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## Opera and the Anthropologist: An Odd Couple?<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract.** The discussion starts with a mere statement of fact which also denotes the relationship between opera and anthropology: on one hand opera is a quite new and "exotic" topic for anthropologists, on the other anthropology is still perceived as a very strange and unusual approach to opera. The author establishes many reasons and endeavors which suggest that opera and anthropology no longer need to be alien to each other. If social or cultural anthropologists did not go to the opera very often in the past, this has certainly changed. The article thus introduces the work of six anthropologists whose personal and professional affinity for opera has been undoubtedly explicated in their academic and biographical account: Claude Lévi-Strauss, Michel Leiris, William O. Beeman, Denis Laborde, Paul Atkinson, and author's opera research. The primary aim of this article is to show that anthropology can say something about the social and cultural phenomenon that throughout the last four hundred years significantly influenced and reflected the identity of Western culture.

**Key Words:** opera, music, art, anthropology, epistemology

### Introduction

I have always dreamed since childhood about being a composer or, at least, an orchestra leader. I tried very hard when I was a child to compose the music for an opera for which I had written the libretto and painted the sets, but I was utterly unable to do so because there is something lacking in my brain. [...] ... if I wasn't able to compose with sounds, perhaps I would be able to do it with meanings.

Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning*, 47

Perhaps anthropology was reticent to study opera because archives of music and its realization exist in the present. Before it was recorded it might have been

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the author's lecture *Rethinking Operatic Europe: Opera Culture as Common European Identity in Anthropological Perspective* given at the Department of Ethnology and Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, University of Belgrade (November 27, 2007).

studied as the social occasion of a community, with a relationship to people, places, practices and circumstances, but now, in its recorded form, it has become both the music of a moment and an anachronism. Opera even, when it questions a social order and a worldview, becomes anthropology. Opera is a quite new, unusual and "exotic" topic for anthropology. Anthropology is still perceived as very strange, unusual and "exotic" approach to opera imagery. It seems that both initial premises well denote the current situation of the relationship between anthropological discipline and opera research. Furthermore, social or cultural anthropologists did not go to the opera very often. Opera's urban glamour, whether it be represented through the splendor of court spectacle, the pomp of national myths and sentimental melodramas, the political party, or the bourgeois festive occasion, seemed hundreds of miles away from their traditional activities or priorities and well removed from their view of life. For four hundred years, opera's aim was to fascinate and create phantasms, focusing principally on the culture of Europe, while anthropology's task was rather different: the deconstruction of such fascinations by focusing mainly on non-European cultures. However, if during this long period the anthropologists perceived opera as something outside their domain, this traditional contradiction between the culture of opera and the culture of anthropologists has been noticeably overcome during the last three decades.

Opera can lead us into the realm of music, art, theatre, science, literature, politics, history, architecture, cultural geography, economy, and even technology. Recently, numerous studies and endeavors that examine opera have appeared within the contemporary trend of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research. They have been conducted not only by scholars in the field of music but also from outside it by scholars whose home disciplines include different fields of the social sciences and humanities. Although the musicologists and music historians have adopted many new theoretical perspectives, it seems that it is perhaps the scholars from outside the traditional field who have most consistently and innovatively posed new questions about opera and its study. As they have approached the subject from a different angle – which sometimes allows them to see what the musicologists and scholars in the field of music may have overlooked or ignored – their efforts have done quite a lot to enrich the literature about opera, as is hopefully the case of this article.

We probably would not be the first in posing the question of what opera has to do with the anthropological program and perhaps it is no coincidence that opera still figures somewhere between embarrassment and disdain among anthropologists. Yet, two previous anthropological focuses, namely the anthropology of music (Merriam 1964; Suppan 1984; Lortat-Jacob & Rovsing Olsen 2004: 7-26; Nettl 2004: 333-52) and the anthropology of art (Morphy 1994; Layton 1991), received a quite similar reception. The anthropological study of music and art met radically opposing observations and arguments,

from disapproval to approval, not only by more conservatively oriented anthropological schools but also by other academic traditions in the social sciences and humanities. Whereas some tried to put them into the classical conceptual box, conserving colonial imaginings of the missionary function of anthropology as a principle for disentangling musical and art folklorisms practiced by "primitive", and of course also "exoticized" tribes, some others, on the contrary, saw in them a kind of reaction against such a colonial program of activities and agendas in social anthropology, which, first, did not devote its attention to tribal music and art as a constitutive object of anthropological research as much as it could and should; and second, in the very traditional anthropological epistemology, the indigenous art practices were usually not perceived as art in the European sense. However, those who believed that the research excursion into "anthropological exotics" has some sense for the discipline and for society, built their positive arguments mainly on the basis of two premises. First, the people who made the first important steps in the field of indigenous music and art were also researchers, for example Morphy<sup>2</sup>, who, several decades ago, had to reflect on their own relation towards the anthropology as a colonial project, and distance themselves from it. Second, traditional social anthropology tended to reduce the understanding of indigenous non-European art and music to just aspects of an entirely indigenous culture, whereas the Euro-centrally established studies of art, music and culture debated whether to appropriate "indigenous" arts from the "superior" Western understanding of art and culture, or to primitivize them into something that is "less" than the art of Western civilization. As a result, from this point on, the perception of cultural phenomena and practices in different societies all over the world became an important epistemological issue: how to read them, what kind of role they have in their own societies as specific practices, how what we know about them can change our conception of what constitutes art, music or theatrical practice. As Morphy says, the fact that the word "primitive" was applied to the arts of non-Western societies for so long tells us something about the European concept of art and the role it has played in the positioning of "other cultures" in European thought (Morphy 1994: 648).

The psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, on discovering the human unconscious, became famous for his claim that the subject is not at home in his own house. This fundamental finding had a delayed entry into anthropology but has lately played an important role by transforming the colonial anthropological paradigm into the postcolonial one. Just what was the crucial point that caused this epistemological break within the discipline? I think this was ex-

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Howard Morphy, "The Anthropology of Art". In *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology: Humanity, Culture and Social Life*, Tim Ingold (ed.), Routledge, London & New York, pp. 648–685.

actly the idea that an anthropologist is not altogether at home in his own culture, in the sense, that should he or she be completely familiar with the society in which they live, there would be no need for them to study it. The idea that an anthropologist does not necessarily need to visit a symbolically foreign and different culture in order to constitute himself or herself as anthropologist was the historical prerequisite for something that might be called the anthropology of opera. This fact maybe highlights why it is necessary that any discourse<sup>3</sup> about the anthropology of opera should begin with the problem of definition. As anthropology is not what it once was, the same goes for opera today. If opera seemed alien to anthropologists, this traditional contradiction between the culture of opera and the culture of anthropologists was, at least in the last three decades, noticeably overcome. Before the 19th century, the concept of opera was entirely connected with the ceremonial display of the European monarch's body and power. But from the 19th century on, opera became a public and relatively popular art, "consumed" by the middle class. As an artistic genre, it was, from the period of romanticism and national awakening, treated as the national art, able to attract "spontaneous" national identification by members of its audience<sup>4</sup>. Accordingly, in the 19th century, opera had become the perceivable socialisational norm of European bourgeois life with its culturally minded and sophisticated bourgeoisie, the bearer of cultural goods and the embodiment of "civilized" values, morals, civilities and aesthetics. However, in the 19th century, opera, like art, music and religion, was one of those concepts that were used to exclude people from civilization and to distance them from European culture. But this social exclusion also happened within the common European culture, as people from the periphery, not to mention peasants, were entirely excluded from the urban cultural luxury. However, just as opera could be used in the past to distance "other" people from civilized Europeans, it can also be used, as Claude Lévi-Strauss showed, to bring Europeans closer to "un-civilized" non-European people exactly through opera.

The processes of decolonialization of anthropological discipline between the 1960s and 1980s coincided in a way with the processes of enormous transformation of opera from just a social occasion to a booming public event

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<sup>3</sup> When using this term, I mostly refer to Foucault's conceptualization, as defined in his books *L'ordre du discours* and *L'archéologie du savoir* (1971) in which he says that discourses are "*practices which systematically form objects about which they speak*".

