

CHRISTOPHER MORRIS, *SCREENING THE OPERATIC STAGE: TELEVISION AND BEYOND* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2024) ISBN: 9780226831299, 280 pp, \$37.50 (Paperback), \$112.50 (Cloth), \$36.99 (E-book).

Screened opera performances—whether in the form of theatrically released ‘cinecasts’ or online on-demand streams—have long formed a distinctive facet of contemporary audiovisual culture, with broadcast opera series like *The Met: Live in HD* and the Royal Opera House’s annual *Live Cinema Season* serving as important strands of opera companies’ revenue streams, advertising, and outreach programmes.¹ While earlier publications have investigated specific aspects of opera’s onscreen presence (such as Jennifer Barnes’ study of studio-shot opera productions for television),² *Screening the Operatic Stage: Television and Beyond* is the first book-length effort to theorise screened opera as a distinct audiovisual phenomenon with its own rich history and an identifiable set of screen conventions and cultural practices. Adopting an admirably interdisciplinary approach and firmly situating these idiosyncratic practices amid our present era’s multi-platform, media-saturated audiovisual landscape,³ Christopher Morris deftly navigates the dominant methods, grammar, and rhetoric which have evolved and shaped the remediation of operatic performance for over a century. While mounting this task is a timely and important undertaking in and of itself, the value of this investigation is perhaps best evidenced in its incisive commentary on the prevailing assumptions which so regularly dictate how opera performances can and should be remediated: enduring frameworks which, by Morris’s reckoning, have long encumbered the idiom and ensured that its considerable creative potential has remained largely untapped.

Screening the Operatic Stage is divided into three sections. Part I comprises the first two chapters and offers a robust theoretical basis for the study’s later analyses, broadly concerning itself with ‘how opera sees itself in video’ (20). Chapter 1 focuses on the prominence lent to onstage projections, video live-feeds, and monitor screens in recent opera productions. Here, Morris deftly confronts the many issues that arise when these conspicuously intermedial creative decisions are later (re-)screened in the form of

¹ Sabah Meddings, ‘London’s Royal Opera House is changing its name and chasing a Netflix series,’ *Bloomberg* (30 April 2024), <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-04-30/london-s-royal-opera-house-changes-its-name-chases-a-netflix-series>; The Metropolitan Opera, ‘Annual Report 2017–18’ (2018), https://www.metopera.org/globalassets/about/annual-reports/ar_1718_111020-3.pdf

² Jennifer Barnes, *Television Opera: The Fall of Opera Commissioned for Television* (London: Boydell, 2003).

³ See Holly Rogers, *Sounding the Gallery: Video and the Rise of Art-Music* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Carol Vernallis, *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video, and the New Digital Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

cinecasts or on-demand opera productions. Moving then from staged screens to screened stages, Chapter 2 accounts for the dominant single-frame approach in recent multicamera recordings of opera performances. Of this practice, Morris argues that the typical absence of split-screen, grid, and multi-windowed views in opera recordings is quite at odds with contemporary stagings, which regularly incorporate segmented sets and multiple windowed sites of simultaneous onstage action.⁴

Part II is more decidedly theoretical in scope, with each of its four chapters striving to account for 'the strangely liminal cultural and conceptual space occupied by cinecasts' (21). Perhaps inevitably, it is the oft-invoked theoretical discourse on liveness and presence in screen media that informs the section's first chapter, in which Morris examines the dominant rhetoric employed in the promotion of cinecasts as global and synchronously shared audience experiences. Chapter 3 thus contends that the 'imaginary of simultaneity' (93) which is at the heart of marketing strategies for so many cinecast series gestated not in the grammar of cinema, but in that of television: a disjuncture between the phenomenon's origins and its aspirations which has, in Morris's estimation, resulted in a great many missed opportunities for creativity and innovation in the idiom. This topic is further addressed in Chapter 4, which explores how the 'question of and desire for virtual presence' (61) has driven the often unimaginative replicatory impetus of multicamera opera broadcasts; that is, the desire 'to recreate the form as it is, essentially in terms of theatre' (137). Here, Morris charges this prevailing approach with having contributed to a marked sense of resistance among audiences to any more daring attempts to reimagine opera stagings as simulcasts/on-demand streams in recent years.

