

Contradictory Directorial Trends in the 21st Century Opera Performance

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Abstract: *In opera, music suggests atmosphere, characters, situations and conflicts in a language of its own and stylistically determined. In the art of opera performance of the 21st century, there is a noticeable distance, sometimes total, from the intentions of composers and librettists who, in their time, worked particularly closely to create an opera score. Therefore, I considered it necessary to analyze the directorial trends in the art of opera performance of the 21st century, reaching the conclusion that they are contradictory. The study captures these different directions of opera directing today, without the intention of making value judgments or classifications, but, mentioning the fact that exaggerated deviations from the initial musical score can generate errors that have nothing in common with an authentic artistic act and an act of culture.*

Key-words: *Opera performance, directorial trend, musical dramaturgy, Regietheater*

1. Introduction - Opera directing and the importance of the musical score

In the world of opera music, the word-sound relationship is a condition for the existence of the lyrical genre. “The art of the show director is an art of suggestion”, considered the director Jean Vilar (Vilar 1968, 5), who oriented the show towards simple, but symbolic and particularly expressive lines, starting from a unique, broad and most important idea, which the author reveals through his text. In the case of opera, the discovery of this leading idea, based on the musical construction, the main themes thought up by the composer, themes related to the libretto and the characterization of the characters, became increasingly necessary.

If in theater the basis for deciphering the dramatic author's ideas for the purpose of stage representation is the literary text, in opera there are two main coordinates, which must necessarily be associated in analyzing the score, when its stage representation is desired. Thus, due to the specificity of the lyric genre, the

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term MUSICAL DRAMATURGY was imposed, which, despite the two terms it includes, must be understood as a whole, “as a specific notion related to the representation of lyrical theater” (Arbore 1992, 105)

The dramatic force that the opera conveys – at the level of the musical score – is the result of the collaboration between composer and librettist. Many times, in the history of music, this tandem has functioned as a perfect mechanism. In the first decades of the 18th century, Antonio Caldara and Pietro Metastasio collaborated on the operas *Demetrio*, *Adriano in Siria*, *Demofonte*, *L'Olimpiade*, *La clemenza di Tito*, *Achille in Sciro*, *Ciro riconosciuto*, *Temistocle*. At the end of the same century, Mozart and Lorenzo da Ponte created the masterpieces *Le nozze di Figaro*, *Don Giovanni* and *Così fan tutte*. In the second half of the 19th century, Giuseppe Verdi and Francesco Maria Piave conceived immortal works of romanticism: *Ernani*, *I due Foscari*, *Attila*, *Macbeth*, *Il corsaro*, *Stiffelio*, *Rigoletto*, *Traviata*, *Simon Boccanegra* (first version), *La forza del destino*. The collaboration between Giacomo Puccini and Luigi Illica materialized in the titles *La bohème*, *Tosca*, and *Madama Butterfly*. There are also such tandems in French romantic opera. The librettist Jules Barbier had a fruitful collaboration with the composer Charles Gounod, creating the scores for *La Colombe*, *Faust*, *Le médecin malgré lui*, *Philémon et Baucis*, *Polyeucte*, *La reine de Saba*, *Roméo et Juliette*. In the 20th century, this kind of long collaboration continued with Richard Strauss and Hugo de Hofmannsthal, who over the course of two and a half decades created the operas *Elektra*, *Der Rosenkavalier*, *Ariadne auf Naxos*, *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, *Die ägyptische Helena* and *Arabella*. I wanted to mention these tandems to show how close the connection is between the composer and the librettist when working on an opera score and how important the word-sound relationship is in the general idea of the libretto. Even when the idea of a director was not yet outlined, Mozart, Verdi and Puccini, directly taking part in the conception of the representation of the premieres. Richard Wagner is a special case, he being the sole creator of his works, even building a theater to fully develop and perfect his conception of Gesamtkunstwerk.

In the opera performance of the second half of the 20th century, the great personalities in the field of direction and scenography brought increasingly profound motivations to the musical-literary thoughts existing in the score and decoded the musical-dramatic language into images, moods, gestures, based on a solid musical, theatrical, plastic, philosophical and historical culture. For example, the German school of opera directing formed by Walter Felsenstein and continued by his disciples Götz Friederich, Günter Rennert and Harry Kupfer triggered a new way of treating expression, both at the level of interpretation and at the level of

stage production, starting from the idea that in opera, the dramatic event must be given an emotional charge that can only be expressed through singing. In this way, singing was no longer a convention, but a normal way of expression within the performance.

