The Metropolitan Opera Goes Public: Peter Gelb and the Institutional Dramaturgy of The Met: Live in HD

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The Metropolitan Opera's Live in HD high-definition movie broadcast initiative has received lavish attention from the mainstream press and rave reviews from audiences. Academic circles, however, have yet to undertake more critical analysis of the content and structure of these complex musical-cinematic events. This essay proposes some preliminary terms for such discussions and a provisional analysis of this unique adaptation of opera for the screen. I will show how the broadcasts have moved beyond previous cinematic incarnations of opera to enact an adaptation of the operagoing experience itself. Even as they function effectively to bring opera to audiences across the world, the broadcasts are simultaneously put to use by the Met to offer a reality television–style organizational documentary that both capitalizes on and raises its own institutional stature. I draw upon observations from my own attendance at several screenings and from accounts of the initiative reported through the mainstream media, with particular attention to statements attributed to Met President (and broadcast executive producer) Peter Gelb. In the end, The Met: Live in HD represents much more than an innovation in cinematic opera, but a compelling new means through which prominent arts organizations such as the Met are learning to leverage new media to advance their institution-building agendas.

Mark Clague maintains that, "in the American context, the prime mover of culture is not the patron, composer, performer, or even listener, but rather the institution that brings these actors into relation to one another." 2 It is only the institution, usually with an ambitious impresario at the helm, that can "develop and propel a particular use of culture for a particular purpose in a specific place." 3 Clague presents this hypothesis in the context of an institutionally focused reading of the history of Chicago's Auditorium Theater and its founder Ferdinand Peck. In the case of the Auditorium, real-estate mogul turned arts impresario Peck faced a key problem that his theater would have to address; namely, how to resolve the tension between the elite associations of high culture and the democratizing spirit of nineteenth-century Chicago. Peck solved this problem in part by striking a deal with the public—he let the wider citizenry become literally invested in the theater by buying shares, in what we might anachronistically term an initial public offering.

Clague's focus on the institution and impresario provides a ready-made framework to analyze a more current instance of high culture in negotiation with the American public. The Metropolitan Opera, under the innovative leadership of general manager Peter Gelb, is by some accounts in damage-control mode, hoping to undo many years of perceived high-cultural isolation. In a kind of negotiation similar to Peck's, the Met is engaged in its own kind of public offering, although not with the explicit goal of raising funds, but to convince the wider public that opera is meant as much for Times Square as Park Avenue. Gelb has made public outreach the watch cry of his administration and has taken dramatic steps toward bringing the Met out of Edith Wharton's Gilded Age and into the modern mediatized age: red carpets packed with Hollywood celebrities now materialize on opening night; Jumbo Trons with live simulcasts spring up in Times Square and the Lincoln Center Plaza; and media-saturation campaigns find images of Natalie Dessay and Anna Netrebko reproduced hundreds if not thousands of times on billboards and buses.

True to the Met's de facto position as the nation's opera house, Gelb's initiatives are also reaching out to America's Main Street and even the rest of the world. Perhaps the most ambitious program launched by Gelb, a former executive in the for-profit music industry, has been The Met: Live in HD, a now two-year-old series of high-definition broadcasts from the stage of the Met into a network of digitally equipped movie theaters in the United States and around the world. If we are to believe much of what we read, Peter Gelb—not just the Met's general director but also executive producer of the broadcasts (his is the last name to appear in the credits)—is single-handedly leading not just the Met, but opera as a whole, out of its Park Avenue ghetto. Newsweek hails the HD initiative as a bold effort "to popularize opera and perhaps save it from obscurity." 4 The industry organ Variety proclaims that, "after years on the ropes, high art is battling back" and hails Gelb for "cribbing moves from the pop culture playbook." 5 Philip Kennicott of the Washington Post calls the broadcasts "one of the more fascinating cultural hybrids to appear recently" through their melding of the operagoing and moviegoing experience, remarking like many other critics on the novelty of eating ice cream during Verdi or Tchaikovsky. 6 (Never mind that eating ice cream has been part of the opera experience since at least as early as the 1800s, with this activity even lending its name to a genre, the aria di sorbetto [sherbet aria]. 7 )

