

**Democratising Opera:
Opera North and the access agenda in action**
Part of the AHRC project 'Opera as Adaptation'

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Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Leeds
School of Performance and Cultural Industries
School of Music

March 2016

The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Acknowledgements

My thanks go out to all those at Opera North (past and present) who have been so welcoming and helpful in facilitating this study, particularly Jane Bonner, Dominic Gray, Rebecca Walsh, Timothy Burke, Jo Bedford, Stuart Leeks, Peter Restall, Jacqui Cameron, and the inspirational Martin Pickard. It was also a great privilege to have Richard Farnes as my supervisor at Opera North, who facilitated so much of this study and whose musical vision, humility and leadership I have greatly admired.

I am grateful to the AHRC, to Opera North Futures and to the Fund for Women Graduates for generous funding, without which I would certainly not have been able to complete this thesis.

My most profound thanks are offered to my excellent academic supervisors Kara McKechnie and Rachel Cowgill, for the opportunity to work on this project, and for the inspiration, encouragement and education. It has been an epic journey, and I could not have wished for better guidance, understanding and comradeship.

Thank you also to various colleagues and friends at the University of Leeds and further afield: those who proof-read, who offered me opportunities and who encouraged my academic endeavours with friendship and debate. Particularly I would like to thank my colleague at the University of Salford Library, Satish Patel, whose flexibility and trust has allowed me the time to complete this work.

To my family: I would like to thank Dylan for his encouragement and belief in me; Chris and John for their unwavering support and childcare; and of course my parents, Margaret and David, for endless childcare, proof-reading, technical support, and sustenance, physical and emotional.

Finally I would like to thank my daughters, Carys and Eos, both of whom arrived during the course of this study, and whose presence has shaped my understanding, my focus and the direction of my academic journey for the better.

Abstract

This thesis explores the role of Opera North as the publicly funded opera company for the north of England, addressing the ways in which the company embodies, mediates and fulfils an agenda for access, education and innovation. A broadly ethnographic approach is taken, through case studies of three productions and the work surrounding them: the commissioned ‘operetta’ *Skin Deep* by David Sawer and Armando Iannucci (2009), the commissioned ‘family opera’ *Swanhunter* by Jonathan Dove and Alasdair Middleton (2009 and 15), and the ‘staged concert’ version of Wagner’s Ring cycle for Leeds Town Hall and touring concert venues (2011-14).

The nature and origins of the access agenda are explored, including the legacy of Opera North’s parent company English National Opera, and the post-war imperative of John Maynard Keynes, and his Arts Council, to fund decentralised and geographically dispersed ‘high’ cultural forms. Recent political agendas are also pertinent, particularly the developing aim of the UK’s ‘New Labour’ government (1997-2010) for cultural instrumentalism to address social issues. This is explored particularly in relation to the commission, by Opera North’s Education and Projects departments, of *Swanhunter*, in 2009.

The access agenda and the works explored in the case studies are situated in their historical, political and artistic contexts, to give a cohesive account of Opera North’s cultural work in and for the north of England and beyond.

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List of Abbreviations

ACE	Arts Council England
ACGB	Arts Council of Great Britain
AHRC	Arts and Humanities Research Council
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BP	British Petroleum
CDA	Collaborative Doctoral Award
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
CUP	Cambridge University Press
DCMS	Department for Culture, Media and Sport
ENO	English National Opera
ENON	English National Opera North
HAR	Howard Assembly Room
HD	High Definition
HM Treasury	Her Majesty's Treasury
HUP	Harvard University Press
IMDb	Internet Movie Database
LTH	Leeds Town Hall
The Met	The Metropolitan Opera
MTO	More Than Opera

NUP	Northwestern University Press
NY	New York
ON	Opera North
OUP	Oxford University Press
PUP	Princeton University Press
ROH	Royal Opera House
<i>S&HI</i>	<i>Seen and Heard International</i>
WNO	Welsh National Opera
YUP	Yale University Press

1 Introduction

In its 2015 annual *Review*, Opera North is described as creating and staging ‘uncompromisingly adventurous’ work of the highest quality; as being socially and artistically ‘transformative’ for audiences, artists and communities; and as working from the following paradigm:

Opera North [...] believes that opera can be for everyone, and increases participation in the arts by championing arts education and reaching out to diverse audiences.¹

This thesis addresses the main research question of how (and why) Opera North embodies, mediates, communicates and fulfils its central agenda for access, education and innovation described above. Within this overarching theme are contained the following sub-questions:

How and why was this attempted by a new commission within the ‘light’ generic framework of operetta, and what conclusions can be drawn with regards to the outcome?