Starting from the last decade of the 20th century and continuing with the first decade of the 21st century, managers of musical performance institutions and artistic creators have shown a constant concern: that of winning a new audience segment, by performing opera productions or moments from the most famous pages of opera scores in unconventional spaces: parks, industrial halls, malls, subways. In this sense, examples include the production of the opera *Otello*, by Giuseppe Verdi, directed by Graham Vick, conceived in an industrial hall in Birmingham, the presentation of opera excerpts in the New York subways by the lyrical artists of the Opera Collective group, or the Opera out of Opera project, initiated by the Santa Cecilia Conservatory in Rome, held in airports or on the seaside, in Italy, Austria, Spain and Greece.

2. The opera performance from tradition to image – shock

Perhaps in no other historical period has the opera performance had a greater diversity in representation than in the first half of the 21st century. The causes are varied: the development of stage technique that allows rapid changes of scenery and special visual effects, the desire to win a new audience segment less familiar with the opera genre, the use - in the ideas of the stagings - of the most recent social, or political and military issues, the desire of some directors (most often theater directors) to shock in order to gain popularity. The well-known tenor Ion Piso ironically remarked that "it was enough for music criticism to talk about Zeffirelli's *Traviata*" or Wieland Wagner's "*Salomeea*", for all the directing profession to be adorned with similar phrases: "*Lucia*" by X or "*Boheme*" by Y (Piso 2015, 243).

Taking a panoramic look at the stagings of opera performances over the last 25 years, we outlined a classification of the directing styles that have manifested themselves during this period:

- a) The revival of "historical" performances, or documentary performances
- b) The use of strong, highly suggestive symbols, which focus the problematic of the work, in the idea proposed by the composer and librettist – the opera performance- metaphor

- c) The production of the opera performance in a classical style, preserving the era, faithfully following the intentions of the composer and librettist, but with special attention to the truth of the stage play and to following the details in the relationships between the characters
- d) The combination of classical and modern, preserving the composer's ideas and using the atmosphere of the music, but using timeless costumes and a setting that uses a modern stage technique.
- e) The creation of a personal, unique directorial emblem, which the director uses in all his performances.
- f) Reinvention, changing the place and time of the action, to the point of denying the composer's intentions, according to existing and more or less controversial principles in Regietheater.
- g) Creating shows - shock, with excess sexuality, violence, in which the score becomes just a pretext, disregarding any indication of place and time, up to a total directorial reinterpretation.
- h) Creating conjunctural shows, which choose to integrate the presented work in a context of the moment and which, with the passage of time, loses its sharpness.

Without claiming to have exhausted this classification, we will detail with concrete examples these directorial directions that have manifested themselves in the art of representing opera in the last 25 years.

3. Analysis of the panoramic perspective of the staging of opera performances in the last quarter of a century

Following the classification proposed in the second chapter, we will argue it with examples in the following subchapters.

3.1. The opera performance – document and the opera performance – metaphor

The great masterpieces of the lyric genre, in most cases, have had memorable stagings that have overcome the passage of time, being represented in the same vision for decades. We can rightly call them documentary performances.

In 1982, at the Arena in Verona, director Gianfranco de Bosio wanted to bring back to the attention of 21st century audiences the 1913 staging of the opera *Aida*, the first show presented in this Roman amphitheater, which paved the way for the most famous open-air opera festival. The show was performed in

consecutive editions, until 2024. Being extremely well documented, the show has not lost its grandeur, delighting both the knowledgeable and the young audience.

Another revival took place in 2023 at the Rouen Opera, with an equally well-known title: the opera *Carmen* by Georges Bizet. This time, the world premiere that took place in 1875 was reenacted. The specialist chronicle cataloged this staging as historical. The reenactment was carried out by Romain Gilbert, the sets by Antoine Fontaine, and the costumes by Christian Lacroix.

The Scala Theatre in Milan has two documentaries with a unique title: *La Traviata*, by Giuseppe Verdi. The legendary production by director Luchino Visconti, which starred Maria Callas in the title role, was performed in 1955 until 1990, when it was replaced by director Liliana Cavani's production, which is currently being performed, with performances already announced for 2026 with soprano Nadine Sierra. Liliana Cavani's production preserves the atmosphere created by Visconti in 1955.

