

Reports



YO!
OPERA

MEETING
Utrecht · 4 - 7 nov 2009

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Contents

Foreword	2
The musician as a chameleon Lecture and discussion about lifelong learning in music	3
The Singing City Discovering your own neighborhood through singing	4
The future of opera 1 Opera is for me...	5
The future of opera 2 Debate between young professionals	6
The future of opera 3 Education experts about the future of opera	8
Operation music theatre First of three public debates on the future of a genre	10

Foreword

During the last Yo! Opera Festival running from 4 until 8 November 2009, around sixty professionals attended the Yo! Opera Meeting. Composers, education specialists, singers, directors and others with a variety of expertise met together around a programme with informative sessions, debates, workshops and three 'Tests'.

The main focus of these days was on exploring which methods, forms and situations can build a bridge between opera and youth. Innovative Yo! Projects such as *De Zingende Stad* and *De Operaflat* were often the starting point of such sessions. The debates were centred around themes such as the creation of ties between young makers and established opera houses, the development of talent and interesting views on the future of opera. Tests offering an experience of Xynix Opera, Bart Oomen and the Wervelwind Ensemble provided insights into the creative processes behind the making of youth opera.

Yo! Opera has experienced these days as extremely inspirational: external feedback is crucial for our development. This feedback was forthcoming: all participants in the Meeting displayed a positive but critical attitude in relation to working with opera and youth. This attitude added the necessary broader context to the content of the Meeting programme. We are extremely grateful to all of you for this! In our turn, we hope that we succeeded in offering you a stimulating programme, from which you may perhaps be able to reap benefits in your work.

We hereby present the reports of the sessions – with the exception of the practically-oriented Tests and the workshops – of the Yo! Opera Meeting, which are well worth reading.

The management and employees of Yo! Opera

The musician as a chameleon

Lecture and discussion about lifelong learning in music

Wednesday 4. November

The starting point of the 2009 Yo! Opera Meeting was a lecture about the place of musicians in a swiftly changing society. Rineke Smilde, lecturer in Lifelong Learning in Music & the Arts at the Hanze University Groningen and the Royal Academy of Art, Design, Music and Dance in The Hague, obtained her doctorate in 2008 on the lifelong learning of musicians. Following her presentation, Smilde's colleague from The Hague Renee Jonker chaired the discussion with the twenty guests.

A changing society

Smilde's dissertation is based on biographical research into the learning styles of musicians. Her research revealed that the musician of today needs to be a chameleon: in a swiftly changing world. Musicians develop new activities and have flexible career patterns demanding different, new skills from them. The musician of today is required to simultaneously fulfil diverse roles. He is a composer, actor, artistic director and a teacher at the same time. These skills need to be developed and the dynamic concept of lifelong learning can assist him in this context. In Smilde's opinion, it can help the musician to become more professional, enterprising and reflective.

Life as a learning process

Smilde studied the lives of thirty-two musicians working in various capacities within their profession. How do they learn and how do their careers develop?

Leadership is one of the central themes, both leadership in one's individual work and in work involving the musician standing in front of a group. Leadership is dependent on authority and on the possibility of exercising authority. Among the qualities necessary for leadership are flexibility, an appropriate attitude, life skills and social skills. 'Person-directed learning is about critical awareness, listening and experiencing. It is about reflection.' In all of this it is important to find one's motivation from within one's own professional identity, as a musician or composer.

How do you view the fact that musicians who teach are frequently viewed in a negative light?

'There is no sense at all in the distinction that is always made between playing and teaching. The fact is that the one makes the other possible. Of the musicians that I interviewed it was in fact the soloists, of all people, who spoke out the most about teaching and about the interaction between teaching and playing. We need to put an end to this distinction; people become damaged because they can get the feeling of having failed.'

There was a response to this from the hall:

'Learning technical proficiency was given the highest priority at the conservatoire and everything had to be sacrificed to this end. Conservatoires are not focused on life after completion of one's studies. When one succeeds in breaking through this structure by producing work somewhere, learning takes place in a more context-based manner. Only then can one shed one's blinkers.'

