing in the 21st Century* (Springer, 2014), 337-38.

<sup>173</sup> Trineice Robinson-Martin, *Teaching Singing in the 21st Century* (Springer, 2014), 338.

better warm-up and develop their voice. The use of melisma helps a vocalist to have a more flexible instrument, as well as to sing more authentically in popular and classical repertoire in which melisma and coloratura are utilized. Helping students to understand not only what each vocalise is for, but why they might choose a certain sequence and how they can modify them allow them to be more independent during periods of time when regular lessons are not possible, and to better understand their instrument and technique. I believe a technically informed and versatile vocalist will have the most opportunity to work professionally and to have vocal longevity.”<sup>174</sup>

Some resources for developing one’s own set of exercises include books in the *So You Want to Sing* Pedagogy Series, of which Karen Hall’s book (listed in my bibliography) is included. In addition to the books listed in my bibliography and in this section, I recommend *Sing Anything: Mastering Vocal Styles* by Gina Latimerlo and Lisa Popeil and *One Voice: Integrating Singing and Theatre Voice Techniques* by Joan Melton, both of which include a number of exercises and a CD with examples of different style-appropriate sounds and vocal exercises.

Extended vocal techniques (EVT) are also part of the soundscape of 21<sup>st</sup>-century operas. Key components of EVT are outlined in Michael Edward Edgerton’s article, “The Extra-Normal Voice: EVT in Singing.” Edgerton concludes his chapter with a number of exercises designed for singers interested in exploring techniques outside of the Western classical tradition He indicates that even air can be used as “an inharmonic sonority,” and the extra-normal voice can be produced via a number of techniques including laryngeal

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<sup>174</sup> Rachelle Fleming, March 2019.

manipulation, vocal fry, breathiness, wide vibrato/tremolo, color (timbre), unusual tessitura, and emphasis of shifting mechanism and glissandi.<sup>175</sup>

According to composer Donald Erb, “Music is made by a performer. It comes from him rather than from his instrument, the instrument being merely a vehicle. Therefore it seems logical that any sound a performer can make may be used in a musical composition.”<sup>176</sup> In the summer of 2018, I had the opportunity to put Erb’s logic to practical use and utilize extended vocal techniques while performing in a 21<sup>st</sup>-century operatic work entitled *What Miss Dickinson Heard - And Didn’t*. I participated as part of a vocal ensemble that presented improvised musical settings of Emily Dickinson poems. The project was the brainchild of composer Kit Young whose previous musical experiences are rooted in classical music and span to include specialized knowledge of Balinese music.

The “unforeheard” presentations (as Kit referred to them) were spontaneous sung readings of a few of Dickinson’s compiled works. The score displayed poem excerpts divided by voice part for soprano, alto, tenor, bass, and ‘rhapsodist’ (a narrator of sorts who incorporated both spoken text and Sprechstimme into the readings). There were also short clippings of musical phrases that would serve as musical prompts sprinkled periodically throughout the piece. Kit used contemporary expanded piano techniques to

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<sup>175</sup> Michael Edward Edgerton, “The Extra-Normal Voice: EVT in Singing,” Scott D. Harrison and Jessica O’Bryan, eds., *Teaching Singing in the 21st Century* (Springer, 2014), 111.

<sup>176</sup> David Cope, *New Directions in Music*, 7th ed. (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 2001), 50.

achieve a variety of unique sound effects. For instance, in some sections of the piece she would drop a miniature teacup on the piano strings allowing it to roll around. She also plucked the strings and hammered them with her open palm or at times a mallet.

The sources of sound effects were not limited to the piano. As vocalists, we were asked to imitate cricket sounds by sucking air between our teeth and incorporating light purring sounds in various manners. During a recording of one set from the work, I indicated that I was cold in the space. Kit agreed and began rubbing her arms with her hands. She took immediate interest in the sound she heard when she performed that action. In the next moment, she had an inspired idea and asked that we all rub our arms with our hands. The resulting sound combined with the cricket sounds to create a wash of sound that emulated leaves rustling in the wind. It added an authentic texture to the atmospheric introduction and is a prime example of how 21<sup>st</sup>-century operas can draw on the creativity and spontaneity of lived moments.

## **The Limits of Specialization**

A movement toward more specialized knowledge progressed alongside the development of conservatory curriculums and the master-apprentice pedagogical model. Today, singers are expected to identify a musical genre of interest, identify a voice type or *fach* category, and perhaps identify an area of focus in a subgenre or with specialized repertoire (i.e., the Rossini Tenor or the Verdi Baritone). In *Teaching Singing in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, a collection of essays focused on modern singing pedagogies and trends, editors Jessica O' Bryan and Sott D. Harrison comment on the challenges of modern modes of leaning contending, "...this tradition does not take into account the proliferation in the

twentieth century of a range of musical cultures, styles, and techniques, which has forced a rethinking of European canonic approaches to singing pedagogy. Each new style – or musical content – requires a unique pedagogy. Singing is now learnt in a variety of environments...at gigs; in recording studios; through imitation of their favorite singers; in church; in group-singing activities; through peer interaction; and in online tutorial environments. The way we teach has had to radically change to meet the demands of our students.”<sup>177</sup> While one-to-one settings where singers seek guidance from an expert teacher is a sustainable and efficient model for teaching singing, there are many challenges that come along with encouraging specialization. While some students are well-suited for focus in very specialized areas, many have a number of skill sets and aptitude in a variety of musical styles that, if developed alongside their classical training, could support their vocal development and pave the way for a viable multi-faceted career.

