DISSERTATION ABSTRACT: ALEXANDER THOMAS SIMPSON, JR.

**Opera on Film:**

*A Study of the History and the Aesthetic Principles and Conflicts of a Hybrid Genre*

(1990)

For those who find either opera or cinema a finished and potentially perfect artform, the operafilm presents, at best, an almost shameful embarrassment of riches. At worst, this hybrid, which represents the artistic union of its two parent genres, exemplifies a cumbersome intrusion of one medium’s exigencies into a realm where the *raisons d’être* for those exigencies are no longer valid. The present dissertation searches for the middle ground between these two extreme positions.

The purposes of this dissertation are threefold. Initially, the writer provides a history of the development of the operafilm, chronicling the important steps in the phases of the development of the genre to the present day. The works of the earliest practitioners of the genre are discussed, both in terms of their creator’s documented intentions and in particular regard to their subsequent impact on the aesthetic values of the history of the genre. The dissertation in the examination of the operafilm concerns itself only with true, cinematically conceived versions of operas and not 1) taped versions of live stage performances, 2) film versions of operettas and broadway musicals, except where those make some striking contribution to the history of the parallel development of the operafilm, or 3) the numerous existing filmed excerpts of operas which in their brevity make no attempt at solving the inherent problem of presenting a reasonably complete operatic entity on the screen.

Secondly, the writer analyzes the particular and peculiar set of problems inherent in the adaptation of opera—traditional and otherwise—to the screen. Principle problems include: 1) an analysis of the central issue: the compatibility or incompatibility of the fundamental precepts of opera and film and 2) an investigation of the applicability of film’s *Auteur* theory and its implications to a genre in which the integrity of a pre-existing musical score must be preserved.

Finally, through the study of selected, representative operafilms of opposing stylistic intent, the writer documents and analyzes some of the manners in which the practitioners of this relatively new artform have attempted to resolve the genre’s stated conflicts.