<sup>4</sup> At the moment the author is also conducting, within the University of Primorska, the two-year project "Opera Audience in Slovenia: An Anthropological Research of the Nation's Cultural Capital", financed by the Agency of Research of the Slovenian Ministry of High Education, Science and Technology.

and media spectacle. At the beginning of the 21st century, the "machinery" of opera is not only being kept alive, after claims that it was already dead, but is also growing steadily. Opera that spectacularizes or scandalizes is a stubborn institutional folklore proving that opera is not only a part of cultural archaeology but also takes a neat place in the bizarre imagery of operatic postmodernism. Today the opera system is becoming larger and more complex than it ever was during its supposed heyday. Recently we have seen major new opera houses being built in Denmark, South Korea, China and Norway; many existing houses have been subject to renovation and refurbishment; and performances are becoming increasingly costly and technologically sophisticated, accompanied by lavish TV broadcasts and by an astonishing range of video, compact discs and DVDs. When opera was televised a few decades ago, it became accessible to millions for whom it had always been an overpriced, alien art form. Opera also enjoys a glamorous star system comparable to that of the pop music, or sports. New elites, particularly the nouveaux riches, meet at La Scala, the Metropolitan Opera House or the Wiener Staatsoper, just as in the times of Louis XIV or in eighteenth-century Naples' royal San Carlo, but now the mass media transmit operatic glamour, prestige and exclusivity to all of us, directly into our living rooms. This tremendous furore around opera leads us, as sociologist Ruth Bereson points out, to the conclusion that opera, far from being a passé amusement for a rich minority, is in fact an arena in which modern democratic states, no less than ancient kingdoms and monarchic courts, are enabled to legitimize their authority and power through ritual and ceremony (Bereson 2006: 15).

Not too many decades ago, it was rare to see a staged performance of an opera earlier than Gluck and Mozart as the core repertory of the modern opera house has been very limited, comprising about fifty operas from Gluck to Puccini. However, the social attitude towards baroque and classical opera has changed considerably in the past few decades. The works and composers of the baroque and classic era are no longer curiosities, and many convincing productions and recordings of operas by Monteverdi, Cavalli, Lully, Handel, Rameau and many others have received international acclaim. Furthermore, early operas frozen somewhere in a lost past and aura are now becoming revived as symbols of musical fastidiousness and exquisite taste crossing social barriers. Opera is a postmodern phenomenon par excellence simply because it remains like a huge relic. The secret of this success and popularity lies, according to philosopher Mladen Dolar, in a specific but multiple phantasm: namely that, throughout four centuries, the opera has been the privileged place for enacting the fantasy of a mythical or "imagined community" (to use Benedict Anderson's term): first in the 17th and 18th century as the supporting fantasy of the absolute monarchy; then in the 19th century as the foundational myth of the nation-state, when the previous court opera evolved into the "state

opera" (Dolar 2002: 3); and in the 20th century as a record of a lost or missing past that could, at the beginning of the 21st century, offer a newly mediated social venue, whose prominence and status is effectively demonstrated through live TV broadcasts and mass tabloids. Because of all this, social anthropologists today do not need to travel to the primeval forests of South America to find relics of ancient social rituals, or to the islands of the Pacific to experience the "exotic", or strange. We merely need to go to the opera, where our own weird rites are performed in both their highest and their most trivial form. Mladen Dolar says: "The moment we enter the opera, we start acting as our own aboriginal population." (Dolar & Žižek 2002: 4). If we accept that opera is able to create an extravagant mythical community (Lindenberger 1984) by constantly recreating the aura of a lost past, it is perhaps no coincidence that French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss found opera an interesting topos for his initiation into the mythologies of non-Europeans.

### Claude Lévi-Strauss' Composing of an "Opera"

In the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, art and music, especially opera, play a manifold, compelling role. The leading proponent of structuralism, which took him from linguistics to structural reading of art, music and architecture as systems of signs, he analyzed, in his fundamental four-volume work *Mythologiques*, the complex multitude and diversity of Amerindian myths through "deep-structured" logical and linguistic rules. But the most interesting thing is that he literally "composed" this comprehensive scientific work in the manner of a musical work. Through this, a theoretical "overture" leads him to a vast set of chapters organized in musical terms, as narrative variations, fugues, arias, recitatives, cantatas, toccatas, sonatas, harmonies and scherzos. At the end of the four-volume symphonic edifice, a reprise and coda crown the argument. Like almost every thinker in the contemporary French pantheon, Lévi-Strauss has been influenced by Wagnerian music. He does not repudiate the analogies often proposed between his own "tetralogy" of *mythologiques* and that of the Ring, and tried to establish the relationship between myth and music as two principal enactments of consciousness. The mechanism of European fantasy in the opera is, according to him, greatly enhanced by music as "a machine to suppress time", just like myths among American Indian tribes (1964: 24). Due to this, he described the relationship between mythology and music, on which he insisted so much, in the initial section of *The Raw and the Cooked* (1964) and also in the final section of *L'Homme nu* (1971), as logical, due to similarity and contiguity, and not as arbitrary.

Mythical Schema	Opera Score
myth contains " the universalities of human mind"	music as a model for " what is the most universal and human at the same time"
myths represent a coherent and organized system of meanings	orchestral score is a coherent and organized system of sounds and staves
myths function as a kind of machine for the suspension of time	opera (in its musical formation) points to a supra-temporal structure which is able to suspend or suppress time
myths are auto-referential: they can be translated only into themselves	opera score is auto-referential: it can be translated only into itself

**Scheme 1: A comparative view on the function and structure of myth schemes and musical scores**

At this point we can consider Lévi-Strauss as an inheritor of a certain operatic tradition known in the 18th century under the slogan, *prima la musica e poi le parole*. As opera has throughout its entire history strongly referred to mythology in general, and often took its themes from Greek antiquity (Monteverdi, Gluck and many other baroque composers) or the Nordic mythological world (Wagner), it is in a position to create a vital presence of mythology in our "demythologized" contemporary society. Also, both opera, as a musical representation, and myth are able to suspend or suppress time. They both have the power to represent a kind of temporal snare. This means that both phenomena play, in a social context, a supra-temporal structure, which is able to stop time or to ensnare it. When Lévi-Strauss compared orchestral scores of Wagner's Ring and myth schemes of Amerindians, he assumed that if we try to understand myth, we have to read it as "we would read an orchestral score, not stave after stave, but understanding that we should apprehend the whole page and understand that something which was written on the first stave at the top of the page acquires meaning only if one considers that it is part and parcel of what is written below on the second stave, the third stave, and so on. [...] And it is only by treating the myth as if it were an orchestral score, written stave after stave, that we can understand it as a totality, that we can extract the meaning out of it." (Lévi-Strauss 2001: 40, also see 1955b: 428-44). So Lévi-Strauss showed us that both systems, European opera and non-European myth, traditionally perceived as totally different and alien to each other, actually exploit otherwise-different cultural machinery – opera by musical instruments and voice, myth by mythical schemata – to attain similar social effects

in parallel (Lévi-Strauss 1964). According to him, music, like opera, can be read contextually, that means through the synchronous and diachronous perspective, which is the typical structuralist novum.

Synchronous reading of opera	Taking opera into the context of other symbolic systems, like mythology, religion, etc.
Diachronous reading of opera	Taking opera into the context of its own symbolic system, for example the interpretation of opera through its previous phases of development

**Scheme 2: Reading opera through the distinction synchronous vs diachronous**

For Lévi-Strauss, both music and myth are basic human universalities. But what kind of element connects these two phenomena that were once, according to him, united but had been drawn apart, each going in a different direction? Lévi-Strauss' answer is that language is the correct point of departure, as both music on the one hand and mythology on the other stem from languages " but grow apart in different directions, that music emphasizes the sound aspect already embedded in language, while mythology emphasizes the sense aspect, the meaning aspect, which is also embedded in language" (20021: 46-47).

Conceptualizing another structuralist dichotomy, that between nature and culture, he argued that if music reminds us of human physiological roots, myth reminds us of our social roots. According to this idea, he regarded opera as an eminent cultural extension of nature, and continued with the assertion that music is able not only to unify both, nature and culture, but can transgress this dichotomy. By inserting opera as an eminent representation of European musical tradition into the structural distinction *natura vs cultura*, he also regarded it as an irreducible cultural mirror of Western human nature and life which is maybe not entirely compatible to the nature and life of "primitive" thought but are not as alien and distant from each other as classical colonial anthropology would have it. When comparing eminent European musical phenomena and non-European mythical phenomena, Lévi-Strauss actually established a specific reading which I would call "civilizational reading". It seems Lévi-Strauss wanted to tell us that European music, with its eminent representation – opera – had the same value or similar position in the mind and life of a contemporary European that myth had in "wild thought". Thus operatic music might be the only mythology that still remains at the disposal of the contemporaries of the "civilized thought". Opera was and remains, paraphrasing Lévi-Strauss, a mythical dimension of European society and probably the most eminent mythology of Europeans that has survived till today.

