

## **Opera across Borders**

# **Transcodification: Arts, Languages and Media**



Edited by  
Simone Gozzano

## **Volume 8**

# Opera across Borders

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Word, Image, Scene, and Digital Transformations

Edited by  
Angela Albanese, Marina Bondi, Benedetta Bronzini  
and Vincenzo Gannuscio

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Angela Albanese, Marina Bondi, Benedetta Bronzini,  
and Vincenzo Gannuscio

## Introduction: A Diachronic Journey Across the Borders of the Operatic Genre

Since its emergence in seventeenth-century Italy, opera has developed into the most multidisciplinary, “elitarian and expensive of the performing arts”,<sup>1</sup> inextricably linked to the public sphere and to urban spaces. Today, it stands at a pivotal crossroads, poised between its rich historical legacy and the pressing necessity to engage with an increasingly globalized and rapidly changing world. As Tim Carter observes in his crucial contribution to *The Oxford Handbook of Opera*, although opera is “messy by definition”,<sup>2</sup> it nevertheless succeeded in establishing itself as a canonical genre, maintaining its status as a highly specialized artistic practice “despite periodic attempts to remove opera from the pantheons of high art and into more experimental theatrical (and even non-theatrical) performance spaces”.<sup>3</sup> While this remains an accurate characterization, it is equally vital to underscore the permeability of the operatic genre. Opera – an inherently multimodal art form<sup>4</sup> – is a space where music, literature, technology, and social history are inextricably intertwined.<sup>5</sup> The development of opera has been shaped and profoundly transformed not only by technological innovations but also by the proliferation, especially in the past four decades, of alternative performance venues beyond the opera house, from the street to television, and more recently, to digital and virtual realms such as the metaverse.<sup>6</sup>

The present volume considers these dimensions by investigating how the “code”<sup>7</sup> of the operatic language has been rediscovered, transformed, rewritten, re-contextualized, and remediated over time. Spanning from the latter half of the nineteenth century to the present, the essays collected here, drawing on Linda Hutcheon’s notion of the “dramaturgical turn”,<sup>8</sup> interrogate the porous boundaries of opera. They foreground the multiplicity of elements that shape an operatic work: the performance space (opera houses, conservatories), the agents of production (poets, composers, singers, instrumentalists, stage designers, costume makers),

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1 Towse 2011, 313–316.

2 Carter 2014, 42.

3 Carter 2014, 48.

4 See Hutcheon/Hutcheon 2009 and Rossi/Sindoni 2016.

5 See Goehr 2014, 130–131.

6 See Lepa/Müller-Lindenberg/Egermann 2023.

7 Fusillo/Legge/Lino/Petricola/Rossini 2025.

8 Hutcheon 2006, 807.

technological and scenographic resources, and the specificity of the audience, all in a constant dialogue between past and present.

In such a perspective, the opening essays in the volume are dedicated to the reception and rediscovery of lesser-known works from the nineteenth century. One such example is *Il Bagno freddo*, a “comic operetta in two acts” composed by Camillo de Nardis and first performed during the Carnival season of 1879 in Naples. The work is here critically examined and contextualized within the operatic landscape of late nineteenth-century Naples by Alberto Mammarella, who also serves as editor of a modern edition of the score. This edition is accompanied by a vocal score with piano reduction prepared by Luca Incerti.<sup>9</sup> A further case study is *Spartaco*, the final opera by the Sicilian composer Pietro Platania, associated with the *scuola Leista*, which premiered at the Teatro San Carlo in Naples in 1891. This work provides here both a case of analysis and rediscovery of a forgotten work and a proper example of rewriting and digital remediation carried out by the Composition and Electronic Music Schools of the Conservatory Licinio Refice (Frosinone, IT). In this innovative version, the audience is invited to influence aspects of the performance in real time, offering a compelling example of the intersection between artistic re-interpretation and technological experimentation.

Nineteenth-century Naples is the protagonist of a further challenge to the boundaries of the operatic genre and serves as a site for examining the interaction between opera and its socio-cultural milieu. The comic parodies of Giuseppe Verdi’s masterpieces staged at the Teatro San Carlino by artists such as Pasquale Altavilla and Antonio Petito reimagine operas in dialect and prose. These adaptations highlight opera’s popular appeal while offering critical insight into bourgeois society of the mid-nineteenth century from the perspective of lower social strata, making opera an effective tool for sociological analysis.

These instances of code adaptation, along with the democratization of the hypertext<sup>10</sup> through its hypertexts, underscore both the evolving diversity of opera audiences and the genre’s capacity for reinvention. At the same time these examples highlight the enduring significance of opera houses and performers in shaping the reception of operatic works within European and European-influenced cultural contexts.

A case in point is the role of nineteenth-century Italian opera singers in London, such as Angelica Catalani, Giulia Grisi, Giuditta Pasta, and Marietta Piccolomini, who are the focus of a study examining how their international careers contributed to the global dissemination and cultural prestige of Italian opera. These

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<sup>9</sup> The two volumes have been scheduled to be published in October 2025 by LIM in Lucca.

