

REVIEW ARTICLE

Quel Plaisir! Quel Plaisir? – On Bodies in Performance

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Clemens Risi, *Opera in Performance: Analyzing the Performative Dimension of Opera Productions*. Translated by Anthony Mahler. London and New York: Routledge, 2022. 198pp.

Axel Englund, *Deviant Opera: Sex, Power, and Perversion on Stage*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020. 280pp.

Tereza Havelková, *Opera as Hypermedium: Meaning-Making, Immediacy, and the Politics of Perception*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. 200pp.

Let's start with where opera happens: the opera house. For the 2022/23 season, Opernhaus Dortmund, known for its fine instinct for rare gems on the operatic stage, decided to mount Jacques François Fromental Halévy's *La Juive*.¹ Having been introduced to this *grand opéra* as a first-year musicology student, I was excited to see the premiere of Sybrand van der Werf's production on a Sunday night in November 2022 – while preparing this review. As it turns out, the performance transferred me straight into the core arguments of each of the three books under consideration here: the intense co-presence unfolding between the performer and audience, generated as in Clemens Risi's account by a briefly indisposed singer; the inclusion of visual codes evoking SM erotic play on stage, which also informs Axel Englund's investigation; and finally, the production of a hypermedia spectacle, which is Tereza Havelková's central concern. A single performance demonstrated the relevance and applicability of each of Risi's, Englund's and Havelková's studies.

First of all, the premiere's starting time had to be postponed from 6 p.m. to 7.30 p.m. at very short notice. This decision was made on performance day, in response to a sudden illness suffered by the singer for the role of Cardinal de Brogni. In a statement delivered before the curtain rose, the opera's director reported that he had called Denis Velev – the second cast for the role – around noon to ask him to return from Paris to Dortmund as he had to replace his indisposed colleague that very night. It was Velev's six-hour drive that prevented the performance from starting on time. The bass arrived at 7.10 p.m., just in time for the delayed curtain. A faintly agitated audience was asked to forgive potential vocal weaknesses attributable to the fact that the singer had been driving a car all

¹ For the 2021/22 season, Opernhaus Dortmund's production of *Frédégonde, drame lyrique*, by Ernest Guiraud and Camille Saint-Saëns in collaboration with Paul Dukas, was named 'Rediscovery of the Year' by the magazine *Opernwelt*.

afternoon, and that he did not have a chance to properly set the mood for his role debut as Cardinal de Brogni. When Velev made his first appearance in Act I, the theatre was flooded with an overwhelming sense of empathy. The same warmth was tangible during his duet with Eléazar (Mirko Roschkowski) in Act IV, and in the tragic finale of Act V. Despite the circumstances, Velev delivered gloriously. And the audience, who responded to the illness and last-minute substitution by focusing on the singer's corporeality and the materiality of his voice rather than the character or the plot, embodied the 'altered mode of attention' (97) Risi describes when opera is experienced in performance.

While the rescheduling that so clearly invoked Risi's study was a consequence of a singer's unforeseeable illness, the production team had made two decisions beforehand that made the performance correspond with the main theses of the books by Englund and Havelková. This mainly concerns Act III, when the Christian community celebrates the wedding of princess Eudoxie (Enkeleda Kamani) and Léopold (Sungho Kim) in the presence of Emperor Sigismond, the bride's uncle. In Act III scene 15 (Boléro: 'Mon doux seigneur et maître'), Eudoxie expresses her devotion and affection for her groom in a so-called pony play, with Kim on all fours and Kamani riding his back. Together with the appearance of a Cardinal double in nylon stockings and high heels during Eléazar's nightmare (Chœur: 'Quel Plaisir! Quelle Joie!²'), this scene appears to confirm Englund's observation that an 'iconography of perversion' (4) has become 'standard theatrical language in opera' (17). And since the audience did not appear to object to these sexually loaded visuals within a setting of Christian virtue (thereby arguably pinpointing double standards), we may agree with Englund that the deviant practice – that is, practice perceived as nonconformal – of both director's opera and BDSM has drifted 'into the mainstream' (13). Not only have phenomena such as *Fifty Shades of Grey* infiltrated the pop cultural mainstream, but 'the visual codes' of BDSM have also become part of 'the conventional sign system of director's opera' (12).

