

# NOTES ON OPERA'S EXQUISITE CORPSE

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*Writing is not an independent order of signification: it is  
weakened speech, something not completely dead: a living-dead,  
a relieved corpse, a deferred life, a semblance of breath.*

Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*

*If anyone ever boos you offstage, that is simply applause from ghosts.*  
Sharon Needles

1. *“What remains of opera?”*—Some questions just refuse to die. Unsurprisingly enough, this is often true of questions *about* dying, the dead, and what remains after death. Our repeated attempts at entertaining them ultimately take on the character of an exorcism ritual, as if we could release ourselves from their monstrous power merely by rehearsing them over and over again. Maybe this time, the uttered incantation, the magic bullet, the stake through the heart will put the matter to rest once and for all. Is opera dying? Is opera in New York still alive? One is tempted to declare, “Opera is dead,” but could there be by now a more familiar gesture, and could one make such a declaration without immediately having to follow it with “Long live opera”? The repeated claims of opera’s exhausted status are in themselves exhausting. The same is true of theatre, which has been dead or dying for as long as anyone cares to remember: Artaud, Strindberg, the Romantics, probably even longer. Somehow with opera, just as with theatre, it turns out that the monster’s head still hasn’t been cut off. Or else, like any monster worthy of the name, it keeps finding ways to rise from the grave.

For the purposes of these notes, let’s not be put off by the awkwardness of death metaphors (surely just as awkward, in their way, as birth metaphors). We might just as easily think about opera’s *ruins*, and indeed, the current critical fascination with remains is in many ways a subset and a continuation of an ongoing critical preoccupation with ruins and ruination. But instead, let’s first acknowledge the ubiquity of the death metaphor, and not just in discussions about opera. The anxious uncertainty over whether opera is still “alive” would seem to have something obvious to do with



*Atys*: Atys (Ed Lyon) mourns over the corpse of Sangaride (Emanuelle de Negri) while the jealous goddess Cybèle (Anna Reinhold) seals his doom. Photo: Stephanie Berger. Courtesy Brooklyn Academy of Music

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the “declinist panic” that Frank Rich sees as the hallmark of how many Americans today perceive the United States’ current political situation. “Is America dead?” asks his headline (*New York Magazine*, July 22, 2012). Elsewhere, he might have asked, “Is Europe dying?” or “Is the West’s decline irreversible?” These various examples are linked, in their way, to the paranoia over opera’s vitality. Under bio-political conditions, it is no wonder that these paranoid uncertainties all take the form of a terrible hypochondria. But to put a spin on psychotherapy’s classic joke about paranoia: Just because you’re a hypochondriac doesn’t mean you’re not actually dying.

**2. *Dead or Undead***—I have a friend, a scholar of the English renaissance, who finds my interest in opera utterly bewildering. As he sees it, “certain artistic forms were doomed to die when the socio-economic class that sustained them disappeared.” Honestly, I am never really sure what he means by this quip. I suppose he has in mind something like the *ancien régime*. (Let us leave aside the obvious fact that our twenty-first-century world continues to be governed by powerful plutocrats who, in some cases, are also opera patrons.) But one might also argue, as Mladen Dolar and Slavoj Žižek recently have, that “from its very beginning, opera was dead, a stillborn child of musical art. [...] From its very beginnings, it was perceived as something outdated, as a retroactive solution to an inherent crisis in music.”<sup>1</sup> Rather than dying while still unborn, however, as the stillbirth metaphor suggests, we could counterpose another conceit: that opera actually begins its life already dead, or as it were, already undead. Opera begins its life as a zombie. Or perhaps, as Frankenstein’s monster, an undead heap of fragmentary limbs and organs, each cut from somewhere else (poetry, music, dance, you name it) and stitched together into a grotesque conglomeration.

