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La actualización mediática de la ópera: la imagen social del cantante transformada por el cine y los medios audiovisuales

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Resumen

La industria de la ópera, inmersa hoy en un proceso complejo de fidelización y atracción de nuevos públicos, utiliza los medios de comunicación para expandir sus horizontes más allá de los teatros. Y lo hace posible gracias a su naturaleza audiovisual y a su lenguaje universal. Surge la ópera en múltiples formatos: ópera en los cines, óperas filmadas, videoclips líricos, televisión-ópera, ciber-ópera…etc. Ante el constante intervencionismo audiovisual y las nuevas demandas de un consumidor cada vez más mediático, es necesario reflexionar sobre las profundas transformaciones estéticas y artísticas que está sufriendo la figura del cantante de ópera. Atendiendo a las perspectivas histórica, sociológica y artística, el artículo analiza la nueva imagen de los divos que ofrecen los medios de comunicación, con el fin de esclarecer algunas cuestiones: ¿Cómo han concebido históricamente los medios la figura del cantante de ópera? ¿Qué cambios ha podido sufrir la imagen de los divos tras el boom audiovisual de la era digital?¿Qué transformaciones sufre hoy el *Star System* trasladado al consumo en los nuevos medios?

Palabras clave

Mediatización, artes escénicas, ópera, comunicación, cultura

How new media are changing opera: the opera singers' social image transformed by cinema and audio-visual media

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Abstract

Immersed today in a complex process of building customer loyalty and attracting new audiences, the opera industry is using media to expand its horizons beyond theatres. And what makes this possible is opera's visual nature and its universal language. Opera can be seen in various formats: opera in theatres, filmed operas, lyrical video clips, opera on TV, cyber opera etc. Set against the constant audio-visual interventionism and the new demands of consumers who are increasingly reliant on the media, it is necessary to reflect on the profound aesthetic and artistic transformation of the figure of the opera singer. Considering historical, sociological and artistic perspectives, this paper analyses the new face of the celebrated opera singers offered by the media, in order to clarify some questions: How have the media historically conceived the figure of the opera singer? What changes might the opera singer's image have suffered after the audio-visual boom of the digital age? What transformations is the opera star system going through today driven by consumption of new media?

Key words

Mediatization, performing arts, opera, communication, culture

1. Introduction

There is no doubt that the twentieth century was the century of the image. This era gave way to a normalised relationship between the sender and the receiver, allowing for a balance between new visual formats and their public acceptance. By contrast, in audio, the technical reproducibility that took over phonography created habits that resulted in a resistance to the advances of music as language. That is, there was a breakthrough in visual learning, but not in audio learning.

Relationships between opera and the media were also born and strengthened in the twentieth century: the musical genre in general [1] influenced film production and later television and video steadily (Fawkes, 2000; Tambling, 1987; Wlaschin, 2004). Today, there are quite a few studies with multidisciplinary —mainly artistic and historical— approaches to the analysis of such relationships and their sociological effects [2]. They recognize the visual nature of opera, traditionally understood as a staged musical-dramatic genre based on narrative temporality whose essential elements (the libretto, the music and the staging) may well apply to the discourse of cinema (Batta, 2005; Radigales, 2005). This narrative condition of the lyrical genre enables it to be consumed, therefore, not only as cinema, but as any offstage audio-visual media.

Among the common definitions offered for opera and cinema, the formal complexity of being formed by the synthesis of many other arts is noteworthy and in line with what Richard Wagner called *Gesamtkunstwerk* (synthesis of the arts) in the second half of the twentieth century (Wagner, 1995, Smith, 1993, pp. 21–61; Bordwell & Thompson, 1993, p. XV). In addition, both cinema and opera have developed production systems to present melodramatic performances for large crowds (Parker, 1998, p. XI, Citron, 2000, p. 24). In a constant search for new audiences and groups of followers, both have in turn built reference worlds mainly based on the creation of a star system (Citron, 2000, p. 2; Ishaghpour 1995, p. 13; Tambling, 1987, pp. 1–10).

[1] Understood as a genre or as a system of production, the musical has its origin in the theatre: opera, music hall, cabaret, musical comedy, rock opera etc.