In Act III of *La Juive* the emperor's majordomo announces a spectacle for the festive banquet. According to the conventions of *grand opéra*, this is realised in the form of a 'Pantomime e Ballett'. But instead of a ballet-pantomime, the production team opted to use a film projection. Still a spectacle, but one realised on screen, rather than on the body. The mimed combat from the original ballet was reduced to snippets showing a battlefield, as the film mainly depicted the return of the victorious hero. In the context of the festive banquet, the media spectacle drew attention to the materiality of the film itself, thus evoking Havelková's concept of hypermedia. Havelková argues that the use of new media connects with a politics of perception. In this case, the film comments on the constructed reality presented by digital media. After all, no media ever render things as they really were. In this production of *La Juive*, the spectacle of the film shows what is intended to be seen: a triumphant victory. In the process, it hides the horrors that made this victory possible. Thus, the film pushes the body back twice: by omitting the ballet and by dismissing the brutal battle for the sake of feelgood celebration.

In short, then, Opernhaus Dortmund's production made tangible the general concerns of each of the three books under consideration here, specifically by drawing attention to the body in performance.

Risi's *Opera in Performance: Analyzing the Performative Dimension of Opera Productions* was first published in German in 2017, and now appears in an English translation by Anthony Mahler. Risi has published widely on the topic of opera in performance. Several of these

² Originally, this chorus is in Act V scene 23, but for this production it was positioned at the end of Act II. Fromental Halévy, *La Juive - Die Jüdin*, piano reduction (Kassel, 2007).

'preliminary publications' were incorporated into the study at hand.³ However, for the first time the book assembles them into a 'larger theoretical framework' (12).

As the book's subtitle suggests, Risi puts the performative dimension at the centre of his study. He draws mainly on theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte's *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* and others, such as Jens Roselt's *Phänomenologie des Theaters*.⁴ Fischer-Lichte's postulate of the bodily co-presence of performer and audience which, she argues, produces an autopoietic feedback loop, lays the theoretical ground for Risi's phenomenological approach to operatic performances. For Risi, the task at hand when analysing a performance from the realm of *Regietheater* is not rigorously to relate the event to the score in order to evaluate the production as well or badly done. Rather, 'the focus is on the question of why and how a certain performance was able to affect the audience in a certain way' (11). Under consideration here (as in Englund's book) is a canon of works mainly from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which in varying appearances regularly finds its way onto stage. That the average opera-goer is familiar with this canon is crucial for Risi's argument because, as he claims, repetition produces expectation. This in turn leads to a more intense engagement with a performance, especially when expectations are not met. Two illustrative case studies prepare the reader for this premise. In their radical approaches, Calixto Bieito's staging of Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (Komische Oper Berlin, 2004) and Hans Neuenfels's staging of Strauss's *Die Fledermaus* (Salzburger Festspiele, 2001) provoked extreme audience reactions, ranging from boos to people leaving the performance.

After a concise first part on the theoretical framework, situated against the backdrop of the performative turn, Risi goes on to approach opera in performance in its ephemerality and uniqueness as a bodily experience that is as subjective as it is intimate. Methodologically, he approaches the performative dimension through a phenomenological framework, arguing that phenomenology does not 'describe any event independently from one's own corporeal experience' (114). Central to this study is the 'phenomenal body in its materiality' (95). Not only are the sound and voice produced by the performer's body of importance, but also each body that belongs to the audience. Consequently, performances experienced by Risi himself take up most of the analysis. The author describes what he observed and felt, how other members in the audience reacted and what the overall atmosphere in the theatre was like. By doing so, he sheds light on experiences that regular opera-goers all have at some point. The quality of his approach lies in their promotion as objects of research and the establishment of an analytical toolbox to tackle them.

