Reviving Passions: A Brief Examination of Opera, Past and Present in Utah

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Rudolph Walter’s Lecture “Opera and It’s Voices in Utah” Synopsis:

“As I invoke the force to be with us, you must realize that the force was operatically in place long before the mythology of Star Wars.”

Mormon pioneers had talents equal to those internationally known, but were isolated. They created ensembles, concerts, and operas. March 6, 1862, opera officially arrived with the Howson Opera Company in 1869, from Australia, with conductor George Careless, who joined the Mormon church when he was 11. He was invited to meet with Brigham Young in 1865 who called him to be the chief musician of the church, to take the Tabernacle Choir and theatre orchestra and lay the foundation for good music. Careless wanted the best players of the Salt Lake Theatre Orchestra, 7 out of 16, and he wanted them paid or he would resign. Brigham Young personally approved the request. A quarter of the pioneer population was English, so it was natural that Gilbert and Sullivan’s HMS Pinafore created a frenzy when it was produced by Careless in 1879, as did several other Gilbert and Sullivan productions. On October 11, 1880, Dudley Buck’s production of Deseret, or A Saint’s Affliction, premiered in New York. It was rich with Gilbert and Sullivan influence. “The New York Times saw it in the darkest of terms”. The Opera Workshop space is named for Emma Lucy Gates, Brigham Young’s granddaughter. Though an early review was not encouraging, after studying in Berlin she was hired as the cover for Frieda Hemple. She performed in Kassel, Germany and won a five-year contract and was listed equal to the finest sopranos ever. She left Germany and toured with her brother in the Lucy Gates Grand Opera Company from 1915 to 1928. In 1897, The Salt Lake Opera Company joined with Lucy Gates, Robert Eastman, and Heber Goddard. In 1961, Leonard Kastle’s opera, also titled Deseret was televised and was received much kinder by the New York Times, which called it “the most expert and convincing opera yet produced by American authors.” The first performance of Handel’s Messiah between Chicago and San Francisco was directed by Careless, sung by an ensemble of both Mormons and “gentiles.” Annual performances began in 1915 and continue today. Leonard Arrington, from Idaho, was serving in 1944 in Tunisia where he first heard an aria from “Madame Butterfly”. He went to 54 operas in the Royal Opera house in Rome while in the military. In 1938, a 28-year-old conducted Forza in Kassel, Germany. He hadn’t rehearsed or performed it before. The Berlin State Opera general operator contacted Maurice Abravanel with instructions, “take the night train to Berlin, now. You rehearse with the singers in the morning. Tomorrow night, you conduct La Forza at the Berlin State Opera.” He conducted many times there, but always without rehearsal. WWII took him to New York to conduct 7 performances of 5 different operas in 9 days as the youngest conductor ever to be signed with the Metropolitan Opera. In 1947 he came to Salt Lake on a one-year contract to conduct the Utah State Symphony Orchestra. Abravanel influenced many performers, including Ariel Bybee, he took her across the country and earned her a name and sang 460 performances in the Met Opera. Glade Peterson sang in Abravanel’s summer festivals before singing in most of the world’s premier opera companies, after which, he returned to Utah to establish the Utah Opera Company which opened in 1978 with La Boheme, which will be repeated this year in celebration of 40 years of business. Michael Ballam opened the Utah Festival Opera Company in 1993. Leonard Arrington bought the first tickets to the summer season. Ballam would later sing at his funeral.
Reviving Passions:

A Brief Examination of Opera, Past and Present in Utah

Utah State University
An introduction

From its first recognized performance in Italy at a royal wedding in 1597, opera gained the reputation of being elite, the highest form of art. Walter B. Rudolph, program director of KBYU-FM radio in Utah and a renowned expert on opera and its history, gave a lecture at Utah State University in which he comically quoted from Armando Iannucci’s book, *Hear Me Out* that opera is a “coming together of music, theatre, design, people, and coughing in the greatest synthesis of art.” Opera has long been regarded as an art form of affluence, and because it is, quite frankly, the most expensive to produce. High ticket prices, compared to other arts events admissions, add expense that creates problems in the sustainability of this art form, though cost is not the only factor creating issues. Most think of opera, in its essence, as being very formal, including the traditional set, costuming, staging, and so on, so production prices stay high.

