

**Operatic Feminisms: Women and Femmes On and Off the Opera
Stage
March 25th, 2023**

Paper Abstracts

Panel: Women, Opera, and Institutions

9:45-11:45

Chair: M. Lucy Turner, *Columbia University*

Samantha Cooper, *Harvard University*

“American Jewish Women and the Nurturing of New York Opera Culture”

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Jewish women frequently participated in New York opera culture. They purchased opera glasses, gowns, and records; read columns about opera singing in Jewish newspapers; taught immigrant youth about the genre’s uplifting power; and worked as seamstresses, opera coaches, artist managers, concert organizers, and ballet dancers. Assorted synagogue sisterhoods as well as local chapters of the National Council of Jewish Women and the Hadassah Women’s Zionist Organization of America featured opera singers and full operas at their fundraisers. By March 1933, Jewish women had made themselves so essential to the New York opera industry that the Metropolitan Opera House sent a representative to a meeting of the Federation of Jewish Women’s Organizations to request their financial assistance during the Great Depression.

To understand how the equation shifted from Jewish women relying on opera to advance their liminal subject positions to the local opera industry relying on them to stay afloat, this paper traces the evolution of Jewish women’s opera activities in New York. Archival findings suggest that opera gradually evolved from a commodity of acculturation, to an uplifting educational platform and a practical tool for philanthropy, to the catalyst for several viable career paths. Recognizing the sizable impact of Jewish women’s opera engagement efforts not only expands previous examinations of American minoritarian women’s encounters with opera, but also offers an empowering example of how an ethno-religious group’s activities became vital to sustaining a city’s elite musical life.

Beth Snyder, *University of North Texas*

“Debating cosmopolitan utopia—female singers at Glyndebourne in the 1930s”

During their pre-war tenure at the Glyndebourne Opera Festival—1934-1939—the creative duo of Fritz Busch and Carl Ebert—both recent émigrés from Nazi Germany—pursued a production strategy that privileged ensemble (both in acting and music-making) over individual performance. It was a strategy pursued via close collaboration, lengthy rehearsal periods, and a preference for re-engaging singers from season to season. Central to these early seasons was a small group of non-British-born female singers—Irene Eisinger, Ina Souez, Luise Helletsgruber, and Aulikki Rautawaara.

This paper recovers the activities of these women and explores the significance of their contributions to the early success of the Glyndebourne project. It further examines the reception of their work by British music journalists, musicologists, and musicians, paying particular attention to the ways that critical contentions with their presence on the Glyndebourne stage were framed within larger debates about Glyndebourne as a site, alternately, of national cultural aspirations and of cosmopolitan creative utopia.

I use correspondence and other documents from the festival archive to explore these performers' activities. I also interrogate the critical reception of those activities through analyses of concert reviews and journalistic reflections, utilizing frameworks for contending with mobile and migratory music-making developed by musicologists Brigid Cohen and Florian Scheduling. I demonstrate that Glyndebourne's early success cannot be fully considered without taking seriously the role played by these women. Further, these women and their activities provided a locus in the British imagination for working out issues surrounding the nationalist and internationalist tensions inherent to the nascent Glyndebourne Festival.

Anna Valcour, *Brandeis University*

"Operatic Institutional Responsibility for Sexual Misconduct"

(Please note: this abstract has trigger warnings for discussions of sexual harassment and assault.)

"They're not going to fire him — they'll fire me," young mezzo-soprano Patricia Wulf intoned in 1998 after enduring repeated sexual harassment by Plácido Domingo behind the curtains of Washington Opera. In the wake of #MeToo, some of the opera industry's most distinguished leaders faced allegations of sexual misconduct from within the operatic community. Surrounding these survivor narratives were years of whispered warnings by industry members of known predators, fears and accounts of retaliation, threats, and gaslighting, as well as a lack of confidence in the competency and moral compass of operatic institutions. While post-#MeToo musicological scholarship has delved into gendered violence within operatic literature, it is mostly an examination of representations of sexual assault and misogyny.