It is obvious that we cannot reflect opera appropriately without adopting a symbolically external point of view. As Claude Lévi-Strauss showed, European cultural phenomena cannot be considered only from inside, that is from the viewpoint of Western culture. If we read opera from a "non-European" perspective, as he did, then we see that opera is not only a part of society, as many Western academic traditions debated previously, but it actually constitutes society. In other words, it constitutes, using Lévi-Straussian dichotomy, the very nature of European culture. Metaphorically and symbolically, opera literally performs the constitution of society (Kotnik 2004: 334). When I speak here of society, I think of course of European society, as only this society can be really described as operatic society, where opera is an "autochthonous" phenomenon. Opera that took over the traditional function of mythology was not just any kind of music or just any kind of art, but a type of cultural machinery that appeared in the late 16th century within the literary and musical circle of the Florentine camerata, continued in the early seventeenth century with Monteverdi, and later with Lully, Handel and Gluck; music which reached its full development with Mozart in the eighteenth century, and with Verdi, Wagner and Puccini in the nineteenth century. As sociologist Rastko Močnik provocatively pointed out, opera may be a phantasmagoric way that European societies tried to retrieve the problem which all societies usually try to resolve with incest taboo, namely the problem of the relationship between nature and culture. The societies which "failed" to separate nature and culture, entertain opera (Močnik 1992: 22). An interesting coincidence which may prove this thesis is that Lévi-Strauss' classical scientific book *Tristes Tropiques* (1955a) needed to be transformed into an opera (Steiner 1996: 50-1).

### Michel Leiris in the Opera

Opera and its history are constantly in anachronistic situations. Opera began as a post-Renaissance invention and as an exclusively court event which was in favor of the display of the power of bourgeois aristocracy, and of the ruling absolutism of Northern Italian cities of the 16th and the 17th centuries. However, opera did not long remain just a musico-dramatic coulisse to royal events in Medician Florence. After short time, in Mantua, it became a specific humanistic manifest which promoted the notion that music, art, and science can have positive effects on humankind. This means that from its very beginning it tended to a sort of universality within a kind of social exclusivity. It was planned to be both exclusive and universal at the same time. However, a permanent state of anachronistic instability did not lend itself to an anthropological approach but then French anthropologists and ethnologists discovered

opera between the sixties and eighties. Lévi-Strauss was probably the first to analyze this form of music from an anthropological angle, with an emphasis on opera as eminent part of the European life of cultivated Europeans. However, he was not the only French anthropologist who showed the close relationship between opera and anthropology. Another outstanding writer, ethnographer and anthropologist, Michel Leiris, turned his mind to one of his major loves, opera. Approaching it as an untrained lover of music, he discerned fascinating patterns of cultural movement in opera and reveals his personal predilection in this great genre. Leiris began his writing career as a poet associated with the Surrealist movement, but he later made major contributions as an art critic and anthropologist, as well as through his great autobiographical confession, *L'Âge d'Homme* (Manhood). His intellectual legacy places him at important points of intersection within French cultural history. He actively participated in some of the most striking intellectual and artistic movements of the 20th century: surrealism in the twenties, ethnography in the thirties and existentialism in the forties. His multi-volume autobiography *La Règle du jeu* stands as a model form of self-enquiry in the 20th century. In *Operatiques* (Operarratics), written in the form of private reviews, short reflections and diary-like notations, he turns his philosophical concerns about all aspects of opera, its form, its meaning, its performance, its aesthetics, and its social history. In the final reflection entitled "Ce que je trouve dans l'opéra" (What I Find in Opera) he summed up opera as:

Aesthetic pleasure in its pure state, in an ambience of celebration,—a real dilettante's pleasure.

That I expect this unadulterated pleasure from opera (an appreciation of beauty alone, outside of any philosophical or moral considerations) may explain why a light work—a comic opera, for example—can move me more than a tragic work: I know that this light work offers me opera in all its purity, hence an emotional quality much finer than when sentimental or intellectual elements are mixed with it. It is, in sum, as if I needed a frivolous opera (a work of celebration and pleasure) to unveil for me the exact nature of opera, and if this unveiling (and not the content of the work) were the motive for the emotion.

Michel Leiris, *Operatiques*, 192

Both Claude Lévi-Strauss and Michel Leiris were not only great opera lovers and experts, but also introduced operatic, musical and theatrical motifs into their works: the former attached importance to Wagner, and the latter to Puccini, Verdi and Leoncavallo. Their approach, however, differed totally, as evidenced especially by a text—replica which Lévi-Strauss wrote after the

posthumous publication of Leiris' *Operratiques* – a collection of extracts and fragments about the opera. The author of *Structural Anthropology* remained sensitive to purely musical questions: the essential role of the score (Mâche 1999: 154-168), while Leiris focused on the libretto (Louis-René des Forêts recalled: "The striking feature of our conversations, which I confirmed while reading a collection of his posthumous notes entitled *Operratiques*, was the fact that he was interested less in music as such, and more in the spectacle and, primarily, in the contents of the libretto. Here he was unbeatable, capable of recounting in detail the plot of every opera, even if it was immensely convoluted and improbable, as is frequently the case with Verdi") and, first and foremost, on the spectacle itself. This fundamental controversy about the character of opera was presented also by Jean Jamin, another anthropologist, ethnologist and a friend of Michel Leiris. If Lévi-Strauss was interested particularly in the orchestral score, structure of music and, naturally, Wagnerian *Musikdrama*, then Leiris' passion and conception of opera was different. He was indifferent to musical and structural problems in opera as he was passionately concerned with the spectacle, the libretto, the opera-goers, the auditorium, the rite. For him, opera is *une espèce de cérémonie d'aller à l'opéra* (Jamin 1999: 34-7). Jean Jamin, in his article "Sous-entendu. Leiris, Lévi-Strauss et l'opéra" (*Reticence: Leiris, Lévi-Strauss and the Opera*), established that the attitude towards opera of both anthropologists was very different.

Lévi-Strauss	Leiris
score	libretto
music	plot
work	ceremony, ritual
orchestra pit	stage, scene
mythical & romantic opera	verist & historical opera
Wagner	Puccini, Verdi
structure	spectacle
mathematical nature of opera	passionate nature of opera
not interested in audience	interested in audience
personal event	collective event
"expert" attitude	"dilettante" attitude

**Scheme 3: Two conceptions of opera: Lévi-Strauss and Leiris**

If Lévi-Strauss always made clear his conscious taste for music, Leiris was far more interested in social occasion and ceremonialism of opera (Jamin 1999: 36-37): the former was interested in how opera was composed, structured and played, while the later how opera was staged, performed and perceived. Roughly speaking, whereas Lévi-Strauss preferred the notion of opera

as musical work, Leiris rather understood it as social work, approaching opera from the point of view of an enthusiast who is insightful and not at all musically "doctrinaire". This difference is also evident in their attendance habit. Lévi-Strauss attended opera, but listened with closed eyes in order to be transported to a magical world miles away from choses terrestres, earthly things; actually he vowed not to visit the Parisian Opéra anymore. On the other hand, Leiris regularly attended opera with his wife to her dying day in 1988. While there, he enjoyed observing spectators, ceremonial gestures, and the order of ritual in general. For him the operatic experience is also a social event and not just a musical structure (Jamin 1999: 41). To speculate, if Lévi-Strauss fitted better into the ascetic atmosphere of Wagner's temple Festspielhaus in Bayreuth, Leiris would have probably enjoyed the 17th century Venetian opera houses known all over Europe for their lavish public status – accessible to all citizens and tourists –, grandiose performances, virtuosic singers and particularly by noisy and spoiled audiences. Despite these differences, however, both scholars made important contributions to the anthropological study of opera.