In an article entitled “Making Room for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Musicianship,” Leah Kardos makes the argument for recognizing the legitimacy of new and varied forms of musicianship due to the impact of post-digital music aesthetics and changes in contemporary music sensibilities. “Undergraduate music programmes are often structured into specialist streams (such as music technology, jazz, performance, composition, sonic arts, etc.), running against the emergent, inclusive, interdisciplinary aesthetic trends discussed in this piece. Beyond issues of vocational viability of graduates, such

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<sup>177</sup> Scott D. Harrison and Jessica O’Bryan, *Teaching Singing in the 21st Century* (Springer, 2014).

specializations can foster potentially crippling literacy issues (music performance graduates who cannot operate technology, music technologists who cannot read music, etc.). This style of curriculum creates boundaries between practices, which in the real world are becoming increasingly blurred and/or irrelevant.”<sup>178</sup> Although Kardos’ research is in the area of music technology, her observations and assertions apply to vocal pedagogy, as well. The boundaries between classical music and various vernacular styles are gradually diminishing, and curriculum will need to expand to include opportunities for students to experience singing in a variety of blended styles.

In a recent symposium for the College Music Society, President Patricia Shehan Campbell issued a charge to an appointed national task force to make recommendations for progressive change in the undergraduate music curriculum. The resulting report urges curricular considerations founded on the three pillars of creativity, diversity, and integration and issued the following foreboding warning to university music programs:

“...without fundamental change, traditional music departments, schools, and conservatories could face declining enrollments if sophisticated high school students were to seek music career development outside the often-rarefied environment and curricula characteristic of America’s colleges and universities.”<sup>179</sup> The Task Force on the Undergraduate Music Major also takes the position that “creativity (defined for purposes of this report as rooted in the ability to improvise and compose) provides a stronger basis for educating musicians than

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<sup>178</sup> Leah Kardos, “Making Room for 21st Century Musicianship in Higher Education,” *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 17 (March 2018): 33–47.

<sup>179</sup> Ed Sarath, “Transforming Music Study from Its Foundations: A Manifesto for Progressive Change in the Undergraduate Preparation of Music Majors,” *College Music Symposium, College Music Society* Vol. 56 (2016).

does interpretation (the prevailing model of training performers in the interpretation of existing works). This position does not suggest there is no longer a place for interpretive performance in the emergent vision; but suggests that when this important practice is reintegrated into a foundation of systematic improvisation and composition, new levels of vitality and excellence are possible in the interpretive performance domain. Such an integrated approach will inevitably engage students more fully with the world in which they live and will work...One of the most startling shortcomings in all of arts education is that too many music students graduate with little to no experience or significant grounding in the essential creative processes of improvisation and composition.”<sup>180</sup>

This sentiment was echoed at the 2017 International Congress of Voice Teachers in Stockholm where findings from a National Association of Teachers of Singing survey of voice performance students graduating at the undergraduate and graduate level was presented. The study cited in *Cross-Training in the Voice Studio* reads, “When asked if they had received any specific training regarding differences between opera and musical theatre...almost two-thirds of them replied No. And when asked whether or not their degrees prepared them for the realities of the current industry almost 60 percent replied No. Almost 60 percent of the professionals currently working who presumably spent upwards of one to two hundred thousand dollars for their education do not feel their training adequately prepared them for a successful performance career...this is not information we can ignore.”<sup>181</sup> The ever-changing professional landscape and the hybrid

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<sup>180</sup> Ed Sarath, “Transforming Music Study from Its Foundations: A Manifesto for Progressive Change in the Undergraduate Preparation of Music Majors,” *College Music Symposium*, *College Music Society* Vol. 56 (2016).

<sup>181</sup> Norman Spivey and Mary Saunders-Barton, *Cross-Training in the Voice Studio: A Balancing Act* (San Diego, CA: Plural Publishing, 2018).



nature of many 21<sup>st</sup>-century operas continues to evolve our thinking surrounding the approaches to vocal pedagogy in academic settings and furthers the argument for cross-training (training that encompasses mastery of a myriad of vocal techniques and styles) over specialization.

