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'REACHING OUT' OR INSTITUTIONAL VIRTUE-SIGNALLING? THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY OPERA PROJECTS IN UK OPERA HOUSES TODAY

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Abstract: The education and outreach departments that coordinate community and participation projects have become a ubiquitous component of opera houses in the UK over the last 40 years yet rarely do their productions appear on the main stage. This article considers recent projects run by Opera North, English National Opera, Opera Holland Park and Glyndebourne and asks whether opera houses are genuinely committed to connecting communities with opera or treat outreach as no more than a means of obtaining funding. The article explores the history of the development of outreach departments and the potential that community involvement offers as a revitalising force for the operatic artform. A series of interviews with opera professionals brings the debate up to date.

Modern opera houses across the UK rely to a great extent on state funding to stage their productions. As Nicholas Payne has outlined, opera's business model is 'not structured to deliver profit, but rather towards generating enough income to cover the costs of production'.[1] For example, in the 2017–18 season Opera North, the opera company based in Leeds, received 67% of its funding from government sources – just over 12 million pounds – most of which came via Arts Council England (ACE). In contrast, only 13% came from ticket sales and 20% from other fundraising initiatives.[2]

To obtain this financial support organisations like opera houses apply for grants from ACE on a regular basis. This involves presenting a case as to how they satisfy the various criteria laid out by ACE to justify the allocation of funds. Since 2013, when ACE launched its Creative People and Places scheme, there has been an increasing emphasis on 'participatory' arts projects, for which funding has been granted to organisations and individuals who work with communities to facilitate participants' engagement in creative activities.[3]

[1] Nicholas Payne, 'The Business of Opera', in *The Cambridge Companion to Opera Studies*, ed. Nicholas Till (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 53.

[2] *Opera North Review 2018*, www.operanorth.co.uk/about-us/about-opera-north/reviews-and-reports/ (accessed 23 July 2022), p. 14.

[3] François Matarasso, *A Restless Art: How Participation Won, and Why It Matters* (London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 2019), pp. 175–76.

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ACE's Let's Create 2020–2030 strategy between 2018 and 2022 saw investment of 1.45 billion pounds of public money with three stated outcomes:

1.) Creative People: Everyone can develop and express their creativity throughout their life.
2.) Cultural Communities**:** Villages, towns and cities thrive through a collaborative approach to culture.
3.) A Creative and Cultural Country: England's cultural sector is innovative, collaborative and international.[4]

Presented with these criteria opera houses have responded by hosting and promoting 'community', 'educational' and 'outreach' projects with an emphasis on 'participation' in order to win funding for their productions. It is common to see such projects given prominence in the brochures, websites and other promotional materials released by opera houses. Accompanying Opera North's financial statistics in its 2017–18 annual review are many references to the company's efforts to 'connect with communities and inspire people of all ages and walks of life to explore opera, music and the arts'. Such statements are supported by anecdotal quotations from participants and audience members, as well as general statistics about the numbers of people who have taken part in outreach projects. However, the methodology for gathering these statistics is less clear, and it is easy to imagine a conflation of participants in community projects and attendees at regular opera productions, perhaps to exaggerate the degree of community involvement.[5]

The hosting of community projects by opera houses is by no means a new phenomenon in the UK. Following the example set by the London Sinfonietta in 1981, professional orchestras and opera houses developed education and outreach departments.[6] The motivations for these developments are complex: some were inspired by the activities of composers like Benjamin Britten and Imogen Holst;[7] others were influenced by the community arts movement and community music activities which began in the UK during the 1960s.[8] Equally significant, according to Gillian Moore, was the 'missionary zeal' of contemporary composers with 'something to say to a wider public than the very small ghetto of people who were coming to contemporary music concerts'.[9] This explains why the London Sinfonietta, specialising in contemporary music, was the first musical institution in the UK to establish an education and outreach department. Likewise, Opera North's education department was partly initiated by Robert

[4] *Let's Create Strategy 2020–2030* (2021). Arts Council England, www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication/our-strategy-2020-2030 (accessed 23 July 2022), p. 28.

[5] For example, the following statement: 'From grand theatres to shopping centres; from community venues to city squares; from the local pub to the global digital arena, Opera North is reaching ever more diverse audiences, with more than 100,000 attendances at our performances over the course of the year'. *Opera North Review 2018*, p. 8.