### William O. Beeman on the Operatic Stage

To move from the auditorium to the stage: William Orman Beeman is an American professional opera singer and an associate professor of anthropology at The University of Minnesota, where he is chair of the Department of Anthropology. For many years he was professor of anthropology, theater, speech, dance, and East Asian studies at Brown University. However, not just an ordinary cultural anthropologist, he is doing something that other anthropologists usually don't: he also sings in opera. From 1996-1999 Beeman sang under contract with Oper Chemnitz in the German city of Chemnitz. He also wrote the book *The Third Line: The Opera Performer as Interpreter* with renowned opera stage director Daniel Helfgot.

William Beeman, bass-baritone, made his debut in Monterrey, California, as Dulcamara in Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore*. He has performed in opera, musical theater and concerts throughout the United States, in Europe, the former Soviet Union and Japan. He is at home with both dramatic and comic roles, and on the concert stage. The beauty and strength of his voice has been widely praised. The *Freie Presse* in Germany wrote of him in June 1997, "He presented a beautiful, expression filled voice with the sheer power to astonish the audience." From 1996 to 1999 he was engaged under a full-time contract at Oper Chemnitz where he featured in 26 productions, including *La Bohème* (Colline), *Die Meistersinger* (Hans Schwartz), *Salome* (Fifth Jew), *Tannhäuser*, *La forza del destino*, *La Traviata*, *Tosca*, *Fidelio* and *Martha*. Opera News and

other periodicals praised him for his portrayals of Don Magnifico in Rossini's *La Cenerentola*, Don Alfonso in *Così fan tutte* and as Max Detweiler in *The Sound of Music* at the Ash Lawn-Highland Festival in Charlottesville, Virginia. In May 1994 he made his Wagnerian debut as Fafner in *Das Rheingold* in San Francisco, for which he received critical praise in *Opera News*. In 1993 Beeman performed the title role in a revival of Cimarosa's *L'impresario in angustie* in Italy, including a command performance for Gian Carlo Menotti at the Spoleto Festival. Other roles include Sparafucile and Monterone in *Rigoletto*, Basilio in *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, Raimondo in *Lucia di Lammermoor* and Mayor Swallow in *Peter Grimes* at Des Moines Metro Opera, Sarastro in *Die Zauberflöte*, Bartolo in *Le nozze di Figaro*, Osmin in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, the title role in *Don Pasquale*, the four villains in *Tales of Hoffmann*, and Leporello and the Commendatore in *Don Giovanni*.<sup>5</sup> And besides this vast range of his repertoire, he has continued both opera and academic work.

In the book *The Third Line* with Daniel Helfgot, he proposes that performers study the opera score's "third line" – movement, focus, facial expression and vocal inflections that can be naturally derived from the interaction of text and music – to transform the score into reality on the stage. The author says: "The book shows singers systematically how to go analyzing the opera score for dramatic and interpretative opportunities often ignored in the opera world ... material on auditions, career management ..." Every opera performer is, according to Beeman, inescapably an actor as well as a vocalist. In order to survive as marketable artists in an increasingly competitive environment, opera singers must be able to perform with greater dramatic depth or comedic skill than was ever expected in the past. Yet many performers have difficulty in attaining the twin goals of vocal excellence and credible acting. Most training, whether institutional or private, emphasizes vocal technique to a degree that crowds out the other dimensions of performance. As William O. Beeman and Daniel Helfgot argue in *The Third Line*, opera performers must take charge of their own professional education. Stressing opera interpretation, not simply opera singing, they propose that performers study a "third line" of an opera score. Traditional techniques teach the conventional two lines of the musical score: the text and the music. The third line consists of interpretative dimensions that naturally derive from the interaction of the text and music, including movement on the stage, focus, facial expression, and vocal inflection. It is based on knowledge of the historical, literary, and cultural contexts of opera characters as well as the understanding of musical styles and performance practices.

When Beeman lived and worked full time at Chemnitz Opera, he also used the German stage for research. Yet his research as an academic often focused

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<sup>5</sup> For more about his roles see the web site <http://realmutoartists.com/beeman.htm>.

on the performing, allowing him the opportunity to be on both stages at once. The performances are part of his research endeavor. "At some point I wanted to be able to talk about performances and performing from the standpoint of the inside ... not just be an observer but to find out what it's like to perform"<sup>6</sup>, said Beeman, who used one of the methods available to anthropologists, participant observation, to conduct his research. In his book, he reveals the "backstage life" of singers: the demanding work schedule in European and American opera houses. As he shows, even getting on to the stage is today very demanding: singers have to sell all their belongings and hit the road for every possible audition around the world in order to get hired as an opera singer. When his rich, resonant bass voice caught the attention of those holding auditions for the theater company in Chemnitz, Beeman took a leave from teaching to accept a position there: "I often think my schedule here is pretty demanding, but I work harder in the theater than I do here, just in terms of sheer time commitment. It's serious work ... you have to live and breathe the theater." He describes his operatic life in Chemnitz opera house as a hard working experience. Practice was from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. every day, followed by another rehearsal or a performance from 6 to 10 p.m. Unlike opera companies in Germany which produce two or three shows a year and stage performances at the weekends, the Chemnitz Opera would produce more than two dozen shows, requiring Beeman to know as many different parts. He performed up to 20 nights a month in a variety of shows. With such a schedule, one of a singer's biggest worries is illness. Each cast member has his or her own routines for keeping vocal chords in shape. One Russian singer with whom Beeman worked would drink a glass of warm beer an hour before each performance. Beeman would not drink even a single beer within a day of performing because, he said, alcohol would dry out his vocal chords: "Singing is very much like athletics, it's extraordinarily physical. ... It's not just learning the notes and the words. Learning to sing a part in an opera is like learning an Olympic routine as an ice skater. It requires a great deal of experience to negotiate a performance from beginning to end." In addition to experience, a singer must have a passion for performing. Those factors coupled with a little good timing allowed Beeman to make a double career; being an academic and succeeding at the unusual task of becoming a professional opera singer, mid-life. If he were a tenor it would be almost impossible for that to happen, but basses are inevitably older characters, like the fathers and grandfathers, in the opera. In addition to being cast in older roles, there is another benefit that bass singers have, said Beeman: While tenors and sopranos have typically finished

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<sup>6</sup> These quotations are from the Kristen Lans' article "Anthropologist Beeman took to German stage for research" published here [http://www.brown.edu/Administration/George\\_Street\\_Journal/22/v22n20/opera.html](http://www.brown.edu/Administration/George_Street_Journal/22/v22n20/opera.html).

performing by their mid-50s, basses who take care of themselves can probably sing to the end of their lives. When Beeman wasn't on stage in Germany, he assumed the role of anthropologist, interviewing those who worked in the theater while they lunched in the canteen. Chemnitz employs some 500 people in its theater organization. That includes everyone who works in the organization's three houses: opera house, playhouse and puppet theater. The theaters are public entities and funded through taxes, which allows the cheapest theater ticket to cost about the same as a U.S. movie ticket, said Beeman. His research, as well as his experience of performing, explores such subjects as how the opera house is organized, how the business and inner workings of opera function, what it means to be an artist, how to start character research, how to interpret arias for the opera stage and the concert stage, how to pursue a career in opera, how singers can deal with "traffic cop" opera directors, how to get at the emotion underlying the words, how to access the character, acting and staging clues hidden in the music, or how to access the singer's, and the character's, motivation, in a practical, bar-by-bar method, using the music itself as a guide, and last but not least, how to look good on the stage and come across well to the audience.

Today, directors rule in the opera houses while in the 18th century the monarchic despots, patrons and impresarios were those who evaluated the status of an artist. In particular, the Western musical world owes a lot to Mozart as he was one of the first artists who – influenced by the socio-political ideas of the German Enlightenment, such as the idea of social contract, the "Enlightened despot", personal happiness, liberation of subject, the value and dignity of the individual – loudly and rebelliously demanded a re-evaluation of the artist's social status, abolishing the idea of musician as private lackey of patrons and impresarios and replacing it with the artist as public figure of honour. Before Mozart's time, opera was treated as *ars mechanico*, machinery for producing pleasure for aristocrats. After the French revolution in 1789, opera as *ars musica* became part of *ars liberalis*, for ordinary citizens. And usually singers were among those who addressed this change the most. In the ethnographic epiphany for singers, *The Third Line*, Beeman addresses, from an onstage perspective, different facets of the profession, including the idea that as the profession of opera has changed so has the expectations of the modern opera performer. Both Beeman and Helfgot write about those huge expectations, why they exist, and how performers are expected to rise to the challenge. John Rosselli, an historian who has intensively concentrated on the industry of opera singers in Italy from Cimarosa to Verdi, including the history of this specific profession (Rosselli 1984; 1992), says that opera as social occasion demands a crowd and raises great expectations simply because it requires so many people and sources to produce it (Rosselli 1996: 304). Only a great fuss around this Western musical form can justify the financial costs to perform it.