The Rome Opera House staged a reconstruction of the first performance of Giacomo Puccini's opera "Tosca" in the 2016-2017 season. Director Alessandro Talevi, together with set designers Carlo Savi and Ana Biagiotti, considered this work of documentation and reconstruction of Adolf Hohenstein's sets and costumes an experiment, as they used the techniques of setting construction from 1900, like an archaeological operation, but also a vivid evocation, full of the color and style of the first production, as Pierluigi Pietricola noted in the "Sipario" newspaper of December 9, 2021.

Among the multiple forms of representation of the opera performance, we note creations by directors who appeal to a unique, powerful symbol on which the edifice of the entire production is built. These approaches always bring unity to the performance, which acquires a strong profile and is easy for the spectator to remember, having a considerable visual impact. We have called these approaches metaphor-performances.

In 2001, Robert Carsen created a production of the opera *Don Giovanni* at the Scala Theater in Milan, which has become emblematic. From the first chord of the overture, the audience is brought face to face with itself through an original mirror effect. The entire show stubbornly keeps this idea, Don Giovanni being any spectator present in the hall. Every detail in the decor imagined by Michael Levine refers to the interior of the hall and the actual stage of the La Scala Theater. The metaphor was even stronger when the Commander's ghost was placed in the central box, mirroring himself in the stage, thus being face to face with Don Giovanni. In this directorial vision that had Daniel Barenboim at the conductor's desk, both the Mozartian score and the aspects of *dramma*

giocosso were extremely well highlighted, the show being repeated for many years with different casts.

The same Robert Carsen used the image of the forest as a metaphor in two productions, but each time with a different meaning. In the production of the opera *La traviata* at the Teatro La Fenice, in 2004, a production made when the theater reopened after renovation following a serious fire, two decorative elements flood the stage in all acts: the forest and money resembling falling leaves. These two deeply contrasting and apparently unrelated elements explain the spiritual turmoil of the central character, Violetta Valery, who oscillates between the falsehood of a wealthy society and pure, sincere love, like the beauty of nature.

In the 2013 production of the opera *Die Zauberflöte* in Baden-Baden, the entire action is set in a magical forest that also includes the orchestra pit. Throughout the action, the forest is seen in all seasons, suggesting the passage of time in Tamino's initiation process. Carsen explains in an interview² that he chose this vision because it creates the duality of real-unreal. The grass of the stage carpet contrasts with the earthy color in some scenes, as the characters in this opera are subjected to trials that may result in the continuation of life or its end.

A final example that we will give about the metaphor-show is the 2006 production of the opera *Tosca*, by Giacomo Puccini, directed by Hugo de Ana at the Arena di Verona. The entire action of the opera takes place under the gaze of the sculpture being the Archangel Michael on top of Castel Sant'Angelo. This unique dominant, powerful, extremely expressive decorative element, representing divine justice, becomes, throughout the three acts, the place of action and, at the same time, a direct participant in dramatic events. The three productions commented on above were periodically resumed, until 2025 at the same theater, or in different theaters, keeping a great impact on the specialized critics and the public. This proves that metaphor-shows withstand time, and well-justified symbols can enhance the musical score.

3.2. The balance between classic and modern in 21st century opera performance in the context of the development of stage technique

Franco Zeffirelli can be called a phenomenal director, because, paradoxically, his classic productions made thirty or forty years ago remain current, always having the same success as at the premiere. There are many examples: *Turandot*, *Aida*, *Carmen* and *La Traviata* represented with enormous success at the Arena in Verona

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vvlr5hm1rFs>

almost every season, *La bohème* still present on the bill of the Metropolitan Opera in New York. What is the secret? Why does time not pass over his directorial conceptions? I believe that this immortality comes from the fact that the meticulously documented and justified directorial thinking is in perfect agreement with the musical dramaturgy of the score, supporting each other - this gives a complete satisfaction to the audience from different generations - and the relationships between the characters were thought out with so much truth that they always remain unaltered. Keeping the same principles that he used in his filmed works, Zeffirelli premiered the opera *Don Giovanni* in 2012, also at the Verona Arena, combining the sumptuousness of the 18th-century castle with the dynamics and authenticity of the relationships between the characters. But the great director did not ignore new inventions on the evolution of stage technique. In 2006, he created a new production of the opera *Aida* at the Scala Theater in Milan, in which he used hundreds of light bars superimposed on elements of Egyptian architecture to hyperbolize the ancient wealth of Egypt. These bars create special lighting effects throughout the show, emphasizing either the drama or the lyricism of Verdi's music.