[6] Julia Winterson, 'The Community Education Work of Orchestras and Opera Companies: Principles, Practice and Problems' (Ph.D. dissertation, University of York, 1998), p. 58.

[7] Gillian Moore, 'A Vigorous Unbroken Tradition: British Composers and the Community since the Beginning of the Twentieth Century', in *Beyond Britten: The Composer and the Community*, eds Peter Wiegold and Ghislaine Kenyon (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2015), pp. 45–73.

[8] Kathryn Deane, 'Community Music in the United Kingdom', in *The Oxford Handbook of Community Music*, eds Brydie-Leigh Bartleet and Lee Higgins (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 323–42; Lee Higgins, *Community Music: In Theory and in Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 42–54.

[9] Winterson, 'Community Education Work', appendix, p. 32.

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Worby, a composer with experience of leading projects in schools based upon the music of John Cage.[10] Contemporary music of this kind, despite its ancestry in high modernism, was well suited to school projects as it did not depend upon the harmony and counterpoint training or performance expertise of earlier classical music. With its use of chance procedures and free improvisation or 'play', this music enabled schoolchildren to engage creatively in professionally led workshops.

This overlap between contemporary music and education work had already been successfully realised by Trevor Wishart in two books of 'musical games', entitled *Sounds Fun* and *Sounds Fun 2*, which were used in music workshops throughout the country.[11] Since the 1970s Wishart has worked extensively as a leader of music education projects, particularly using voice and music technology. *Sun – Creativity and Environment* and *Sun 2 – A Creative Philosophy* expound on his commitment to community education projects.[12] Wishart's work also reveals important connections between contemporary music and the 'community arts movement'. As he explains:

> In the 1970s, community arts was just emerging as an important force. I also got involved in performance art which tended to be going on in the street in unusual venues. I had a political commitment to the idea of art being accessible to everybody and a crucial part of life. Creativity, rather than art.[13]

It was this 'political commitment' that both contemporary music and the community arts movements held in common and it also played into musical education projects. For example, Wishart explains in his introduction to his musical games that they were written to 'teach a mutual respect for the efforts of others, rather than a passive respect for authority'.[14] Authority here could be the perceived elitism of musical institutions like orchestras and opera houses, traditional forms of musical education like harmony and counterpoint or the idea of creativity itself as being the exclusive activity of elite artists: the few not the many.[15]

These ideas of the creative potential of everyone and their communities has been enormously influential, becoming an orthodoxy within UK arts policy, as is clear from ACE's Let's Create strategy. It is a dominant ideological principle underpinning the education work of opera houses, developed in workshop settings and often referred to today as 'co-creativity'.[16] This kind of work sees opera houses sending professionals out into a community context to work, like Wishart, in 'unusual venues', with a 'commitment to the idea of art being accessible to everybody'. Wishart produced one such project while composer-in-residence at Durham University, *Encounters in the Republic of Heaven* (2010), which he describes as 'an exploration of the music inherent in everyday speech. It brings together stories

[10] Katie Tearle, 'I Was St Francis', in *Beyond Britten: The Composer and the Community*, eds Peter Wiegold and Ghislaine Kenyon (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2015), pp. 131–42.

[11] Trevor Wishart, *Sounds Fun* (London: Universal Edition, 1975); Trevor Wishart, *Sounds Fun 2* (London: Universal Edition, 1977).

[12] Trevor Wishart, *Sun – Creativity and Environment* (London: Universal Edition, 1974); Trevor Wishart, *Sun 2 – A Creative Philosophy* (London: Universal Edition, 1977).

[13] Ibid.; Winterson, 'Community Education Work', appendix, p. 20.

[14] Wishart, *Sounds Fun*, p. 3.

[15] John Paynter and Peter Ashton's book *Sound and Silence* was widely read and introduced these ideas into the music education system in the UK and eventually into the national curriculum. John Paynter and Peter Aston, *Sound and Silence: Classroom Projects in Creative Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

[16] Matarasso, *A Restless Art*, pp. 45–59.