### Denis Laborde in Pursuit of an Opera

The production of an opera from the first idea to the final presentation in front of the audience is a complex organism, which has been explored by Denis Laborde, an ethnologist, musical anthropologist, researcher at the Centre national de la recherche scientifique and teacher at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales in Paris. He studied at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique, Paris, and as a conductor dedicated himself to contemporary music. He then studied anthropology at EHESS, working on musical ethnology in Western cultures. Today, his work is mostly dedicated to an anthropology of music practised in Western societies, by exploring *les lieux des musique*, festivals and contemporary musical creativity. For this article he is interesting because he conducted an ethnographic research of Steve Reich's opera *Three Tales*. Between 1997 and 2002 he worked with Modern Ensemble from Frankfurt as participant observer, exploring the background, or rather, the "backstage" of the production of the last Steve Reich opera, *Three Tales*. In this project he examined the ways in which an opera is produced today. On the ground he was faced by certain methodological difficulties concerning the enormous quantity of actions: the problem is that so much is happening at the same time while one is trying to observe the different processes of creating an opera. Because of this Laborde proposes a plaidoyer for a dynamic, contextual and anti-intellectual approach to action which enables one to explore more concretely how Western societies produce music (Laborde 2001: 275-304; 2006: 121).

Listening to music would not be possible without the knowledge of means of musical representation. In a musical script alone, titles, epigraphs, score annotations, programs and various musical allusions become major tools that help the listener interpret the music. These tools can also refer to various social, national, moral and other values. This of course involves a specific audience able to "read" these "extramusical" signs, even if it does not recognise them as significant. Such signs are a key tool of interaction between the music and the audience. Thus, inherently connected with both musical and cultural processes, they become a basic means through which culture enters music and music enters culture; as communicative action. Laborde would say that it is due to this that the reception of music becomes a dynamic, culturally conditioned process.

### Paul Atkinson Backstage at the Opera

Among anthropologists who currently pursue the study opera we find Paul Atkinson, a social anthropologist at the Cardiff School of Social Sciences, Wales, and the author of several essential accounts of principles in

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ethnographic practice and in qualitative research. On the back cover of his book *Everyday Arias: An Operatic Ethnography*, published in 2006, we read:

Paul Atkinson explores the remarkable world of opera through his fieldwork with the internationally known Welsh National Opera company. In order to illustrate how cultural phenomena are produced and enacted, he takes us on stage and behind the scenes into the collective social action that goes into the realization of an opera. The author demonstrates how artistic interpretation is translated into the routine work of the rehearsal studio and the theater, and how producers negotiate a practical reality with their performers to ultimately create extraordinary performances through the mundane, everyday work that makes them possible. Atkinson calls for a sustained investigation of cultural phenomena, not based solely on textual analysis but on the importance of collective work and social organization. Atkinson's work will appeal to anthropologists and sociologists who study the performance arts, as well as to those engaged in theatre arts, opera, and music.

Paul Atkinson utilizes a dramaturgical framework to analyze the embodied craft of opera performance. Based on his ethnographic work with the Welsh National Opera, he illustrates how, through tedious repetition and rehearsal, opera embodies gesture to stylistically convey meaning in a performance that is both a visual and musical (Atkinson 2004: 100). He builds his approach to opera performance from the symbolic interactionist tradition. That means that he understands opera performance as the complex relations between music, words, intentions, motives, emotions, embodied gestures, and "bodies which are couched to move and interact in the physical space of the stage" (Atkinson 2006b: 95). According to him, the opera performer acts on the stage like a symbolic-interactionist interpreter, producing meaningful symbols, gestures, emotions, actions and reactions. His ethnography of an opera company thus explores the relationship between the everyday life of music-theater (the collective) and the performer (the individual). Certainly, the singers are the most representative protagonists of the embodiment of performance. As he has emphasized in his research, the accomplishment of opera is profoundly physical work, as performing opera is eminently embodied activity:

Operatic singing, which demands a highly developed, physically supported voice, is more taxing than most forms of singing. Singers themselves compare their vocal work with that of athletes. The production of the voice depends upon the management of the body and control of the breath that is very different from the everyday production of singing.

Atkinson, "Opera and the Embodiment of Performance", 104-105

Atkinson's commitment to working with the opera company stemmed from two streams of interest. On the one hand, there was his long-standing interest in opera itself as he became, in Cardiff, a serious operagoer on a regular basis. On the other hand, he had an intellectual interest in performance more generally. Roughly, we could describe his approach to opera as an interactionist one, where three monads, the performance, the body and the dramaturgy, are interactionally produced and imagined. Studying these elements of an opera company leads him to the conclusion that opera is a collective experience on all levels (Atkinson 2006a: 5). Both Laborde and Atkinson, whose approach to opera is mostly from the off-stage perspective, stress the great complexity of different social processes which define an opera company and make its production possible.

### My Commitments to Opera

My interest in opera and its research derives from a number of personal and intellectual commitments that cannot be all mentioned here. I was born in the rural region of Kozjansko, the Eastern part of Slovenia, far from urban luxuries and cultural venues, like opera or theater. In spite of this I was initiated, as a very small boy, into a rich traditional culture of folk singing. As far back as I can remember, my family always sang together on occasions such as family celebrations, birthdays, or community rites of passage. Both my parents were talented and very keen to sing Slovenian folk songs as this was a natural social act and a way of communicating with others. Not many decades ago, such folk singing continued as a crucial mean of socialization in rural Slovenia, where more urban forms of culture and sociality were not accessible. I entered the opera house for the first time as a teenager in Ljubljana. Rigoletto was on the program and although I was enraptured and overcome with emotion, I was surprised that my first impression was as if I had always been a part of this "singing world". Opera seemed to me familiar, not strange; I think that my early family indoctrination into the culture of folk singing was crucial for my familiarity with opera. More concretely, it gave me certain musical ammunition and cultural sensitivity with which I was able to address my first operatic attendances. My path to opera was therefore definitely strongly marked by the cultural capital of folk song. When I migrated from the rural Kozjansko region to Ljubljana in 1994, where I undertook my study of sociology of culture and philosophy at the Faculty of Arts, I was also furnished with the opportunity to start going to opera more often. However, it was not until I became a member of the Association of opera and ballet lovers in Ljubljana in 1996 that I became a serious operagoer on a regular basis. Then, opera quickly became not only a private passion but also a part of my sociological research and anthropological

formation. My commitment to deal with opera stemmed from two streams of interest. On one hand, there was my short-standing opera attendance, which reminded me intensely of what I brought from my family – the passion for singing, which turned, when getting to know opera more closely, into personal interest in the art form. While a student at the University of Ljubljana, I also took 3-year private course of opera singing in Ljubljana but quit after finishing my diploma study as I was not sure if this is what I really wanted to do with my life. So I decided on science rather than singing. On the other hand, I have also had a strong intellectual interest in opera as a social phenomenon. In particular, I was interested in how people understand opera, and I soon recognized that even intellectual traditions interpret it in very different ways. So, these two strands of interest came together in my own desire to reflect and observe the world of opera and what it is all about.

Two books, Philippe-Joseph Salazar's brilliantly argued study *Idéologies de l'opéra* (1980) and Ulrich Weisstein's anthology *The Essence of Opera* (1964) particularly inspired and encouraged me at the start of my own anthropologically oriented research of opera, and indirectly shaped some of my epistemological stances towards opera research in general. My work on opera has resulted in three books<sup>7</sup> and several articles published in Slovenia and abroad. In my ten-years of research into different aspects and from different angles, I used different but complementary approaches and methods, particularly historical anthropology<sup>8</sup>, and also socio-cultural "anthropology at home"<sup>9</sup>. In 2001 and 2002 I undertook extensive fieldwork

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<sup>7</sup> The first book *Reprezentacije opere* [The Representations of Opera] published in 2003 brings an extensive ethnographic research of the opera system in Slovenia, including the analysis of national cultural policy and representations of opera in Slovenian media. The second book from 2005 entitled *Antropologija opere* [The Anthropology of Opera] is a historic-anthropological and socio-anthropological study of academic discourses and intellectual traditions which dealt with opera. The third work, an essay written in French *Opéra dans l'arène du provincialisme et du nationalisme* [Opera in the Arena of Provincialism and Nationalism] and published in February 2006 by Parisian publisher *Éditions Manuscrit*, introduces Slovenian opera culture to francophone readers.

