

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT: KATHRYN L. CATON

Opera Experiments and Social Transformation in the Age of Digital Technology: Shifting Stages, Media, and Audiences

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Abstract

Performers and spectators are arguably the most important factors in any theatrical endeavor. Together, they form two sides of a single coin – balancing each other through constant negotiation of participation, communication, and power. Surprisingly, the often-subtle mediations between audience and performers can mirror changes in social expression and be mapped simply through their physical relationships to each other and the space surrounding them.

The advent and rise of analog and, more recently, digital technologies has drastically changed how modern societies function, how people interact with each other, how we form values and distinguish meaning, and, of course, how we listen to and receive music. As technology deepens its grip on society, increasingly affecting varied modes of social interaction and expression, the physicality of performance, theater, and opera has begun to shift with it, mirroring abstract values of contemporary audiences as well as absorbing technological innovations familiar to them. A “strange tension” has emerged between our “inherited architectural form” of theaters and a “changing mode of social expression.”¹ This tension has become more evident in all manners of performance, spurring a rise in what is called “performance art” in response to these changing modes of expression.

This project will articulate ways in which the delicate relationship between operatic performers and performances and their twenty-first century audiences reflect the changing social structures in which they live and new social-psychological experiences affected by the permeation of new technologies, specifically through the creative use of space. It will address how the physical, binary nature of “audience” versus “performers” is being challenged in some productions, particularly through the transformation of non-theatrical spaces into performance spaces, and how this expansion reflects the social expression and behaviors of some modern audiences. The aim of this project is to illuminate how some new opera and new productions of opera are going beyond traditional opera during the latter half of twentieth and twenty-first centuries and to articulate how these changes are reflecting broader social structures, behaviors, and modes of expression – postulating on reasons why this particular vein of experimentation with space is so resonant with some audiences. While considering multiple ideas and approaches of new, reconceptualized, and experimental opera between 2005 and 2018, this project will focus on opera that confronts the binary concept of the (abstracted) proscenium arch and reconfigures the physicality of the spectator as it searches for more dynamic connections with fragmented, individualistic, and scattered Western audiences.

¹ Louise Pelletier, *Architecture in Words: Theatre, Language, and the Sensuous Space of Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 78.