The latter chapters of Part II examine how, despite the movie theatre being routinely framed as the sole venue capable of replicating the scale and affective aspirations of opera, cinecasts rarely attempt to directly replicate the experience of opera house attendance and instead typically assure audiences that they will experience something greater and more special still. This is convincingly argued in Chapter 5 with reference to an array of recurring editing and directorial practices, while also turning towards the experience of the opera singers themselves, who typically temper their performances to befit the new medium: opera is thus 'transformed by the knowledge of your spectatorship' (136). Crucially, this chapter features the volume's most targeted account of the conventions that most characterise contemporary screened opera (shot lengths, cutting rates, dolly/jib/zoom practices, and so on): a vital resource which helpfully contextualises these conventions amid antecedent multi-camera production

⁴ Morris cites Katie Mitchell's production of *Written on Skin* (2012, Aix-en-Provence) as vivid evidence of this tendency.

practices from across the history of broadcast television and beyond. Closing Part II of his study, Chapter 6 sees Morris revisit the oft-parroted stance that cinecasts need only present opera 'as-it-is': the replicatory impetus mentioned earlier, once described by *ArtsJournal* editor Douglas McLennan as the *facsimile* approach (160). By focusing more closely on a number of recurring practices in screened opera (such as cinecasts' incorporation of interval interviews with performers, conspicuously ostentatious camera movements, and artificial audio 'sweetening,' among others), Morris highlights the paradoxical contrast between opera companies' flaunting of their aspirations towards verisimilitude and their seemingly contradictory assertion that live attendance at the master venue is, in the end, an irreproducible experience.

Part III houses one further chapter in which Morris applies his ideas to other outlier productions that have enjoyed similar onscreen afterlives. Focusing solely on site-specific stagings of well-known 19th-century repertory (as opposed to avant-garde works, which have more routinely served as the inspiration for alternative interpretations), Chapter 7 takes its case studies from two separate trilogies of televised opera: the Puccini and Verdi productions that formed *La via della musica* (dir. Andermann, 1992–2010), and a separate trilogy of Swiss opera telecasts produced for the channel Schweizer Fernsehen (prod. Beck and Eggenberger, 2008–2010). Especially striking here is Morris's appraisal of the latter example and its questionable harnessing of the site-specific idiom to convey its crude socioeconomic commentary on opera culture (the production sees *La bohème* relocated to a 1960s social housing project in Bern which is home to a working class and racially diverse population).

Finally, in the volume's short Conclusion, Morris's closing reflections concern themselves with the more widespread proliferation of opera on screen since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the many developments that the ensuing era has occasioned in stage-to-screen remediation more generally. These observations serve *Screening the Operatic Stage* as a fitting coda, as well as a moment of (not entirely optimistic) reflection on what may lie ahead for screened opera. Of course, the timeliness of Morris's observations in the wake of a global pandemic—especially those concerning issues of listenership, liveness, and simultaneity—is eminently clear at many earlier junctures in his study. For instance, amid the volume's rich historicization of the reception of early broadcast opera from the early 20th-century on, one cannot but be struck by the unintentional sense of absence with which Ernst Schoen branded early radio broadcasts of opera (96) and its close equivalence to that of the many 'quarantine

concerts' that characterised the early COVID era, as highlighted by screen music scholars like Landon Palmer.⁵