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told by adults and children, revealing their melodies, rhythms, and sonorities.' The materials were collected from 'homes, schools, and meeting places in the North East of England'.[17] A recent community project run by Opera North that mirrors this approach is *Song of Our Heartland* (2020), by composer Will Todd, an excellent case study in the ways in which such materials are transformed in a professionally managed community production.[18] This combination of the Britten-influenced community piece devised for amateurs and professional collaboration and the political impetus from contemporary music and the community arts movement has been taken up by many composers, such as Jonathan Dove, John Barber and Omar Shahryar.[19]

Alongside these cultural developments were new sources of funding to support such endeavours. For example, in the 1980s the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation financially supplemented the Arts Council to encourage community outreach projects.[20] Jane Davidson became Scottish Opera's education officer in 1984, the first such position in a UK opera house. She reports that an important motivational factor in founding and developing the education departments in opera houses from the 1980s onwards was to gain and maintain financial support from the government.[21] Although many such departments were founded for cultural or ideological purposes, opera houses soon discovered the overall financial benefit of educational activities to support their artistic activities. This relationship evolved into a kind of tacit, mutually convenient arrangement, where if the government funded opera houses, the latter would promote arts involvement in the community.[22] This arrangement is important also because it has influenced the internal power structures of opera houses themselves. Payne has argued that:

> There has always been a tension between how much may be derived from 'earned income', from ticket sales and commercial exploitation, and how much from 'contributions' from either public or private. The relative strength of each element determines where the economic and artistic control lies.[23]

Over the history of opera this control has shifted from absolute monarchs to impresarios, composers, interpreters and, in the present day, to a 'relatively new breed of general manager, whose role is to balance the artistic and business concerns', the various stakeholders (public and private money, artists and audiences) involved with opera.[24] The usual institutional structure today involves a board of directors

[17] Trevor Wishart, *Encounters in the Republic of Heaven* (Durham: University of Durham, 2010), p. 3.
[18] Oliver Rudland, 'How a Community Told Its Story through Opera – Exploring the Techniques and Methods in a Co-Created Production', *Sounding Board: The Journal of Community Music*, 1 (2021), pp. 7–10.
[19] John Barber, 'Finding a Place in Society; Finding a Voice', in *Beyond Britten: The Composer and the Community*, eds Peter Wiegold and Ghislaine Kenyon (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2015), pp. 109–30; Jonathan Dove, 'Who Needs Community Opera?', 2020, www.traction-project.eu/who-needs-community-opera-part-one-lets-take-over-a-whole-town/ (accessed 23 July 2022); Omar Shahryar, 'The Composition of Opera for Young People' (Ph.D. dissertation, University of York, 2019).
[20] Winterson, 'Community Education Work', p. 58.
[21] Jane Davidson, interview with the author, 18 June 2020.
[22] Davidson also gives the example of RESEO (European Network for Opera, Music and Dance Education), which she argues was founded to obtain funding from the European Union. She also observes that Scottish Opera, unlike other UK opera houses, receives funding directly from the government and not through ACE, which may explain why Scottish Opera was the first UK opera house to establish an outreach department.
[23] Payne, 'The Business of Opera', p. 53.
[24] Ibid., p. 62.

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from the public and private sectors headed by a chief executive officer, often with joint experience in the arts, media and business. What Payne does not touch upon, however, is the important (perhaps disproportionate) influence exerted within this balance by education departments, because it is this type of work that has been increasingly the mechanism whereby opera houses have received (or justified) funding from the state.

Education work, or the administration of such work, has been a route for many opera professionals to senior positions. In the 1990s and 2000s Stephen Langridge directed education projects at Glyndebourne, including two community operas, *Misper* (1997) and *Zoë* (2000), for its main stage; he is now artistic director for the whole company.[25] Similarly, the composer Jonathan Dove composed a series of community operas for Glyndebourne, staged in towns around the UK: in particular *Hasting Springs* (1990) in Hastings, *Dreamdragons* (1993) in Ashford, Kent and *In Search of Angels* (1995) in Peterborough.[26] Dove subsequently received commissions for major opera houses, many of which have entered the active repertoire, such as *Flight* (1998), *The Enchanted Pig* (2006), *The Adventures of Pinocchio* (2007) and *The Monster in the Maze* (2015).