<sup>8</sup> For more about the historical anthropology see André Burguière's text (1978: 37-61) which is of constitutive importance for the field. Also the article of Lucette Valensi and Nathan Wachtel (1996: 251-274) is very informative and insightful.

<sup>9</sup> When pursuing my anthropologically informed research "at home" (Jackson 1987; Peirano 1998:105–128) and programming my fieldwork, I was essentially assisted by the texts of fundamental relevance in the field of methodology and epistemology of social anthropology, such as the studies of Sanjek (1990), James, Hockey & Dawson (1997), Ingold (1996, sections 1-9, 99-146, 147-198), Bernard (1988), Gupta & Ferguson (1997) and Leach (1982: 24-41).

into the Slovenian opera system, including both Slovenian opera houses, in Ljubljana and Maribor, and in supporting cultural or state institutions, from which I gained a very insightful ethnography. Due to this, I can say that opera is an interesting but demanding terrain that requires from an anthropologist a high level of theoretical inspection, epistemological formation and methodological proficiency.

Of course, the first thing I did was to start examining the Slovenian "orthodox" knowledge about opera. As a matter of fact, opera in Slovenia has not had any significant academic attention and knowledge about it is therefore very modest and confined to traditional topics, approaches and disciplines. From the analytical review of the literature, ranging from the events from the "national" awaking and the Panslavic movements in the middle of the 19th century, all the way to the contemporary musicological, musico-historical, or ethno-musicological writings, I expected to find out what had already been done in the field of national opera studies and quickly saw that the bulk of the literature about opera comes predominantly from two academically canonized disciplines: musicology on one hand and music history and music scholarship on the other. Opera still seems strange to these Slovenian academic traditions; and the Slovenian academic domestication of opera also remains strange. The biggest problem lies in the epistemological orientation, which mostly observes opera as a pure and phenomenalisised object of art and music while it completely excludes or ignores the examination of the procedures that established knowledge about opera, and were created by individual researchers or intellectual traditions. This problem is particularly visible in provincial environments as the Slovenian, where academic traditions and practices are familiar with different ideological discourses and provincialism. The Slovenian "national operatic milieu", including the privileged academic and cultural communities, has always been a matter of narrow, untouchable circles, and the experts writing about opera have never been considered as problematic or doubtful. I have, in the most meticulous detail, revealed that the domain of opera research in Slovenia is "still completely dominated by the field of the traditionally oriented part of musicology and musical history which, without any kind of problematisation, inserted opera, their respective subject, into the different ideological (generic, romantic, evolutionist, positivistic, national(istic), progressist, developmentalist, authenticist and essentialist) constructions" (Kotnik 2005: 380). Slovenian traditional opera studies, however, owe their conception of opera to a much broader understanding of certain notions and terms, such as history, nation, culture, or art.

Traditional Perspectives	Anthropological Perspective
history = an objective structure reduced to a chronological study of political events and figure	history = science of analytical procedures and cognitive instruments for creating the reflection of past
nation = an organic fact and biologically founded community	nation = a socio-culturally and historically imagined and politically constructed category; = the form of contemporary organization of state
culture = a natural fact	culture = a matter of social constructions
art = the field of natural dispositions for manifestation of the autochtonity of national culture	art = a set of practices and forms of cultural production which is historically determined and from which it is required and expected to produce – in certain time and place – certain aesthetical and other effects

**Scheme 4: Different comprehension of some basic categories: history, nation, culture, art**

With regard to the scheme presented above, we need to outline some characteristics of the situation of opera studies in Slovenia which urged me to explore other disciplinary, particularly musicological and musico-historical, traditions as well: 1) there is an absence of an elaborated field for recent and contemporary operatic studies; 2) the research of opera is entirely dominated by traditional musicology and music history: the extremely marginalized position of opera studies within the traditional competent disciplines, the ignorance of foreign achievements in the field, the hegemony of one discourse which disables different or other views, the romanticism and sentimentalization of the opera phenomenon; 3) there is a need to understand the research teleology of traditional orientations in the field: the documentation of Slovenian operatic creativity, the defense of the genesis, the origins and the continuity of autochthonous operatic tradition; the production of national musical and operatic history – the production of the national character through music, " the Slovenianness of Slovenian opera" ; the promotion of opera as part of national archive; the epistemic inability for understanding opera as real social practice; the nationally colored academic imperative – " Slovenian researchers should explore the Slovenian cultural creativity" . In Slovenia, it has been impossible till recent times to imagine any interpretation of opera outside the provincial motives and discourses of national awariness and belonging.

Traditional Perspectives	Anthropological Perspectives
history of opera = chronologically closed structure of composers and musical persons	history of opera = a representation of different shared histories of musical, theatrical, cultural, political, economic, intellectual and academic ideas and practices
nationality of opera = founded on the biological explication of the constitution of nation	nationality of opera = founded on naturalist, nationalist and organicist ideologies
opera as high culture = a denomination which is considered as the real scientific finding	opera as high culture = a denomination which needs to be considered as an ideological construction
operatic art = a sacred thing and the property of musicologists, musical scholars and musicians	operatic art = a social phenomenon
operatic work = a musical work	operatic work = a social work of musical and other practices
composer = the producer of national character of opera and the bearer of the nation's esprit	composer = an artist of certain national territory, cultural milieu or musical place
opera audience = an undefined crowd outside any analysis and reflection	opera audience = a specifically imagined community which is a constituent part of opera system

**Scheme 5: Different comprehension of some specific categories:  
history of opera, composer, etc.**

Due to these epistemological discrepancies, my anthropological investigation of opera needed to turn towards an archaeology<sup>10</sup> of scientific

<sup>10</sup> By this term I understand, according to Salazar's conception of the "archaeology of opera" (1980) a historical genealogy of discourses speaking about opera, as well as a theoretical concept and interpretative instrument, according to Foucault's "archaeology of knowledge", by which it is possible to question traditional ideas and reevaluate past and existent discourses in a new and fresh way. In this kind of archaeology, discourses are described as specific practices inscribed into the domain of "archive".

discourses about the opera. In this investigation I found that even the most recent Slovenian academic writings about the opera seek to be accepted as the nation's guardians, witnesses, providers and the propagators of its identity or of its unique and representative cultural image. The irony of this kind of expertise and epistemology, however, is that it is the experts themselves who want to fulfil the task, which they conceive as their mission for the "nation's sake". My approach to opera was therefore still strongly marked by this provincial situation in Slovenia where opera has been more a subject of continuing and complex ideological commodification than reflection.

Despite terminological multiplicity and numerous definitions, I have approached, on the conceptual level, opera "as a representational category used to describe a certain discursive field" (Kotnik 2005: 41). With such an open concept I tried to avoid any pre-theoretical imagination or pre-inscribed value interpretation that would define the object of research, and consequently also determine the understanding of what opera is, without doing any investigation. This has too often been practised by traditionalists and positivists who behaved as if they already knew, from the outset, what opera is, and particularly, what it should be. By doing so, academicians actually projected their own imagination of opera which later came to prevail in their interpretation, and this rather begs the question about the need for further research. This problem covers the social, ideological, semantical and power implications of interpretations which either create a hegemony of one knowledge discourse, or establishes the field of value – the aesthetic, intellectual, ideological and other choices within which the phenomenon of opera takes its particular place. My approach was very different. If, for traditionally oriented musicologists, music historians, musical scholars and other related specialists, opera was perceived as a naturally given fact which is somehow "there" waiting to be explored by them, for me it was a construction which, socio-historically determined, needs closer attention. Traditionalists and positivists are usually unaware that social phenomena, which are explored by them, are "also constructed by them, by their professional ideologies, personal inclinations, interpretative strategies involved, methods used and particularly by epistemology they are able to reflect and elaborate" (Kotnik 2006b: 94).