Smilde concluded the discussion with a final statement: 'It is such a shame that many people still have the wrong mindset. Where learning music is concerned, it's a question of AND, not OF.'

The Singing City

Discovering your own neighborhood through singing

Thursday 5. November

The music education project The Singing City, a Yo! Opera project, formed the basis of a discussion about opera and new media. During the 2009 Yo! Opera Meeting, music technologist Henk van Engelen and music teacher Allerd van den Bremen talked about the project's background and form. After a short demonstration answers were provided to any remaining critical questions put forward by the Meeting participants following the presentation.

In 2007 Yo! Opera initiated a study based on the question of how new media can also be employed in an artistic and educational context. This resulted in a series of lessons for various age groups encompassing a variety of school subjects: *The Singing City*. For the development of the technology, there was close collaboration with Waag Society and the state primary school the Rietendak school in the Utrecht suburb of Ondiep. In the meantime, the lesson plan is being tested at other schools, for instance in Rotterdam and Arnhem.

The project contributes to a simple mission of Yo! Opera: 'get the whole world singing!' During the lessons the pupils work on a route through their own neighbourhood. They seek out locations and think up assignments for these that all involve singing. The locations and the assignments ultimately result in a musical quest through the neighbourhood, engaged in by the children themselves with the assistance of a mobile phone with Internet and GPS capabilities. Upon satisfactory completion of an assignment they can follow the route to the next location where another assignment is handed out. The game has a competitive element: the students can earn points. Afterwards they can watch the route they have taken.

After the project had been introduced the participants of the 2009 Yo! Opera Meeting followed parts of the lesson plan.

The project has resulted in several important insights:

- The technology removes the fear and shame of singing
- The project is truly in line with the children's experiential world
- Children are frequently in a better position to work comfortably with new media than their teachers
- The project offers appealing opportunities for parental participation

Anyone interested in learning more about the project can read the research report by Sandra Trienekens (lecturer in Citizenship and Cultural Dynamics). Trienekens studied the cultural and social effects of *The Singing City* for the School of Social Work and Law of the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (*Hogeschool van Amsterdam*).

The future of opera 1

Opera is for me...

Wednesday 4. November

Within the framework of the 2009 Yo! Opera Festival, pupils from three secondary schools created their own opera under professional supervision. At the Gerrit Rietveld College (Utrecht) they created De Operaflat, the Globe College (Utrecht) made the production Wegwijzers and at the Oosterlicht College (Nieuwegein) the production Blow your mind was realised. In Parnassos participants in the three projects met to exchange experiences.

Moderator: Debora Patty

Role division between young people and professionals

The young people talked about the directors, musicians and singers who were involved in their opera production. They also spoke of their own role, for instance, making the music and writing the monologues in the case of the Oosterlicht College.

Debora asked how it was to work together with professionals. Quincy felt that he was listened to attentively during the rehearsals for *De Operaflat*. Jihane said that she initially found it hard to get on with Babak (musician). 'There was a great deal of miscommunication. I became really angry on one occasion. Fortunately it's going much better now.' She continued her story: 'I was extremely surprised that they came to our school, since the students here are primarily from immigrant families. I thought that they would think: We can't reach these pupils with such a project anyway.'

Frits found it annoying at times that he did not have much say in things, where the musical director Romain was concerned. 'We were in fact taken seriously, but I would have liked to be able to do more my own thing.'

Frits introduced a new topic. 'Did all of you also have the same experience at school that everyone around you said: Who is actually participating in this project?' The others confirmed this. It became apparent that the pupils of the Globe College practically had to defend themselves concerning their participation in the project. All those present were extremely positive about the project in which they had participated.

What have you learned?