Traditionalist values create problems in capturing the interest of new generations of audiences, who, it seems, would rather be packed into a standing-room-only venue, sardine-like, against four hundred other sweaty individuals, jumping under a strobe light to catchy, upbeat songs that deaden eardrums from fifty yards away. In other words, the new consumer, with a shorter attention span, becomes easily distracted, while more mature audiences who enjoy watching singers in period costumes sing a story in a foreign language for three hours, age out from attending opera faster than they can be replaced. Opera companies then lose ticket sales, which drives ticket prices up even further. The obvious question begs to be answered: Why is this centuries-old art form worth saving? And if the answer proves that opera is worthy, what can be done to break the cycle that seems to drive opera further from the public?
Opera, past and present

Music is deeply rooted in human culture, dating back forty-thousand years to primitive flutes made from bones of birds, significantly defining cultural identities, expressing thoughts and feelings, and creating social bonds from humanity’s earliest days (Owen). Over time, the invention of vast varieties of instruments and the development of vocal music yielded many types of music including classical music and opera. Inspired by Greek tragedies, and in hopes of simplifying the polyphonic frenzy of the Renaissance at the end of the sixteenth century, “a group of Florentine musicians and intellectuals” composed the first opera. Comprised mostly of recitatives with a few musical interludes, the style caught on rapidly in Venice, where the first opera house was constructed nearly four hundred years ago (Four Centuries of Opera). Two hundred years later, opera came to the western hemisphere, most prominently in New Orleans, in the early 1800s, when Spain still owned the land. This area of the New World was more closely connected to the music cultures of Europe, in comparison with the English Puritan settlers in the north, who viewed music as appropriate only for liturgical purposes, and theatre as especially useless (Snowman). Just over fifty years later, in the 1860s, when the railroad was established, opera was able to grow and travel across the United States, including to Utah. Even though a quarter of the pioneers who settled the territory were English, Mormons pioneers were much more accepting of music, and embraced it, largely due to the encouragement of their leader, Brigham Young. In Rudolph’s lecture, “Opera and its Voices in Utah” he explains, “opera initially did not cross the plains with the Mormon pioneers, nor did classical music, but singing was a very important part of the pioneer heritage and everyday lives.” Brigham Young encouraged his followers to enjoy not only sacred music, but secular music as well.
President Brigham Young knew that true happiness comes through righteous living, but he also knew that much enjoyment in life can come through wholesome recreation and entertainment. He was fond of the theater, dancing, and other social amusements and provided opportunities for the Saints to enjoy these pastimes, believing that they were important to the people’s wellbeing. In Salt Lake City he supervised the building of the Social Hall, in which were held dances and theatrical performances. In referring to the Social Hall he stated: “That is our fun hall, and not a place in which to administer the sacrament. We dedicated it to the purpose for which it was built (Happiness and Social Enjoyment).”

Rudolph argues that Mormon pioneers had talents equal to those of many internationally known artists, but were isolated until well into the 1800s. Springing from those early settlers, great composers such as James Prigmore and Leonard Kastle, conductors such as George Careless and Maurice Abravanel, and performers such as Emma Lucy Gates and Michael Ballam, all either have deep roots in, or are natives of, Utah. These artists, along with others, have put this state on the international opera map (Rudolph).

Opera has come a long way since its origination, with advancements in costuming, set design, and lighting. Surtitles were established and trademarked by the Canadian Opera Company in the 1980s (An Introduction). The word is derived from the French word ‘sur’, meaning ‘above,’ reflecting the location of the projected libretto above the stage. Surtitles, or supertitles, helped build a huge rise in popularity for opera, providing a deeper level of understanding and more plot-driven stagings of operas. Supertitles enhance audiences’ understanding and engagement, especially for attendees not fluent in the native tongue of the opera, while being able to preserve the integrity of the libretto in its original language (Adair).
Broadcasting opera has graduated from radio recordings to high definition screenings of both live and recorded productions being staged anywhere in the world. For example, Cinemark holds in-theatre screenings of the Metropolitan Opera season throughout the entire year. All the advancements in the staging, producing, and experiencing of opera have, in some opinions, elevated the perception of this art form while also making it more accessible. However, despite of all the progress, the popularity of opera, especially in the United States, continues downward in an alarming decline.