## **The Benefits of Improvisation**

In addition to adopting cross-training, modern teachers can respond to the need for expansive pedagogies by incorporating improvisation, as well. In *The New Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning*, Christopher Azzara's article on improvisation lists a number of scholarly individuals and organizations in the field that advocate for improvisation in music classrooms, among whom include The Consortium of National Arts Education Associations, Contemporary Music Project, and The National Association of Schools of Music.<sup>182</sup> Inherent in Azzara's research is the idea that within the definition of improvisation, "an individual has internalized a music vocabulary and is able to express musical ideas spontaneously, in the moment of performance... Improvisation is often compared to speaking and conversation in language... In this context, improvisation skill allows individuals to express musical thoughts and ideas

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<sup>182</sup> Christopher D. Azzara, "Improvisation," ed. Richard Colwell and Carol Richardson, *New Handbook of Research in Music Teaching and Learning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 171.

from an internal source, with meaning, and it also promotes the acquisition of higher order thinking skills.”<sup>183</sup>

Azzara, researcher Gary McPherson, and others assert that improvisation can assist with improving musicianship skills, as well. McPherson’s study presents quantitative data concerning musical aptitude amongst high school instrumentalists who practice learning another instrument and use mental rehearsal and singing. It supports the notion that performance proficiency and improvisational ability go hand in hand.<sup>184</sup> Given this data, one can presume that the same benefits may transcend instrument and apply to students at the collegiate level, as well. University jazz studies programs, while a fairly new phenomenon in the U.S., may offer more comparative data.

According to Wendy Hargreaves, who wrote an article entitled “Pathways for Teaching Jazz Improvisation,” in *Teaching Singing the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, there are lowered expectations and perceptions surrounding vocalists’ ability to improvise. Despite the dominant perception that improvisation is the domain of instrumentalists, singers can and should learn to improvise, if not for the cognitive and artistic benefits, then for the simple motivation of being competent in a highly competitive field where this skill set is becoming increasingly valuable.

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<sup>183</sup> Christopher D. Azzara, “Improvisation,” 172.

<sup>184</sup> Gary McPherson, “Evaluating Improvisational Ability of High School Instrumentalists,” *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, no. 119 (Winter /1994 1993): 11–20.

Urban Arias is a Washington D.C.-based opera company whose stated mission is to expose DC-area audiences to engaging, accessible, and entertaining operas; to provide a professional venue at which both established and emerging composers can present their shorter works; to commission new, short operas regularly; and to bring new audiences to the art form through relevant, current material.<sup>185</sup> In their regular “Opera Improv” series a small troupe of four singers participates in “sung audience-directed skits.” In an effort to learn more about the preparation process for a troupe like this and the implications for pedagogical integration of improvisation, I sat down for an interview with Ian McEuen, a versatile artist and improviser who has performed with Urban Arias since 2017.

McEuen became involved with Urban Arias after performing a piece by Michael Nyman, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for A Hat*, and with Robert Wood, the Conductor and General Director of Urban. “He told me about the improv project, and I had a small amount of singing-based improv at a summer program as part of an acting and vocal pedagogy exercise. I’ve also done a lot of just straight acting improv in just about every acting class that I had ever taken. I was in a troupe in high school... Since then, we have done [*gosh*] three or four performances, and then we have two more coming up this spring,”<sup>186</sup> exclaims McEuen.

As part of the audition process for the troupe, singers are narrowed down based on results from strictly vocal auditions. Then, singers are called in to work with veteran

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<sup>185</sup> “About” on Urban Arias’ website, accessed on March 9, 2019, <http://www.urbanarias.org/about/our-past-work/blue-viola-2/>.

<sup>186</sup> Ian McEuen in a Skype interview with the author, March 2019.

members of the troupe in an audition that tests their comfort level and skill with improv games. Much of the group's improv format was initially fashioned using classic improv games such as those used on shows like *Whose Line is it Anyway* (ABC network). "We ask the audience for an occupation or a famous person, real or fictional, and then a location. Then Bob would improvise on the piano, and we would make a scene happen,"<sup>187</sup> recounts McEuen.

In more recent performances, the group implements the advice of an improvisation expert, opting for more a more limited, structured improv format. McEuen describes this process stating, "For example, one of the things that we do in performance now, or at least did in this last iteration, was we take three elements from an opera plot, the known opera plots. In one case, we used 'a cough,' 'a candle,' and 'a manuscript' and then with those things as constraints (that we rehearsed), we asked the audience for occupations, famous people, and locales and tell a story. We have these signposts of elements to operate with so that we don't just sort of windmill through the whole exercise. We would try and have a beginning, a middle, and an end, and use those three elements as signposts for the different parts of the story."<sup>188</sup>

According to McEuen, the musical prompts are a key component to the games, and a large part of the rehearsal process is built around practicing spontaneous responsiveness. McEuen describes the exercise led by Wood noting, "He gives us a very simple accompaniment, and we just improvise a quote from an aria, or on a vowel, or a

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<sup>187</sup> Ian McEuen, March 2019.

<sup>188</sup> Ian McEuen, March 2019.

nonsense language. We're not telling a story. We start with the various central building blocks so that we get used to creating and taking musical cues."<sup>189</sup> Starting with small decisions and building in complexity is a proven method for increasing comfort level and skill with improvisation. Other methods involve familiarizing students with the building blocks for the musical style they wish to explore through music theory and ear training using listening examples focused on style.

The three methods highlighted by Hargreaves and re-iterated in studies done by McPherson and others involve 1) encouraging students to listen to, imitate, and internalize improvisations by ear, 2) encouraging students to learn and apply basic theory in terms of scales, chords, harmonic progressions, and 3) encouraging students to learn to play an instrument. The "motor feedback" provided by instruments purportedly assists with "harmonic conceptualization."<sup>190</sup> Any combination of these methods may prove helpful in teaching classically trained singers to adapt to improvised music, whether its origins are jazz, blues, gospel or soul music.