It does not confront what it is like to 'fall in love' with your abuser every performance, re-live personal trauma under glaring lights, or be gaslit by industry professionals into silence backstage. Thus, it is paramount to pivot our musicological scholarship to address present-day circumstances and its people — a concept Naomi André has coined as "engaged musicology." My case study on Domingo emphasizes the gross (mis)handling of sexism and sexual harassment within the operatic industry and its subsequent protection of and belated accountability for the actions of authorized men by accentuating the brutal, hegemonic realities of power, oppression, and the cultural cultivation of fear and silence within the operatic industrial complex. I argue that until these institutions dismantle their systems of oppression, they are also culpable for sexual abuses of power within the industry.

Molly Doran, *Wartburg College*

“Staging Women’s Trauma on the Twenty-First-Century Operatic Stage: Exploitation vs. Ethical Engagement”

When the Royal Opera House staged a brutal and excessive gang rape in its 2015 production of *Guillaume Tell*, it became clear that much of the opera world refuses to consider the implications of sexually violent staging choices. Using this production as a starting point, I consider the ethics of representing women’s trauma on the operatic stage through two additional case studies that demonstrate different modes of engagement.

I analyze Barbara Hannigan’s acclaimed performance of Ophelia’s madness in Brett Dean’s *Hamlet* (2017), showing that her sexualized and deranged behavior transforms the scene into exploitative spectacle. My interview with Hannigan reveals that she exerted little control over her performance and that director Neil Armfield forced her to wear a revealing costume that made her uneasy. I consider the ethical implications of staging women’s trauma for both audiences and performers, foregrounding the ever-relevant question of empowerment versus exploitation. Lastly, I examine the Boston Lyric Opera’s (BLO’s) 2019 production of *The Rape of Lucretia* as a model of ethical, feminist engagement with women’s trauma. BLO consulted experts on sexual and domestic violence during preparations for the production and centered Lucretia’s perspective in performance. Relying on methodologies from trauma and performance studies, I suggest a two-tiered approach to ethical engagement with women’s trauma on the operatic stage: 1) performances must be framed by educational opportunities outside of the performance itself and 2) staging choices must represent trauma by bearing witness to suffering and must consider the performance’s potential implications for both audiences and performers.

Panel: Opera by Women

2:15-4:15

Chair: Lauren Bernard, *Columbia University*

Amy Zigler, *Salem College*

“‘Believed to be a witch’: An examination of female agency in Ethel Smyth’s *Der Wald*”

“I feel I must fight for *Der Wald* ... because I want women to turn their minds to big and difficult jobs.”¹ Ethel Smyth wrote this in a 1902 letter to Henry Brewster as she was deciding to travel to the United States to oversee the production of *Der Wald* at the Met. It is a famous quote, foreshadowing her activism in the Suffrage movement. The strength and determination in this sentence are not only emblematic of Smyth herself but also of her female characters, and in particular the female characters in *Der Wald*. *Der Wald* has been less investigated than other Smyth works, perhaps in part because it only existed on paper; it has not been staged since 1904 and no recording exists - yet. In January 2023, I was invited to attend the world premiere recording of *Der Wald* at the BBC Studios, to be released later this year. Hearing the work changed my perception of the characters; no longer were they good and evil, innocent heroine and malevolent

witch; they were strong women with their own agency. Building upon the work of Wood, Lebiez, Gibbon, and Kertesz, and through an examination of the libretto situated in my experience of the music, I will discuss the ways in which Smyth created an opera that subverts traditional gender roles and that caused such a disconnect between critics' expectations and their experiences that their only recourse was to declare it a failure.

Jennifer L. Campbell, *University of Kentucky*

"*Song from the Uproar: Missy Mazzoli, Isabelle Eberhardt, and Feminist Voice*"

