A Note from the Guest Editor

What awaits opera studies beyond the performative turn? The trope of the turn implies a linear movement along a new trajectory. Giving the idea of a journey along a path, road, or river, the question—as open as it may seem—thus contains a reassuring promise of progressive exploration. And yet the ubiquity of various turns in the humanities may seem disorientating, labyrinthine even. Moreover, linearity sits uneasily with the reality of any research field—a very different geographical metaphor, which sprawls in all directions and yields a variegated harvest. On the most basic level, the turn toward the performative designates a shift of attention from closed structures to an open-ended process, which in itself resists the linearity of a turn. As such, it cannot be conclusively dated or located, but has been detected retrospectively and proclaimed programmatically many times over. In this sense, what we need to get beyond is perhaps just the definite article: rather than a unified paradigm shift, "the" performative turn is a meandering network of movements from artifact to action.

Such gesturing toward the performative happened in many areas throughout the twentieth century. In the early 1900s, for instance, Berlin scholar Max Herrmann advocated a shift from the text-focused study of theater, which considered it a subset of literature, to the study of its performance, thereby laying the foundation for German *Theaterwissenschaft*.[1] From linguistic philosophy came J. L. Austin's 1950s analysis of speech acts, which under particular circumstances may effect concrete changes in the world, rather than just conveying information.[2] Austin's notion of performative utterances inspired later theories of performative acts, most famously perhaps Judith Butler's notion of gender performance.[3] From the 1960s and onward, theater, happenings, and performance art have explored the interaction between actors and audiences as a central part of their aesthetic project.[4] Eventually, the humanities followed suit more broadly, and during the 1990s, performativity became a buzz word impossible to ignore.

As for the field of opera studies, it has been generously irrigated by performative perspectives since around the turn of the millennium. After having remained within the domain of structuralist musicology for most of the twentieth century, it admitted in the 1990s a plethora of theoretical perspectives—hermeneutics,

The Opera Quarterly Vol. 35, No. 1-2, pp. 1–6; doi: 10.1093/oq/kbz021
Advance Access publication October 29, 2019

deconstruction, psychoanalysis, feminism—which were brought to bear on librettos and scores. While these were still primarily conceptualized as operatic works, it should be noted that mobilizing performativity and process against structuralist analysis was (and is) a core project for the critics associated with New Musicology—Lawrence Kramer, Susan McClary, and others—whose work grew increasingly influential in the last decade of the century.[5] From Kramer's perspective, the hermeneutic act itself is performative: it is a demonstration of meaning that operates by illocutionary force, rendering the critic's interpretation of music analogous to that of the performer's.[6]

If the written score rather than the operatic performance thus remained the object of interpretation, a clear move in a different direction happened in 1997, when Tom Sutcliffe published the first book-length examination of contemporary operatic staging in English.[7] Sutcliffe's *Believing in Opera* marks the starting point of a central strain of performance-oriented opera scholarship, seeking more refined approaches to operatic production, dramaturgy, and mise-en-scène. Another milestone along the same lines was David J. Levin's 2007 *Unsettling Opera: Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Zemlinsky*, which furnished the field with a whole new conceptual toolbox for studying contemporary staging.[8] From Levin's perspective, director's opera—often unsettling in the sense of being highly provocative—foregrounds the unsettledness of the genre itself, thus articulating the open-endedness favored by performative aesthetics.

The contributions to this double issue are offshoots from a conference organized at the anniversaries of these two books, in the summer of 2017. It was held at Stockholm University under the heading "Opera and Performance: Taking Stock and Looking Ahead." Bringing together scholars from Europe and the United States, its aim was to map out the continuing ramifications and bifurcations of the performative across the field of opera studies today. The resulting essays, collected here, give a broad—if necessarily incomplete—overview of current key issues: how are the concerns of the performative turn developed, refracted, or replaced in opera studies today? Have notions of performance and event entirely replaced the traditional focus on operatic works, or have they merged into new syntheses? How has the field been impacted by other vital perspectives in the humanities, such as media theory, spatial studies, or posthumanism? How do these perspectives relate to the recent developments in the art form itself, which often take place outside the grand institutions of mainstream opera?

The issue opens with an essay by Clemens Risi, which extends the main trajectory of the performative turn into the present, searching for new methodologies and modes of attention to opera. While Sutcliffe and Levin's work on *Regietheater* is often fueled by hermeneutic concerns, Risi follows Erika Fischer-Lichte and Carolyn Abbate in seeking to turn from meaning-centered perspectives toward the live interaction between audiences and performers.[9] Unlike the work or the production, a

performance happens only once, in a unique time and place, and is fundamentally co-defined by the audience and performers. Risi's essay highlights this unrepeatability by attending to two specific nights when lead singers chose to go onstage—as Don Giovanni and Lohengrin, respectively—despite being indisposed. Analyzing how this fact impacted not only the singing, but also the perceptions and reactions the audience, Risi pinpoints the double exposure of rehearsed representation and physical presence that is unique to live performance.