**3. *(Un)dead or Endangered***—A biological metaphor (“Art form *x* is alive, art form *y* is dead”) also expresses an idea about an underlying “ecological” set of conditions. On the one hand, a resemblance to the living dead inheres within opera’s very concept; but on the other hand, as J. D. McClatchy and others have suggested, it also resembles an endangered species, and as such it asks us to take seriously that art forms are capable of vanishing completely. After all, no one today performs dithyrambs in the way the Greeks once did, not even Richard Schechner. As an artistic practice, they have gone the way of the Dodo. In this light, the deathly pallor of opera reflects the specter of total extinction, and if the idea of a future without opera is chilling, it may be because it also raises the possibility of a future without the arts in general. But again, some questions never die: these go back to *The Birth of Tragedy*, and long before.

**4. *Contaminations of the contemporary***—Does contemporary opera even exist? Today’s artists, working under the slogan of “the contemporary,” alongside today’s critics, working under the ever-accelerating journalistic paradigm of “news,” come together to maintain custody over what the Italian Futurists once founded as “the religion of the new.” (No need to dwell upon the fact that these same Futurists were also enthusiasts of fascism, that most radical form of state-enforced capitalism, and that a religious worship of the new owes as much to the religious or fetishistic form of the commodity as it does to the traditions of artistic experimentation and

*avant-gardism*.) For now, let us set aside the question of whether the *new* and the *contemporary* are always and everywhere the same thing. In a situation where worship of “the new” is the rule, opera would seem to be a special blasphemy, a pollution that reeks of the defunct, a dead weight dragging things down toward the old and the impure. The very fact of opera’s survival in—or in some cases, in competition with—these art world conditions suggests that the genre has found ways, like a parasite, to thrive in even the most adverse of circumstances.

**5. *The corpse as aesthetic object***—One way of narrating the history of a modern sensibility in the arts would be to take stock of the shifting status of the dead as objects of artistic representation. Walter Benjamin locates a point of origin for this narrative in seventeenth-century Europe—historically contemporaneous with the emergence of opera—in whose theatre, so he argued, “the corpse becomes quite simply the pre-eminent emblematic property,” the bodily sign that ruination extend its empire over every corner of the world, even to the physical, creaturely body. From this point one could proceed through Goya, Baudelaire, the Surrealists’ parlor games, and so on, up to the present. These days, the cadaver’s powers of fascination seem as strong as ever before in elite and mass culture alike. Even drag performance today is in thrall to the charms of the *cadavre exquis*, as the widespread popularity of Sharon Needles attests.

**6. *The corpse as Verfremdungseffekt***—For all these reasons, James Jordan’s remarks in his March 2012 review of Christopher Alden’s *Così Fan Tutte* at City Opera are remarkable: “Zombies are impossible to escape these days—on television, film, video games, even reworkings of Jane Austen (*Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*), and now New York City Opera has given us a *Così Fan Tutte* starring the undead” (*New York Post*, March 19, 2012). If opera maintains connection with death and undeadness, what happens when contemporary opera productions are conscious of this connection? Alden’s *Così* came close to answering to this question. It dispensed with the glitter that often accompanies Mozart’s operas, and centered on a cast of pale-faced actors drifting vacantly through a stark, grey space. The production drew on its singers’ capacity for irony, understatement, and cynicism. Alden frustrated the audience’s capacity for empathetic engagement, often risking its boredom. The approach seemed Brechtian, but only vaguely so: Brecht-ish. Was the deadness in these performers’ eyes because they were zombies, or because they were exercising an alienated approach to acting, or both? Although the answer was not altogether clear, the ambiguity was itself suggestive. The epic theatre supposedly came about in a moment when Brecht decided to powder his actors’ faces with ghastly white chalk in order to indicate the fatigue—the dead tiredness, so to speak—of their characters in *Edward II*. Defamiliarization, that means by which art can revive the zombie-like spectator and reawaken perceptual processes deadened by habit, has always paradoxically contained a faint hint of the morbid.

**7. *Bodysnatchers***—Deadness behind the eyes, and a certain flatness of affect: the singers in Alden’s *Così* had this much in common with the performers in Richard Maxwell’s similarly gestic co-production with the Wooster Group of Eugene



Top: *Così Fan Tutte*, directed by Christopher Alden. Photo: Carol Rosegg. Courtesy New York City Opera. Middle: The Wooster Group's *La Didone*, directed by Elizabeth LeCompte. Photo: © Paula Court. Courtesy The Wooster Group. Bottom: *Dark Sisters*, directed by Rebecca Taichman. Photo: Richard Termine. Courtesy Michelle Tabnick.