An Art Form in Decline

Charlie Albright, in a CNN article, writes that audiences of classical music in recent decades have actually contributed to the death of classical music by adhering to unspoken rules that dictate a strict method of operation for classical concerts and operas which audience and performers alike must follow. “Coughing? Forbidden. Performers speaking from the stage? Discouraged. Improvisation in a concert? Rarely done and almost never taught in even the most prestigious classical music colleges and conservatories.” These rules only perpetuate the idea that classical music and its listeners are stuffy and elitist. Albright suggests that to save classical music, audiences and performers must break from traditional expectations of strict concert etiquette and bring the focus back to the enjoyment of music. Anne Midgette, a journalist and music critic, states “we do opera no favors when we try to make it all be high art and rip away those populist roots” (qtd. in Huizenga). Loyal opera audiences may see adaptations or variations from original productions as tasteless and inappropriate, creating a reluctance to accept new takes or visions. While there may be some merit in conserving original settings and stagings, the real reason people attend opera is to be moved by the music and inspired by the story. Instead of comparing different performances of the same work, audience members should consider each
production, whether the opera is different or not, as a new work of art, and really try to understand why the directors made the choices they made and learn something new. Composers create operas with narratives relevant to the times in which they are written, and it seems only appropriate that directors honor this tradition to create a new narrative, a new “take” that is relevant to the time in which it is performed. In other words, if audience members are not required to wear powdered wigs and petticoats, then it stands to reason that directors and performers shouldn’t be required to do so, either. Of course, audience member will judge any given performance, but should do so with an educated and fair understanding of the intent of the opera.

Another contributing factor to opera’s decline may be that perspective ticket buyers have shorter attentions spans than ever before. According to Leon Watson in *The Telegraph*, “researchers surveyed 2,000 participants in Canada and studied the brain activity of 112 others using electroencephalograms. The results showed the average human attention span has fallen from 12 seconds in 2000 ... to eight seconds. Goldfish, meanwhile, are believed to have an attention span of nine seconds.” And it’s no wonder, with action-packed movies, video games, and pocket-sized computers that demand and divert our energies in thousands of ways at once. A story set to classical music, sung in another language may be enough to put the entire millennial generation to sleep, or some might think. Therefore, as loyal audience members begin to age out, there are holes left in the theatre’s seats, and the rising generation of consumers can’t seem to pay attention long enough to fill them.

Additionally, opera goers may be deterred by the ticket price, as the cost of attending an opera has increased greatly in recent years. Sadly, however, attendance and ticket price often
have an inverse correlation. That is, the fewer people that attend an event, the more the ticket must cost to pay for renting the space and paying the performers and all those involved in its production. Another financial factor ailing opera houses is the increasing cost of renting space and employing people to run and perform in shows, even though the productivity of these people hasn’t increased. This principle was explained by William Baumol, an economist who wanted to figure out “why barbers make more in San Francisco than in Cleveland and why services such as health care and education keep getting more expensive... dragging down the economy-wide rate of productivity growth” (Lee). This financial element, Baumol’s cost disease, makes it more difficult to produce opera as time goes on. Because of these factors, tickets become less affordable and attendance decreases. Supporting local and professional opera companies is crucial to the survival of opera, and therefore, it is now more important than ever to educate young audiences about the incredible experience of seeing opera, as there is no better way to convince young people that opera is even worth saving.