Going a step further, critics such as Douglas McLennan of the Los Angeles Times hail not just the novelty of aspects of the broadcasts, but the advent of a new art form entirely. "Filmed operas have been around for quite a while," McLennan writes, "but they were never like this. The Met has reinvented the form. Or, rather, it has created a new art
form." 8 I agree with McLennan but for slightly different reasons. The Met's HD broadcasts present much more than an afternoon of Donizetti—or a longer afternoon of Wagner—but rather a dramatization of the experience of attending the actual Metropolitan Opera, effectively doing double duty as opera broadcast and institutional documentary (or, in less flattering terms, reality television or even an infomercial). The Met's HD broadcasts aim to present to the world not just opera, but Opera, that is, the Metropolitan Opera.

Following Clague's analysis of the Auditorium Theater, I'd like to examine the broadcasts through an institutional and impresarial lens to show how the true innovation of the broadcasts lies not just in their staging opera in a new medium, but in the way they stage the Met itself for the public through new media. The HD broadcasts have adapted the occasion of the opera broadcast to remediate the presenting institution, deploying a set of practices that I term institutional dramaturgy. The resulting media event defies easy classification. It is at once operatic and cinematic, live and mediated, high and low, exclusive and inclusive. Even as they open up the Met to the masses, in the end the broadcasts serve ultimately to burnish the reputation of the Met itself. Given the success thus far of Peter Gelb's initiatives, this remediation might indeed be just what the Met needed.

Before we analyze the institution any further, it seems only fair to let it speak for itself to clarify the goals of the broadcasts and how they fit into larger institutional goals. Instead of letting the Met speak directly, I'd like to let them speak in the manner in which they have been speaking to the public--through the media. Media coverage of the Live in HD initiative has been staggering, giving Gelb and the Met opportunities to articulate the goals of the broadcast through hundreds if not thousands of print, radio, online, and television reports. Some might argue against extrapolating the Met's position from secondhand media accounts, but since media coverage has been such a defining part of the story of the broadcasts, it seems more appropriate to look there for the kind of goals they communicate to the public. The consistency across media accounts testifies to the Met's ability to stay remarkably on message in the initiative's rollout.

The following summary tracks three broadly conceived goals articulated by the Met and Peter Gelb, taken from a selection of print-media articles that is exemplary but by no means exhaustive. First, the initiative seeks to deploy new media to update the opera experience. Second, the broadcasts serve Peter Gelb's larger goal for the Met to reinvent opera with theatricality. Third, the broadcasts hope to produce a wider renewal of opera as an art form and a social institution. What will be especially helpful from these accounts is the way in which they focus attention not just on the art form of opera itself, but on the Met as an institution. In articulating its goals, the Met continually draws legitimizing authority from its unique institutional status, past and present.

1. **Updating the opera experience.** Although the HD broadcasts do represent an innovation in format, both the Met and outside observers have been quick to point out that the initiative is in some sense nothing new. The broadcasts are merely the latest incarnation of the Met's long-standing media dominance in the opera world. Once upon a time, the Met actually toured the country, until the costs became too high and fans had to content themselves with radio and, later, television broadcasts. In the words of Peter Gelb, "This 'Live in HD' program is really the logical, modern evolution of what the Met pioneered with its live radio broadcast.... We're taking advantage of new digital and satellite technology to beam the spectacle of live opera in high definition to potential new audiences in new venues." 9 Even as he looks to the future, however, Gelb draws from the authority of the good old days of opera in America in the early 1900s, when "whole communities used to gather around the radio to listen" to Met radio programs. 10 Gelb sees the movie broadcasts as "the 21st-century modernization of that experience," which will make the Met "as available electronically to its followers as the Yankees are to theirs." 11

Along with this new emphasis on satisfying a nationwide and international opera community comes the promise of a greater degree of interaction in the opera experience. One observer sees Today Show-style intermission features as the promise of American Idol-inspired features to come:

This intermission feature, patterned after the longtime Met radio intermission features, was an example of how these telecasts can fascinate and inform the audience. Don't be surprised if Peter Gelb doesn't dust off the Met's old "Opera Quiz" segment and, instead of celebrity contestants, comes up with an interactive device that we, sitting in a theater in the Midwest, can use to answer questions from our seats! 12

Whether drawing from the past (fireside chat) or looking to the present and future (reality television), the movie broadcasts want to make something new out of the opera broadcast for present-day viewers. The special features that distinguish the movie broadcast from its radio forebears--glimpses into the orchestra pit, dressing-room interviews, video clips--show how this new medium seeks to look back and look forward, seeking to innovate even as it continues to draw on the historic pedigree of the Met.