The development of stage technique led to the emergence of the concept of scenographic dramaturgy, named by Melisa Poll in her doctoral thesis "Robert Lepage's Scenographic Dramaturgy: The Aesthetic Signature at Work". Analyzing director Lepage's production of the Wagnerian tetralogy created over two seasons, starting in 2010 at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, the author emphasizes that the set made up of digitally coordinated levers and called "Ex Machina" visually embodies Wagner's leitmotifs and the inner lives of the characters through changes in the architectural configurations of the wooden pallets, as well as through compositional changes in the video images and light projected onto the surface of the set" (Poll 2014, 178).

The atmosphere of the show, imagined in these technical performances, is deeply wagnerian, legendary, supernatural, in perfect harmony with the music and the libretto, director Robert Lepage wanting to get as close as possible to the idea of the total show, *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

On the stage of the Bastille Opera in Paris, built 35 years ago according to all the requirements of a modern opera house, in 2023 the opera *Roméo et Juliette* by Charles Gounod was staged, directed by Thomas Jolly, who combined, as Lepage did, bringing to the attention and feeling of the viewer the Shakespearean atmosphere, using an advanced stage technique, in which the revolving stage created variety in the playing space. A huge staircase like the one at the Opera Garnier dominated from every angle in which it was used and, above all, lit. The

director managed, through a few changed elements, to create poetry, spectacularity, opulence and drama, also concerned with the strong relationship between the characters.

3.3. The emblematic directorial style in the productions of Robert Wilson and Stefano Poda

Robert Wilson and Stefano Poda are two directors who have created a personal language, so that whoever sees just one frame of a show immediately guesses the directorial signature. Robert Wilson's style - considered austere by some critics - is close to the symbolism of the Japanese Noh theater. The stage is treated as a canvas on which lines of a minimalist decor are drawn, lines of extremely slow movements, sometimes lines of light, sometimes a light of almost unreal clarity on which the characters are outlined. Everything seen on stage is minimalist and symbolic. Wilson himself stated that he hated naturalism, declaring himself an anti-Stanislawskian and an admirer of formalism. He started everything from an empty space, considering that nothing is more beautiful than that space. For those who do not know his style, it is difficult to imagine that titles like *Turandot*, *Otello*, *Aida* and *Lohengrin* can be treated in a minimalist vision and yet with a completely special force. The respect for music is complete in his stagings, and the viewer cannot get lost in the details, because the scenic image reaches the essence, like a sculpture by Constantin Brâncuși. Studies have been written about his style to explain and decode his artistic language. In his book entitled *The Theatre of Robert Wilson*, published in Cambridge in 1996, theatre professor Arthur Holmberg exposes and analyses all aspects and all connotations of the "Bob Wilson method" in theatrical language.

A follower of symbolism, like Robert Wilson, Stefano Poda declared in an interview in Bucharest, before the premiere of his opera *Oedipe*, by George Enescu: " ...my language tends to go beyond concrete and minor constraints, to discover what is universal in each score. I am not trying to bring opera closer to us today, I want to make it so that we come closer to opera. Art is not about giving lessons – like, for example, I will show you what this opera, or that one, etc., means – but about creating the conditions for the audience to forget time and space, and become free to travel."³

³ <https://operanb.ro/stefano-poda-visul-meu-era-sa-pun-oedipe-in-scena-pe-acropole-la-atena-dar-destinul-a-vrut-sa-se-intample-intai-in-romania/>

In a long interview symbolically titled “Quanto lo spazio scenico si fa dramma globale”, conducted by Federica Fanizza in 2020⁴, Stefano Poda explains that his very personal style in which he now builds his shows is the synthesis, the method, his own code outlined from many experiments especially on stages in other continents than the European ones. To obtain a perfect conceptual unity that we can call “Poda Style” he combines direction with scenography and lights, in the idea that the opera is pure abstraction thanks to pure, unrationalized emotion. In his opinion, there is no modern versus traditional direction. That is why, in all his productions, we find both images that remind us of ancient theater and elements of contemporary art. The always white walls have slits of light, adorned with a dominant and repetitive symbolic element, usually a part of the human body (eye, ear, hand). The costumes are black and white, with bright color (especially red and green) being used only twice at most to mark a dramatic or unexpected situation. The stage is usually covered in white sand that flows down from above, forming an ever-increasing mound. Stage lighting is extremely important for Poda who, as he confesses in the interview, studied it very deeply by analyzing Caravaggio's paintings. Alongside the characters of the opera, a large group of men appear, revealing their bodies in almost ritualistic movements. The 2018 International Forum of Performing Arts Experts held in Beijing was dedicated to the theme “Stefano Poda, Opera Design as a total Art Work”.