O'Neill's *Early Plays*, seen earlier that season at St. Ann's Warehouse. Even more, however, this *Così* called to mind another recent Wooster Group project: their *La Didone* (2009), which brought together Cavalli's 1641 opera of the same name and a B-rated Italian horror film from 1965, *Planet of the Vampires*. In yoking together sensuous music-theatre and vampiric aliens into a *conchetto* of sorts, the Woosters found dialectical ways to reconsider age-old anxieties plainly manifest within opera history about performance's power to take control of its spectators' bodies. These anxieties go all the way back to Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*, that paradigmatic *favola* of musical enchantment (and enchainment) playing at the boundaries of the living and the dead. In short, the Wooster *Didone* tapped into a problem intrinsic to the very concept of opera itself.

**8. Horror / Cheese**—A principle of *possession* seemed also to operate in Alden's *Così*, albeit in the background. Only occasionally did Alden bring it forward, as when Fiordiligi's aria "*Come Scoglio*" was staged with the soprano Sara Jakubiak seated with her head dangling down at the neck, her long blond hair falling over her face in a manner that recalled the iconic image of the undead child in *The Ring* (2002). What is it about opera that seems so ripe for comparison with horror movies, if not that both play unashamedly on the pleasure produced by a playful manipulation of sensory stimulus and haptic/emotional response? Opera and cheesy scary movies: both *crave* bodies. The same could be said for any medium or genre that trades heavily in sensation, for example, the popular novel. It's no surprise, for instance, that Anne Rice's interest in vampires is supplemented by her interest in castrati and the exquisiteness of eighteenth-century opera, as her 1982 novel *Cry to Heaven* attests.

**9. Operatic remains as a question of politics**—Peter Gelb's installment at the Metropolitan Opera in 2006 was greeted with a tremendous amount of critical and popular excitement. Life and death seemed to hang in the balance. Would Gelb revivify the Met, and in turn, the larger New York opera scene? Several productions seemed to suggest the possibility that he might: the William Kentridge *Nose* (2010) and the Willy Decker *Traviata* (2011) come immediately to mind, but even more than these, Patrice Chéreau's staging of Janáček's *From the House of the Dead* (2009), which I reviewed approvingly in *PAJ* 96 (2010). In Chéreau's hands, Janáček's opera was a paean to the machine-like power of modern social conditions to transform living bodies into the walking dead. It was a deeply political piece, but in no way didactic. It posed no facile answers. Instead it left something discomfiting under the audience's skin, some itchy irritant or remainder left behind by the performance.<sup>2</sup>

**10. The Pulse**—All glimmers of hope aside, six years after the start of Peter Gelb's regime, vital signs at the Met and in the larger New York scene have seemed, to some parties at least, as weak as ever. At the end of the spring 2012, Alex Ross complained in the *New Yorker* that "[t]his has been the most dispiriting opera season since I began reviewing music in New York, twenty years ago," attributing the problem to "a lack of intellectual vitality" (*The New Yorker*, March 12, 2012). In the *Times*, Zachary Woolfe requested a return to first principles, asking "What do we want from opera in New York?" as though recent catastrophic events demanded the entire question

be rethought from the ground up, or as though the cultural administrators of New York opera needed to be reminded of their basic artistic obligations (*New York Times*, January 4, 2012).

No doubt, the dimming of hopes surrounding Gelb's leadership at the Met has fueled much of this rhetoric. Certainly Gelb should be credited with the positive aspects of his pioneering *Live in HD* broadcasts, which bring opera more fully into the age of digital reproducibility. But could the phantom liveness promised by these mediated spectacles make up for the company's great gamble, Robert Lepage's malfunctioning, \$16 million *Ring* cycle, proclaimed by Gelb to be "revolutionary" but panned by just about every major New York opera critic? Frankly, I couldn't say. The Met refused my request to write on the *Ring* for *PAJ* (and prohibitive ticket prices, nearly \$400 for Family Circle seats, combined with the cycle's poor reviews proved truly effective deterrents). When, not long after, the *Times* broke the news that Gelb had tried to ban *Opera News's* critics from reviewing the Met's performances after receiving their tepid notices in response to the Lepage *Ring*, it seemed the company had gone into full-blown "damage control" mode (*New York Times*, 21 May 2012).