Frits said enthusiastically: 'I have learned that creating contrast is really fun. If someone is speaking in a joyful tone, it creates a fine effect to opt instead for extremely sombre music to accompany them. Casper said that he was already writing texts before he participated in the production. The girls from the Globe College thoroughly enjoyed the music and singing. In their view, even more attention ought to be devoted to this aspect if another such production were to be made. One of them said: 'I initially thought that making such a production was nothing for me. I don't have a beautiful voice.' She pointed next to her: 'When they joined up, I said I would also participate. And now I have learnt how I can use my voice.'

Is this opera?

'Yes, it's a youth opera,' said one of the girls from the Globe College. 'A tarted up opera,' added another. Casper: 'It is really opera but not like in the theatre. Opera without opera, actually.'

The future of opera 2

Debate between young professionals

Wednesday 4. November

A number of young professionals entered into a debate about their relationship to large institutions, the public, hierarchical work structures, balance in the landscape and dead and living writers...

Moderator: Thomas Myrmel, composer

'What is the relationship between yourself as a maker and the large institutions?'

Daniel Cross from the Rosa Ensemble felt absolutely no affinity with the large, established institutions. What they stand for is in sharp contrast to his own work. 'With the Rosa Ensemble a balance exists between all makers, something totally different from the hierarchical structure that is the norm in the case of classical repertoire operas, for instance.' A number of other young professionals acknowledged this. Not everyone turned out to be an opponent of the established order. On the contrary, they were of the opinion that it is in fact a good thing that both an underground and a classical scene exist.

Myrmel concluded that the distinction between 'repertoire opera' and 'new opera' by young makers thus also relates to the working process, expressed in two extremes: hierarchical as opposed to democratic. However, there are other possibilities between working as a collective and the old-fashioned hierarchical work structure. Each discipline can continue to do its own work, so long as there is room for mutual dialogue.

Critical questions overtook the debate: Myrmel asked Lena Vizzy (De Nederlandse Opera): *'Is an opera house interested in working with a young, professional maker under conditions where the outcome is uncertain?'* 'Yes,' replied Vizzy without hesitation. 'But don't forget that De Nederlandse Opera makes a great many productions, and also large-scale ones. It is a huge happening, an immense machine. There are composers who operate as dictators, but there are also composers who work in a diametrically opposed fashion to this at DNO.'

The participants came to the conclusion that they worked in an environment in which everything had its function. There were workplaces for experimentation as well as large houses for the classical operas. The question ought to be: is there a healthy balance between the genres? Kees van der Meer: 'We are talking about artists and institutions, but aren't we forgetting the public? For whom are we making opera? For children, young people, for what kind of public? Are we connecting with them? Isn't this much more important?' In response, Myrmel asked him: 'Should the opera house be a vehicle to this end?' De Nederlandse Opera does in fact try to open its doors and attract new audiences. It is a large opera house with a loyal public. Nevertheless, DNO certainly wishes to reach more young people.

So it's all about the balance in the cultural landscape. The repertoire, the experiment, the location opera... each category of makers needs to stay in contact with their own sort of opera. And the various ways of working are connected with the various aims of opera. The question is: can each composer work in these various ways? Kees van der Meer is seeking to achieve this combination. He attempts to bring the world of the classical opera closer to a public that normally shuns it by presenting something really attractive and meaningful.

Myrmel touched on the fact that the consensus about being conscious of the public during the compositional process has altered radically in relation to twenty years ago. 'In those times, people only talked about High Art!' Three years ago during the Music Days in Paris a similar discussion was being carried out between various institutions. Their position at the time was: 'We are doing everything well, but why doesn't the public show up?' Yo! Opera has very clearly chosen to work *in* the community and to recruit foreign artists and let their work be seen. One of the young professionals remarked: 'The public wishes to be put at ease and to be indulged with humour, music or poignant emotion. There is no fixed, stereotypical public. It is not a large, homogenous group. These are people with needs and desires that change with each new generation.'

Cross is of the opinion that opera houses undergo too little development. Noortje Braat adds to this. 'Large institutions are unappealing because of their bureaucratic nature.'