[2] The relationship between opera and media has given rise to an interesting and extensive literature. The purpose of this paper is not to analyse the role that opera has had in the history of cinema, but we will mention some significant references in addition to those already used in this analysis and those mentioned in the reference section: Casadio, 1995; Grover-Friedlander, 2005; Puelles-López, 1997.

Considering all these similarities, opera has logically gone through a process of *commodification*[3] since the early twentieth century to the present day, taking on a new meaning when it migrated to the screen, be it large (cinema theatre) or small (television, computer, iPhone, mobile phone, etc.) (Radigales & Fraile, 2004, p.100).

Commodifying the world of opera and its stars has not always resulted in natural encounters due in large part to the complexity of releasing the singers from their live performances in theatres (Bourre, 1987; Ishaghpour, 1995). Although commodifying opera and its star system has made it become more popular, giving it greater visibility and popularity, many of the resulting media products have not been considered artistically satisfying. They appear to undermine the traditional sense of the art by showing opera singers separated from opera's social conventions and rules that require some prior learning from its public (Citron, 2000, p. 18; Benjamin, 1989). In the twentieth century, the media seem to have portrayed, more or less systematically, a somewhat decontextualized, stiff, superficial and elitist image of opera singers based on the discourse on the distinction between high and low culture made by Pierre Bourdieu. This is explained by the fact that opera is rooted in a theatrical tradition whose social conventions were consolidated in the nineteenth century, a time when the musical genre in general —and opera in particular— was the most popular spectacle in European cities and that later would be replaced by cinema and television[4] (Roselli, 1998, p. 451). This unrealistic image now seems to have aroused the concern of operatic agents. Fearful of the generational change suffered by audiences attending shows in theatres in the twenty-first century, opera is rethinking its relationships with the media to connect with new and young audiences more familiar now with the audio-visual discourse than with the operatic one (Lundby, 2009; Fontcuberta, 2003). The lyrical industry reactivates the commodification of its pieces, taking advantage

[3] In brief commodification can be defined as the act of creating interdependence between the performance and the visual arts, where none of the three levels of audio-visual discourse take supremacy over one another. Speech, music and noise overlap into a meaningful unity. Moreover, this commodification contributes to illustrating the music, which in turn contributes significantly to understanding the visual discourse (Radigales & Fraile, 2006, p. 100).

[4] Certainly, when it comes to Europe, we mean those cities that capitalised on opera as a trend: Milan, Paris and Vienna in particular, cities where composers who claimed to be "someone" in that world flocked to. But the examples of Verdi or Wagner are enough to confirm the popularity of the genre for the creation of fans and detractors, ie supporters of one composer or the other, both born the same year (1813) and ethically and aesthetically far apart, but who left an indelible mark on the genre.

of the situation created by the global processes of digital convergence that have affected almost all cultural economies [5] (Miège, 2006, pp. 155-166; Martel, 2011, p. 415; Bustamante, 2011).

In order to be integrated into society, opera is now ready to transform its production processes if this is required by its public's use of new media. Opera now launches multiple audio-visual products, such as opera in theatres, DVDs, or streams media via the Internet. It is also building an information network of audio-visual content intended to paint opera as a world of reference to which the young can associate their lives and desires.

The creation of social identification using its greatest potential for mass appeal, opera singers, is key in this process of renovation. To understand the strategic relevance of the current opera star system in open media processes of dialogue with young people, we must look to the past. This paper will attempt to show readers what has been the media career experienced by opera singers in order to clarify some of the key aesthetic and sociological transformations that this art form is living globally thanks to the virtual opera star system (Matellanes, 2007, pp. 151–155).

2. Early Early twentieth century: Casting opera singers to lure viewers

Cinema started to become popular when opera had already established its own institutional mode of representation (Burch, 2011). Since its inception, the new medium intuitively incorporated opera's lyrical appeal and learned culture. Cinema used the symbols opera had created, rather than its products, along with its hopes and aspiration when it took opera as a source of inspiration, much in the same way that photographers were inspired by paintings[6] (Tambling, 1987; Gombrich, 1995, pp. 16–37). Specifically, *il*

[5] Of the classical arts, opera seems to be the musical genre that has suffered more profound changes in five years than in its four centuries of existence (Martel, 2011). The phenomenon is due in part to the incorporation of leading edge technological advances in production processes (Berini, 2011). The mutations that are being suffered also appear to be due to the influence of certain disciplines, such as arts marketing, digitisation or social networks, in the relationship that theatres are now trying to keep with the audience (Lacasa & Villanueva, 2011, p. 65–73).