**11. On Life Support / Dead on Arrival**—The situation with New York City Opera has been even more depressing, ever since its failed bid to bring Gérard Mortier to its helm in 2008. Since then, it has been beset by a host of budgetary woes, forced to move from Lincoln Center, and ensnared in intractable labor negotiations. The programming has suffered for all of this misery, both in the quantity and quality of performance offerings. The company's most exciting venture in recent memory was its presentation of three existential, one-act *Monodramas* (John Zorn's homage to Artaud, *La Machine de l'Être*; Schoenberg's *Erwartung*; and Morton Feldman's *Neither*, based on Beckett's poem of the same name), staged by Michael Counts in spring 2011. Its 2011–12 season was a mostly dreary affair, and for a second consecutive year, its 2012–13 season will feature only sixteen performances, a considerable falling-off for a company that once produced hundreds of opera evenings each year.

For a new work in 2012, City Opera brought forward *Prima Donna*, with music and libretto by the singer-songwriter Rufus Wainwright. Billed as a "love letter" to opera, Wainwright's score did little more than nostalgically knock off the conventions of Romantic opera (late Strauss, Delibes), at times blending them with those of modern pop and indie music. Where Broadway once embraced "rock opera," *Prima Donna* might more accurately be called "rockstar opera" in honor of its celebrity composer, but the Lloyd-Webberism is much the same. *Prima Donna's* libretto also failed to arouse any serious interest. Focusing on an aging singer, it felt like the most obvious and narcissistic kind of autobiographical allegory. There were gestures made in the direction of class politics, cliché, and campiness—citing, in its way, both *Sunset Boulevard* and *The Queen's Throat*—but these gestures were uncommitted, as if the piece couldn't decide whether to take any of its own attitudes seriously or not, provoking the audience's awkward laughter during some of its more obviously sentimental sequences. Its only honest moment came at the very end, when Wainwright let the

*ottocentismo* fall away and offered a last ballad, a slow and melancholy strain whose dying fall sounded finally like the composer's own music.

**12. Back to life**—Not all backward glances are equally doomed. While this was not the case with Wainwright's *Prima Donna*, sometimes what's old, and even what's old enough to be properly historical or canonical, can seem fresher and more exciting than what purports to be new. Sometimes, the liveliness of the (supposedly dead) past rivals that of the present (supposedly living) moment. From this perspective, we might recall Giorgio Agamben's view, as expressed in his essay "What is the Contemporary?", that being contemporary consists not in "the new" *per se*, but rather in "the untimely." For Agamben, channeling Nietzsche, to be authentically contemporary involves standing apart from one's time, being out-of-sync with one's historical situation, finding ways in which the past survives within the present, and seeing the present's achievements not as points of pride, but rather, as symptoms. In this, Agamben echoes a point already made decades earlier by T. S. Eliot, whose essay on "Tradition and the Individual Talent" argued that anyone who wishes to be an artist "beyond his twenty-fifth year" must possess a historical sense, one that "involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence."