One chapter, in my opinion, would have benefited from revision for the translated edition. In his penultimate chapter, entitled 'The future of opera?', Risi is interested in the effects of digitalisation on opera's distribution and its experience in mediatised form. How the autopoietic feedback loop may adapt to 'online-liveness' (a term borrowed from Nick Couldry) is of primary concern in this chapter. The answer, it appears, lies in the observation that social media – and YouTube specifically – produces its own feedback dynamics without putting the live event at risk. The mediatised event stimulates the longing for the live and reinforces the perpetuation of memory and expectation that according to Risi is crucial for any bodily experience of a live event.⁵ Active participation, in turn, is

³ These include Clemens Risi, 'Shedding Light on the Audience: Hans Neuenfels and Peter Konwitschny Stage Verdi (and Verdians)', *Cambridge Opera Journal* 14/1–2 (2002), 201–10; Risi, 'Opera in Performance: In Search of New Analytical Approaches', *The Opera Quarterly* 27/2–3 (2011), 283–95.

⁴ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, trans. Saskya Iris Jain (Abingdon, 2008); Jens Roselt, *Phänomenologie des Theaters* (Munich, 2008).

⁵ Havelková argues similarly when referring to Steven Connor's observation that 'the proliferation of reproductions actually intensifies the desire for origin': Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (Oxford, 1989), 151.

manifested in ‘speaking about the event, in commenting on it, in discourse’ (148). Though I concur with Risi in this regard, I regret that he has missed the chance to reflect on these questions from the perspective that a five-year gap between the German publication and the translation would have offered. How can we evaluate a future for opera from a (hopefully) post-pandemic perspective? How does such a future differ from one proclaimed in 2017? The restrictions that came with lockdowns and closed theatres not only brought to life new and creative forms of performance, but also gave further urgency to discussions around digital opera.

Large sections of the most insightful parts of Risi’s study are devoted to the relationship between voice and body ‘both with regard to individual singers and with regard to the interplay between singers and audience members’ (110). The author draws special attention to the listener’s heightened awareness of a singer’s body and voice once it had been announced that the singer was indisposed. He also describes the strong feeling of intimacy that results when an audience member has the impression that a singer is performing for them alone. Further, Risi notices that audiences express empathy for performers when unusual gestures or athletic movements seem to challenge the physical activity of singing. In this regard, Chapter 7’s historical perspective on the connection between gesture and vocal training is illuminating. Although outlined as separate thematic foci in two different chapters, Risi convincingly shows that voice and body are deeply intertwined with the interplay of representation and presence in performance. Of central interest in this regard is the dimension of eroticism, which for him is not about representation of the erotic mechanism but ‘rather of the phenomenal dimension of performance, that is, the special relationship in which desire plays a decisive role’ (119). Along the lines of Roland Barthes’s *jouissance*, Georges Bataille’s *érotisme* and Wayne Koestenbaum’s fantasies of vocal penetration, Risi claims ‘an eroticism of the performative that defines opera as a special attraction’ (122).

The text may have gained from a clearer framework for addressing the question of how to speak about voice. While admitting that ‘there are many ways to speak about voices’, Risi remains faithful to his chosen methodological framework by mainly referring to phenomenologist Bernhard Waldenfels, for whom voice always signifies ‘heard voice’ (115). Exhaustive engagement with the wide field of voice studies naturally goes beyond the limits of Risi’s text, but some engagement with alternative voice theories might nevertheless have added depth to the author’s evocative descriptions of vocal performance and listening. For instance, Risi describes an intense encounter with Slovakian soprano Edita Gruberová, ‘as if her voice is floating bodiless in space and is right next to me, as if my entire body is enveloped and filled with the unique sound of this voice, whose sensual intensity cannot be remembered and also cannot be anticipated’ (115). Here, the perceived separation of body and voice is striking, and reminiscent of the key argument in Jelena Novak’s *Postopera: Reinventing the Voice-Body*.⁶ Novak argues that the artificiality of operatic singing *per se* generates a perceivable gap between body and voice that is enhanced but not created using new technology. She refers to Carolyn Abbate, who in *Unsung Voices* describes a kind of aural impairment belonging to the opera singer: ‘they do not *hear* the music that is the ambient fluid of their music-drowned world’.⁷ I cannot help but wonder how the felt effect of dividedness may map onto Risi’s description of Gruberová’s voice and others.