[6] In his History of Art, EH Gombrich argues that the development of photography forced the artists to go beyond their experiments and explorations. Then, stripped of the function of representing the likeness of the world, painting had to explore regions that excluded photography and that led to the evolution of modern painting (Gombrich, 1995, pp. 16–37) through the various avant-gardes. André Bazin also says, referring to

bel canto was one of the greatest objects of admiration by creators and audiences. New filmmakers outside the avant-garde art, associated it with glamour, public attention, eccentricity and access to the aristocracy. Also, society's infatuation with singers was fuelled by a dark desire: many opera singers were from the lower class and embodied some of the main aspirations of the working class, such as easily getting money and fame with their voices, not much work and some luck (Schroeder, 2002, p. 48).

Until the twentieth century, *il bel canto* had been the main operatic element capable of moving viewers into a contemplative state from which they could emotionally justify any unreality, hyper-reality and even irrationality of the plot. Especially, the c*anto* with ethereal lines, melodic *sfumature*, typical of the latest manifestations of the so-called *bel canto* of the first third of the nineteenth century, with authors such as Donizetti or Bellini (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 10; Bourre, 1987; Ishagpour 1995; Dahlhaus, 1988, pp. 6–7).

Cinema also needed the public to suspend their disbelief and, naturally, many of the first productions used plots and opera stars to attract and make the new medium credible in the eyes of audiences who loved opera[7] (Radigales, 2005; Ishagpour 1995; Tambling 1987; Schroeder, 2002). The explosion of a type of *operatic musical cinema* was swift, constituting one of the fashion trends in the 1920s. Some examples are the version of *Carmen* that Raoul Walsh directed in 1915[8], the production of *The Nibelungs* premiered by Fritz Lang in 1924, or *The Knight of the Rose* directed by Robert Wiene in 1925. With this, cinema was collaborating, more or less consciously, in the construction and magnification of the social image and the operatic star system[9] (Fawkes, 2000).

In the first half of the twentieth century, the use of opera singers to attract audiences to many films was accompanied by the live performance of the famous singers, who were now initiating stellar careers on the big screen, on the day of the premiere (Radigales, 2005, p. 63). Some examples are the version of *Carmen* that Cecil B de Mille premiered in

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the exotic made fashionable by literature and exploited by the early films of the 20s, that cinema, in its early years, did nothing but reinforce the fads in society (Bazin, 2006).

[7] Now these people could dream of their favourite singers, watching them from a privileged position and for a lower price than that offered by the theatre (Schroeder, 2002, p. 49).

[8] The history of cigarettes, popularized by Bizet's opera, was one of the recurring themes in several silent films (Powrie, Banington, Davies & Perrian, 2007).

[9] When the opera went from being a private show (the camerate) to a public spectacle, it immediately created its own star system: the public attended the theatres to see their favourite singers, especially the prime donne and castrati who walked their fame around Europe and whose arrival in the cities where they played was often accompanied by large pomp (Radigales & Villanueva, 2012).

1916 with the collaboration of Geraldine Farrar, a singer already celebrated in theatres such as the Metropolitan Opera House in New York (Met), the *Don Quixote* of GW Pabst in 1933 had the Russian bass Feodor Chaliapin and the 1932 production of Smetana's *The Bartered Bride,* reinterpreted by Max Ophüls, in which Jarmila Novotna shone; she was a new diva seduced by Hollywood who years later would participate in *the Great Caruso* with Mario Lanza (Christiansen, 1984).

The list of singers who multiplied their fame and fortune in the silent era grew significantly with the advent of sound: Lina Cavalieri, Anna Case, Enrico Caruso, Andrés de Segurola, Lawrence Tibbett, Lotte Lehmann, Mary Costa and Jan Kiepura, among others (Uselton, 1967).