**13. Funerary Architecture**—With respect to the untimeliness of the contemporary, it is telling that two of this season's most impressive offerings were "remounts." One of these two was the Les Arts Florissants production of Jean-Baptiste Lully's *Atys*, originally performed at BAM in 1987. This restaging of Lully's opera, a *tragédie-en-musique* from 1676, made plain that seventeenth-century music continues to have tremendous contemporary appeal, more than twenty years after Richard Taruskin published his thoughts on "The Modern Sound of Early Music."<sup>3</sup> Philippe Quinault's libretto focuses the tragic action on the amorous entanglements of *Atys*, in love with the nymph Sangaride, who is herself betrothed to the King Celenus, while *Atys* is beloved by the vengeful goddess Cybèle. Theatrically speaking, this was not an historical opera being performed "the way it really was," nor was it an infantile, creampuff fantasia on baroque themes (as was the case with some of the productions LAF brought to Brooklyn for BAM's Baroque Opera Festival in 2010). Rather, the LAF production revealed *Atys* as baroque in a truly robust sense: somber, obscure, a great marble mausoleum draped with heavy Phrygian cadences. Director Jean-Marie Villégier often quoted the historical conventions and gestures of the late seventeenth-century stage, lending them classical gravity while never slavishly recreating them, while Carlo Tommasi's scenic design moved the opera's pastoral setting indoors, into a windowless room suggesting one of the apartments at Versailles. In short, it was a kind of French *tombeau*, in the multifarious sense described by musicologist and opera scholar Carolyn Abbate: both a physical monument, and an artistic homage in music and/or literature to the past, one that effectively recreates the past anew.<sup>4</sup>

In *Atys*'s most spellbinding moment, the title character falls asleep and is sent a dream from the lovesick goddess. The sirenlike voice of Le Sommeil (Sleep) sounds the mesmerizing words, "Dormons, dormons tous / Ah que le repos est doux" ("Let's



sleep, let's all sleep. / Ah, how sweet is rest."), like a clarion call from beyond the bourn of time, and the slumbering Atys is greeted with a vision of a dancer who clearly recalls the famous image of the sun king in his splendid ballet costumes. As Mark Franko has argued, this staging introduces its own conceit of memorialization into the opera: the production is set in the time of the opera's premiere, the 1670s, while the tradition of the courtly ballet flourished some two decades earlier, in the 1650s. "The dream is the nostalgia of the court for youth in the heyday of its earlier enthusiasm for court ballet. The present is cold and nocturnal whereas the dream rediscovers the light of day. This wonderful baroque conceit offers a model for our relation to the performance itself. [...] Our relation to this production is conditioned in more ways than one by the past: the 1980s compared to today; the 1650s compared to the 1670s" (*Jampole.com*, October 12, 2011).

To these remarks, I would only add that the moment becomes a mournful allegory—not just of the past in its relation to the present, as Franko argues—but an allegory of spectatorship as well. The dream moment is also a spectacle-within-a-spectacle, with Atys separated from the theatrical image by the mediation of the dream. In this way, the play-within-the-play and the framing Howard Gilman Opera House recall Benjamin's notes on Brecht's Epic Theater, which describe an "abyss which separates the actors from the audience *like the dead from the living* [emphasis mine], the abyss whose silence heightens the sublime in drama and whose resonance heightens the intoxication of opera." With opera, the clarion call of the dream and the theatre is also the call of the past and the dead.

**14. *Replaying the Play of Mo(u)rning (Sex and Language)***—The other "remount" of the 2011–12 season that bears discussing was *That Morning Thing*. Robert Ashley's 1967 opera had never been seen in New York prior to its November 2011 premiere, sponsored by the Kitchen and Performa 11. After Ashley wrote the piece, it was only performed three times in the following few years: at Ann Arbor's ONCE Festival in 1968, and later, in Tokyo and Oakland. Still, the piece gained a following as rumors and recorded fragments circulated in the 1970s. Although Ashley's work still remains to an embarrassing extent outside the established, institutionalized scene of uptown opera, it has long been a staple of the downtown performance world and abroad, and it continues to command a cult following. (This following is reflected in the fact that 2011 also saw performances of his 1984 television opera *Perfect Lives* in both Manhattan and Brooklyn, as well as evenings of his chamber music performed at St. Marks's Incubator Arts Project. These St. Marks performances included the debut of Ashley's new work, *World War III Just the Highlights*, whose score appeared last year in *PAJ* 101.) For the fall Performa festival, Ashley worked with a cast of seventeen musicians and dancers to reconstruct *That Morning Thing*, mostly from his own memory. As such, the work might better be described as a re-performance, a reenactment of the performative remains of its original. Typically, we say that operas and plays are re-mounted or revived, and that works of live art or performance are reperformed, but with Robert Ashley's work, which vexes the boundaries between the two categories, we are in unclear territory.