As noted earlier, Morris's methodology relies on an impressively interdisciplinary range of literature, with each chapter introducing its own targeted and highly relevant theoretical framing. Here one might think of the extensive research on surveillance that informs Morris's nuanced analysis of *Judith* (2020, Bayerische Staatsoper) in Chapter 2, his exacting inquiry into issues of simultaneity and liveness in broadcast media in Chapter 3, or the apt harnessing of literature on sports broadcasting and pre/post-game interview practices that characterises Chapter 6. Notwithstanding these eclectic theoretical debts however, several constant conceptual emphases unify his study's many disparate analyses. We have already seen how Morris confronts the rigidity of existing practices and expectations for screened opera, which he ardently charges with having stymied the rich creative potential of the idiom. His study's many varied analyses are thus collectively coloured by, in the author's words, a sense 'of opportunities missed, of turns not taken' (55). Yet, perhaps the most consequential theoretical throughline of *Screening the Operatic Stage* is Morris's conscious decision to approach remediated opera's medium-specific properties by way of the *televisual*, here understood as connoting a body of 'characteristics, values, and aesthetics beyond the confines of specific technologies or media' (13). Channelling the work of Lisa Parks,⁶ Morris recounts how televisual grammar and presentational syntax has, since the 1960s, expanded far beyond the confines of broadcast television and can be seen to permeate an array of screen media contexts, including opera cinecasts (101). Arguably the most important unifying thread of Morris's study is thus his compelling argument that it has been the conventions of television—not cinema—which have long served as the dominant model for broadcast opera (100). This recurring emphasis on the televisual throughout the volume serves Morris as an indispensable means of foregrounding the most distinctive properties that characterise the rhetoric, aesthetics, and reception of screened opera: whether one thinks of the 'self-obliterating' grammar of multicamera opera productions,⁷ or their paratextual materials (intro/credits sequences, host

⁵ Landon Palmer, '@Concert: Liveness in the Time of Coronavirus,' [in] *Transition: Journal of Videographic Film & Moving Image Studies*, 10/1 (2023), <https://intransition.openlibhums.org/article/id/11262/>

⁶ Lisa Parks, *Cultures in Orbit: Satellites and the Televisual* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁷ This quality stands at odds with that of related multimedia phenomena, such as *cine-concerts*, in which a considerable degree of audience appeal is instead derived from the foregrounding of otherwise unseen material processes involved in the creation of screen music. See Brooke McCorkle Okazaki, 'Liveness, Music, Media: The Case of the Cine-Concert,' *Music and the Moving Image*, 13/2 (2020), 3–24.

segments, backstage interviews, etc.) which are so tangibly indebted to the conventions of 'the televisual live' (117).

Beyond these impressively interdisciplinary theoretical debts, one of the great challenges inherent to engaging in a study like this—which centres around both the inherently remediated nature of the works themselves and the experience of their audiences—is to account for the densely concentric levels of screened experiences that productions like these can entail for viewers.⁸ Morris deftly confronts this challenge throughout *Screening the Operatic Stage* by simultaneously accounting for both our own experience of remediated opera productions onscreen and the original experience of the opera house attendees whose performances we are (re-)viewing, carefully considering the distinct aesthetic, experiential, and musical ramifications of both modes of spectatorship. Morris's dual-interrogation of these two points of view/audition is a continual presence in this study, as he probes the most consequential commonalities and distinctions between the two. This joint focus is especially palpable in the book's early analysis of Tobias Kratzer's *Tannhäuser* (2019, Bayreuther Festspiele), a production notable for incorporating a mixture of both a projected live-feed and pre-recorded scenes with its cast members, which offer a backstage metanarrative to be experienced alongside the primary drama playing out onstage. Related issues are raised by the 2016 iteration of Frank Castorf's *Ring* cycle at Bayreuth, which serves the volume as its apt introductory case study. Not only does Castorf's production and its subsequent telecast/on-demand stream distil many of the key aesthetic issues probed throughout Morris's investigation, it also lays bare the most recurring criticisms which are typically levelled against multimedia opera stagings: whether they are viewed as the fruits of a hackneyed and self-indulgent fad, or simply panned for being realised in uninteresting or unimaginative ways. By assessing the prominence lent to numerous screens, projections, an enormous overhanging monitor, and a multicamera live-feed of the onstage performers as part of Castorf's set, as well as the production's subsequent post-existence in Sky Arts' own multicamera broadcast of the run (dir. Myriam Hoyer), Morris presents a compelling interpretation of the concentric levels of remediation at play in the German director's divisive *Ring*. Here, as throughout this volume, Morris's terse observations and close readings of specific scenes and shots serve to efficiently untangle remediated opera's often dense mesh of screened layers, convincingly exposing the ramifications of these recent technical developments and aesthetic shifts