In all these early productions, the stereotyped movements and affected gestures of the actors had more to do with the gestures of opera, giving greater value to the musical-theatrical component, than with cinema (Radigales & Villanueva, 2012; Schroeder, 2002, p. 48–50). But the natural evolution of film language led to a widening gap between the two acting styles, as cinema was building its own institutional mode of representation, while opera still wanted to satisfy its traditional public. Gradually, hiring a singer to play a non-singing role became forced and unusual, as very few singers had the combination of qualities required to act in front of a camera: dramatic ability to appear telegenic without losing the gestural flexibility of *bel canto*, fascinating personality, good physical appearance and popularity (Schroeder, 2002, p. 296). Except for cases such as the renowned acting ability of Geraldine Farrar, Mario Lanza or even Maria Callas in *Medea* directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini in 1969, very few singers were successful as actors. In recent decades, both Ruggero Raimondi and Jose Van Dam tried their luck, with more or less success in dramatic roles outside their roles in filmed operas[10].

Both the scenic and interpretive guidelines of these early films, designed to meet the tastes of fans of a musical genre in decline and the inability of its artists to adapt to the development and the demands of the new mass medium generated a rather sophisticated and unnatural first image of opera singers through audio-visual fiction. This distancing helped to establish an asymmetrical relationship between the arts: cinema boosted the operatic mass phenomenon without convincing opera to contribute to the star system that emerged as exclusive of the big screen. Seeming not to understand the communication

[10] Jose Van Dam actually played a retired singer in Le maître de musique de Gérard Corbiau (1988). And Luciano Pavarotti also played himself in the forgettable Yes, Giorgio (Frankin J. Schaffner, 1982).

power of the new medium beyond its mere distribution, opera lost a first opportunity to connect with unfamiliar popular audiences.

3. Commodification distorts the image of opera in the second half of the twentieth century

The various types of audio-visual operatic products[11] that were commonly marketed in the second half of the twentieth century helped to sharpen the initial stereotypical image of the opera singer (Fawkes, 2000, pp. 171–209; Citron, 2000, p. 6). The opera documentary (filmed in the theatre or opera house), ready to be edited on VHS, narratively reinterpreted by filmmakers as *filmed opera* or *opera on TV* or even used as a theme and reference world for their narrative, has tended to reproduce a unique view of the world of opera and its stars. It reproduced the distant and superficial gaze still linked to the conventions of the theatrical legacy of the nineteenth century (Tambling, 1987; Radigales, 2005, Roselli, 1998, p. 451).

This phenomenon is seen, for example, in the practice of imitating the grotesque and stiff props typical of the theatre, even when the scene was not meant to be shot in a theatre. That was the case of a production of *Aida* directed by Clemente Fracassi[12] in 1953 or the operatic adaptations made by the prolific director Carmine Gallone.

Furthermore, the world of singers and the opera star system has always tended to be portrayed in an extremely sensationalistic way. It is seen through the prism of glamour, infatuation, grandstanding or even mockery as in the Marx Brothers' parody *A Night at the Opera,* directed by Sam Wood in 1935[13] or in the 1982 production of *Fitzcarraldo,* directed by Werner Herzog. All these films also tended to cast opera singers in roles of glamour

[11] The studies mentioned in note 1 describe multiple types of audio-visual products with operatic content, such as filmed opera, backstage opera, television opera, melo-opera, opera biopic, opera documentary, musical theatre, video-opera, or operatic film, among others. Since scholars have not clearly defined all of them, below are the definitions of those used in this analysis: an opera documentary is a performance recorded in a theatre or opera house as a "filmed document" to be kept in files, available on VHS or broadcast on television. Filmed operas are movies with their own narrative elements. They are considered complex and very artistic products, as they try to use the language of cinema to tell a story from an opera libretto (Radigales, 2005, p. 70).

[12] See: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0CTo22pU6oc

[13] See: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VKnG26986MI

and grandeur, but also with a psychological simplicity that makes them seem lacking in humanity. In order to set the scene for success, they have only been allowed to show their most virtuous facet: their *canto* (Schroeder, 2002, p. 296).

Multiple factors appear to justify this distorted, sophisticated and grotesque recreation of opera offered by conventional media. Most of these factors can be seen in three significant trends from the 1950s that helped to increasingly remove the operatic reality from the collective imagery of the masses: the theatrical tradition, art filming processes and the proliferation of lyrical biopics.