Over a series of mostly disconnected “acts” and an epilogue, *That Morning Thing* explores sexual power relations from a variety of different positions. The overall effect is chilling. Its various movements include: women trafficking robotically in gridlike patterns, seeming to respond to subtle cues from their static male counterparts; a woman of color being made repeatedly to count to four in irregular rhythms while a white, male keyboardist counters with increasingly violent, arrhythmic sounds; a female dancer imitating a randomized series of pin-up girl poses while another woman’s recorded voice narrates in graphic detail the experience of being sexually assaulted, the opera’s only narrative event, significantly.

As one might expect from this intertwining of erotic and violent behavior, death and decay are near the heart of this opera too. Ashley has explained that the piece came about in response to the coincidentally simultaneous suicides of three of his female friends. He insists, however, that the “decay of language” into an invisible medium for perpetuating power relations is the piece’s more crucial concept. In interviews he has linked this decay to the larger political-economic conditions of capitalism, but also, more generally, to language’s incapacity for expressing the infinite complexity of life, particularly in the face of the mysteriousness of death. (In his words, “you can’t explain in words why you commit suicide.” See: *Performa Magazine*, August 21, 2011.) In forging links between sexual violence and language’s performative power, *That Morning Thing* anticipated, as it were, much of the next few decades’ feminist and queer politics (e.g. Michel Foucault, Judith Butler). At the same time however, in its repeated scenes of misogyny performed by a cast of young, student-age women, *That Morning Thing* was disturbing. It walked a razor-thin line between demonstrating these links and merely representing sadism and the death drive without any contextualization or commentary.

**15. *Twilight of the Myths***—Catherine Clément, who (literally) wrote the book on how opera finds systematic ways to undo its women, has drawn significant attention to the close, indeed pathological, relationship this undoing has to opera’s basis in myth. As a genre, it’s unclear whether opera can ever shed its myths entirely, and the intractability of the mythic in opera is not only a problem for women, but for the metaphysics of opera itself. From Monteverdi’s time to Mozart’s, the presence of onstage gods and other similar supernatural beings was simply standard operating procedure. Moreover, many operas that go by the name of nineteenth-century *verismo* could be seen as myths disguised in nineteenth-century dress: *Traviata* as a rewriting of Orpheus for a disenchanted, realistic age, for example. Even when the gods would seem to have disappeared altogether, Wagner brought them back again, if only to try killing them off in a spectacular conflagration. Can god be killed? Can opera be killed? These questions, arguably, go hand in hand. But again, here we come back to Nietzsche.

**16. *Mournfulness and Stoicism***—In *Dark Sisters*, young New York composer Nico Muhly and playwright/librettist Stephen Karam take up the question of myth in a typically American way: by drawing on historical events and figures, and endowing them with a mythic stature (see also: *The Mother of Us All*, *Einstein on the Beach*,



Top: *That Morning Thing*, directed by Fast Forward. Act I: Frogs. The cast's female performers, trafficking robotically in gridlike patterns, seeming to respond to subtle cues from their static male counterparts. Photo: © Paula Court. Courtesy Performa. Right: *Atys: The dream ballet*. Photo: Pierre Grosbois. Courtesy Les Arts Florissants.



*Satyagraha, Nixon in China*). At the same time, this new work is an opera about the many myths of America itself, their illusions and their internal contradictions. Based on the aftermath of a raid conducted in 2008 by Texas state authorities against a polygamous community of Mormon fundamentalists, *Dark Sisters* begins with the laments of a group of sister-wives belonging to a family undergoing a similar catastrophe. From this crisis follows a larger crisis of faith for the opera's sister-wife protagonist, Eliza, who comes to doubt the divine infallibility of her prophet husband, and ultimately claws her way, Nora Helmer-style, to a Pyrrhic kind of freedom. In its final scene, set at an open grave, the opera leaves ambiguous the question of life after one severs one's ties with a religious past.