⁸ As Morris highlights in Part I of his study, this is especially true of multicamera recordings of opera stagings that in themselves incorporate onstage video feeds and projections. Examples include Castorf's *Ring* (2016), Honoré's *Tosca* (2019), and Katie Mitchell's *The Waves* (2006) and ... *some trace of her* (2008).

for both the production being scrutinised and for multicamera opera recordings more generally.

Were I to flag one area that is not investigated in this volume and which I feel the author's approach would have vividly illuminated, it would be the increasingly prominent incorporation of immersive, extended reality (XR), and 3D projection technologies in recent operatic and theatrical productions.⁹ Given this volume's deft framing of 'video's colonisation of the stage (operatic and otherwise)' (25) by way of rapid developments in projection technologies, I believe productions like BASE Hologram's 'Callas in Concert: The Hologram Tour' or Shibuya Keīchirō's 'humanless' multimedia work *The End* would serve as fertile ground for an extension of this investigation.¹⁰ This is particularly true of the latter example, especially given the existence of an elaborate multicamera recording of Shibuya's 'opera' (2013, Théâtre du Châtelet) and the considerable difficulties that would have undoubtedly arisen in the filming of the four giant onstage screens used to facilitate the production's hologram effects. While experimental productions like these may not constitute screened opera in a strict or more conventional sense, they nonetheless vividly espouse the rich potential for innovation and creativity that so many cinecasts and on-demand opera streams elide, serving as evidence that some creators and opera companies are—at least in certain respects—becoming attuned to the rich potential of these technologies. Here, one might think of *Munkination*: an extended reality Afro-futurist work with a timely climate justice message, born of a collaboration between the Royal Opera House's recently founded in-house innovation programme Audience Labs and the illustrator/musician HAM.¹¹ More recently and closer to home, *We Who Live Under Heaven*—a forty-minute "mixed reality opera" born of a collaboration between Dublin composer Roger Doyle and multidisciplinary artist Jo Mangan—premiered at the 2025 Kilkenny Arts Festival, serving as further evidence still of these trends' ever-increasing visibility in contemporary music scenes and festival contexts, both in Ireland and internationally.

Nonetheless, and notwithstanding these fertile avenues for future exploration, *Screening the Operatic Stage* represents a valuable milestone in the development of our

⁹ Chapter 7 does make passing reference to contemporary music theatre's recent embrace of digital and immersive technologies (163), yet this is primarily in relation to certain contemporary productions' incorporation of soundwalk elements and the profusion of networked and multisite performance practices in recent opera stagings and their onscreen post-lives.

¹⁰ See Jessica Tsun Lem Hui, 'Reconfiguring Voice in *The End*: Virtuosity, Technological Affordance and the Reversibility of Hatsune Miku in the Intermundane,' *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 34/3 (2022), 364–379.

¹¹ Samantha King, Nina Willment, Rebecca Smith, and Toki Allison, 'Immersive Storytelling and Climate Realities,' online panel, Kings College London, 2 April 2024.

understanding of this century-old audiovisual practice which, despite its ever-increasing visibility as part of our current era's mediascape, has long been neglected in terms of robust scholarly inquiry or theorisation. Morris's timely study redresses this imbalance with impressive rigour and depth, without ever sacrificing the clarity of prose and mischievous penchant for wordplay that will undoubtedly be familiar to readers already acquainted with the author's tenor. I am in no doubt that this study will serve as a foundational text for much future research and teaching in eclectic areas of musicology, opera studies, screen music/sound studies, film theory, and digital media studies, yet I equally anticipate that its reach may extend far beyond the comfort of academic inquiry to provoke valuable reflection among opera producers and digital media practitioners in the years ahead.

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