2. **Theatrical renewal.** Gelb also sees the movie broadcasts as an opportunity to reassert the theatricality of opera, a central aim of his larger agenda for the Met. Gelb presents himself as a kind of operatic fundamentalist seeking...
Notably, Gelb in other contexts makes it clear that on his watch the stage of the Met will be no place for that redheaded stepchild of theatricality, Regietheater. Gelb assures his public that he will be bringing the right kind of theater back to the Met, and no crazy Europeans need apply:

Some critics will no doubt be waiting for the Met's new GM to cross the line between selling that art form and selling it out. Gelb addressed that recently when he recalled seeing one of those "Euro-trash" productions that try anything to connect. It was a Rigoletto conceived by a German film director as "Rigoletto Meets the Planet of the Apes." Set amid the shattered remains of the world's opera houses, it had the singers dressed, yes, as apes. "There will be no ape suits," Gelb declared, "in our new productions." 17

Although the movie broadcasts do not have any direct bearing on this theatrical renewal on the stage, their ability to bring the visual as well as the musical to a larger audience is a key virtue in this regard. One critical account of the initiative warns readers that, despite "the electric feeling of sharing a live event with an audience," the movie broadcast "is not a true theatrical experience." 18 The same critic, however, also acknowledges the ability of the broadcasts to transmit a different kind of theatrical experience (the "new art form" alluded to by McLennan earlier) through the behind-the-scenes preview and intermission features, praising these features as "a fascinating glimpse into the inner workings of a major opera company." Drawing authority from the past and the present, the broadcast initiative serves the Met's fundamentalist theatrical agenda by representing the glory of the Met's past for a newly accessible base of fans of the Met's present and future.

3. Renewing the art form. The updating of the experience and reassertion of the theatrical are closely tied to the third, more diffusely articulated, goal of the video broadcasts; that is, to help bring about a wholesale renewal of opera as an art form. In the success or failure of Gelb's new initiatives, both the future of the Met and the future of opera as an art form are at stake. Gelb has repeatedly stated that institutional isolation and lack of connection from the public are the greatest challenges, both for the Met and opera in general. The economic and artistic consequences of not addressing these challenges will be dire, but through HD broadcasts and other media innovations the Met can reassert its cultural relevance and in the process "propel opera back into the mainstream." 19 The introduction of nonoperatic artistic collaborators and new media initiatives such as the movie broadcasts "have one common purpose," according to Gelb; that is, "to improve the Met's position by educating audiences and increasing the box office." 20 The renewal of the Met as an institution and opera more generally is a matter of reconnecting with the public and educating them about the art form: "We're already an aging art form and we now have to make sure we are undertaking initiatives like this that will create audience development; audience education and connect the Met generally with its local, national and global fan base in a way that has not been possible previously." 21

In many ways, the venerable Met might seem an unlikely candidate for the kind of deal that Ferdinand Peck had to strike to open the doors of the Auditorium Theater. Usually an initial public offering (or IPO for short, an abbreviation now firmly embedded in the popular imagination after the tech boom of the 1990s) is for a scrappy young start-up, or maybe a middle-aged establishment embarking on some period of speculative growth. You go public so that you can raise the necessary capital to become the next GE, IBM, or ExxonMobil. In the arts marketplace, however, the Met is already one of the few indisputably large-cap companies out there. It already is the ExxonMobil of performing-arts organizations. In fact, the finances of the Met were quite conspicuously put in the black just before the arrival of Peter Gelb, thanks to a $25 million gift secured by Joseph Volpe from Met chairman Mercedes Bass, matriarch of a family with considerable oil wealth. 22 That was a record-setting one-time cash gift, mind you, virtually unheard of in the world of carefully negotiated megphilanthropy. Of course, with the price of energy behaving as it is, that record might not hold for long. Mrs. Bass herself might easily break her own record.