3.4. Musical score - basis or pretext in the 21st century opera performance?

It is known from documents, memoirs and letters of different eras, the meticulousness with which composers and librettists collaborated when creating an opera. Moreover, before the emergence of the notion of a director, composers watched the rehearsals, the performance of the singers, participating directly in the representation of the new opera. Giuseppe Verdi left as testimony to his involvement in the rehearsal laboratory his stage notebooks, which are nothing more than director's notebooks in which the position of the characters on stage, the gestures, the positioning of the decorative elements, the placement of the light, even if it was achieved with the help of gas lamps, were noted. In Diana Todea Săhlean's book “Giuseppe Verdi, opera director?” fragments of these notebooks are reproduced, especially from the stage notebook for the performance of the opera *Aida*. Verdi's letter to Ghislanzoni, the author of the libretto, reveals the concern and, above all, the responsibility that the composer

⁴ <https://www.sipario.it/attualita/dal-mondo/item/13207-intervista-a-stefano-poda-di-federica-fanizza.html>

assumes when writing each note based on each syllable in the text: In the duet (Amneris-Aida) there are very good things at the beginning and at the end, although it is too straight and long. It seems to me that the recitative could be said in a smaller number of verses. ...But although later the action heats up, it seems to me that the stage password is missing. I don't know if I make myself understood by saying the stage password; but I want to say the word that sculpts and makes the situation clear and obvious." (Todea-Săhlean 2022, 166).

However, we notice that opera directors increasingly forget that the connection between music and text is indissoluble. In fact, many times even the music no longer matters. What matters is the full manifestation of the ego of a director who does not know music, since he is a theater director without musical studies. On European stages (especially on stages in Germany) we are witnessing an exacerbation of the concept of *Regietheater*. Everything can be changed: the place of action, the character of the characters, the era. The director takes the liberty of changing everything. We are increasingly seeing a phenomenon that distances the opera from the idea of the total show: at the end of the show, the musical achievement and the interpretation are applauded, and the direction and the set design are booed. Such situations have often existed on the most important stages, as was the case with the premiere of the opera *Don Carlo* at the Vienna State Opera (2024), directed by Kirill Serebrennikov. Moreover, the conception of the show divided the audience into two camps, with conductor Philip Jourdan having to stop this reaction by waving a white handkerchief, a reaction commented on in many Viennese publications⁵.

There have been more serious situations, when people in the audience, due to the images that were too shocking, needed medical care, as also happened in 2024 at the Stuttgart opera. Theater directors Calixto Bieito and Dmitri Tcherniakov gained notoriety in opera directing precisely by completely reinterpreting or moving away from the original libretto of the opera, most often resorting to bringing the characters up to date. Often, the presence of the choir on stage was suppressed, it participating only from the wings, as happened in the staging of the opera *Il trovatore*, by Giuseppe Verdi at the Theatre de la Monnaie Brussels in 2012.

Andreas Homoki, with musical studies in Berlin and a solid intellectual background, has achieved a middle ground in his productions. Each of his directorial conceptions is based on the musical dramaturgy and the composer's style, but he finds an appropriate, substantive formula that passes through the

⁵ <https://artfocusnow.com/news/from-text-to-textile-serebrennikovs-misunderstood-don-carlo/>,
<https://www.welt.de/kultur/klassik/article253751314/Don-Carlo-in-Wien-Die-Rache-des-Regietheaters-an-seiner-Regie.html>

filter of the artist's and today's audience's thinking, as can be seen in the photo album made on the occasion of his celebration at the Zürich Opera.

In the very diverse universe of the conception of the 21st century opera show, there are also shock shows, in which sexuality appears without any dramaturgical-musical justification, just because it is “fashionable” and the directors, along with the opera managers, believe that they can attract young people to the theaters. Of course, these productions are very questionable, especially since the cast includes stars of the lyrical genre, who could temper these exacerbations that have nothing in common with the artistic act.

4. Conclusions

The representation of the opera performance in the 21st century is extremely varied and bears the imprint of the educational background of the director, who is knowledgeable about music. The longevity of a production is directly proportional to its value, as is usually the case with all artistic creations in any field. The opera performance is a totally complex show, in which all elements must collaborate in order to create a major artistic act.

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