But perhaps more significant is the public face of opera houses, seen through their websites, social media platforms and public reports. These present community work on a par with fully professional work and indicate how dependent opera houses have become on community outreach work. As Winterson has argued:

> The education departments of orchestras and opera companies are clearly making an impression but, now that their work has been established, it is time to look beyond the novelty of the idea and the glossy images of the publicity material, some of which would swallow a school's music budget at one go. The more cynical see fund-raiding as the principal motivation for this work.[27]

The arrangement that has evolved between government (in the form of quangos like ACE), opera houses and community participants is rife with political, ethical, artistic and social questions. How do opera houses understand the needs of community arts involvement and the general needs of a community? To what extent are opera houses suitable for community work? How can projects organised by opera houses be evaluated? Is the involvement of opera houses the most efficient or effective way to invest in educational projects?

Such questions have naturally arisen from the community work of opera houses over the last 40 years and centre on several key points. First, there is a lack of a lasting 'legacy', such as a theatre group or band that might live on after a community project has finished. Katie Tearle, who founded Glyndebourne Opera's education department in 1986, described this as 'the critical debate around the Parachute Jump in which an arts organisation targets an area, does its project and hot foots it back to its base'.[28] Second, there is the sense that communities are being used or manipulated by the opera house. Lee Higgins, who was involved with Dove's *In Search of*

[25] www.glyndebourne.com/about-us/who-we-are/biographies/stephen-langridge/ (accessed 23 July 2022).

[26] Jonathan Dove, 'From the Weaving-Shed to the Airport: Experiences of Writing Opera for Glyndebourne and the Community', *Glyndebourne Season Programme* (1999), pp. 121–25.

[27] Julia Winterson, 'So What's New? A Survey of the Educational Policies of Orchestras and Opera Companies', *International Journal of Community Music*, 3, no. 3 (2010), p. 357.

[28] Katie Tearle, 'Community Opera', *Opera & Music Theatre Forum* (London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 1997), p. 9.

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Angels, reports that 'there was a feeling amongst some that the project had been "produced" on the people of Peterborough rather than being created alongside them'.[29] Similar criticisms were levelled at English National Opera (ENO), whose community opera project *Arion and the Dolphin*, staged in Plymouth in 1994, was accused of 'busily trying to ease its subsidised conscience and lose its elitist tag by placing its specialist skills at the service of the community'.[30]

I will now examine two more recent examples: the *Elders Oratorio* by ENO and *Help Me Believe* by Opera Holland Park. Will Todd, a community musician and composer, was active in both projects, and a comparison of his experiences in these projects shows how the relationship between opera houses and community projects has developed over the last 20 years, while also providing some suggestions for best practice. The *Elders Oratorio* was staged at Southwark Cathedral, London in 2001 and involved school-age participants from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. It was an immersive project involving a lot of contact time: every week there were sessions in different settings in East London for local participants with Todd, and together they 'evolved' the final piece, 'in a very messy way, and not necessarily a good messy way'. In particular, Todd recalls that:

> none of the players I got to use were from the actual orchestra from ENO, none of the soloists were from the opera company; they just brought them in from elsewhere. And I said at the time: I don't know what this means, I don't know what it means to be ENO and then do a project in the community where none of the people in the project are anything to do with ENO?[31]

Todd considered this to be the 'bad version of such events', initiated to 'tick the box for Arts Council funding' and an instance of what could be described as 'institutional virtue-signalling', where, for the bare minimum of cost and input, an institution gains the social (and ensuing financial) credit of reaching out and supporting disadvantaged communities.[32]

However, Todd also emphasised that 'things have become much more honest in the past 15 years'. A counterbalancing project, in Todd's experience, in which an opera house fully engaged with a community, both institutionally and creatively, was Opera Holland Park's *Help Me Believe*, written with the Grenfell community to commemorate the anniversary of the Grenfell Tower tragedy and first performed in June 2018.

For this production the community was invited to perform in the opera house itself, alongside the professional musicians. Most community projects run by opera houses are site-specific productions that take place in the community away from the opera house itself. James Clutton, the director of *Help Me Believe*, felt that to do something, however small, that was worthy of the tragedy required a dedicated collaboration, where the full weight of the opera company (singers, orchestra, staging, design and so forth) was brought to

[29] Higgins, *Community Music*, p. 48.
[30] Matthew Brace, 'Opera by the People, for the People', *Independent*, 25 July 1994, www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/opera-by-the-people-for-the-people-the-floodgates-an-everyday-opera-of-west-country-folk-is-homespun-1416305.html (accessed 23 July 2022).
[31] Will Todd, interview with the author, 7 May 2020.
[32] The phrase 'virtue-signalling' was coined by James Bartholomew and denotes the practice of publicly expressing opinions intended to demonstrate one's good character or the moral correctness of one's position on a particular issue while, crucially, not being the one to pay the cost of correcting the issue in hand. It has become especially pronounced with the development of social media. See Charles Moore, 'The Spectator Notes', *The Spectator*, 25 April 2020, p. 11.

