Alternate Venues for Opera Performances. Wagner Started It...Should We Retreat Now?

Dr. Christopher Jaffe

Jaffe Holden Scarborough Acoustics, Inc., 114A Washington Street, Norwalk, CT 06854

Abstract: Although there has been a resurgence of interest in opera over the last fifteen years in America the current outlook for continued financial support for this form of musical theatre as well as classic concerts is bleak. At one time opera was enjoyed by the unwashed as well as sophisticates and a number of today's creative opera directors are trying to appeal to a broader segment of the market. This paper will discuss the break with tradition that Richard Wagner and Adolph Appia succeeded in achieving at Bayreuth in terms of architectural acoustic design and how these changes were integrated with new approaches to scenic design and stage lighting. In addition examples of contemporary opera companies are presented that are creating a more intimate and emotionally powerful experience for their audiences by breaking out of the picture-frame productions of proscenium theatre. Among these companies are the Colorado Opera and the Opera Theatre of Saint Louis.

INTRODUCTION

Opera is a form of musical drama, no more, no less. If we research the history of theatre from the time of the Greeks and Romans, we find evidence that music was integrated in some of their dramatic productions. Frescoes in Pompeii show musicians accompanying actors in Roman plays and many representations of Greek musicians decorate urns and vases.

Greek and Roman theatres and amphitheatres were quite egalitarian, having hemispheric seating arcs that surrounded the circular "orkestra" performing area. The "skene" was an upstage dressing room structure with entrances onto a "proskenion", an open platform just forward of the 'skene" immediately behind the "orkestra".

After the rise of Christianity, the Church banned theatre in Europe for centuries, with Mystery Plays presented in cathedrals the only form of musical drama available to the populace. During the Renaissance, musical drama bloomed in two areas for very different audiences. The Commedia dell 'arte in Italy and the Guild Players of Pre-Elizabethan England produced musical dramas for the common folks, while fancy spectacles and masques were being performed for the nobility at court.

Commedia dell 'arte turned into the English music hall, vaudeville, the circus and Broadway style musical theatre while the palace spectacles evolved into what some term Grand Opera and which to this day carries an elitist image. Part of the reason for this negative connotation is that the court theatres placed the nobility in individual boxes along the walls of the audience area, allowing the unwashed to stand or sit on benches on the floor below.

In these court theatres, the Greek "proskenion" became an elaborate arch (the proscenium) that framed painted scenery, creating an artificial wall between audience and singers that lost the intimacy of performance. Since the scenery was painted in perspective, actors could never play upstage and had to work the apron area for realistic effect.

WHO BROKE THE MOLD?

We cannot separate music and dramatic literature from politics and change. With the nineteenth century signaling the end of Royalty and the beginning of Democratic Governments and with the Industrial Revolution creating a middle class of mechanics as well as merchants, great artists like Richard Wagner and Adolph Appia led the way to break down the barriers between classes as well as the barrier between performers and audience.
The most influential of the group was Richard Wagner, the great dramatic composer, who designed and built a musical playhouse in Bayreuth Germany for his music alone. This unique opera house referenced the early Greek and Roman amphitheatres of ancient times. It had amphitheatre seating in a single block with a wide end stage that provided excellent sight lines and fine acoustic characteristics. Wagner envisioned Opera as a spectacular emotional experience and buried his orchestra deep under the stage to create an enveloping low frequency sound field which he called "The Mystic Abyss".

Others soon followed. Max Reinhardt with his Grosse Schauspielhaus in Berlin, Jaques Dalcroze and the great hall of the School of Eurythmics in Hellerau near Dresden, as well as Jacques Copeau and his Vieux Colombier in Paris.

However, in the main, the tradition of the Italianate Court Opera prevailed since the availability of existing structures made it easier to produce in the Italianate style and the financial supporters of Grand Opera were the moneyed class of the Industrial Age...the new Royalty, if you will.

**BRAVE NEW WORLD**

But there are those who still won't give up. Those who know the emotional power of the circle and the intimacy of thrust stage productions will not be denied. Among them are Nathaniel Merrill of Opera Colorado and Charles MacKay of the Opera Theatre of Saint Louis who produce their works on open stages that have done away with the proscenium entirely.

Opera Colorado productions are produced in Boettcher Concert Hall, the first vertical surround concert hall/opera house in the Western Hemisphere. Architects Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates, with acoustician Chris Jaffe and conductor Brian Priestman envisioned the space as a venue for opera from the beginning of the design process. There is no "Bear Pit" surrounding the orchestra so that singers entrances can be made easily from stage left or right, from trap rooms below or catwalks above.

The two orchestra pits in the Boettcher Hall are as unique as Wagner's, allowing for maximum flexibility in terms of orchestra size, production needs and compositions. Shown below is a plan of the stage showing the orchestra pits as well as the trap areas of Boettcher Hall. The Saint Louis Opera, which performs at the Loretta Hilton Center uses the thrust configuration to great advantage. Both organizations have international reputations for their work and devoted audiences that thrill to this style of presentation.

![Diagram of Boettcher Hall stage](image)

**FIGURE 1:** Floor plan diagram of the Boettcher Hall stage.

Non-proscenium opera is less expensive to produce. It is emotionally charged and therefore accessible to a wide spectrum of the population. Let's not continue to attempt to mount productions in theatres that were designed for painted perspective scenery, court intrigues and sailing ship technology and move into the new millennium with courage and vision.