McEuen bemoans the lack of exposure to improvisational techniques in his formal training academic. Most of his skill in this area was acquired through an extra-curricular summer program or through 'on the job' experiences such as those facilitated through his participation in David Lang's *little match girl* and Bill T. Jones' *We Shall Not Be Moved*. McEuen recalls his observations of Bill T. Jones with some of the African-American cast

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<sup>189</sup> Ian McEuen, March 2019.

<sup>190</sup> Wendy Hargreaves, "Pathways for Teaching Vocal Jazz Improvisation," Scott D. Harrison and Jessica O'Bryan, eds., *Teaching Singing in the 21st Century* (Springer, 2014).

members during rehearsals. “He encouraged those singers to improvise with runs and stuff within an opera. He said, ‘this is part of your musical tradition. You need to be prepared to do this. You need to be flexible enough in the moment try something new if the spirit moves you.’ So, that was a really amazing process to just be a fly on the wall and watch. It was something that I had never seen in an opera production, a director, conductor, and composer all saying ‘try something new,’” recalls McEuen.<sup>191</sup>

McEuen advises singers and teachers to draw inspiration from the bel canto tradition noting , “I think that we could learn a lot from the old ways of teaching singing, which incorporated improvisation with cadenzas and performance practice... There was an improvisational component in performance and in everyday voice lessons, and I hope that going forward there are more teachers that encourage spontaneous vocalizations from their students. It will make them more flexible in the moments as actors and as singers and performers in whatever musical or dramatic thing they're doing.”<sup>192</sup>

Both McEuen’s accounts and the current research in music education credit improvisation as a tool for improving higher order thinking skills and improving performance proficiency. As part of a balanced curriculum, improvisation techniques should be incorporated into individual voice study and into academic courses like aural skills and music theory.

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<sup>191</sup> Ian McEuen, March 2019.

<sup>192</sup> Ian McEuen, March 2019.

## Viola Spolin's Theater 'Games'

Viola Spolin was an innovator in improvisational theater. A protégée of Progressive Education advocates, Neva L. Boyd and Margaret Naumberg, Spolin along with Suzanne Bing Robert Yarrow and Anthony Frost note her lineage in *Improvisation in Drama, Theater, and Performance* stating, “Her greatest single contribution was the development and systemisation of Boyd’s insights about the use of games.”<sup>193</sup> Spolin’s theater games became the basis for her book *Improvisation in Theater*. As is the case with singing, many of the techniques and exercises are based on experiential knowledge (backed up later by science) and have been passed on and adapted over the years by various practitioners. Exercises that encourage participants to “explore and heighten,” “give and take,” and “follow the follower” have been used in varied forms by theater directors throughout the globe to encourage actors to be more present, intuitive, and responsive.

With many of the exercises ‘sidecoaching’ from the director-teacher is encouraged. Ideally, phrases like “explore that idea” and “expand that gesture” are supportive and help participants to remain focused on remaining present and not “interpret or invent.” Spolin further explains this phenomenon in *Improvisation for Theater*, “Side coaching keeps the stage reality alive for the student-actor. It is the voice of the director seeing the needs of the overall presentation; at the same time it is the voice of the teacher seeing the individual actor and his needs within the group and on the stage.

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<sup>193</sup> Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow, *Improvisation in Drama, Theater, and Performance*, Third (United Kingdom and New York: Palgrave, 2016).

It is the teacher-director working on a problem together with the student as part of the group effort. Side coaching reaches the total organism, for it arises spontaneously out of what is happening on stage and is given at the time a player is in action.”<sup>194</sup>

Spolin’s methods benefit the developing actor by providing an environment where desired technical skill sets can develop freely and blossom organically. Any behavior we would label as talented is reframed by Spolin as behavior that displays one’s “greater individual capacity for experiencing.” *In Improvisation for the Theater*, she notes “Acting can be taught to the ‘average’ as well as the ‘talented’ if the teaching process is oriented towards making the theater techniques so intuitive that they become the students’ own. A way is needed to get to intuitive knowledge. It requires an environment in which experiencing can take place, a person free to experience, and an activity that brings about spontaneity.”<sup>195</sup> In order to create an optimal environment for exploration, Spolin encourages the removal of both the desire for approval and fear of rejection. To this end, theater “games” may be used as a means for finding personal freedom.

In the academic setting where developing a solid vocal technique is paramount, theater games adapted for voice students can serve the dual role of increasing students’ “capacity to experience” and reinforcing vocal technique in a manner that is transferable to real-world working experiences. This section includes the “Explore and Heighten”

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<sup>194</sup> Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater: A Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques* (Eastford, CT: Martino Fine Books, 2017).

<sup>195</sup> Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater: A Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques* (Eastford, CT: Martino Fine Books, 2017).



exercise, taken from Spolin's *Theater Games for Rehearsal*, which may be easily adapted for potential use in a group voice class or opera workshop rehearsal. Following Spolin's game, I've listed a number of vocal and dramatic exercises that are my own adaptations of the exercises implemented during the rehearsal process for *What Miss Dickinson Heard - And Didn't*. I've also included suggestions for layering and increasing the level of complexity and challenge for the singer with each approach.

