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Opinion

PUBLIC MUSICOLOGY How to Talk about Opera at a Time of Crisis
by Samuel N. Dorf (*Published on April 04, 2020*)

Samuel N. Dorf is Associate Professor of Music at the University of Dayton. A musicologist and dance historian, his monograph *Performing Antiquity: Ancient Greek Music and Dance from Paris to Delphi, 1890-1935* (Oxford University Press, 2019) examines the performance and reinvention of ancient Greek music and dance in *fin-de-siècle* Paris, and queer music reception. His research explores intersections between musicology and dance studies, choreomusicology, reception studies, queer studies and the history of performance practice.



As I write this under a government-issued stay-at-home order (it's late March 2020), I realize that many of us won't be able to attend a live musical performance for some time, let alone a pre-performance lecture. As public life comes to a standstill across the globe, so too, it seems, does public musicology. When our communities emerge from this pandemic, we may very likely find ourselves in a changed world: will audiences return to our theatres to both escape and help process the recent trauma? if or when they do, what will we scholars and critics have to say?

Sadly, for me at least, figuring out what to say to an audience of opera-goers in the days and weeks following a tragedy is a familiar challenge. When you're one of only a handful of musicologists in a 50-mile radius of an opera company and symphony orchestra, chances are that you will be asked to give a pre-performance lecture. Since moving to Dayton, Ohio, in 2010 I've given dozens, most for our wonderful opera company, Dayton Opera, which is part of the Dayton Performing Arts Alliance.

Providing a synopsis of an opera's plot while highlighting key musical moments tends to get monotonous quickly: in truth, I could give an overview of the drama and major arias of Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* with my eyes closed. So in recent years I have challenged myself to develop pre-performance lectures that are not only informative and accessible to a general audience but relevant: in other words, that speak to how the operas relate to our own community here in America's Midwest.

To recall the tragedy mentioned a moment ago, over the past year the city of Dayton has come under significant pressure. In May 2019 a white supremacist group affiliated with the Ku Klux Klan obtained a permit to stage a rally in the heart of our city. This was followed by a string of devastating tornadoes that destroyed over 1500

buildings and damaged nearly 7000 more. As the city launched a massive rebuilding effort throughout the summer of 2019 the community was rocked again, this time by a mass shooting in the heart of the city's entertainment district that killed nine and left another seventeen wounded.

As our community came together to usher in a new opera season in Fall 2019, I wanted my lectures to engage with the urgency of the moment. But how? In a time of great uncertainty when we desperately need art in our lives not only as a distraction from the news, what should be the role of the pre-performance lecture? This is arguably one of the most public of public musicology activities.



The Dayton Performing Arts Alliance (DPAA) 2019-2020 season opened last September with a collaboration between its three arts organizations (the Dayton Philharmonic Orchestra, Dayton Opera and Dayton Ballet), a production of Haydn's *The Creation*. At a time when our community was still on edge after a traumatic summer, Haydn's oratorio served as a wonderfully appropriate work to kick off our season, the music bringing people together and creating unity through the miracle of creation. For a speaker, there were of course many topics to address, from orchestration through libretto to matters of musical style and structure; but for this audience, at this time, I wanted to focus on the hope, the light and the thanksgiving within the work, specifically the famous emergence of light amidst chaos in the opening and the final chorus's call for us to all 'Praise the Lord, Uplift your voices', accompanied by triumphant brass and drums. This was a hopeful message by a creator marveling at the miracles of our very existence – and it was a message Dayton desperately needed at the time, as the community struggled to heal, to work through differences of opinion and differences in faith, to come together to find solutions to the problems that face us. Of course, we couldn't solve these problems in a concert hall on a single evening; that's the audience's homework for the next day. For 'on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made'. And, so, I invited the audience to take a well-deserved break from the 'creation' that they did at work, at home and in our community, and to enjoy the DPAA's *Creation* in a spirit of peace and restful contemplation. It felt important to ask the audience to reflect on their emotional engagement with the work of 'Creation' when our present world still felt upside down and stuck in the chaos of the introduction.