A chamber opera for seven singers and thirteen traditional instruments, *Dark Sisters* appears governed by a principle of musical restraint and discipline, one appropriate to an opera on the theme of patriarchal repression in which the female characters have to remind themselves, mantra-like, to "Keep sweet, no matter what." The score is entirely tonal. It employs no digital electronic elements, but it clearly and deftly draws influence from Muhly's many compositions that combine live instruments with laptop, such as when a series of arpeggio trills stops all too abruptly several times in rapid succession, each time as though in a digital sound file cut. Similarly, on a more structural scale, large musical ideas and movements break off too soon and come to anti-climax, repressing the culminations and fulminations one typically associates with opera. (During an earlier preview performance of some of the opera's songs at Le Poisson Rouge, Muhly explained that the treatment of mad scenes in most traditional operas is a bit too "Jersey Shore" for his tastes.) The overall tone is notably stoic—though more the kind of stoicism that erupts when one's beliefs have been shaken to their core rather than the kind typically associated with American Puritan Christianity—but it was leavened with a sense of intimacy. Muhly cites Copland's *Tender Land*, Meredith Monk, American hymnody and folk music for his sources of inspiration.

**17. Allegory of the Cave(s)**—If one seeks out the caves where opera's shadow lives on after its supposed death, one finds many such shadowy places in New York, some more flourishing than others. Beyond the large-scale basilicas (Lincoln Center), the mid-sized temples (Gotham Chamber Opera), and the various smaller chapels (Dicapo Opera. etc.), one finds a host of even smaller, more independent organizations in a variety of forms, often operating under the radar of most Lincoln Center subscribers. One can point, as several critics recently have, to the work of independent opera impresario Beth Morrison, who is teaming up with HERE Arts Center in January 2013 to produce the first annual Prototype Festival. Prototype 2013 looks to program ambitious new work, likely similar in its aesthetic sensibilities to that once seen at City Opera's Vox Opera Festival, which is now greatly reduced in its scope compared to what it once was, like the rest of City Opera. Judging by Morrison's most recent projects—for example, her production of young American composer Missy Mazzoli's new opera *Song from the Uproar* this past spring at the Kitchen—the practitioners of this new work are young, enterprising, talented, and

highly trained. They battle a dismal economy and a climate of austerity with a DIY approach and the desire to redefine the genre from the ground up. They work in a variety of stylistic idioms, drawing upon the many great musical developments of the twentieth century that are still residual in twenty-first century musical culture: atonality and serialism, the use of folk and popular forms, indeterminacy and chance, minimalism and post-minimalism, electronics, sound, and noise.

But more than anything else, the full name of the Prototype: Opera/Theatre/Now Festival suggests an increasing emphasis on the interwovenness of theatre and opera, one I find not only in Morrison's work as a producer, but across the entire field of New York opera in all its various manifestations, all the way up to Peter Gelb's Met. This work makes a hybrid, protean form from the conventions of opera, theatre, experimental music, performance, live art, and media. As such, it often seems to draw inspiration from the notion of inter-/multi-medial exchange and synthesis seemingly intrinsic to the concepts of "the operatic" or "the theatrical" themselves. As examples of this practice, one might think of the composer Joe Diebes, or of the interdisciplinary artist Pablo Helguera, both of whom have recently appeared in this journal.

**18. Theatricality**—The current trend toward combining elements from opera and performance art reflects the fact that there has long been an operatic side of sorts to the world of contemporary performance: for example, Robert Wilson, or Marina Abramović and her admiration for Maria Callas, or the two combined in Wilson's recent *Life and Death of Marina Abramović*. More provocatively, however, this tendency counterbalances another current trend among contemporary performance and visual arts practitioners—detected by numerous critics, from Roberta Smith in the *Times* to Paul David Young and others in this journal—toward embracing theatricality, after decades of disavowing the theatrical altogether. In his influential 1967 essay, "Art and Objecthood," Michael Fried famously argued that, "The concepts of quality and value—and the extent that these are central to art, the concept of art itself—are meaningful, or wholly meaningful, only *within* the individual arts. What lies *between* the arts is theatre."<sup>5</sup> Or opera. Or both, whenever opera tries to out-theatricalize the theatre.