### **Explore and Heighten<sup>196</sup>**

Participants are asked to agree on "Where, Who and What," Spolin's simplified terminology for determining the setting, basic backstories for the character's involved, and an activity that will be played out in the scene. In expanded versions of this exercise, an audience member may choose the Where, Who, and What for the participants.

**Purpose:** To open the gate to new discoveries.

**Focus:** On being open to exploring, heightening, and expanding onstage play.

**Description:** Teams of two or more players agree on Where, Who, and What and play the event (scene) alert to side coaching as it is given.

**Notes:** 1. "Explore and heighten" can be used as sidecoaching throughout rehearsals. 2. Director must be totally attentive, watching and listening for sounds, movements, ideas, pauses, etc., which ordinarily might slip by unnoticed. The simplest gesture is explorable, alerting everyone to the possibilities for inspired stage life.

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<sup>196</sup> Viola Spolin, *Theater Games for Rehearsal: A Director's Handbook* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1985).

## Improvisation Exercises

### Circle Singing Exercise #1

**Purpose:** This is an exercise that can assist classical voice students with developing the confidence to take creative risks. The exercise also draws on concepts that are more commonly applied in theater courses, learning to give and take energy, and active listening. These concepts are universally applicable for performing artists of all genres.

**Exercise:**

1. Participants will stand in a circle facing one another.
2. One person is designated to begin a drone (a repetitive, continuous sound or pattern of sounds).
3. All participants will then join in and sing the same drone pattern.
4. Once the drone is established, the person to the right of the initial drone singer will begin to improvise, singing any spontaneous sounds or patterns that are prompted by the drone.
5. When the improviser has decided that they have completed their singing, they will then return to the drone, signaling the person to their right to begin their own improvised phrases.

There is no time limit or boundary to how the drone and improvisations are realized. That is left completely to the creativity of the participants.

**Suggestions for Group Voice Class/Studio Class/Opera Workshop:** I suggest that once the exercise has been mastered in the form indicated above, that it is expanded to challenge participants even more. Have singers hold hands and look each other in the eye to pass around the role of improviser in an unpredictable fashion, rather than in a prescribed order. Singers may also be asked to begin their improvised phrases imitating the timbre, vocal color or pattern that was used by the previous improviser. Then, they must gradually change it to reflect their own creativity. In this manner, participants are encouraged to explore vocal timbre and colors, as well as employ active listening in order to develop the skillset of learning to ‘give and take’ and build on what has been given.

## **Circle Singing Exercise #2**

**Purpose:** This exercise is designed to encourage active listening. It also promotes the development of intuitive responsiveness. As a performing artist, whether performing as a soloist or with a partner or group, your performance is enhanced when you have the ability to actively listen to and respond to the prompts in your creative space. Musical prompts can come from a duet partner, ensemble members, the accompaniment, or even from a musical pattern played by a specific instrument in the orchestration. Often times, the young opera singer has been trained to be so narrow-focused (my individual voice, my melody, my lines, etc.), that they are lacking in their ability to be musically responsive, and to consider the entire score and musical atmosphere they find themselves in from scene to scene. By actively listening to and responding to the sounds around us, we immerse ourselves in the music begin to expand our thinking around our role as performers.

1. Participants will stand in a circle facing one another.
2. Participants will inhale together, and each will sing an initial sustained pitch using any vowel they choose.
3. Once the starting pitch has settled (participants are not required to match pitches), participants can move to other pitches and vowels, taking breaths and re-entering as needed.
4. They will use active listening skills to respond to the vowel sounds and pitches they hear from other participants and provide a sung response.

**Suggestions for Group Voice Class/Opera Workshop:** Instructors can adapt the exercise above to only focus on a specific musical genre or style. For instance, the exercise may take on new meaning, and new colors and rhythms may be introduced if it has been determined that the sounds must fit the style of Bach chorale or an African-American spiritual. Singers can be asked to focus on only singing in a legato or staccato fashion; the possibilities for employing their knowledge of musical styles is endless. This exercise can involve as few as two singers or more and is ideal for group voice class or opera workshop. It can be used in aiding students in preparing a work by a specific composer or in understanding characteristics of a specific musical style infused in the work, while encouraging, creativity, active listening, and spontaneity.

### **Improvised Rhythm Exercise**

**Purpose:** This exercise is designed to encourage rhythmic ear training and improvisation. It also encourages active listening, improvisational freedom, and rhythmic creativity.

**Exercise:**

1. One participant initiates a rhythmic pattern using only vocal sounds.
2. The next participant, chosen by the initial participant (eye contact or a gesture may be used), joins in with a new rhythmic pattern.
3. They, in turn, choose the next participant.
4. This practice continues until all participants have joined the game, each having introduced and sustained their individual rhythmic pattern.
5. Now, the participants are encouraged to introduce new sounds and rhythmic patterns at will, and in response to one another slowing down and speeding up as the energy exchange dictates.

**Suggestions for the Group Voice Class:** Instructors can adapt this exercise, simplifying it to only focus on one improviser at a time in a group voice class setting.