Because of this, I understand an anthropology of opera as an epistemological shift of perspective from the perception of opera through the prism of classical categories – such as music, art, genre, aesthetical structure, social institution – to the understanding of opera as a specific but complexly composed social practice, representation<sup>11</sup> and imaginary<sup>12</sup>. For me, opera is a net or a mixture of

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<sup>11</sup> I use this term according to Stuart Hall's definition which says: "*Representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. [...] Representation is the production of the meaning of the concepts*

discourses, therefore a representation of representations. Thus, in my anthropology of opera this phenomenon is represented as an ensemble of different imaginations and practices (singing, composing, theatricality, scenography, academic study and so on) which create the opera phenomenon and make its social imaginary possible (Kotnik 2005: 33). By this conception of opera I wanted to challenge some well-established notions and canonized receptions of opera, such as opera as music or art, and further develop a provocative thesis that opera is not music in itself, but rather "it became music". Similarly, opera is not art form in itself, but "it became art". Let me illustrate this provocative attitude by an example which I described in my 2006 French essay:

If I tell someone that I deal with an anthropology of opera, many people usually react like this: 'So, you are dealing with music?!' My answer is the following: 'No, I deal with opera.' In this answer which resonates like a bad joke, we find one of the details most significant for the understanding of the epistemology of anthropology of opera. Some Slovenian musicologists and admirers of beautiful operatic music didn't understand me properly. They took my epistemological position as if I deny the idea of opera as music. For them the equivalence between opera and music is entirely a natural fact. Such negation of opera as musical category really would be a great radicalization of my standpoints. All I wanted to say is the following: the study of opera as musical genre and its incorporation into the programs of musical scholarship and musicological canon today represents not only a musical or artistic hegemony but also academic and ideological uniformism. In opposition to this, opera (as music) should rather be considered in terms of the construction of a social, cultural and professional canon<sup>13</sup>. Is that how opera "became", socio-historically, music or a kind of musical domain? The hegemony and the dominance of music that prevailed within the domain of opera should be taken as the fall into a specific ideological form which was manifested very differently in each epoch: in the 18th century, for example, through the ideology called *prima la musica e poi le parole*, through the glorification of aria, through the rise of castratos and divas; in the 19th century, through the Wagnerian symphonism, the romantic cult of musical genius (personified by such as Bach, Mozart and Beethoven), the image of "absolute musician", and through the academic canonization and musicological standardization of music and musical genres; and in the 20th century, through the idea of opera as record and through the development of musical industry and discography in general. We can see even today the consequences of this unification, condensing and reduction of the meaning of opera exclusively to music. The first, quite prominent example of this is the superior position of composer

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*in our minds ...*" (1977: 15, 17). Due to this, representation is a process of transforming general pictures or abstract concepts into particular and concrete manifestations.

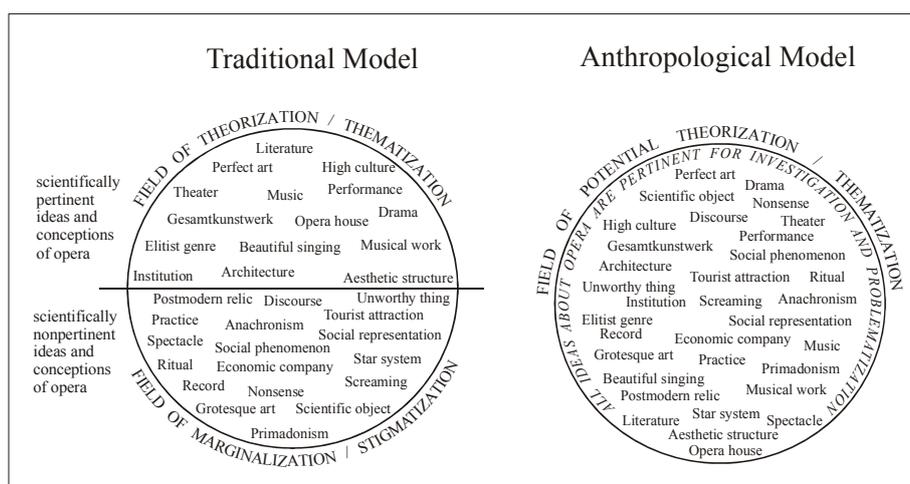
<sup>12</sup> The term 'imaginary' means an imaginal world of certain time, place, social group or the sphere of human activity. It is a frame of imagined world which crosses place and regulates time. However, at the same time it is also a kind of stock or set of practices and institutions which create the foundation of imaginary.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Bergeron & Bohlman 1992, Brody 1970.

in relation to librettist where authorship of an opera is concerned. The second example refers to that how books about opera are catalogued in libraries and bookshops; as a rule, all books about opera, without any regard to thematic focus or disciplinary orientation they employ, are uniformly classified under "music". Such phenomena did not always exist. On the contrary, they are the result of certain well-established social processes, on the basis of which a certain hegemony could be imposed in the past.

Kotnik, *Opéra dans l'arène du provincialisme et du nationalisme*, 25-26

While doing my fieldwork, I interviewed one Slovenian musicologist from University of Ljubljana who expressed surprise that I was doing this kind of research as he felt only musicologists should investigate opera. But one could ask who investigated opera before the 19th century when there was no musicology as a science of music. Of course, he couldn't answer. Let me further illustrate the fact that different ideas and intellectual categories representing opera, music, art, high culture and so on, are often taken as entirely self-evident, as "undoubted truths", rather than conceptions which need to be analytically examined.



**Scheme 6: Models of the Objectivation of Conceptions and Ideas about Opera**

All the denominations of opera, as sketched above, are not naturally given facts but rather socio-historical constructions which should be reflected again and again or at least pertinently communicated. It is therefore important to notice the development of the concepts that have defined the canon of theories and ideologies of opera, and the way in which they became associated with the scientific pertinence and academic standard. This is of great importance, particularly the way academic vocabulary domesticated operatic

phenomenon within certain theoretical streams and disciplinary frames. Such academic familiarisation of opera is represented as an essentially ideational discourse and a reflex of the mentality receptions. What, therefore, is the field of activity of an anthropological investigation? I think it should be based on three premises: first, an anthropological investigation does not stop at national criteria or priorities, nor does it necessarily conform to the "geographical", "ethnic" or other doctrinally imposed rules, but follows exclusively the modus of a phenomenon, taken under scientific scrutiny, in its most different formations, representations or transformations; second, it does not classify the topics and the aspects of opera phenomenon according to the criterion of value or representativeness: there are no topics or aspects of opera phenomenon which would be excluded in advance or considered as unworthy of research; the anthropological epistemology only differentiates between pertinent and non-pertinent procedures and approaches used to scientifically investigate opera.

Within the fieldwork performed within the Slovenian opera sphere from 2001–2002, some deep-rooted social mythologies about opera were also questioned. Among them, three central questions were explored: first, how did opera become the "national thing"; second, can opera really be understood as "high culture"; and third, does opera embody "its own language". Focusing on these three topics, I explored some of the most common stereotypes and prejudices about opera found not only in broader society but even among specialists at universities. In this respect, it is shown in the ethnography that the greatest paradox of the recent Slovenian research agenda in the field of opera studies, undertaken mostly by musicologists and music historians, is that on one hand these two professions declare themselves to be the owners of the privileged right over the domain of opera studies, while on the other hand I was faced with a drastic shortage of relevant and pertinent literature in opera from these domains. Furthermore, this bizarre situation is also internalized, as confirmed in my ethnography, among all the other bodies of the opera sphere, including opera artists, the directors of opera companies, the cultural officials and bureaucrats, the musical publicists and opera critics, and the media.

## Conclusion

It is beyond the scope of this article to show fully, firstly, that opera can be a relevant object of anthropological research, secondly, that anthropology can offer a pertinent approach to opera, and thirdly, that anthropologists can manage very well in the opera. I think anthropology can contribute to opera research, particularly at the point where, first, it is necessary to look into the

world of seemingly self-evident, correct and sufficient definitions and understandings of opera, and on the basis of this reflection, to analyze further how these function in reality; second, to show that there is no denomination of opera that could always be taken for granted – there are only socio-historically conditioned constructions of different intellectual and other traditions which give to opera within certain cultures, a certain dominant social meaning and sense; and third, to examine the ideas about opera in order to reach a better understanding of the operatic phenomenon and its imagineaire.