Overall, it is a joy to listen with Risi to the many performances he describes so vividly. The longer one engages with his arguments, the more the author becomes the reader’s

⁶ Jelena Novak, *Postopera: Reinventing the Voice-Body* (London, 2015).

⁷ Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, 1991), 119. Quoted from Novak, *Postopera*, 20.

very own opera buddy. Risi's descriptions of stage settings, singers' bodily exertions and their vocal effects, his own impressions and physical tensions, and the atmosphere in the audience, are engaging and comprehensive. By almost 'resurrecting' the performance, the author creates the conditions for the performer–audience relation to incorporate the circle of readers too. All in all, Risi's text proposes an important shift of perspective towards the performative dimension of opera, as well as a methodological approach that has already proved its urgency and applicability in opera studies.

Axel Englund's book, *Deviant Opera: Sex, Power, and Perversion on Stage*, opens with an analogy that may seem slightly strange at first. Opera and BDSM, the author claims, have a lot in common: they both create powerful emotional experiences, constantly hold a tension between fantasy and reality, and oscillate between artifice and authenticity. What is often regarded as deviant sexuality is no stranger to opera; on the contrary, 'the affinity with supposedly deviant sexuality that has insistently adhered to opera; the obsession of operatic plots with the intersection of power, violence, and desire; opera's normative reproduction or performative subversion of misogynist assumptions; the hyperbolic theatricality of opera's musical and textual representation of sexual desire; and the discourse of sensual enjoyment associated with the experience of operatic song' (xv) all point to an enduring chemistry between opera and something approaching perversion.

Englund navigates elegantly between the poles of physical presence and performativity on the one hand, and plot and meaning on the other. Whereas Risi acknowledges the interplay between the two while keeping his eye primarily on the former, Englund approaches his case studies from both sides. Indeed, his central point of interest demands it: sadomasochism shares a certain theatricality with opera, as it constitutes itself within the frame of role-play. It makes use of semiotically readable props and gestures, while relying on actual corporeal dedication at the same time. In Chapter 2, Englund scrutinises two productions of Handel operas, arguing that whereas an iconography of perversion is foreign to the historical origins of operatic repertoire, 'the intertwining of eroticism and power into excessive spectacle is not' (51). Both the productions under discussion – Jossie Wieler and Sergio Morabito's *Alcina* for Stuttgart 1998 and Robert Carson's *Rinaldo* for Glyndebourne Festival 2011 – integrate elements of kinkiness. In *Rinaldo*, these are evident in a boarding school setting, mandatory school uniform ties, Armida's rubber dress, and spanking (or caning) practices, given to her furies to 'transform abstract and verbal notions of eroticized power into visible objects on stage and to superimpose on the instability of gender relations a corresponding instability of eroticized power relations' (66).

It is essential to note that Englund does not read these stagings as contemporary projections of the iconography of deviant sex onto operas from the past. Rather, speaking of 'preposterous history', he sets up a discourse-analytical framework to tease out how the use of the visual language of BDSM in these twenty-first century stagings capture the respective historical sexual discourses of the time. For Handel, this is the Baroque non-heteronormative fluidity of gender representation and casting convention on the operatic stage. In the case of Mozart, whose *Don Giovanni* is the centrepiece of Chapter 3, the Marquis de Sade's *120 Days of Sodom, or the School of Libertinage* can be regarded as the backdrop for the productions under discussion. Conversely, the nineteenth-century operas discussed in Chapter 4, Wagner's *Parsifal* and Puccini's *Tosca*, are filtered through Friedrich Nietzsche and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch (as well as Žižek, Lacan and Deleuze as post-Freudian readers of masochism). For Berg's operas, *Wozzeck* and *Lulu*, Weimar Berlin is the central reference point. The city was known for a nightlife full of excess during the roaring 1920s; it was here that 'the visual codes' of sadomasochism

(SM) were established at this time (157). No wonder that the pony play is to be found regularly in recent stagings of *Lulu*, with Lulu riding Dr Schön (171).