The Met doesn't need an IPO so much to raise cash, but to refashion its institutional profile. The Met through the broadcasts is focused not just on bringing opera to the masses, but on refashioning its own public image by bringing
opera to the masses. The whole point of the broadcasts is their institutional frame—viewers see not just opera, but the Metropolitan Opera, and what the Met is doing for opera by bringing it to the masses. The real work of the broadcasts takes place not just at the HD broadcasts, but also in the press coverage they generate. As with so many other mediatized events—sporting events, presidential debates, celebrity divorce trials—you don’t have to have seen the event live, much less have attended in person, to participate. Just by hearing about it through a secondhand account, or by making small talk about it after the fact, you contribute to the event’s public profile. The fact that you care helps make the event an Event.

Peter Gelb wants people to care about the Met and opera, and he seems to understand that it’s by reproducing the Met that he can accomplish this most readily. His product has become so unique and isolated as to be incomprehensible in the current media spectrum. By reproducing the Met in new forms, Gelb has managed to tap into the latent "exhibition value" of his product, as formulated by Walter Benjamin. Benjamin contrasts the exhibition value of technologically reproduced art with the "cult value" that unique objects acquire in ritual use. "With the emancipation of specific art practices from the service of ritual," he writes, "the opportunities for exhibiting their products increase." HD technology presents an important new category of exhibition value for opera. The art form can now be deployed for a new use distinct from its original function in the opera house and its now technologically passé use in television and radio broadcasts. Additionally, this newfound exhibitability in reproduced objects concerns itself with more than just the artistic. Benjamin clarifies that "through the exclusive emphasis placed on its exhibition value, the work of art becomes a construct [Gebilde] with quite new functions. Among these, the one we are conscious of— the artistic function—may subsequently be seen as incidental." Reproduction not only multiplies the occurrences of the object, but changes the way people can experience that object.

In the HD broadcasts, the artistic does almost become incidental, overshadowed by the initiative’s powerful institutional dramaturgy. Institutional dramaturgy consists of the practices through which an arts institution structures its patrons’ experiences in the service of advancing its goals or articulating its identity. Institutional dramaturgy is not to be confused with the critical or historical guidance supplied by artistic dramaturges, but it is intimately tied up with what happens on stage. In fact, it is institutional dramaturgy that lends performances much of their aura of success. It is concerned with managing the public profile of the presenting institution and lending that extra bit of star power to the artistic product. The people concerned with executing institutional dramaturgy work in part behind the scenes—the press agents, marketers, fund-raisers—and in part in what we would term the front of house—the house managers, ushers, housekeepers. But all are guided by the larger administration, often headed by an ingenious impresario, the person with the overall vision of how the institution should be staged.

The Met’s broadcasts invite and enable the audience to inhabit imaginatively the status-imbued space of the Metropolitan Opera House, the corporate headquarters of the initiative. From beginning to end, the experience connects the audience to the institutional mother ship at Lincoln Center. Although you purchase your ticket from the individual movie theater rather than from the Met directly, when you arrive in the theater, the screen shows slowly panning shots of the interior of the Metropolitan Opera House. A sound track familiar to any concertgoer or operagoer accompanies the images: the dull murmur of conversation mingled with the distant cacophony of the orchestra warming up. All the while, a clock at the bottom corner of the screen counts down to the start of the show, in effect taking the place of the ushers who would rush you into the house when the overture is about to start.

Once the broadcast begins, the experience begins to diverge from that of the actual opera, but with features designed to compensate, indeed almost overcompensate, for the remote audience’s not being present at the actual event. The broadcast actually begins about ten minutes before the actual opera, with special greetings and behind-the-scenes features. The host of these special features for five of eight broadcasts in the 2007–8 season was none other than Renée Fleming. Doing her best Katie Couric imitation, the reigning diva of our time acts as virtual tour guide both before the show and during intermission. She greets the viewers, chats with the stage managers during set changes, and interviews the conductor and the stars. Fleming participated as host in only one broadcast in the first season of the initiative, and her more prominent role this season is hardly surprising, for Fleming seems to have emerged as the new face of the Met. Her head shot for Thaïs has served as an emblem of the Met’s 2008–9 season. This image graces not just the cover of the house’s season brochure, but also the preprepared press envelope in which materials are sent to the media, as well as numerous pages on the Met’s website.