For the past decade, American composer Missy Mazzoli has been enjoying tremendous success, garnering fellowships and amassing numerous critically acclaimed premieres and repeat performances. Her multi-year stint as composer-in-residence for Opera Philadelphia resulted in the award-winning work *Breaking the Waves*; her opera *Proving Up* (January 2018) premiered as part of the Washington National Opera's American Opera Initiative; and in July 2018, she was named composer-in-residence with the Chicago Symphony. With regard to opera, Mazzoli is forging an exciting and decisive path through a world historically dominated primarily, if not almost exclusively, by male composers. In this paper I focus on Mazzoli's breakthrough piece, her 2012 chamber opera *Song from the Uproar*, in which she captures the conflicted and nomadic tendencies of the young Swiss woman Isabelle Eberhardt (1877-1904). Eberhardt, who often dressed as man, travelled alone through North Africa, and eventually converted to Islam, was boldly unconventional for a female at the turn of the twentieth century, and her mobility was especially remarkable. In Eberhardt's time, being able to travel easily and economically was largely a male privilege—proper young women still required travelling companions—but she dexterously maneuvered through this masculine space by unfettering herself from female signifiers. Eberhardt's story, and Mazzoli's musical depiction of it, offers an updated interpretation of the "wanderer" archetype prevalent in 19th-century German literature and music. Through the use of analytical techniques and the exploration of text-music relationships, I address how Mazzoli's portrayal of Eberhardt connects with musical settings of past wanderers, specifically Franz Schubert's protagonists in *Winterreise* and *Die schönen Müllerin* and Gustav Mahler's hero in *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*, but I ultimately argue that Mazzoli's formal structure, harmonic language, and instrumentation create a distinctive voice for her heroine and a path for Mazzoli herself—both

Allison Smith, *Boston University*

"*Contrapuntal Feminisms: Cape Town Opera's One in Three (2022)*"

One in Three (2022) is a patchwork opera comprised of excerpts from Sibusiso Njeza's *Amagokra* (Heroes, 2021), George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* (1935), and Marlene van Niekerk's *Die Kortstondige Raklewe van Anastasia W* with music by Braam du Toit (*The Brief Shelf-Life of Anastasia W*, 2010). These works, interspersed with expert and witness testimony, provide commentary on the prevalence of domestic and sexual abuse and femicide in South Africa. While much of *One in Three* is scripted, there are portions of *Amagokra* that allow for improvisation. I argue that it is in these

improvisatory moments that the cast sounds and the audience hears the nuances of South African womanhood. These moments challenge the portrait of womanhood painted in *One in Three* – one of proverbial violence at the hands of men. Intended to mimic informal everyday conversations among Black women in South Africa’s townships, the improvisatory portions of *Amagokra* accomplishes three tasks. Firstly, it prioritizes interactions between women. Secondly, it allows for Black women to speak their womanhood directly to those who share it in the audience – these improvisatory moments are in isiXhosa and are not translated in the surtitles. Thirdly, it decenters the white feminist, Afrikaans framework of the production. Drawing from feminist anthropology texts (Sara Ahmed 2017, 2021; Sara Farris 2017; Sara Motta, 2018), and Indigenous studies (Dylan Robinson and Pamela Karantonis, 2011; Amanda Kemp et al., 1995) this essay will disentangle the ways in which different feminisms performed during *One in Three* interact with and challenge one another.

Marysol Quevedo, *University of Miami*

“Sisters of the clear waters’: Afro-diasporic Womanhood in Tania León’s ‘Oh Yemanja’”

Cuban-born composer Tania León’s opera *Scourge of Hyacinths* (1994) received more than twenty performances and garnered the composer the BMW prize for best new opera at the Fourth Munich Biennale Festival. When Dawn Upshaw included its final aria, “Oh Yemanja (Mother’s Prayer),” in *The World so Wide* (1998), however, New York Times critic David Mermelstein found León’s aria an outlier within Upshaw’s album, opining “the soprano’s focused timbre conveys both maternal concern and a faintly exotic atmosphere.”

In this presentation I analyze “Oh Yemanja” as a synthesis of disparate traditions that, much like the composer herself, challenges categorization. Yemanja, an Orisha venerated in Afro-diasporic Yoruba religions, governs all forms of water and is worshiped as a nurturing mother figure by practitioners. In several accounts, León explains how the aria’s melody emerged from a prayer-song her own mother and grandmother sang. “Oh Yemanja” not only merges contemporary classical music traditions with Yoruba-derived melodies, it also combines aesthetic and spiritual practices that draw from and speak to Afro-diasporic understandings of womanhood, motherhood, sacrifice, and pain. In both text and music León offers a prayer to Yemanja that evokes the clear and nurturing waters through a hauntingly spiritual, liquid sonority. In contrast to Mermelstein’s superficial assessment of the female voice as “faintly exotic”--a dismissive appraisal historically levied at Afro-diasporic expressive practices--I contend that the aria can only be fully understood as a complex tapestry when one accounts for the frayed and mended identities of Afro-diasporic womanhood upon which it is based.