As Englund points out, *Deviant Opera* is not about the past but the present. And this is where the second aspect of the book's argument unfolds, one that to me seems inherently political. It starts with the bodies. The scenes described in *Deviant Opera* require the singer to engage physically not only with symbols but also with actual performed violence, suppression and harassment. For instance, in *Rinaldo* the rubber dress for Armida interferes with the conventional physical techniques of vocal production. Or there are the naked and tied-up bodies of the flower girls in Romeo Castellucci's production of *Parsifal* (Brussel 2011). Klingsor and his double rearrange them so that 'they come across less as human bodies than unsettlingly body-like objects' (125). Englund devotes one of his in-depth readings to Calixto Bieito's *Don Giovanni* (London 2001). Focusing on Zerlina as an ambivalent character in the first place, Englund sheds light on how Bieito shapes her as an 'expression of an ambiguous fascination with the dynamics of power and powerlessness' (90). In her aria 'Batti, Batti' – from which Bieito eliminates any coquetry – she is in full control of Masetto, provoking him to do to her what she describes in her lyrics. But it is not Masetto who turns the text from the figurative to the literal. In the Act I finale, Don Giovanni and Zerlina, in a shabby party location, are flirting before he throws her over his shoulder and walks behind the scenery with her ('Vieni con me, mia vita'), from where the audience hears her screaming as 'Giovanni picks up the exact terms of Zerlina's violent rhetoric and pushes them into physical reality' (101). The violence performed here transgresses the safety, sanity and consent that are supposed to guarantee accident-free experiences in BDSM. Bieito's staging plays with and acts upon 'boundaries between the figural and the literal, between play and reality ... [and] points to the permeability of an analogous boundary: that of enacted violence and actual violence' (116). In this staging, Don Giovanni clearly crosses a line that in turn produces an effect of extreme violence, an effect that Englund calls the *actuality effect*.

The actuality effect (with its purposeful reference to the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*) results from the 'most crucial point of the analogy between SM and opera as it is presented in deviant stagings: because their fantasy scenarios of domination and submission necessarily involve the real bodies of real people, who put themselves at stake in the performance, their theatrics may turn out to be more real – or real in a different sense – than one would initially believe. The actuality effect ... repeatedly imagines this unsettling possibly on stage' (50). The scene from *Don Giovanni* is a perfect example of the actuality effect's potential for breaking 'through the diegesis altogether' (48). Regardless of whether they are perpetrators or victims, the actuality effect demonstrates how the singer is, in a way, forced 'to go all in' with their body. In the end, they are 'laborers of opera' (118), taking the 'risk that they are participating in the wrongdoings that they are attempting to portray' (117). For the audience it also draws attention to the fact that there actually is a border that can be transgressed.

As a workplace, the opera house is saturated with hierarchies and power struggles. The resonances of the #MeToo outcry from 2017 echoed fiercely through the halls (and orchestra pits) of some of the most prestigious opera houses worldwide. Chapter 4, entitled 'In-House Allegories', focuses on metareferential productions negotiating on stage what goes on backstage. Next to the *Parsifal* production, it may come as no surprise that Puccini's *Tosca* is of specific interest here. Stories circulate around the opera: about injuries caused by fake knives and too much aggression during rehearsals, about female singers scared of Scarpia's fake death expression, and the dominance of directors and male singers over their female colleagues. These stories are more than just anecdotes. They reveal that opera is anything but a world of luxury. And we, the audience, may

be mesmerised, shocked or disgusted by what we see and hear. When in full effect ‘this is what the actuality effect reveals: the fascination with the violation of boundaries *within* the theatrical space depends on the fact that it evokes the violation of the boundaries *surrounding* the theatrical space’ (151).