Renée Fleming’s leading role in the broadcasts brings into focus how heavily the broadcasts rely upon what Dudley Andrew identifies as the dependence of any adapted object on the cultural status of the original. It’s hard to think of someone with more cultural status in the opera world than Renée Fleming—and for the broadcasts she’s our operatic fairy godmother, turning our dingy neighborhood movie house into a red-draped hall with crystal chandeliers. Renée Fleming’s participation, like that of Beverly Sills last year before her passing, is crucial to making the broadcasts work—this is the Met, after all, and any old host won’t do. Securing someone like Renée Fleming doesn’t come easy—she’s probably booked through 2015, if not 2020. Even though she’s just talking and not singing, and even though she performs her broadcast duties voluntarily and without payments or contracts, her engagement as host is a casting coup.
that could happen only for the Met. 27 Despite her central role, Renée Fleming ultimately ends up as something of a seconda dama. It's the institution--thanks in part to Fleming's participation--that steals the show.

Philip Auslander has demonstrated how live and mediatized performances have become inextricably dependent on one another, and the live can no longer maintain its earlier claims to primacy. The live no longer stands as an aural original that the mediatized has the privilege of reproducing in a degraded secondary format. Instead, the live "has become the means by which mediatized representations are naturalized." 28 We accept the mediatized event because of its existence as a live event: "[I]f the mediatized image can be recreated in a live setting, it must have been 'real' to begin with." 29 With the live and mediatized, it seems hard to tell anymore where one begins and the other ends: "[W]hereas mediatized performance derives its authority from its reference to the live or real, the live now derives its authority from its reference to the mediatized, which derives its authority from its reference to the live, etc." 30

Auslander's observations arise as a diagnosis of the tensions between live theater and television, but with The Met: Live in HD--notably the l-word is part of the initiative's name--diagnosis seems to have become prophecy or maybe just recipe. Gelb and the Met have recognized the symbiosis that now exists between the live and mediatized. Now that the two are so inseparable, they may as well help each other out. Like a true "orchid in the land of technology," 31 the Met has found in HD technology a viable life partner.

Indeed, going a step beyond Auslander, the HD broadcasts mediatize the institution, not just the cultural product of the institution. The HD broadcasts take not just the individual opera, but the Metropolitan Opera, as their main product--the opera is inseparable from the Opera. The broadcasts work ultimately in service not of opera (or even the director or performance), but of the institution, and the original performance and its presenter gain even more cachet. Through this remediatization, the Met can capitalize on new forms of exhibition value and in turn reinvigorate the exchange value of its original product. In his bid for inclusivity, therefore, Gelb has to make a subtle case for exclusivity, as well.

As the Met makes its way out to the suburbs, the institutional dramaturgy of the broadcasts enables the old dame to keep her glamour, one might say her authenticity, intact. Benjamin notes how authenticity is the one frontier that reproduction cannot ever conquer completely: "In even the most perfect reproduction, one thing is lacking: the here and how of the work of art--its unique existence in a particular place." 32 If the Met can't make you actually present, they can do a lot to compensate for it--hence the special touches like Renée Fleming. Benjamin further explains how "technological reproduction can place the copy of the original in situations which the original itself cannot attain." 33 Even as the HD broadcasts "meet the recipient halfway," however, their overtly articulated links with the place of origination ironically ensure that the movie audience can't forget that they are not there for the real thing. The broadcasts let us pretend to go to the Met, but in the end remind us that we are, well, just pretending. Kevin Kopelson, in a review of Wayne Koestenbaum's work, acknowledges this inconvenient truth that suburban opera queens must come to terms with, a circumstance that the institutional dramaturgy of the HD broadcasts can't quite overcome. "Most of us are parochial and monolingual," he writes. "We don't live in Paris, Vienna, Milan, or any other city with an opera house. We don't speak French, German, Italian, or any other language that would enable us to know the libretto as well as we know the score.... We're pseudo-metropolitan and pseudo-cosmopolitan." 34