First, in the twentieth century, opera films followed the tradition of opera theatres. This means that often the physical environment was shown in the representation itself: showing the orchestra or the conductor helped to create this dimension of myth and reinforced an "unnatural" stylisation of the filmed event. They separate the viewer from the narrative and convey the musical *pathos* (Ishagpour, 1995). Documentary operas*,* for example, have hardly been understood by the public when released from the tradition of attending the show in person (Tambling, 1987).

Second, the very process of filming operas has generated a lack of artistic verisimilitude. On one hand, historically various authors have discussed the problem of filming *canto* (Atkinson, 2006, pp. 95-108; Morris, 2010; Heyer, 2008; Tambling, 1987; Bové, 2011). From the aesthetic point of view, the use of close-ups on a solo performance is considered unpleasant and intrusive according to opera fans, because these show the singers' forced gestures and interfere with the musical narrative (Donington, 1988, p. 281). This is intensified in the more properly narrative audio-visual operatic products, considered works of art in themselves, such as *opera on TV* or *filmed opera.* They dispense with recording in the theatre, therefore, the reference to an actual performance and the viewers' consequent ability to accept gestural artifice within the conventions of opera are lost. These films have often had actors and singers lip-synching to arias and vocal ensembles in open spaces in order to achieve greater verisimilitude and interpretive diegesis. Examples of these are the film version of *Parsifal* produced by Syberberg in 1982[14], *La Traviata,* directed by Franco Zeffirelli also in 1982 with Teresa Stratas and Plácido Domingo, and Luciano Pavarotti and Edita Gruberova in Verdi's *Rigoletto* by Jean-

[14] In this movie, the lip-synching is, in itself, a challenge and a challenge (?) aesthetic (Radigales, 2012, pp. 115–127).

Pierre Ponelle released in 1983 (Radigales, 2005 : pp. 80–83)[15]. In addition to lip-synching, other resources have been repeatedly used to avoid showing close-ups of actors while singing: the recreation of visual flashbacks while the aria is being sung and the simulation of interior monologue (Tambling, 1987). Although all of them have tried to overcome the lack of movement of the operatic narrative, they have also avoided showing the face of the more real, raw and physical work of the artist, reinforcing an image of opera singers that is closer to the archetypal mythology than to human endeavours.

In addition to other problems related to the process of filming, it is necessary to make a brief mention of the static quality of traditional operatic staging, the lack of freedom of interpretation and acting movements when they are choreographed to music, the facial rigidity required by the camera, the audio-visual slowness of some musical passages and overtures, and the excessive duration of operas[16]. All of these factors have been recognized as crucial for drawing an accurate picture of this art and its creators (Tambling, 1987, Citron, 1994).

In relation to the trends that have favoured the devaluation of opera, the special influence that the lyrical biopic[17] exerted on the existing social imagery related to opera singers should be mentioned. As a recurring theme in the twentieth century, biopics based on the life of singer-songwriters were produced with varying degrees of success. Examples are *The Great Caruso* by Richard Thorpe in 1950, *The Death of Maria Malibran,* produced by Werner Schroeder in 1971, and the three film versions of the life of the famous tenor Julián Gayarre produced in Spain[18]. Although almost all biopics were based on actual documented biographies, all of these films tended to show the most charismatic and flamboyant personality traits of opera singers selectively and distorted by narrative

[15] See for example: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bW2DI9TBhSc

[16] See examples at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hANgV_2lNwE , http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QntYrxty0u8

[17] Although filmed biographies (biopics) are not opera shows mediated by film, television or video, they are one of the categories of film that, being inspired by the life of real or imagined celebrities, have received great popular acceptance in the twentieth century (Bingham, 2010).