Another young professional countered: 'Why are you so critical of them? Each opera house is different and if it doesn't click well you should just go to another house.'

Lena Vizy: 'It's also about balance. We don't just have traditional opera. I went to work for DNO because the productions really move me at times. It is not as black and white as they sometimes say. However, it is in fact difficult to effect changes, due to its being a large and cumbersome machine.'

Mara Davis describes the Australian cultural landscape. 'There is no balance, there are just large opera houses that only programme works composed prior to the 19th century. As a young professional maker, this is extremely frustrating.'

Myrmel concluded that there is a great deal of collaboration between the young professionals outside of the institutions. The diverse aspects can exist alongside of each other. The institutions wish to be more flexible and development is possible. The Dutch opera landscape is really not so bad.

Concluding remark: 'Let's try to keep it that way, as healthy and alive as possible!'

The future of opera 3

Education experts about the future of opera

Wednesday 4. November

In three parallel sessions young people, young professionals and education experts 'dream aloud' about the future of opera. Paul Reeve, Director of Education at the Royal Opera House in London, chaired the discussion between the nine participants.

According to Claar Gieben, one's initial experience with opera determines one's relationship to it. A bad first experience can turn people totally off the idea of going to the opera. Andreas Altenhof added that one cannot actually speak of opera for young people, as there are so many different target groups. Young people have diverse backgrounds.

Authenticity is an important word in the discussion. 'When young people listen to an opera that is not sung in their own language, they will have left the hall after two minutes,' said Hans Tolhuis. Lotte Latufeku: 'Authenticity lies in the choice of how one tells a story. When singers sing in their own language they have a deeper relationship to the text. Young people can see right through this if this connection is lacking and then the opera loses authenticity.' Andreas Altenhof added that opera is about a story in music. The listener must be able to comprehend the combination of words and music. Marga Wobma-Helmich does not view it as such a black-and-white issue. 'One needs to understand a story, but above all one needs to feel what is happening.'

The chairperson wondered to what extent the style of opera singing is a problem. According to Latufeku the problem involves the poor acting skills of opera singers. 'Here I am and it's all about singing, I don't need to act. If we would train singers as actors this would solve a great deal.' Gieben: 'What would really help would be to bring a singer into contact with young people. They will recognise the quality of the singing at close hand. They can touch the singer and experience the manner of breathing.' Latufeku thinks that it would also help to have young people performing on the opera stage, this would help young audiences to identify with opera.

Reeve: 'Should new operas be smaller scale and embrace modern themes that appeal to today's audiences?' Tolhuis thinks an opera about someone like Michael Jackson would be a good idea: about someone's life. Wobma-Helmich draws a comparison with literature. 'One starts with children's books – special books with illustrations and less text for a young target group. You don't immediately give a child Shakespeare. Opera ought to be offered to children from an early age; make it a part of their lives!'

Reeve poses the question as to whether the future of opera lies in a different relationship between artist and public. Tradition determines that the public plays a passive role. Should opera be taken outside of the opera houses? Sara Clethero does not think that opera is for the upper classes per se, but that the opera houses do give this impression. Latufeku confirms that people in Australia are more interested in performances of opera in exotic locations. Various locations are used to tell a story and disciplines such as the circus are integrated.

The word opera

'Should we discard the word opera?' Nico Schaafsma: 'Opera is a confusing word, just like music theatre. One can have endless discussions about it. Is opera a subcategory of music theatre or vice versa?' Altenhof: 'Opera is often used as a label by big organisations with large budgets.' Gieben: 'The

youngest target group doesn't even know what opera is, they just go to listen anyway.' Tolhuis: 'It is an old word. Go with the flow and do something modern with it, also with the language.' Latufeku: 'Opera is simply a difficult word.' Reeve: 'Most young people associate opera with something tedious involving fat Italian women. Yo! Opera is appropriating the concept anew.'