<sup>10</sup> Genette 1982, 13.

interpreters not only perpetuated the mythos of the *primadonna*, but also played a pivotal role in sustaining the international allure of the genre. The development of the opera industry and the transformation of opera into a marketable cultural product are revisited in a contemporary framework through an analysis of the evolving relationship between iconic Italian opera singers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and technological innovation. This trajectory begins with Enrico Caruso's popularization via the phonograph and audio recording technologies, and extends to Luciano Pavarotti's televised performances, which brought opera into millions of households worldwide. These developments are examined to identify how modern media and communication technologies can rejuvenate and democratize the operatic tradition, bridge generational divides, and secure the relevance of opera within twenty-first-century cultural production.

The intersection of opera with technology and new media is further explored through cases of rewriting, remediation, and transcodification. This is the case of the reverse procedure of the operatic adaptation of Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* as a "Secular Oratorio" by the Italian composer Gino Negri, who adapted and reassembled some epitaphs from the collection composed shortly after April 25, 1945, in the final phase of WWII. Negri's work was performed for the first time in 2024 through the collaboration of three Milanese institutions, the Brera Academy of Fine Arts, the State University of Milan, and the Giuseppe Verdi Conservatory. Another example of *Literaturoper*<sup>11</sup> are Yuval Sharon's experimental stagings of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (2013) and of Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch* (2015) with the Los Angeles opera company *The Industry*. Sharon's productions expand the concept of opera as a volumetric art form, saturating architectural space with sound and meaning through voice, gesture, and scenography. These works, in their most extreme form, fundamentally challenge the spatial, acoustic, and ritual norms of traditional opera houses.

Peter Sellars' intermedial adaptations of the Mozart/Da Ponte trilogy – *Così fan tutte ossia La scuola degli amanti*, *Le nozze di Figaro*, and *Don Giovanni* (1991) – are also discussed, particularly the 1991 television version of *Don Giovanni*. Sellars transposes Enlightenment masculinity into the context of 1980s African-American culture in New York, offering a compelling example of opera's social and historical recontextualization through mass media.

The political, social and pedagogical potential of opera is addressed in the analysis of the *Decolonizing Opera* initiative at Northwestern University (USA). This program, particularly through the course *Opera and Race* (ongoing since 2021), focuses on racial and gendered implications of canonical operas, such as Gioachino Rossini's

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11 Carter 2014, 51; Giroud 2014, 171.

*L'italiana in Algeri* or Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, within the context of contemporary North American society, seeking to uncover and dismantle entrenched stereotypes. The *Selam Opera!* Project also exemplifies opera's potential as a tool and a resource for intercultural dialogue and social commitment as it aims to bridge operatic tradition with the multicultural identity of Berlin, focusing specifically on the city's Turkish-German community.

In a volume dedicated to *Opera across Borders*, it is fitting to consider the most radical redefinition of operatic boundaries: the very boundaries of sound. Can a work in which sound is absent, or lacks defined pitch, still be considered an opera? One essay addresses this question through *Face Opera II*, a work by American Deaf sound artist and activist Christine Sun Kim. In this opera, the primacy of pitch and audible sound is replaced by body movement, gesture, mimicry, and American Sign Language (ASL). *Face Opera II* challenges the sonocentric foundations of Western opera, presenting an alternative aesthetic where meaning is constructed visually and kinesthetically rather than aurally.

This volume originates from the interdisciplinary research project *Polimnia. Opera for All!*, launched in 2024 and bringing together the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, IUL University of Florence, the Conservatories of Modena, Reggio Emilia, Gallarate, Potenza, Pescara, and Frosinone, and the Academy of Fine Arts of Frosinone. Drawing on the theoretical framework of Community Opera, as explored in the afterword, the project examines contemporary opera production through the lens of inclusive co-creation, cultural growth, and social change. It engages with the challenges confronting the operatic genre, which often risks being seen as outdated or out of touch with contemporary society. At the same time, the project investigates strategies, forms, and models aimed at making Italian opera more appealing to new generations, emphasizing inclusion, education, and training, in dialogue with the international Community Opera model. These themes also informed the International Summer School *WISD: Word, Image, Scene and Digital Transformations*, held at the Vecchi-Tonelli Conservatory in Modena from 22–25 September 2025.

We are sincerely grateful to all the authors for their contributions to this volume and for engaging with each stage of their work with sustained dialogue and dedication. Special thanks are also due to the publisher for including this work in their catalogue, and Laura Lulli, Director of the Centre for the Study of Transcodification, Department of Human Studies at the University of L'Aquila, who welcomed and supported this book project with genuine enthusiasm. Finally, we extend our warm thanks to the administrative staff of the Department of Studies on Language and Culture at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, for their unflagging professionalism and generous assistance.

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