Englund’s book is both illuminating and compelling. The author develops his claims via several strands of thought, without ever losing hold of any of them. For me, the strong but not excessively loud political undertone stands out as the actual core concern of the book. Englund is both cautious and firm in stating that *Deviant Opera* holds up a mirror to our society, its power dynamics and gender relations and our, the audience’s, involvement in all of this. Even though the fourth wall might put us at a safe distance from the stage performance, we are never free from responsibility. ‘Does the audience not come to the opera house to hear extreme suffering voiced in stylized, high-pitched cries?’, Englund asks (152). Did I not go to *La Juive* because I was curious to see how Rachel would be thrown into a giant pot of boiling water, how she would suffer from betrayal and be torn away from the man she loves whilst others triumph?⁸

Given the focus on bodies performing between eroticism and perversion in the other two texts under discussion here, Tereza Havelková’s *Opera as Hypermedium: Meaning-Making, Immediacy, and the Politics of Perception* may at first sight seem like an outsider next to them. Havelková is hardly concerned with director’s opera at all. When she briefly mentions two stage productions of Wagner’s *Ring*, she does so to point to her central topic: an ‘enquiry into contemporary relationships with opera and the media’ with the ‘concept of hypermediacy ... as the starting point’ (1). The author takes the study’s key concept, ‘hypermediacy’, and its counterpart, ‘immediacy’, from the theory of remediation as introduced by Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin in 1999.⁹ She incorporates recent work of Gundula Kreuzer and Nicholas Ridout to argue that because of Baroque opera’s preference for overtly showing its ‘material hybridity’ and even Wagner’s failures in achieving illusionism (7), opera is to be situated ‘within the context of the genealogy of hypermedium’ (9).¹⁰

Alongside her goal, ‘to chart the theoretical terrain of opera as hypermedium’ (23), Havelková’s concern is to map out the productive field of tension between, on the one hand, immediacy and media transparency, and on the other, hypermediacy, or the disclosure of media’s materiality. To illustrate this, Havelková connects the dots between theatrical spectacle and early cinema of attractions, both of which leave the audience stunned. She argues that to be ‘wondered at their workings’ (10) one needs to acknowledge the medium itself, not only the meanings conveyed. For opera this approach leads to a twofold view. First, there is the question of how new media – video and film projections in particular, but sound amplification too – add to the ‘traditional’ media of opera, meaning the ones that commonly create the live event. Second, if media and technology are capable of ‘rupturing’ the unity of an analogue live performance, thereby exhibiting themselves as a medium, then for opera ‘the medium of song’ does so too.

That Havelková takes media theory as her starting point is crucial for the general argumentative and theoretical tenor of her text. She further relies not only on performance studies (Josette Féral and Erika Fischer-Lichte) but also on film and media studies as well as art theory (including Mieke Bal, Walter Benjamin, Maaike Bleeker, Susan

⁸ In the Dortmund *Juive*, Rachel is crucified.

⁹ Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA, 1999).

¹⁰ The works by Kreuzer and Ridout to which Havelková refers are Gundula Kreuzer, *Curtain, Gong, Steam: Wagnerian Technologies of Nineteenth-Century Opera* (Oakland, 2018), and Nicholas Ridout, ‘Opera and the Technologies of Theatrical Production’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Opera Studies*, ed. Nicholas Till (Cambridge, 2012), 159–76.

Buck-Morss, Mary Ann Doane, Laura U. Marks and Laura Mulvey, to name a few). By considering an astonishing range of perspectives from audiovisual research, she undertakes an important shift in the way she regards opera. Aiming beyond the dualism between the live and the mediatised, her methodological framework is based around an approach to opera as audiovisual event. Havelková focuses explicitly on the multimedia composition of a production, as well as its consequences for the audience, or as she calls them, the 'audio-viewers'. She thus also incorporates 'effects and modes of engagement' (13), for which she deals with questions of perspective, point of view and point of listening. For her, technology certainly adds to the live event; consequently, she is concerned with how media technology has 'changed sensitivity to the (body) perceived' (34).

Havelková also attends to meaning-making. She writes, 'I approach operas on both stage and screen as events, and I am wary of the sharp distinction between opera, music, and sound as objects carrying meaning, on the one hand, and as material, multi-sensory events, on the other. I am rather concerned with how the material aspects of opera interrelate with its processes of meaning-making, processes that may ultimately also be understood as relational' (15). Like Risi and Englund, then, Havelková's methodological framework considers the performative dimension and its relation to meaning. However, her approach differs in that she focuses specifically on the mixture of media on stage, an aspect that neither Risi nor Englund draws attention to.