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bear on the project, fully integrating the participants into an operatic presentation no different from any other main stage production.

Opera Holland Park (OHP) and the residents of Grenfell Tower already had strong community links: the two buildings are only about a mile apart, OHP already did community projects in the Grenfell area prior to the incident and a core member of their staff had died in the fire. This well-established bond, based on genuine mutual sympathy, allowed a project to progress that did not feel contrived; everyone involved was fully invested in commemorating the tragedy and there was an obvious shared purpose that united the community and the opera house.

During workshops with both children and adults the participants shared their experiences of the tragedy. These were emotionally 'hard', and Todd reports that 'the adults in that project were upset people'; many got angry during the sessions, producing very 'jagged, dark elements'. However, the process was also 'incredibly therapeutic' and gave those involved an opportunity to express the pain they had suffered as individuals and as a community. As in other community opera projects led by Todd, he and the participants improvised various songs during the workshop sessions that produced some of the material for the final song; this was subsequently reshaped and then rehearsed with the participants. In the case of *Help Me Believe* all the words for the song came out of the workshops.

Todd was keen to emphasise that the sessions gave all the participants 'this immersion for us all in a sort of creative moment… because people say things when they're feeling creative differently to how they might do just telling you about it'. The sharing of traumatic experiences and Todd's response to these feelings generated the music for the song. The value of this approach lay as much in the process of bringing the song into being and allowing participants to voice their experiences as it did in the final musical product. This was reflected by the fact that almost all of the residents of Grenfell who came to the first session went all the way through the process to the singing at the end in the final production.

A comparison of the *Elders Oratorio* and *Help Me Believe*, perhaps representing two ends of a spectrum, suggests some criteria necessary for a successful interaction between opera houses and community projects:

1. They should involve full-time singers, musicians, directors and so forth from the opera company itself, those involved with professional productions and not just those employed by the education department or hired in.
2. There should be some common ground between the opera company and the community in terms of location, identity or social issues of concern to all involved.
3. Participation in creative workshops is not in itself enough to fully engage with communities; they must be invited to join with the opera company in a shared public performance which is treated with the same level of importance as any other main stage production.

An obvious way of ensuring that opera houses properly engage with communities, therefore, is to make sure that some community productions take place in opera houses themselves, making full use of their facilities. Site-specific productions make it all too easy for opera companies to separate their 'real' productions from 'education

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projects', the latter often functioning as a kind of 'tick box' exercise. Todd mentions that 'you have to be watchful for that the whole time: who's delivering this?'. Winterson also highlights that 'education work is often treated as an adjunct rather than an integral part of an organization's work', which results in a 'two-tier system where the rich get performances, and the poor get workshops', even if it is the state which is subsidising the work.[33]

There are some good examples of this kind of collaboration. In 2001, the same year as the *Elders Oratorio*, the Royal Opera House (ROH) invited the community opera organisation W11 Opera to perform in the ROH's Linbury Theatre.[34] Nevertheless, this was not on the main stage and did not receive the same prominence as their professional productions, also often the fate of the contemporary music staged in the Linbury Theatre. The same is true of Opera North, where community and contemporary collaborations are usually presented in the Howard Assembly Room and not the Leeds Grand Theatre. There is something of a two-tier system here: main-stage productions for the 'real' operas from the standard repertoire in the proper theatre and the studio theatre for the rest. A smaller venue may be more appropriate for some community projects or rehearsals but it is telling that most community projects do not take place on the main stage – and, indeed, smaller theatres were built partly to cater for the educational projects which opera houses are now obliged to host.

One opera house, however, that has excelled at fully integrated community productions on the main stage is Glyndebourne.[35] There is an irony here: for most of its history Glyndebourne has been a privately funded enterprise, perceived as highly exclusive, although the company now receives large grants from ACE. But Glyndebourne fully owns its theatre buildings and so there are periods of the year when its international festival is not taking place and the opera house is available; this empty period has provided an opportunity to present newly commissioned full-length community productions on the main stage.