[18] There are three Spanish films about the legendary tenor Julián Gayarre (1844-1890). The first documentary feature about the singer was El canto del ruiseñor, released by Carlos San Martin in 1934. 25 years later, Domingo Viladomat directed Gayarre in collaboration with a young Alfredo Kraus that had to be dubbed to mask his strong Canary Islander accent. In 1986, the Catalan tenor José Carreras dubbed himself to play Gayarre in Romanza final directed by José María Forqué.

fiction. As if they were made from a common script, all these films highlight the singers' innate genius and the virtuosity of their voices, which hardly need any training. They also show their private lives, usually empty and problematic, full of dramatic events or romantic episodes. Some examples of this are *Callas Forever* (2002) by Franco Zeffirelli, *Yes, Giorgio,* played by Pavarotti, or the history of *Farinelli, il Castrato,* released in 1994 by Gérard Corbiau[19].

Baring several notable exceptions such as the version of *The Magic Flute* shot by Ingmar Bergman in 1974, Syberberg's *Parsifal* or *Don Giovanni* directed by Joseph Losey in 1979, most audio-visual products released since the 1950s have contributed to the definition of a distorted social image of the operatic reality. The techniques used in filming have not helped to improve the narrative verisimilitude of opera characters, already, in essence, simple and archetypal (Auden, 1951, p. 8). Through melodramatic fiction, the world of the stars has been portrayed as unrealistic and unattainable to viewers, preventing them from learning about the human facets of singers' lives that help people relate to the artist and, above all, nourish the desire to learn and share the art.

4. The turn of the twenty-first century: The global, humanised singer

As we have said, the portrait that the social media have drawn of the world of opera includes the idea that opera has not kept up with the times (Lacasa & Villanueva, 2012, p. 414). In the eyes of many, opera is an unknown, distant genre from another era (Adorno, 2006; Laenen, 2003). Not only because, due to its tradition, opera is considered a seemingly unchanging art, but because it requires its public to want to learn its complexity (Eco, 1985, pp. 30, 66–67, Smith, 1993, pp. 21–61; Fülfe, 2011; Radigales, 1999, p. 11).

Since 2000, theatres that are aware of this reality and affected by the changes that the digital age has brought on the cultural economy have encouraged a shift towards creating openness, customer loyalty and adaptation to new audiences[20]. They are now

[19] The film tries to portray one of the most controversial physical practices in the history of opera. While tellina the life of the famous singer, the film describes the living conditions of the emasculated artists that proliferated in the eighteenth century in Italian society. Contemporary of Corbiau's work, a Spanish production, La leyenda de Baltasar el castrado (1996), was directed by Juan Miñón on the same subject.

[20] This is set forth in the manifestos of the main international operatic organisations, such as the English National Opera (ENO) in Britain, http://www.eno.org/explore/about-eno/about-eno.php, The Metropolitan

rethinking their communication strategies taking into account multiple phenomena: the nature of the media consumed for entertainment by new generations, the ubiquitous use of screens that has invaded our public and private lives, the use of high quality digital technology that enables streaming opera performances through the Internet[21] and the incorporation of advertising strategies taken from arts marketing techniques in the production processes (Lipovetsky & Serroy, 2009: 268, 314; Berini, 2011; Square, 2001, pp. 80–83).

Affected by such sociological trends and historically bound to get feedback from the media, opera is again focusing its communication strategies on the process of commodification. But in this process, opera now appears to have two clear objectives: 1) to expand its markets through massive audio-visual dissemination, thereby facilitating its greater integration in society and 2) to remove the distant image that the public and especially young people have constructed about the genre (Silverstone, 1994, p. 3; García-Avilés, 2009; Radigales, 2005, p. 59; Roselli, 1998, pp. 450–451).

Regarding the first objective, in the twenty-first century, opera industry has embraced global diffusion of performances in an audio-visual format. The business of opera in theatres is thriving, there are new consumer platforms on the Web, such as video on demand or streaming broadcasts; DVDs aimed at opera fans are marketed for collectors, virtual media libraries with videos are created and applications for mobile devices are launched[22] (Heyer, 2008, p. 600; Lacasa & Villanueva, 2011, pp. 65–74; De Diego, 2010; Wasserman, 2009; Carroll; Foth & Adkins, 2010, p. 147).