In conclusion

Reeve concluded with the remark that it would be wonderful if we could see whether opera would still be in existence a hundred years from now and which form this art would have assumed by then. He believes that opera will survive. The day's discussion has revealed that a number of things are important in order for opera to be able to survive. The key issues are:

- interpretation: how is the story told?;
- authenticity: the manner of communication;
- the presentation of the singers;
- a canon for various target groups;
- introducing the opera idiom gradually;
- making use of young artists to promote the process of identification;
- reclaiming opera as a concept.

Operation music theatre

Friday 6. November

Report on the first of three public debates on the future of a genre initiated by NFPK+, TIN and MCN.

Moderator: Lex Bohlmeijer

The 200 persons attending the debate formed a cross-section of the entire opera and music theatre industry. There were representatives of established institutions and production houses, but also young musicians, singers, directors, writers and composers.

Introduction

The moderator Lex Bohlmeijer formulated the topic for the first debate: 'If we wish to ensure a healthy sector, it is important to nurture and develop young talent. How do we achieve this? And how do we do this together?' He posed the following three subquestions: Who are the young makers? Are the established institutions actually suited to the task of developing talent? What improvements can we make to the various stages in the process of developing talent?

The following persons were invited to sit on the discussion panel: Guus Mostart (intendant Nationale Reisopera), Miranda van Kralingen (Artistic Director Opera Zuid), Marc van Warmerdam (Director Orkater), Koen van Dijk (Artistic Director M-Lab), Sylvia Stoetzer (Artistic Director De Diamantfabriek) Anthony Heidweiller (Artistic Director Yo! Opera), Robert Nemack (director), Thomas Myrmel (composer), Rosa Arnold (violinist), Caroline Cartens (soprano), Femke Krist (writer, actress), Rik Elstgeest (musician).

Who are the young makers?

Bohlmeijer put three questions to the young makers: what is your ambition, why do you want to create music theatre and what are the obstructions to realising your dream? Femke Krist aspires to make new theatre in preference to the familiar, established repertoire. Currently she is working on the direction and text for a new musical. In her view: 'there is so much more possible than what is currently on offer in the big theatre halls. It is all show, glitter, splendour and spectacle with a happy ending. I strip the musical down to its core.' The lack of financial means does not hold her back from developing concepts.

The composer Thomas Myrmel wishes to communicate with the public in everything that he makes. Myrmel loves opera because it is a lively art form that continually changes, while always remaining an instrument for achieving specific aims. He says: 'In this multidisciplinary world, opera is the perfect summarising medium; it contains everything.' He came to the Netherlands from the United States because there are many opportunities here for young makers. Here, he has the opportunity to realise productions. When he has an idea that he wishes to develop, the biggest obstacle that can confront him is himself. 'If I write shit, that's the end of it.'

Other young makers mention various problems that they encounter. For instance, production houses are sometimes of the opinion that one is too far advanced in one's development to be given a place with them, while at the same time one is too small for the established institutions. Auditions for singers are often not transparent and more and more people are undergoing training while the market is

getting smaller. Often one doesn't get as far as an interview with the subsidy provider because one's application has already been rejected and funding bodies are not always creative in allocating funds. Many makers also recognise the problem of overcompartmentalisation. As a result, the existing production houses do not always readily accommodate music theatre.

Are the established institutions actually suited to the task of developing talent?

Koen van Dijk, Artistic Director of M-Lab, the laboratory for music theatre, focuses on diverse forms of music theatre and tries to take an extremely open approach. He would like to link up young makers with the coach of their choice, however there are also young makers who do not wish to be coached. Experienced makers enjoy working with young people. He stresses that it is necessary for makers to be able to set down their ideas clearly on paper.

Anthony Heidweiller, Artistic Director of Yo! Opera, was asked whether there is in fact sufficient talent to be developed. He replied that this is certainly the case, but that not everyone has the nerve or the opportunity to present what is closest to their heart. 'Actually, there is no real freedom as a maker.' According to Heidweiller, the solution is 'to develop a stage where carte blanche applies, where true freedom exists for making music theatre.'