Misper (1997) and *Zoë* (2000), mentioned above, were the first such productions, both composed by John Lunn with libretti by Stephen Plaice. Both were described as 'youth operas', an outgrowth of Glyndebourne's extensive Youth Opera programme (GYO). Later, adult community participants were included, and since the production of *Knight Crew* (2010), with music by Julian Philips and a libretto by Nicky Singer, Glyndebourne has staged a new community opera on its main stage at least once every three years. These include *Imago* (2013), *Nothing* (2016), *Belongings* (2017) and *Agreed* (2019). Part of the success of these productions has been the actual community that has developed around GYO. GYO is open to young people living within a 25-mile radius of Glyndebourne and any young person can sign up to the mailing list, which currently has 700–800 members. Workshops are run in spring and autumn and those on the list are invited to attend on a first-come, first-served basis, not on their ability to read music. Once a participant has attended a workshop they are

[33] Winterson, 'So What's New?', p. 361.
[34] The production was *Flying High* with music by Graham Preskett, a libretto by John Kane and directed by Philip Coleman. Information stored at the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Central Library.
[35] The following information was provided by the Glyndebourne Education Department Team.

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eligible to audition for a performance project. Many participants have been involved with multiple productions, such as Kate Simner, who sang roles from *Imago* onwards and has since joined the GYO administration, becoming Glyndebourne's education projects coordinator. These productions are always well attended, as the participants invite friends and family, and through this process GYO productions have developed their own following or community.

In many ways, this is the positive benefit of community opera both for communities and the opera house. Communities benefit artistically and socially from involvement with a professional production and opera houses benefit by developing and growing their audiences, genuinely contributing to the social fabric of the surrounding area. In a sense, this process returns opera to the social conditions in which it evolved and flourished, the opera house acting as a focus for the community, a role usurped in the 1930s by cinema.[36] Community operas also tend to base their plots around themes that resonate with the experiences or trials of their participants and audiences. *Imago*, for example, was a story about characters who met in real life and then as avatars in a virtual-reality video game, and the opera explored the social effects of the internet and ethical issues concerning anonymity and personhood. *Agreed*, set on an island beset with social division and prejudice, was an allegory about the recent political tensions created by the mass immigration of refugees to the UK.

These community operas revitalise the artform from a museum culture in which the stories told refer to social circumstances that have long since disappeared to a living, breathing commentary on contemporary society. A community opera is in some ways a euphemism for a new opera or what a new opera could be in ideal circumstances. This is perhaps why 'community operas' are very often newly commissioned works. The significance of the creative workshop discussed above is not just a political idealisation of the creativity of the community, but also a reciprocal arrangement for the composer, where features of social life (whether narrative or musical content) are 'discovered' and incorporated into a new score, thus providing up-to-date material.

Perhaps operas are always about communities, because, more often than not, they tell stories in which groups of people interact. Britten's *Peter Grimes* is an obvious example, but even in 'psychological' operas, such as Schoenberg's *Erwartung*, or operas about isolated social elites, such as Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, the protagonists of the operas are framed by a clear social context, their actions defined by the surrounding moral code.[37] A community opera refocuses the operatic artform, away from external features such as the bel canto voice, the theatre building, props, sets, direction and lighting, and back to its core, written for a community about a community. Community opera projects can dispel the elitist aura of opera – lavish productions attended by rich people wearing expensive clothes – and return to storytelling and social reflection, even if the execution is not always perfect.[38] New audiences can glimpse a vision of opera that plays into one of

[36] Richard Taruskin, 'The Death of Opera', in *The Oxford History of Western Music: Vol. 4, Music in the Early Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 547–49.

[37] Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, *A History of Opera: The Last Four Hundred Years* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), pp. 425–55.

[38] This point need not contradict the previous argument that opera houses should be obliged to dedicate their full resources to the production of community operas on their main stage. The point here is the *directionality* of these resources: either to enhance the status of rich patrons or, as it is argued here, to tell a story of deep relevance to the whole community.

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the deepest and most ancient features of human societies, mythical self-consciousness achieved through drama.