Opera House in New York, http://www.metoperafamily.org/metopera/about/ourstory.aspx, and the Gran Teatre del Liceu in Barcelona, http://www.liceubarcelona.cat/el-liceu/ la-institucio/projecte-artistic.html. To illustrate the national scene, statements made by the agents who currently manage theatrical policy are published in the online version of Opera XXI. Some examples are the open perspective of Rosa Cullell, former president of the institution, http://www.operaxxi.com/protagonistas/?id=13, and that of the current general director of the Teatro Real, Miguel Muñiz, http://www.operaxxi.com/actors/default.phpid=12.

[21] Contrary to what might be expected, in the twenty-first century, far ahead of dance, theatre or museums, the opera industry is a pioneer in using "the latest technology in the process of broadcasting and disseminating art outside the stage, among other reasons, because of the ability of their governing bodies to bear the cost of technology" (Berini, 2011).

[22] For more information, consult the article on the collection of operatic audio-visual services undertaken by authors Iván Lacasa and Isabel Vilanueva, published in volume 88 of the magazine Telos, http://sociedadinformacion.fundacion.telefonica.com/seccion=1266&idioma=es_ES&id=2011072710100001 &activo=6.do

Many of these products and audio-visual services have established themselves and have created their own markets in the last 10 years. All of them are filmed in theatres and also depend on the original performance on the stage (Morris, 2010, p. 98, D'Agostino, 2010). It is logical, therefore, that the processes of production of the opera on stage gradually adapt to the new demands of these new markets[23], a fact which directly affects opera singers (Bové, 2011; Heyer, 2008; Barnes, 2003).

If the lyric tradition had *"opted for the voices, making do with four badly painted backdrops"*[24], in the twenty-first century, stage managers impose complex castings with camera tests to find especially attractive physiques for audio-visual media (Beard, 2010, pp. 24–25). As a consequence of the change and not without some controversy[25], the figure of the opera singer has changed and opera is now closer than ever to marketing its own star system and getting a continuous feedback from film media. Paradoxically, today opera is getting inspiration from cinema and is imitating its communication models to generate crowds of fans. The twenty-first century opera stars such as Renée Fleming, Anna Netrebko, Angela Georgiu, Natalie Dessay, Rolando Villazón, Juan Diego Flórez or Roberto Alagna had to grow as total artists to meet the overall requirements for new singers. These demands have increasingly less to do with their musical skills: artists put their voice at the service of interpretive visual requirements to meet the tastes of the global masses that attend theatres and consume opera over the Internet (Sánchez, 2008, pp. 36–37).

[23] The first stage transformation occurred with the emergence of opera on TV. Makeup and sets became more natural to convey a realism demanded by the new environment in the productions of Giancarlo Menotti, Benjamin Britten and Peter Sellars, among others (Barnes, 2003). However, the change in the theatre stage came when multi-camera recording equipment was introduced in the production process to sell the recording to television, to be broadcast live to other countries or to edit the DVD version. The main theatres of the world now have full audio-visual departments and are equipped with the latest technology capable of providing simultaneous broadcasting in HD quality, a master shot for screens in the seats of the theatre and recording resource shots by robot video cameras (D'Agostino, 2010).

[24] See http://www.abc.es/hemeroteca/historico-15-01-2010/abc/Catalunya/la-opera-buena-voz-o-buen-cuerpo_1133079077798.html

[25] In recent years, controversy has arisen about the criticism that some stage directors have poured over some singers. Some have not hired opera stars because they were too fat, too old or too short in order to produce an “ideal edit”. This was the case of the Italian soprano Daniela Dessi, who was forced to abandon the production of La Traviata in Rome, 2010, because the director Franco Zeffirelli considered her too "mature" and "plump" for the camera (La Vanguardia, 2010).

Regarding the second objective, it should be noted that the construction of this new brand of global artist without getting further public participation, does not break with the traditional distant and sophisticated image of the opera singer. Recognizing this, opera is not trying to renew itself using only new means of distribution of its products. It has also undertaken the creation of an online information context to bring significant changes in the collective imagery (Lacasa & Villanueva, 2012, p. 414–416). Thus, it promotes multiple and heterogeneous communication initiatives, which would be impossible to detail in this analysis. We will only mention those that significantly affect our object of study, opera singers. Today countless media formats can be found on the Internet, although not all of them can properly be considered opera, they enhance its presence by providing information about opera singers which was previously unknown. They are not only part of a marketing strategy, but they give the stars a cultural value as an artistic reference to which people can actively associate their lives through new media (Jenkins, 2008, p. 27).