Winds of Change

If the great works of Shakespeare can be taught in our English classes, then why not use opera in similar ways? It could be useful not only in music classes, but in humanities and even foreign language and history classes. Operas often portray some aspect of culture, political mood, or historical events at the time of their composition, and can be a new and engaging way to explore the pasts of different cultures and their humanity, even while being portrayed in another language. Composers include careful shaping of phrases and dramatic interpretations which provide great meaning to the text, and can be helpful in teaching foreign languages to students. Though opera is not yet integrated into the U.S. education system in this way, steps are being taken in the right direction to educate young audiences about opera. Specifically, through
programs sponsored by opera companies and university opera theatres, small casts travel to elementary, junior high, and high schools where they perform shows in special assemblies. Performing lighthearted and engaging repertoire meant for young audiences, these companies cultivate a new love of opera in young people. Utah State University has such a program, through which current vocal students can learn opera repertoire, teach children about opera, and can also be rewarded for their time and commitment through a scholarship. These groups are meant to inspire school-age children to learn about opera, and they also show students that classical music can be full of life and fun; it doesn’t have to be tragedy and death, and it doesn’t have to lull the listener to sleep.

Early exposure to opera is crucial to the sustainability of the art form, and with low accessibility for the general population to attend professional live performances, options such as live streaming of professional operas, university level productions, outreach groups, and recordings are all great resources to get opera circulating among the masses again. However, going to see a live, professional opera production is an experience unlike any other. Nearly everyone has immediate access to thousands of pictures of priceless artwork in their pockets today, so why would anyone go to a museum and pay admission to see the genuine article? Most claim that, ‘it’s just not the same.’ Viewing an original piece of art evokes a special emotional reaction that cannot be replicated. The same principle applies to opera. Listening to recordings of Maria Callas sing Puccini’s ‘Vissi d’arte’ is not the same as watching Floria Tosca as her heart tears apart, lamenting her and her lovers’ fates, and begging God not to betray her.

Opera companies have the responsibility to know their younger audience and create a season of shows that appeals to them. Even if it is the director’s favorite score, Wagner’s six-hour-long Der Meistersinger von Nurnberg may not even keep the attention of the most avid
opera viewer. Operas that keep the interpretation fresh and the action engaging will be much more likely to promote a second visit to the opera house, or even a season ticket purchase.

**Passion Plays its Part**

People take the time to educate themselves about opera and invest their time and money to see opera because it is worth saving. Without trying to outline all of the reasons why music is beneficial, it is hard to argue the ways it impacts people. Listening to music in general is good for mental and physical health. According to a study by John’s Hopkins, “research has shown that listening to music can reduce anxiety, blood pressure, and pain as well as improve sleep quality, mood, mental alertness, and memory. ... If you want to firm up your body, head to the gym. If you want to exercise your brain, listen to music” (Keeping Your Brain Young with Music).

Music provides a way for people to communicate across all barriers of language, space, and time. It has a way of transcending traditional types of communication and immediately enlightens the listener with the emotion the composer, director, and performer want to convey. It brings people from all over the world together to share a common idea, regardless of how each listener interprets it. Music is a universal language that unifies and connects all those who listen.

There are few types of music that enrich a person’s life more than opera. In his lecture, Rudolph describes opera as the fine dining experience of the musical world, not to be confused with fast food or take-out. It is not only about a pleasant voice, or a story, but about the mastery of the some of the most difficult music ever written. Without need for amplification, opera inspires emotions in the audience through song, dance, set and lighting design, costuming, orchestration, and a message that reaches each audience member, that gives depth to some aspect of their life. The combined effect of these elements keeps audiences coming back for more.
Rudolph describes a young man who, in 1944 was on active military duty in Tunisia, where he first heard an aria from ‘Madame Butterfly,’ which inspired a lifelong love of opera. This man, Leonard Arrington, later historian of the LDS Church and part founder of the Western History Association, was able to see 54 operas while serving in the military and he continued his patronage once he came back home. He was the first to buy tickets to the opening summer season of the Utah Festival Opera Company in 1993. Rudolph and Arrington became friends, and Rudolph even recollects hearing Arrington perform in his home at an intimate gathering. He recounts that, while the performance was less than technically impeccable, anyone who saw it could feel Arrington’s intense love for the music. Rudolph’s main theme when talking about opera and great singers, centers on passion, the love of music--not talent, and certainly not affluence. People who give opera a chance know it isn’t about elitism. Rather, opera illuminates the human experience: the passion, the nobility, the degradation; at its best, opera brings people together in a shared, nearly euphoric, emotional experience. Opera provides a deeper understanding of humanity, of compassion for one another, and an exalting connection between anyone who will listen, and that makes it worth saving.
Works Cited


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