Today, opera is not only one of the liveliest and most polemical areas in musical scholarship and musicology, it has an increasingly high profile in other social sciences and in the humanities. Anthropology is capable of adding a significant contribution to this colorful operatic mosaic. My primary aim in this article is to present some of the operatic endeavours of anthropologists whose academic work has touched opera, not merely as a musical, aesthetic or artistic category, but as a social and cultural phenomenon that, throughout the last four hundred years, significantly influenced and reflected the identity of Western culture. As an anthropologist educated in Slovenia during the period of great social change and political transition, my approach to opera is maybe an idiosyncratic one. Opera as a musical, compositional, stylistic or aesthetic structure is for someone not expert in music scholarship difficult to understand. But if we take into account opera's social dimension, anthropologists can certainly say something about its "social power" according to the principles, methods and procedures we use to understand social phenomena particularly, as one of the tasks of practising anthropology today is producing new objects, developing new perspectives and creating new findings in existing objects. Opera still has many secrets to be revealed and offers many opportunities for all kinds of erudition.

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Vlado Kotnik

### Opera i antropolog: čudan par?

Tekst započinje jednostavnim iznošenjem činjenice koja dobro pokazuje odnos između opere i antropologije: s jedne strane, opera je nova, neobična i "egzotična" tema za antropologe, s druge strane, antropologija se i dalje smatra prilično čudnim, neuobičajenim i "egzotičnim" pristupom operi. Staro je uverenje da socijalni i kulturni antropolozi, u prošlim vremenima, nisu često išli u operu. Urbani glamur opere, bilo da je bio predstavljen kroz sjaj dvorskog spektakla, pompu nacionalnih mitova i sentimentalnih melodrama, kao politički događaj ili narodski festival, činio se hiljadama kilometara daleko od tradicionalnih aktivnosti antropologa, i sasvim udaljen od njihovog uobičajenog mesta istraživanja. U toku četiri veka svog postojanja, glavni cilj opere bio je da fascinira i stvori fantazme fokusirajući se na evropsku kulturu, dok je zadatak antropologije bio sasvim suprotan: da dekonstruiše takve fantazme usredsređujući se primarno na ne-evropske kulture. Autor, međutim, nastoji da pokaže da postoje brojni razlozi koji dokazuju da opera i antropologija ne moraju više biti tuđe jedna drugoj, niti međusobno udaljene. Ukoliko su antropolozi smatrali operu nečim što je strano njihovom polju proučavanja, ta tradicionalna kontradikcija između kulture opere i kulture antropologa je prevazilažena tokom poslednje tri decenije. Kao rezultat tog nastojanja, članak nas upoznaje sa šest antropologa čije su lične i profesionalne sklonosti ka operi bez sumnje bile jasno prisutne u njihovom akademskom opusu i biografiji: Klod Levi-Stros, Mišel Leris, Vilijam O. Biman, Deni Labor, Pol Etkinson i autor ovog članka. Dok je Levi-Strosovo strukturalno čitanje

Vagnerovog "Prstena" pokazalo koliko je opera matematički strukturirano delo, kao i mit, Leris je ukazao na strasnu, ceremonijalnu i društvenu stranu opere. Štaviše, rad i delo Vilijama O. Bimana pokazali su da se u isto vreme može biti antropolog i profesionalni operski pevač. Druga dva istraživača, francuski muzički antropolog Deni Labor i britanski socijalni antropolog Pol Etkinson, minucioznim istraživanjem moderne operske produkcije, otkrili su život iza scene savremene operske mašinerije pokazujući kako se u tom složenom procesu ukrštaju muzički, teatarski, kulturni i ekonomski putevi. Konačno, ovaj autor otkriva svoje lično i intelektualno interesovanje za operski život u Sloveniji i pokazuje šta antropologiju opere čini posebnom i različitom u odnosu na druge, uglavnom dominantne, muzičke i muzikološko-istorijske tradicije proučavanja u Sloveniji. Stoga, glavni cilj ovog rada je da pokaže da antropologija ima šta da kaže o operi, i to ne samo kao muzičkoj, estetskoj i artističkoj kategoriji, već i kao društvenom i kulturnom fenomenu koji je, tokom četiri veka postojanja, značajno uticao na tokove Zapadne kulture i reflektovao njene osobine. Pritom, ovaj članak pokazuje ne samo da je opera relevantan predmet istraživanja za antropologe, već i da antropologija jeste i treba da bude pertinentni pristup proučavanju opere, ali i da se antropolog sasvim lepo može snaći u operi. Posle svega, opera i antropolog ne bi trebalo više da budu čudan par.

*Ključne reči:* opera, muzika, umetnost, antropologija, epistemologija

Vlado Kotnik

### L'opéra et l'anthropologie : un drôle de couple?

Le présent texte s'ouvre sur un simple fait, qui témoigne bien de la relation entre l'opéra et l'anthropologie : d'une part, l'opéra représente un sujet nouveau, étrange, et "exotique" pour les anthropologues ; d'autre part, l'anthropologie est toujours considérée comme une approche plutôt bizarre, inhabituelle et "exotique" à l'opéra. On croit depuis longtemps que les anthropologues sociaux et culturels n'avaient pas toujours l'habitude de fréquenter l'opéra. Le glamour urbain de l'opéra, qu'ils se manifestât dans la splendeur des spectacles de la Cour, dans la pompe des mythes nationaux et des mélodrames sentimentaux, dans les événements politiques ou les fêtes populaires, semblait se trouver à mille lieues des activités traditionnelles des anthropologues et, surtout, très éloigné de leur lieu de travail habituel. Pendant les quatre siècles de son existence, l'objectif principal poursuivi par l'opéra était de fasciner et de créer des fantasmes en se focalisant sur la culture européenne ; l'anthropologie, en revanche, avait une tâche tout autre : déconstruire ces fantasmes, en se concentrant principalement sur les cultures non-européennes. Toutefois, l'auteur cherche à démontrer qu'il existe de nombreuses raisons pour lesquelles l'opéra et

l'anthropologie ne doivent plus demeurer étrangères l'une à l'autre. A cet effet, l'article présente six anthropologues qui, attachés personnellement et professionnellement à l'opéra, le donnaient à voir dans leur œuvre académique et leur biographie : Claude Lévi-Strauss, Michel Leiris, William O. Beeman, Denis Laborde, Paul Atkinson, et l'auteur du présent travail lui-même. Tandis que la lecture structurale de la "Bague" wagnerienne proposée par Claude Lévi-Strauss montre à quel point l'opéra est doué d'une structure mathématique et d'un caractère mythique, Leiris a signalé le côté passionné, cérémonial et social de l'opéra. Par ailleurs, l'œuvre de William O. Beeman témoigne du fait qu'il est possible d'être à la fois anthropologue et chanteur professionnel d'opéra. Deux autres chercheurs, anthropologue de la musique français Denis Laborde et anthropologue social britannique Paul Atkinson, ont découvert la vie qui se déroule derrière les coulisses de la machinerie de l'opéra grâce à une recherche minutieuse sur la production opératique moderne : cette recherche leur a permis de dévoiler l'entrecroisement des voies musicales, théâtrales, culturelles et économiques dans le processus complexe de la mise en scène. Finalement, l'auteur du texte révèle son intérêt personnel et intellectuel pour la vie de l'opéra en Slovénie pour montrer ce qui distingue l'anthropologie de l'opéra et la rend différente par rapport aux autres traditions d'histoire musicale et musicologique, pourtant plus dominantes. L'objectif principal du présent travail consiste donc à démontrer que l'anthropologie a des choses à dire sur l'opéra, compris non seulement comme une catégorie musicale, esthétique et artistique, mais aussi comme un phénomène social et culturel, qui a exercé une influence importante sur la culture occidentale au cours des quatre derniers siècles tout en reflétant ses traits caractéristiques. Le présent article montre par ailleurs que l'opéra représente un objet d'étude pertinent pour les anthropologues, que l'anthropologie constitue et doit constituer une approche pertinente à l'étude de l'opéra, mais aussi qu'un anthropologue est capable de se débrouiller très bien à l'opéra. Après tout, l'opéra et l'anthropologue ne devrait plus représenter un drôle de couple.

*Mots-clés*: opéra, musique, art, anthropologie, épistémologie