Havelková's theoretical framework is geared towards the analysis of contemporary opera, though it may also offer a toolbox for analyses of director's opera. The two case studies presented in *Opera as Hypermedium* are both by Louis Andriessen. *Rosa: A Horse Drama* (Amsterdam, 1994) and *Writing to Vermeer* (Amsterdam, 1999) are pieces not only 'constituted by media' but also 'highly reflexive in their acts of representation and their approach to both visual and audio technology'. *Rosa* uses audible amplification and 'thematizes the use of film on the operatic stage through the title figure' (20). In combination with live music and stage action the hypermedial setup, with videos by Peter Greenaway, culminates in the protagonist Rosa being shot from the projected imagery. *Writing to Vermeer* mainly consists of sound inserts by Michel van der Aa and projected paintings by the eponymous artist Jan Vermeer, which are reenacted both on screen and on stage, thus complicating the mimetic relationship between the two-dimensional visual representations.

In her first two chapters, Havelková ties together concepts on perspective and visuality from film theory (Christian Metz and Laura Mulvey), theatre studies (Marion Bleeker), art theory (Michael Fried) and film sound studies (Claudia Gorbman) to show that hypermedial opera calls for a multidisciplinary methodological approach. Her use of Craig Owens's essay, 'The Allegorical Impulse', as well as Paul de Man and Walter Benjamin in Chapter 1, in support of an argument that hypermedial opera 'performs' the failure of meaning-making, is as remarkable as her pursuit of a 'listening point of experience' in Chapter 2.¹¹ Here, she presents a highly engaging and critical take on the classic concept of perspective as direction of vision, arguing instead towards an understanding of perspective as a multi-layered and multisensual 'point of experience' (97). The conclusion she reaches in this chapter, based on an analysis of *Rosa*, is multifaceted. One aspect is that music, or arias rather, may offer a 'point of experience' in opposition to the otherwise 'apparent multiplicity of viewpoints suggested by visual representations' (95). At the same time, an aria may also be perceived to have an absorbing effect of immediacy, thereby obscuring the point of experience (96).

¹¹ Craig Owens, 'The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism', in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York, 1984), 203–35.

As far as bodies are concerned, Chapter 3, 'Liveness and Mediatization: (De)constructing Dichotomies', is of special interest.¹² Usually, the body live on stage is perceived as present in its physical materiality. It is contrasted to the mediated (visualised) body, which is often regarded as absent, since it is not *actually* there on stage (114). Andriessen's *Writing to Vermeer*, Havelková argues, 'questions the possibility of such an opposition' as 'the performing, physical bodies are clearly informed by and dependent on the media images' (114). Once again, the body at stake here is the female body, in this case situated within the Vermeer household, which is saturated with live music and the voices of singing women and children. The audiovisual projections generated by Van der Aa contrast Andriessen's domestic scenes with the outside world. Van der Aa's inserts, designed with electronically manipulated sounds and moving images, are representations of historical events of 1672, the 'Dutch year of disasters' (100).

To critically engage with the question of sign and referent alongside the question of (re)presentation of the feminine body, Havelková takes on film theorist Mary Ann Doane's theorisation of the masquerade in narrative cinema.¹³ As the masquerade 'reconfigures the relationship between the image and its (female) spectator', womanliness in this opera is presented as a mask 'enacted through gestures and clothing' (118). This effect is created by the fact that the women on stage are 'presented as visually dependent on the women in Vermeer's paintings [projected on screens], and the feminized gestures of domestic work are repeated and multiplied'. This 'indicates that it is possible to gain distance from the cultural codes of femininity but not to become independent of them' (118). Interestingly, though, the visually staged gap that critically comments on cultural codes of femininity is opposed with a perceived unity between voice and body, articulated by live female singing. According to Havelková, this is readable as 'nostalgia for the live within the economy of reproduction, which, in the opera, is bound up with utopian nostalgia for a blissful private sphere' (125). At the end of the opera, the public floods the private just as the mediated floods the live: 'The women's singing is drowned out by the electronic sounds, as the stage is (literally) flooded with water from the open dykes' (125). The women disappear and so do their voices.