**Improvised Singing Exercise #1**

**Purpose:** This exercise helps students to become familiar with a specific text without the pressure of assigning rhythms and melody. It allows singers to assign value to certain words in the text by text-painting and to simultaneously familiarize themselves with a prescribed mode/scale or musical style.

1. Participants silently read through a written text (a poem or libretto will suffice).

2. The instructor establishes an order for entrances. For example, “John will sing the first line, followed by Keisha, and finally Julio.”
3. A scale or mode for improvisation is established. For example, “we will sing using the harmonic minor scale.”
4. Singers will then take turns singing each line of the text in the established order. Students are encouraged to improvise the sung material within the boundaries of the prescribed mode.

**Suggestions for the Group Voice Class/Private Voice Studio:** There is an opportunity to vary the type of text that is used. An opera libretto or poems in a similar literary style as text that will be later sung in assigned repertoire may serve as a helpful teaching tool. Students may be asked to sing in a particular style or with scales or modes that support the styles explored in specifically assigned repertoire. Ideally, an accompanist familiar with the determined mode can support improvisers with harmonic progressions that become part of the soundscape of this activity.

### **Improvised Singing Exercise #2**

**Purpose:** This exercise helps students to become familiar with a musical style or scale/mode. In preparation for the activity, the instruction should assign a scale/mode or harmonic progression for the student to incorporate into their private practice routine.

1. The instructor plays the assigned scale or harmonic progressions while the singer sings along to establish a baseline.

2. A time signature or set number of beats for the improvisation is established.
3. The singer will improvise for the predetermined number of beats per bar of singing.

**Suggestions for the Group Voice Class/Opera Workshop/Private Voice Studio: In**

group voice class, students may take turns keeping a steady rhythm and improvising for a set number of beats or bars, similar to a jazz combo. However, the musical style, mode, and order of singing can all vary. Improvisers can use nonsense syllables, vowels, or words. Rhythmic variation in solo-singing is encouraged. While one student improvises, the others can establish a repeated drone pattern to sing or remain silent and observe. The improviser can pass the solo on after a set number of beats or bars of singing by making eye contact with or gesturing to the next chosen soloist (instructors can also choose each soloist or predetermine the order).

For the private voice studio, the instructor can encourage students to improvise a vocalise over the prescribed harmonic progressions or improvise using a predetermined mode. In this manner, classical voice students can begin to expand beyond diatonic major and minor scales to become familiar with and actively apply other less familiar scales/modes deemed appropriate by the instructor. In both the group and private voice studio settings, rhythm may be removed from the equation. A well-versed accompanist may allow for more freedom with harmonic progressions. The instructor or accompanist may provide the musical prompt, and the student can then improvise based on their response to the prompt. Additionally, instructors may add another layer of complexity by asking students

to channel a certain emotion or sentiment to the singing. As students become more comfortable, fewer boundaries are needed, and the door is opened for more creative exchange.

## **Conclusion**

Through a review of historical data, relevant literature, and current research in the field, I have highlighted the historical evolution of improvisation in operas and traced the origins and practice of genre fusion in American operatic works. Using narrative inquiry, I have presented the stories and insights of four prominent composers, along with singers associated with their works, and other industry practitioners. In this section, I briefly revisit the research questions and summarize the emergent themes in the study. I also discuss the implication of the findings from this study and identify potential areas for further research.

The first question in this study was, how and why has the definition of opera broadened? The historical data presented in the second chapter outlined the areas where improvisation and genre-fusion were prominent in opera and highlighted the social/cultural factors that influence composers, singers, and industry decision-makers, even today. The cyclical and reciprocal relationship between art and society is evident when we examine opera's history and origins. The highly ornate and spectacle-driven aesthetic of the Baroque era fueled the aspirations of composers and singers. In turn, castrati, the master singer-teachers of the period, developed a performance practice that



further inspired innovations in opera and laid the foundation for modern vocal pedagogy. With opera reforms and technological and scientific development, came new pedagogical approaches, vocal aesthetics, and performance practices. Throughout history and in the present day, composers and singers, in response to the social, cultural, and artistic movements of the age, continue to evolve in their expressions and rise to meet the new demands precipitated by new aesthetics.

The second research question was, how does genre fusion make room for improvisation in opera? The narrative data and experiential knowledge imparted by the study's participants in chapter four served as a body of research that pointed to genre-fusion as one vehicle for improvisation in opera. Genre fusion is often a tool used by the composer to enrich and best tell a story. For instance, in cases where African-American culture was central to the storyline, composers felt compelled to infuse African-American vernacular music into the score. A traditional and authentic characteristic of African-American vernacular music is that it is improvisative. For this reason, there were areas in the operas that fused classical music with this style where free expression was permitted or even encouraged. In the case of David Lang's piece, *The Mile-Long Opera*, the work shines a light on the shifting and diverse nature of New York City and its inhabitants. It points to issues like gentrification without commenting, and centers itself in the intersection between individualism and community. Here, improvisation was again used as a critical tool for storytelling and expression even though the work does not have genre fusion at its core.