Thus, we see the double edge of the broadcasts' institutional dramaturgy--by leveraging the prestige of the Met and the glamour of figures such as Renée Fleming to win over new opera fans, they can't help but reinforce the inherent exclusivity of the real thing. Peter Gelb has managed to make the Met at once more inclusive and more exclusive. Or, looked at more charitably, the Met has opened up to the public, with the predictable side effect that the original now acquires even more cachet. In either case, the genius of putting Natalie Dessay and Anna Netrebko on the side of buses reveals itself more clearly. Even if the people waiting at the bus stop don't go to the Met, they might start to think that some day they'd like to go to the Met, which in turn makes it all the more special for the people who actually do get to go. If the Met is "cribbing moves" from anyone, it seems they are getting them from the folks at Disneyworld. (In the Met's defense, new outreach initiatives have brought about free open dress rehearsals, in addition to a limited block of $20 rush prime orchestra seats for every performance, so those of us who do take the bus can still have a chance at seeing the real thing.)

What Peter Gelb has figured out is that it's not just what takes place on stage or even front of house that makes the difference. One reporter for Germany's Handelsblatt opens a feature on the HD broadcasts by noting the careful arrangement of Gelb's office: the general manager stands up to greet his visitor from behind a designer desk with the past--three of his six Emmys--arrayed behind him. 35 On the other side of the office hangs the future--a flat-screen television, showing live footage of the stage of the Met. Although Gelb did promise no Planet of the Apes Rigoletto, he didn't say the same about his office, which the reporter says, "one might easily take for a piece of intellectual Regietheater, so symbolic does the arrangement appear." 36 Indeed, at the Met these days, the most meaningful stagings aren't necessarily of Puccini or Mozart, but of the Metropolitan Opera itself.
Endnotes

1 I would like to thank those who have read or commented on previous drafts of this essay: David J. Levin in a seminar on adaptation in theater, opera, and film; participants in the EthNoise! Symposium, "Musical Meaning and Its Mediation," on 24 May 2008 at the University of Chicago; and participants in the Music and the Moving Image conference at New York University, Steinhardt, 31 May 2008.


3 Ibid.


10 Ibid.


13 Watts, "Beam Me Up."


15 Elysa Gardner, "Metropolitan Opera Doors Open Even Wider; New Chief Aims for Crossover," USA Today, 6 October 2006.

16 Ronald Blum, "Gelb's Trying to Start Metropolitan Opera Revolution: 'There is only one hope,'" Associated Press, 21 September 2006.


18 Gowen, "Digital Theater Matinees."


20 Blum, "Gelb's Trying."

21 Ibid.

22 Daniel J. Wakin, "Metropolitan Opera, in Tight Times, Receives Record Gift of $25 Million," New York Times, 5 January 2006. Gelb declined comment at the time about how he would specifically spend the money (he had not yet
formally begun as general manager) but said, "It certainly makes it easier for me to look at the coming seasons, and the transitions I'm going to be overseeing, with greater optimism."


24Ibid.

25These observations are based upon my own attendance at Met Live in HD screenings: in the 2006–7 season, I Puritani (The puritans) (Bellini) and Eugene Onegin (Tchaikovsky) and, in the 2007–8 season, Macbeth (Verdi), Hansel and Gretel (Humperdinck), and La fille du régiment (The daughter of the regiment) (Bellini). Thanks to William Evans, Matthew Adelizzi, Alicia Hidajat, and David Levin for sharing their company and impressions at these broadcasts.


27I am grateful to Marisa Biaggi, creative content manager at the Metropolitan Opera, for clarifying the financial terms of the participation of Renée Fleming and other broadcast hosts.


29Ibid., 38–39.

30Ibid., 39.

31Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 35. I consciously retain Harry Zohn's more poetic "orchid" translation, even though the recent Harvard edition of the essay preserves Benjamin's allusion to Novalis with the more literal "Blue Flower in the land of technology."


33Ibid.


35Thomas Knüwer, "Der Met-Knacker" (The Met-Cracker), Handelsblatt, 8 January 2007.

36Ibid., translation mine.