A few weeks later I was back in the auditorium to introduce Dayton Opera's production of Puccini's *La Bohème*, a perennial operatic favourite, especially with our local audience. The pre-performance lecture, held an hour before curtain time, was packed. When I asked the 100-or-so people in attendance if they had seen the opera before, nearly half raised their hands. To be expected, I told my audience: *La Bohème* is not itself an opera of surprises, for its tragedies are key to the marketing of the work. (If the main character is fainting and coughing in Act I, chances are she is not going to survive the evening's entertainment.) The composer Benjamin Britten delivered a damning criticism of the opera in 1951: '[A]fter four or five performances I never wanted to hear *Bohème* again. In spite of its

neatness, I became sickened by the cheapness and emptiness of the music.' The takeaway here is not that Britten found the work cheap and empty, but that he saw it four or five times, like many of the audience members before me. Is this beloved stalwart of the operatic repertoire being performed to death? If so, my challenge was to encourage the audience to see and hear *La Bohème* anew, whether this was their first time or, like Britten, their fourth or fifth time.



La Bohème of course is filled with catchy tunes, some of which are familiar nowadays from movies, instrumental concerts and even pasta sauce TV ads. This is often said to be Puccini's greatest gift, his gift of melody. Yet, as I like to remind my audience, opera is more than a vehicle for great music: opera is drama, opera is staged, opera is community. So I walked the audience through the opera's plot, as I usually do, but made sure to pause and contemplate those parts that resonated with our current situation. For example, I reminded listeners how, during the frivolity of Act One, Puccini makes us aware of the different roles of art, contrasting Rodolfo's poetry, burning in the fire to help his companions stay warm inside their shared garret, with Schaunard's music, performed to a parrot until it died (with the help of some poisoned parsley) and rewarded handsomely by Schaunard's rich employer. In the opera, this is all woven into a richly scored comic scene celebrating the frivolity and fun of the four bohemian buddies. While one artist burns their work in order to survive, another uses art to kill (albeit a parrot) and for that gets a reward. The scene subtly reminds us that life is not fair, nor is it always just, nor does it always make sense: feelings common among Daytonians trying to make sense of tragedy.

Addressing the final act, I found it was important to acknowledge the real emotions many in the audience would be likely to feel, and the real tears many would shed from their seats in the theater. As I said, many of us are still healing after a traumatic summer. We cry for many reasons, because our nerves are raw, because we are grieving, we are scared, but also because the artists on stage and in the pit (and Puccini, too, I guess) are good at their jobs. And so, as I talked the audience through the final scene I hoped not only to illustrate the compositional and structural tricks employed by Puccini (the reemergence of musical themes representing happier times in the opera), but to tie them to how these moves manipulate our emotions and mirror the injustice we had seen in Act I. Mimi's death is so tragic because it is so unfair.

It doesn't have to be like that. It shouldn't be like that. Why does Mimi have to die from cold and hunger while that rich guy from Act I gets to waste money on a violinist playing music to kill a parrot? Thinking about economic and health injustices closer to home: How is it fair that in our own state of Ohio there are 1.5 million people living in poverty? That's 14% of our population. Nearly 20% of the children in our state live in poverty. To quote the sage wisdom of my mother-in-law, Victoria Carman: 'You know, it's better to be rich and healthy than to be poor and sick.' And this is the fundamental injustice in the opera. We relate to it because Puccini leads us to believe that love endures throughout, that love can survive in the cold, through both sickness and in health. But let's be real: Love, along with art, is much harder when you are poor and when you are sick, and you can no longer love when you're dead.

'What is the price of that good cry?' I asked the audience before sharing some hard facts: 'The Metropolitan Opera in New York took in nearly 150 million dollars in donations in 2018. That is three times the amount brought in by the Food Bank for New York City, now *that* is a tragedy. We can't leave the theatre after our good cry and think this is just another tragic love story. Nor should we rush to the box office demanding a return of our tickets and a boycott of our arts organizations. As the quartet of bohemians teach us, we need both, and art isn't just there to fuel the furnace when we are cold. If Mimi's death teaches us anything, it is that art *is* life. Without the poetic dreams of springtime, the soaring melodies, the beautiful pink bonnet, without philosophy, music, art and poetry, what's the point of all the rest? And so, whether this is your first *La Bohème*, your fourth, fifth (like Benjamin Britten), or even your 600th, I invite you to think about these things as you enjoy the performance.'

Today we are facing another seemingly insurmountable obstacle, the COVID-19 pandemic threatening our lives, our economies, and our humanity. As I write this, I am unsure if the rest of our local arts season will be able to continue. Many performances have been postponed or cancelled already, and it remains unclear when we will be

able to safely congregate to participate in music making. It is another moment of crisis, certainly; but this means that it is more important for us to offer heartfelt and honest discussion of works for the public as soon as we become able to do so.

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