It is not hard, then, to see why community productions are so popular with audiences and participants and why they are often well attended. Dove says of his community opera work that 'the experience as a whole was always spectacularly worthwhile for a huge number of people'.[39] Conscious of their greying audiences, Sir Simon Rattle and the Berlin Philharmonic commissioned Dove's *The Monster in the Maze*, 'for Actor, Soli, Adult, Youth and Children's Choruses and Orchestra', to attract new and younger audience members to their concerts.[40] Recent performances of Britten's community opera *Noye's Fludde* (1958) by the Berlin Philharmonic had not resonated with contemporary audiences, because, according to Dove, a successful production of *Noye's Fludde* depends on those present knowing the Anglican hymn tunes that incorporate the audience within the performance of the piece; a new community opera, however, can adapt to contemporary participants and audiences. Nonetheless *The Monster in the Maze* is closely modelled on *Noye's Fludde* in its writing for a variety of young amateur voice types, the inclusion of amateur instrumental parts, an hour-long structure and a story chosen for its universal appeal. It is based on the Greek minotaur myth and has been extraordinarily successful, with 16 staged productions by separate opera houses to date and translations into Catalan, Taiwanese, Dutch, French, German, Portuguese and Swedish. This is testament both to the value and success of community opera and to the role of such new compositions in developing new audiences; *The Monster in the Maze* has also been given main stage performances at a number of opera houses, including Barcelona Opera's Gran Teatre del Liceu.[41]

Accounts lamenting the decreasing 'relevance' of opera and its audience numbers are common. The tenor Joseph Calleja recently claimed that 'Opera's future is bleak. Our audiences are dying.'[42] If this is true then opera houses that treat education work as just an adjunct activity are missing a valuable opportunity. In an age where being seen to be privileged is no longer a social asset, opera houses have little to lose by fully embracing community opera in the manner of Glyndebourne and executed in the way in which Jonathan Dove has excelled.

The devil is in the detail, in how wholeheartedly opera houses apply themselves to community opera projects. The temptation for institutional virtue-signalling is still strong: brief, superficial projects that can be attractively documented for websites and social media. A particularly egregious example was ENO's Healing project in July 2022, for which the opera house welcomed '150 people from refugee organisations to the London Coliseum for a day of singing, conversations, food and pop-up opera performances',[43] effectively one

[39] Dove, 'Who Needs Community Opera?'.

[40] Oliver Rudland and Rajan Lal (eds), *New Music and Society Conference Report* (Cambridge University: The Phoenix Music Society, 2022), pp. 4–5.

[41] '*The Monster in the Maze*: Production History', www.jonathandove.com/the-monster-in-the-maze.html (accessed 23 July 2022).

[42] Jasper Rees, 'Opera's Future Is Bleak. Our Audiences Are Dying', *Telegraph*, 9 June 2022, www.telegraph.co.uk/opera/what-to-see/joseph-calleja-interview-yo-yo-weight-binge-performances/ (accessed 23 July 2022).

[43] English National Opera, 'A Celebration of Culture, Community and Creativity at the London Coliseum, as Part of Refugee Week 2022', www.eno.org/discover-opera/eno-engage/open-opera/ (accessed 23 July 2022). Originally advertised as the Healing project, its title was subsequently changed on ENO's website.

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afternoon's worth of events, with activities that any professional opera house could organise with little preparation or investment.[44] No one doubts the importance of helping refugees, but is an opera house the right kind of institution to execute this? Might the money have been better spent in another way to help refugees? Can opera provide the 'healing' they need? Or is this really about an opera house attaching itself to a morally charged issue, gaining social credit and perhaps more state funding? If opera houses continue to receive funding earmarked by ACE's updated Let's Create 2020–2030 strategy for 'creative communities', then arguably they should do so through workshops, commissions and productions that are of genuine value to the communities in which they are situated.[45] Given the huge value of community opera projects both for participants and audience attendance, and the nature of the operatic artform itself as a form of societal self-reflection, this would be an admirable ambition. However, it is an ambition that can only be properly realised with substantial investment and full artistic commitment from all involved.

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[44] Winterson has raised similar issues about outreach projects that are 'no more than an exercise in synchronized rolling about on the floor for the children; all good fun but educationally barren'. Winterson, 'So What's New?', p. 361.

[45] Indeed, as this article went to press ACE announced that ENO would receive reduced funding through the National Portfolio scheme.

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