As Risi notes, *Regietheater* has usually adhered to the unwritten rule that a production may alter the stage directions, but not the music: the recognizable sound has been the ground against which the mise-en-scène is the protean figure. If an unchanging, resonant core has thus been at the center even of radical reinterpretations, my own contribution foregrounds an example of the recent tendency to meddle with that core as well. It approaches Alban Berg's unfinished opera *Lulu* via its uneasy combination of structural perfection and factual incompleteness. Against the background of a growing body of alternative versions after the expiry of the copyright restrictions in 2006, the essay delves into Christophe Marthaler's 2017 staging from Hamburg, starring Barbara Hannigan and named "performance of the year" by *Opernwelt*. This production, I argue, not only contributes to an open-ended performative process by adding another version of the score to the existing ones, but that version in itself also gives center stage to the fundamental incompleteness of Berg's second opera.

If the performative turn was about dislodging opera from the written score and the complete work, one of its most pervasive results has been a general valorization of open-endedness, even to the point that praising its presence or lamenting its lack have become ready-made conclusions that can be tacked onto almost any argument. Provocatively dislodging this fixture, Arman Schwarz's contribution places opera's open-endedness in a dialectic relationship to sedimentation and objecthood: from nineteenth-century staging manuals to current film-inspired opera, he outlines a tradition bent on arresting opera's imagery as much as unsettling it. A similar countertradition is discernable in the musical register: in parallel with the nineteenth-century emphasis on character psychology and audience identification, Schwarz hears a mechanistic repetitiveness that forestalls immersion and constitutes a bridge between Rossini and American minimalism—which, in the guise of Robert Wilson and Philip Glass's 1976 *Einstein on the Beach*, furnishes the essay with its principal case study.

This will to fix the visual world of opera also speaks to opera's close and complex relationship to film. From the proto-cinematic quality of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* via early silent-film adaptations to present-day cinecasts from the Met and elsewhere, this bond has inspired a growing literature on which Laura Tunbridge builds in her essay.[10] She scrutinizes a reversal of the typical remediation of opera by film: the 2016 opera *The Exterminating Angel*, adapted

by Thomas Adès and Tom Cairns from Luis Buñuel's 1962 film about a group of guests who find themselves in a private hell when they are inexplicably unable to leave a dinner party. In Tunbridge's reading, the claustrophobic situation reflects back onto the media through which it is represented. Attending to its use of immersion, repetition, and song, she shows how the opera—not least in its HD broadcast—becomes a dramatization of the tension between fixed repeatability and unpredictable performance, simultaneously staging and streaming the uneasy intermedial relationship that it exemplifies.

The current interest in technology can be construed partly as a reaction against the liveness often fetishized by performative aesthetics. It also, however, betokens a shared interest in materiality: while recent work on staging has attended in detail to its physical substrates, work on voice has attempted to look beyond inherited tropes and symbolic values to catch a glimpse of the concrete physical phenomenon.[11] As a resistance to the anthropocentric bias inherent in performative perspectives, typically giving the human body pride of place, this tendency is also indicative of an increased sensitivity to posthumanist perspectives, which regard the singing body as one node among many in music's network of vibrant materials. From this angle, Christopher Morris's essay pursues the notion of nonhuman agency in opera. Via Philip Stölzl's cyborg-themed staging of Berlioz's 1838 opera *Benvenuto Cellini*, he explores the ways in which props, objects, and technologies may be thought of as onstage actants. In the end, however, Morris emphasizes that this perspective need not be limited to the present-day high-tech gadgets invading the opera stage, but has permeated the genre throughout its history.

Another recent tendency has been to examine the physical spaces that surround and condition performance, be they commercial cinemas, open-air theaters, or repurposed industrial locales. In the recent collection *Operatic Geographies*, edited by Suzanne Aspden, cultural geography goes to the opera, approaching its venues not as neutral receptacles, but as sites charged with sociocultural values and political power, impacting operatic events and audiences alike.[12] In her contribution here, Aspden develops this perspective on a performance that takes place outside of the auditorium: at English country-house operas like Glyndebourne and its more recent descendants Garsington and the Grange, she argues, the activity of operagoing becomes a theatrical event in its own right. Here, the audience-as-performers are sold a site-specific experience shot through with rural escapism and nostalgia for the English aristocracy. As Aspden notes, this perspective also plays into a more widespread phenomenon in the world of current opera: immersive performances and participatory aesthetics that renegotiate the traditional borders between audiences and singers.