The third research question was, how does genre-fusion and improvisation in 21<sup>st</sup>-century operas impact vocal pedagogy and performance practice? This question was

informed by the compilation of literature and qualitative data provided by participants in chapters four and five. The hybrid and improvisative nature of many 21<sup>st</sup>-century operatic works has a direct impact on perception in the classical music community and serves as a prompt for exploration in the field. The research reveals that the impact of these elements and their use in 21<sup>st</sup>-century operas is part of a larger narrative and demonstrative of a movement toward embracing non-traditional and non-dominant norms in opera. Many classical singers do not believe that the current structure and curriculum in academic music programs has provided them with the adequate tools necessary for career viability. Classical voice teachers are polarized and either double down in their resistance to new pedagogies or perceive cross-training as a way forward. Operas with technology integrations, expanded orchestration, use of instrumentation typical in non-classical music, and style elements from a variety of musical idioms make a case for the furthered development of new voice pedagogies. Ultimately, the findings of this study show that, even today, traditional classical singing technique is valued as a grounding foundation for any style of singing. However, singers and teachers are prompted to respond to modern operas and the musical styles and elements they employ by expanding their own facility with those styles and elements.

Cross-training involves teaching classically trained singers to adapt their singing methods to various styles. Singers may employ a wider chest register range, microphone technique, speech-to singing resonance, and extended vocal techniques with 21<sup>st</sup>-century operatic repertoire. They learn to master the style elements associated with a variety of genres, scooping and bending notes in a jazz standard or spiritual with the same accuracy and adeptness they might apply to singing a portamento in an Italian aria. In the 21<sup>st</sup>

century, the style and manner in which opera is composed directly impacts both performance practice and pedagogy.

In chapter five, I reviewed a number of pedagogical methods and studies that assist singers and teachers with navigating the technical vocal demands and performance practice associated with 21<sup>st</sup>-century operas. The body of research is guided by the fourth research question; how do we best prepare singers for participation in 21<sup>st</sup>-century operas that contain the aforementioned elements? The findings of this study reveal that the 21<sup>st</sup> - century voice teacher who is well-versed in a variety of musical styles is best equipped to cross-train and work with singers to become more comfortable engaging with improvised material. The personal testimonies from interviewees and the research data affirmed the notion that improvisation assists with improving both higher order thinking skills and performance proficiency. Teachers can use improvisation as a tool for improving singers' skills and for promoting a high level of overall adaptability and responsiveness. These skills carry over to enhance acting skills, as well.

The countless benefits of integrating improvisation into music curriculums have been recounted in a wide array of studies across disciplines. By implementing vocalises and dramatic activities that exercise and increase our creativity, responsiveness, and musicianship, we increase our musical aptitude. Consideration of technology integration whether musically, as in operas that fuse classical music with electronic music, or acoustically, as in microphones, is another integral component that was a recurrent theme and is a crucial element in training the 21<sup>st</sup>-century opera singer.

The use and pedagogical implications of amplification in opera is an area I may further examine in future research. Another area I have identified for future research

involves an examination and comparison of jazz and classical voice performance and pedagogy programs at American universities. I am interested in exploring whether the pedagogical techniques used in jazz voice programs can be transferable and beneficial to classical voice students.

Taken as a whole, this body of research establishes the impact of genre fusion and style elements like improvisation on voice pedagogy and performance practice. It also documents the stylistic and technical considerations that modern opera singers and teachers take into account in order to branch out and explore operatic works that have genre-bending and/or improvisative elements. Additionally, it offers voice instructors suggestions for an expanded pedagogical approach. Armed with a knowledge of the innovation and developments inherent in the opera's past, present, and future, singers and pedagogues of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are better equipped to be as flexible and progressive as the art form itself.

## Appendix A

### Sample Letters Requesting Participation in Study

Hi, Dr. Fleming,

I am writing because I am a singer who observed your recent crossover musical theater masterclass at the University of Maryland, College Park. I would love to interview you and gain your insight into the direction of voice pedagogy and college voice curriculum as trends in the opera industry continue to expand the demands of a career in the field.

Here is a bit more information about my research topic:

I'm currently enrolled at UMD pursuing a doctoral degree in Vocal Pedagogy. My dissertation research examines the vocal technique and performance practice elements in 21st-century operas. I'm also looking at the growing prevalence of elements like improvisation and genre-fusion in 21st-century operas. My goal is to see if there is any indication that college vocal music programs steeped in the Western classical tradition should perhaps follow the lead of college jazz studies programs and expand the way we teach classical singers so that they are more versatile and better prepared for careers in opera.

Would it be possible to submit a short list of preliminary questions and set up a follow-up interview via phone call or video chat? Please indicate your availability and openness to participate in my study.

All the best,

Sequina DuBose

Dear Participants,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in research for my dissertation entitled "The Impact of Genre-Fusion and Improvisational Elements in 21st-century Operas on Vocal Pedagogy and Performance Practice. Please see the attached consent form which will allow me to use your interview in a published version of my paper once it is complete.

**You will receive a finalized copy by March 31st and have the opportunity to prevent any particular phrase from being used in the study if you so desire.**

**Please sign and return (email scan) the attached consent form by March 16, 2019.**

If I have not yet received your interview responses, please email them as soon as possible, or contact me to set up a Skype interview where I may record your responses in real time (in order to later transcribe them).