Rik Elstgeest, a musician with De Veenfabriek, adds that if everything is regulated this can have a oppressive effect. On the one hand, a maker needs to feel enough security to be able to do what he wants; on the other hand, an institution or production house should not interfere in this too much.

Marc van Warmerdam from Orkater disagreed with the idea that established institutions are not suited to the task of developing talent. He had long been of the opinion that it is precisely outside of these organisations that space needs to be created for young makers, however, he has since changed his view. Young talent seems namely to have a strong tendency to isolate itself, thus losing connection with tradition. It is precisely the existing structures of a large organisation, such as Orkater, that can provide freedom. Actually, Van Warmerdam thinks that 'the bigger the organisation, the greater the responsibility to provide space and means and to give opportunity to young talent.' He also emphasises the importance for one's own organisation of being able to access a network of young makers. In the Newcomers Programme, Orkater has created an environment in which the development of talent can proceed more smoothly.

Guus Mostart, intendant of the Nationale Reisopera, invites young singers to experience productions from beginning to end in the RAP programme. Training projects are concluded with a showcase performance. De Reisopera is not an opera studio or teaching establishment; rather, it is an organisation that wishes to work with new people and to build up a network. This generates goodwill, reputation and talent. It is beneficial for an organisation to be confronted with young people. Opera primarily appeals to the older generation and is able to further develop by being confronted with new ideals and ideas.

Opera Zuid also takes a risk by taking on young singers, makers and directors. Artistic Director Miranda van Kralingen indicates that the organisation does not fulfil the function of a production house, but is the only opera company that truly binds young talent to an ensemble for a longer period. Van Kralingen offers suitable individuals the opportunity to work with Opera Zuid for a period of two years. Talent can especially be developed through working in the opera genre, for while the musical only copies and reproduces (from abroad), an opera is staged anew every time.

What improvements can we make to the various stages in the process of developing of talent?

When the debate arrived at this topic the tone became more heated. The question arose as to whether talent is truly given a chance where the established institutions are concerned. Young talent should not have to be a brand name used to give an institution a reputation. 'It's all about how we can realise the upward progression of talent: its longterm advancement!' It is important in the long term to bring together people with a vision or an idea and to reflect on this process. If a young maker has made a successful production for a production house, Elstgeest is of the opinion that an ensuing boost to the maker's professional career should immediately follow, in order to achieve a durable result. A maker should be able to make a fixed deal, to be able to go on tour if his production is of sufficient quality, for 'otherwise it will be dropped again as usual and very few people will see what a fine production has been created.'

Conclusion

Paul Slangen's impassioned plea received huge applause. 'I get really annoyed. We are talking about art! One can develop oneself or not. Sometimes one needs to realise that one did not succeed, while at the same time still feeling proud of actually having made the attempt. Art is not a short-term endeavour, nor is it the prerogative of youth. Art requires courage and investment. Not everyone will succeed, nor is this necessary. You have to allow art to happen. And talent must prove itself!'

Machteld van Bronkhorst mentioned that young makers can also apply for a subsidie from the NFPK+. Corina van Eijk responded with 'Just start making something!' Van Kralingen wondered whether people actually dare to take risks. Subsequently, a young maker outlined her own situation: 'One doesn't grow up with an awareness of the particular risks one is taking. As the child of a baby boomer everything seemed possible and one was stimulated to do what one enjoys.' The real world can then come as a considerable disappointment and can turn out to be inaccessible. Risk-taking is by no means a matter of course. Someone else joined in, stating that for this generation a gap really exists between theory and practice. During art studies for instance, one is not taught to also think in productional terms.

Paul Reeve, Director of Education at the Royal Opera House in London, was disturbed by the negative and defensive tone of the debate. In his work he enjoys the shared passion, the power of art and the feeling of interconnectedness. Maybe the basic underlying principle of this afternoon could be that we all want the same thing? 'Keep on debating, but take the things that we share as your point of departure!'

The final remarks were summed up by Bohlmeijer in the motto: 'Having talent is having guts.'