Havelková's case studies remain narrowly focused on two operas by one composer. Beyond briefly mentioning Michel van der Aa's *Sunken Garden* (2013), the author could easily have integrated a closer look at other works, such as Van der Aa's *One* (2002) and *Blank Out* (2016), both of which also incorporate multimedia. Furthermore, a broader application of the topic would call for engagement with composers who do not work with a video artist or film director, but compose a videographic dimension alongside the score in the form of scenographic and conceptual directions. In this regard, it would have been interesting to see how the hypermedial music theatre of, for instance, Olga Neuwirth would fit within Havelková's theoretical framework. However, these remarks only confirm the veracity of the author's introductory claim that the issues she raises 'concern opera more generally' (2). They involve director's opera too, as Dortmund's *La Juive* shows. My critique hence gives voice to my own urge to approach other works of contemporary opera through the questions Havelková raises, namely that of meaning-making, strategies of immersion within hypermedia, and the active involvement of the audience's perception, informed by a broader critical approach to audiovisual and sensory perception. Havelková's arguments are intriguing, yet complex, and due to the many theories she directs towards her issues, it sometimes requires an extra effort from the reader not to get lost in the plethora of names

¹² For both Havelková and Risi, the starting points for elaborating on this dichotomy are Peggy Phelan and Philip Auslander. See Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London, 1993) and Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, 2nd edn (London, 2008).

¹³ Mary Ann Doane, 'Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator', *Screen* 23/3–4 (1982), 67–86.

and concepts associated with them. It would have been helpful to ease the intensity of theoretical explorations. Nevertheless, her book does shed useful light on the complexity of opera as art form, especially when paired with other media such as film and sound design.

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I was struck by the extent to which these studies (and others they draw upon), however explicitly or implicitly, revolve around the female body. The most intense encounters described by Risi are those with the female voice, notably that of Edita Gruberová and Cecilia Bartoli. I cannot help but wonder: Would a similar effect be possible with a male voice? Or is it naïve to think that a duet such as ‘Dio, che nell’alma infondere amor’ from Verdi’s *Don Carlo* – a personal favourite – might move us in a similar way? On a similar note, almost all the directors and composers discussed are male. Englund has this misalignment in mind when he considers ‘authorial gender’ (7). In this regard his penultimate chapter on Barbara Hannigan, who claims the position of conductor in a shiny varnish and leather outfit while performing the role of Gepopo in György Ligeti’s *The Mysteries of the Macabre* (with extracts from *Le Grand Macabre*) is highly relevant. Hannigan crosses the line into the masculine realm of conducting while at the same time emphasising her female body. Other women composers, conductors and stage directors such as Oksana Lyniv, Joanna Mallwitz, Susanna Mälkki, Olga Neuwirth, Lucia Ronchetti, Sarah Nemtsov, Sivan Eldar, Amy C. Stebbins, Isabel Ostermann, Magdalena Fuchsberger and many others, are equally worthy of attention. In this respect, it is in some way a relief that all three books look back on the last twenty-five to thirty years of opera production. This gives hope that studies building on these approaches will broaden the view of productions with women, not only on stage but also in the roles of author, director and conductor.

Ultimately, what is at stake in each of the texts under consideration here is the body, not only that of the performer but also the body of the audience or the audio-viewer. In their analyses, Risi, Englund and Havelková demonstrate how live performance, with or without new technology, affects the audience’s bodies as well. This may be in the form of heightened attention to the singer’s output, but it may also take the shape of consternation, or of being stirred by the potential crossing of a border towards real pain and actual violence. The mix of media causes opera to cross the bridge towards cinematic modes of perception. But the art form is never really able to abandon the liveness of the operatic performance, with its sound, music and most importantly, with the ambivalences that accompany singing in its multifarious interrelation between body and voice. Risi’s, Englund’s and Havelková’s texts are valuable for highlighting these aspects, which cannot be captured in a score. But they are also relevant to the interested opera-goer, as they shed light on how the audience is and gets involved. With my introductory remarks on *La Juive* in Dortmund I hope to have shown that there is much to gain, so to speak, by ‘bringing these books with you to the opera’.