Alessandra Campana's essay takes as its point of departure the notion of looking back, inscribed into a foundational myth of opera: that of Orpheus and Eurydice. Anxious about its own textual tools, the performative turn appears to reenact the

Orphic turn: it fears that the backward gaze of scholarship will eradicate the event that is the object of its love and attention. Campana argues that opera criticism must face and articulate this gap, which necessarily attends any text about a performance. Her essay discusses three examples—two of which themselves stage the Orpheus myth—in terms of this turning back. Gazing into the present from a hypothetical future, Campana calls for a critical pursuit not only of what opera and opera studies are, but also what they can be in the future. If the performative turn privileges process over structure, then, the concept of "opera" itself must be as open-ended and mutable as the singular performance.

Opera today can no longer be defined either by its core repertoire, its traditional venues, or its characteristic vocal technique: these and other cornerstones of the tradition have long coexisted with performances that subvert them, yet still claim the name of opera. Opera scholars have sought to acknowledge this, focusing their efforts on contemporary and experimental opera, redefining the genre, as it were, from its outskirts.[13] Similarly, the scholarly interest in mediating technologies reflects the fact that what once seemed like incidental conduits have fundamentally changed the identity of what they were enlisted to convey. To address this situation, the Stockholm conference included a panel of shorter papers under the heading "Operatic Ontologies in the Twenty-First Century," tracing a range of recent attempts at reconceptualizing opera in practice. These papers—by Gundula Kreuzer, Wayne Heisler, Heather Wiebe, and Ryan Minor—are reproduced, in lightly touched-up form, in the closing section of this issue.

While the Met has been globally broadcasting star-sung big-money opera since 2006, Kreuzer notes, New York has also been home to a very different tendency: in the last decade, a host of small-scale companies for indie and underground opera have been founded, often performing new works or radically revised repertoire pieces, and doing so in intimate venues that foreground the physical impact of performance. In Opera Philadelphia's festival "O17," Heisler finds another ambitious attempt to open up opera—the O is for both Openness and Opera—to more diverse audiences, new performance spaces, and genre cross-overs, yet also notes that boundaries and enclosures remain (and must perhaps do so). Against the background of a vogue for participatory and immersive aesthetics in the UK—also covered in Aspden's article—Wiebe provides an overview of critical perspectives recently directed at these supposedly progressive forms of spectatorship. Minor, meanwhile, turns to a choreographed performance of Brahms's Requiem—labeled here "Human" rather than "German"—querying its participatory politics and universalizing claims, but also drawing attention to its recognizably operatic manner of staging an "opera-adjacent" work, which ultimately suggests that the category of the operatic itself may have run its course. Taken together, these contributions testify to the field's keen interest in reimagining its object of study and staying attuned to the

continuous expansion and diversification of opera as it migrates and mutates ever further into the twenty-first century.

Axel Englund

NOTES

1. Erika Fischer-Lichte, for instance, emphasizes Herrmann's importance as a foundational figure of the tradition she attempts to develop in *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (London/New York: Routledge, 2008), 30–37.

2. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962).

3. This theory is most famously developed in Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

4. Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power*, 18–22.

5. Seminal publications include Lawrence Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice 1800–1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), and Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

6. This is one of Kramer's core contentions, recurring throughout his production, but most succinctly presented perhaps in the first chapter of *Interpreting Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

7. Tom Sutcliffe, *Believing in Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

8. David J. Levin, *Unsettling Opera: Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Zemlinsky* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

9. See Carolyn Abbate, "Music—Drastic or Gnostic?" *Critical Inquiry* 30/3 (2004): 505–36; Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power*.

10. Jeremy Tambling, *Opera, Ideology and Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987); *A Night in at the Opera: Media Representations of Opera*, ed. Jeremy Tambling (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); *Between Opera and Cinema*, ed. Jeonwong Joe and Rose Theresa (New York and London: Routledge, 2002); Michal Grover-Friedlander, *Vocal Apparitions: The Attractions of Cinema to Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Marcia J. Citron, *When Opera Meets Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); *Opera at the Multiplex*. ed. Christopher Morris and Joseph Attard, special issue of *Opera Quarterly* 34/4 (2018).

11. See *The Voice as Something More: Essays Toward Materiality*, ed. Martha Feldman and Judith T. Zeitlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019); Nina Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015); Karmen MacKendrick, *The Matter of Voice: Sensual Soundings* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016); Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. Paul A. Kottman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

12. *Operatic Geographies: The Place of Opera and the Opera House*, ed. Suzanne Aspden (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

13. Notable examples include Eidsheim's *Sensing Sound* and Jelena Novak, *Postopera: Reinventing the Voice-Body* (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2015).