Videos about the life of opera stars can be found on platforms like YouTube. Today it is common to learn the most intimate facets of opera stars, such as the account of the physical and mental preparation that tenor Roberto Alagna posted in 2008 from his garden[26] (De Diego, 2010, pp. 1–2). There are also interviews with singers where they talk about their roles for the opera season. These products, which can also be found both in the extras of the DVDs and in the theatres' websites are an important educational tool for new audiences: with them, consumers can learn the value of opera as a collective art which is much more complex and rich than they would have imagined only from listening to the opera stars' performances. The statements of the singers, directors and set designers, help to contextualise the meaning of operas in a current context (Sheil, 2012, p. 129–150). It is increasingly common to see opera stars acting as journalists with their co-stars in clips shown as commercials during the intermissions of operas broadcast to cinema theatres around the world. Renee Fleming and Plácido Domingo are among the superstars hired by the *Met Live in HD* to entertain their thousands of virtual fans during breaks[27].

But social media is where the opera star system seems to be taking a new social dimension: through accounts in networks like *Facebook* or *Twitter,* opera singers

[26] As examples, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hObQanDkXVg, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lJ0CbEaJjl0&feature=related

[27] See: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S9cSsyzdq2g

communicate directly with audiences, generating authentic virtual communities around their personas. Unlike the official accounts of the theatres, opera singers use their accounts in a much more personalised way. They actively participate in wall posts, showing their engagement with current affairs. They respond to the concerns of their fans and post private information about their lives, as well as musical facts and opinions about their work in the theatres. Through a small act, such as actively participating on social networks, opera is finding new ways to create true virtual communities that can share knowledge, relationships, desires or memories associated with the new version of an opera star. These media project a more current, social and humanised image of opera stars and, consequently, also of opera, which causes a visible growth in shared interest and contributes to multiplying the number of its followers[28].

5. Conclusions

Like all arts, opera has always needed an audience. Throughout history, it has used the fascination people feel for singing to support its modes of representation —based on theatre traditions from the nineteenth century— and for creating a star system that generated crowds of followers. In the constant search for audiences, opera has also explored ways of spreading its art off the stage. From the beginnings of cinema to the present day, it has lent itself to a commodification process as a means of communicating its conventions to society –using media released from the theatrical tradition—.

For these media, the lyrical universe and its star system have been more than an intermittent source of thematic, narrative, artistic and commercial resources from which they have drawn to find their own institutional modes of representation and create their massive audiences.

To go beyond mere exploratory excursions that have generated a distorted and unrealistic social image separated from its artistic reality and, therefore, a problem of currency opera today cannot simply grab its public's attention through the dissemination of

[28] See, as examples, the personal spaces of Renée Fleming, http://www.facebook.com/pages/Ren%C3%A9e-Fleming/102646583109298#!/pages/Ren%C3%A9e-Fleming/102646583109298 , http://twitter.com/reneesmusings , Anna Netrebko, http://www.facebook.com/login/setashome.php?ref=home#!/annanetrebko?sk=info, Roberto Alagna, http://www.facebook.com/RobertoAlagna.Tenor , and Juan Diego Flórez, http://www.facebook.com/pages/Juan-Diego-Florez/36643928379 .

audio-visual products. It is now rethinking its relationship with the media, recognizing not only their value as tools of communication, but their potential educational value which is necessary for opera to be understood by new audiences in a more real and enriched manner.

To encourage dialogue with these audiences, opera has learnt from cinema and the media how to get closer to their emotional worlds, creating references that show they are connected and committed to human concerns. Thus, thanks to the Internet and social networks, opera stars, through their lives and art, are creating and giving a new currency to the world of opera, not only in transforming its own image but by engaging its audiences, (Gordillo, 2008, pp. 9–10).

As its stars are already doing, opera in general has an opportunity to dialogue with young people on social networks and to share its more human aspects and concerns. This will help its public to nurture a genuine and personal involvement with the world of opera and will awaken their desire to learn about it (Pereira-Dominguez & Urpí-Guercia, 2005, p. 78; Rössel, 2011, p. 89).

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