Thanks again!

Sincerely,

Sequina DuBose

# Appendix B

## IRB Consent Form



Initials: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Institutional Review Board

405-840-1234 irb@umd.edu

### CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

<b>Project Title</b>	<i>Interviews for 21<sup>st</sup> –Century Opera Study</i>
<b>Purpose of the Study</b>	<i>This research is being conducted by Sequina DuBose at the University of Maryland, College Park. We are inviting you to participate in this research project because you are an active knowledgeable person in the classical music field. The purpose of this research project is to study the impact of trends and elements in 21<sup>st</sup>-century operas in the U.S. on performance practice and voice pedagogy at the university level.</i>
<b>Procedures</b>	<i>The procedures involve interviewing prominent composers, singers, arts administrators, and voice pedagogues. The interviews will be audio recorded for transcription and the anticipated time commitment for each interview is 45 minutes.</i>
<b>Potential Risks and Discomforts</b>	<i>There are no known risks from participating in this research study.</i>
<b>Potential Benefits</b>	<i>There are no direct benefits from participating in this research. However, we hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study through improved understanding of the evolving impact of elements in 21<sup>st</sup>- century operas on voice pedagogy.</i>
<b>Confidentiality</b>	<p><i>You have been chosen for this study by virtue of your prominence and expertise in the field. The researcher intends to attribute your ideas to you in any reporting of this study.</i></p> <p><i>You will have the opportunity to prevent any particular statement from being used in the study if you so desire.</i></p> <p>The consent forms, audio recordings, and interview transcriptions collected during this study will be securely stored in a password-protected computer file. This data will only be accessed by the Principal Investigator. All data will be deleted one year after data collection is complete.</p>
<b>Right to Withdraw and Questions</b>	<p><i>Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.</i></p> <p><i>If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to</i></p>

Initials: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

	<p><i>the research, please contact the investigator:</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Sequina DuBose</b>  <b>4318 Rowalt Drive Apt. 301</b>  <b>College Park, MD 20740</b>  <b>Sequinadubose@gmail.com</b>  <b>(410) 241-9492</b></p>	
<b>Participant Rights</b>	<p><i>If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact:</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">University of Maryland College Park  Institutional Review Board Office  1204 Marie Mount Hall  College Park, Maryland, 20742  E-mail: <a href="mailto:irb@umd.edu">irb@umd.edu</a>  Telephone: 301-405-0678</p> <p><i>For more information regarding participant rights, please visit:</i>  <a href="https://research.umd.edu/irb-research-participants">https://research.umd.edu/irb-research-participants</a></p> <p><i>This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.</i></p>	
<b>Statement of Consent</b>	<p><i>Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form.</i></p> <p><i>If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.</i></p>	
<b>Signature and Date</b>	<b>NAME OF PARTICIPANT</b>	
	<b>SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT</b>	
	<b>DATE</b>	



# Appendix C

## IRB Approval Letter



UNIVERSITY OF  
MARYLAND

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

1204 Marie Mount Hall  
College Park, MD 20742-5125  
TEL 301.405.4212  
FAX 301.314.1475  
irb@umd.edu  
www.umresearch.umd.edu/IRB

DATE: February 27, 2019

TO: Sequina DuBose  
FROM: University of Maryland College Park (UMCP) IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [1397790-1] Interviews for 21st –Century Opera Study  
REFERENCE #:   
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APPROVED  
APPROVAL DATE: February 27, 2019  
EXPIRATION DATE: February 26, 2020  
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The University of Maryland College Park (UMCP) IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

Prior to submission to the IRB Office, this project received scientific review from the departmental IRB Liaison.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on the applicable federal regulations.

This project has been determined to be a MINIMAL RISK project. Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of February 26, 2020.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Unless a consent waiver or alteration has been approved, Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others (UPIRSOs) and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.

## **APPENDIX D**

### **Initial Questionnaire for Composers**

[ ] indicate parts of the letter changed to address each specific participant's work.

1. What is your musical background?
2. What unique musical elements present in [ ] reflect the potential for innovation in 21st-century opera?
3. What role does improvisation play in the opera, from the standpoint of both composition and performance practice?
4. In what ways are [jazz idioms] infused in the opera?
5. What advice do you have for singers interested in preparing for a role in [ ]?
6. How should one approach [ ] both musically and from a dramatic standpoint?
7. In your opinion, what adjustments, if any, should the classically-trained singer make to prepare for a career that involves participation in 21st-century operas that fuse genres?

## **Appendix E**

### **Initial Questionnaire for Singers**

1. Did you have to assume command of any new musical styles/genres in order to interpret the role of [ ] in [ ]?
2. Have you participated in, or know of any operas that incorporate elements of multiple genres or that incorporate and encourage improvisation?
3. Are there any methods you adopted in preparing for the role of [ ], both musically and dramatically, that differ from your usual routine?
4. What were some of the challenges and positive attributes of the role?
5. Do you have any suggestions with regard to vocal and musical training for singers interested in pursuing a career that includes participation in 21st-century opera?

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