**19. Opera's Spectrality, Opera's Futurity**—"What is the future of opera?" Really, we're asking the same question a different way, since one can look at a ruin or a remain and see the future predicted within it. The August 2012 issue of *Opera News* was devoted to the future of the genre, not just in New York but nationwide. Philip Kennicott wondered whether the future might mean mostly the increasing sophistication of technologies used to organize and disseminate opera performances: *Live in HD* taken to its logical extremes to incorporate holographic bodies set within immersive virtual spaces made available at great distances. In short, a kind of Handel-on-the-Holodeck scenario. The issue also profiled a number of up-and-coming singers, conductors, composers, directors, and managers, but it kept its focus mostly on the uptown scene in New York and elsewhere. Among the young talents hailed as opera's next wave, I noted the inclusion of Andreas Mitisek, currently the head of California's Long Beach Opera, an administrator who also serves the com-



pany as a conductor, stage director, and designer, often all at once. And so on the one hand, we find modern-day Berninis like Mitisek, and on the other, a new idea of operatic form taking place in downtown New York and elsewhere—one that more closely aligns itself with the tradition established by Robert Ashley’s operas (among others: for example, Meredith Monk’s operas and Robert Wilson’s early work) and that has at times been billed by its producers as nothing less than the future of the genre itself. Either way, we seem repeatedly, ineluctably, to be finding *some kind* of theatricality as the future of opera. So, are we contemporary, or Wagnerian, or both?

**20. *Playing Through***—It has long been a commonplace in the German philosophical tradition to regard history as a kind of drama. One thinks immediately of Marx’s rewriting of Hegel’s claim that history repeats itself first as tragedy, then as farce, but Benjamin argues that this tradition of using theatrical vocabulary to describe historical events extends all the way back to the German seventeenth century. Regardless, let’s stick with this metaphor for a final moment. If history is a drama in process, one could then say that practitioners of contemporary opera are in a word, “corpsing.” *To corpse*, as the British theatre slang has it, is for an actor to break character mid-scene. Corpsing typically occurs when something hilariously funny happens, but the scene or circumstances require the actor to pretend not to notice, or not to be amused. One corpses when one plays through these catastrophes, demands a keeping-up of appearances, even after the illusion has been murdered or ruined. Perhaps the illusion died long ago, or right at the very beginning. Perhaps it never existed to begin with.

To recognize these possibilities is to have an understanding of opera that is historically informed, and to look forward to its futures, endlessly rewriting and replaying the notes written on its own (ever increasingly) exquisite corpse.

## NOTES

1. Mladen Dolar and Slavoj Žižek, *Opera’s Second Death* (London: Routledge, 2002), viii–ix. See also, the title of Joseph Kerman’s collection of essays, *Opera and the Morbidity of Music* (New York: NYRB Books, 2008).

2. Joe Kelleher has written about the “unpredictability of theatrical events [which] is also tied up [...] with whatever happens to *remain* [emphasis in original] of the event, for example in the thoughts and feelings of the audience as it is passing before us.” In reflecting on these remains as something that gets “under the skin” and acts like an irritant, he cites Alan Read. See Kelleher’s *Theatre & Politics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 22–23, and Read’s *Theatre, Intimacy & Engagement: The Last Human Venue* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

3. Richard Taruskin, *Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 164–72. (Essay originally published as “The Spin Doctors of Early Music” in July 1990.)

4. Carolyn Abbate, *In Search of Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 189–91.

5. Rebecca Schneider draws specific attention to the interrelatedness of intermediality and Fried’s notion of theatricality in this passage, which she quotes in *Performing Remains: Art and*

*War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (London: Routledge, 2011), 159. Here and throughout this essay, I am indebted to Schneider (and particularly *Performing Remains*) for the significant attention she has paid to question of remainder, remains, reenactment, death, zombies, haunting, theatricality, and temporality. See also: Rebecca Schneider. "In Response, a Call," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 16, no. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2004), 307–9.

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