How and why did the commission of, and work around, a new ‘family opera’ address a particular set of access and educational objectives?

How and why were Opera North’s Ring opera productions presented accessibly for a potentially new audience in the north of England?

Through three case studies I interrogate the cultural work of the company, in response to, and embedded within its own historical and political contexts. Ultimately I aim to elucidate the ways in which various permutations of the drive for increased access to opera are realised and responded to. Initial methodological approaches were broadly ethnographic, with case studies of three productions and the work surrounding them: the commissioned ‘operetta’ *Skin Deep* by David Sawyer and Armando Iannucci (2009), the commissioned ‘family opera’ *Swanhunter* by Jonathan Dove and Alasdair Middleton (2009 and 2015), and the ‘staged concert’ version of Wagner’s Ring cycle for Leeds Town Hall and touring concert venues (2011-14). As will be noted in Chapter 2, the historical and political contexts in which these case studies are embedded emerged as being of crucial importance in formulating an understanding of the broader access agendas that Opera North addresses. Methodology thereafter became mixed, with ethnographic approaches integrated with literary investigation into historical musicology, history and cultural policy.

This study takes as its premise the political centrality of the aims of access and education within Opera North as a publicly funded opera company in the UK. The picture I will

¹ Opera North, *Review 2015* (Leeds: ON, 2015), p.3.

outline of the company and its work is illuminated more fully by a prior understanding of the drivers for increasing access to opera, historically and politically. Opera North is the child of two distinct (but overlapping) agendas for widening access to opera. One is that of its mother company, English National Opera. The impetus of that company to increase access to opera can be traced back to the nineteenth-century philanthropists who laid the foundations for the company that became ENO, in order to improve the lives of working-class people in Victorian London.² More generally the modern access agenda, as outlined by Opera North in its *Review* statement, is cascaded from Opera North's principal funding body, the Arts Council (formerly the Arts Council of Great Britain, now Arts Council England) which came out of the post-war ambitions of Liberal economist John Maynard Keynes for a more equal and democratic distribution of the arts, specifically including opera.³ This body, installed by the 1945 Clement Attlee Labour government, was created to enable and regulate public spending on the arts as part of the rebuilding of Britain after the physical, economic and emotional devastation of war, and was to work at 'arm's length' from government.⁴ During the first half of the twentieth century, opera had become the preserve of the upper classes,⁵ but was judged by the 'intellectual aristocracy' of the day (as cultural policy scholar Anna Rosser Upchurch describes Keynes and his social 'class'⁶) to be culturally important to the nation, perhaps even, as the nineteenth-century reformers would have it, societally 'improving'.⁷ The combined paternalism of the old Liberal guard and the socialist reforms of Labour resulted in a new hope and a new mechanism whereby such art forms might be available to everybody. The implementation of the Arts Council can thus be understood as a social reform, in the same spirit of egalitarianism as the key welfare measures of the period: the initiation of the National Health Service, National Insurance

² For a full account of the founding activities and legacies of social reformers Emma Cons and Lilian Baylis, see Chapters 1-4 of Susie Gilbert, *Opera for Everybody: The story of English National Opera* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009).

³ The Arts Council's precursor, the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA), began during World War II, initially sponsored by private aid and later by the Treasury via the Board of Education. The ACGB was to continue and expand upon the activities and opportunities afforded by CEMA, more permanently, and in a time of peace.

⁴ Currently the governmental DCMS distributes funds via the 'arm's length' principle, whereby funding is channeled via another body (the Arts Council) in order that government might avoid direct involvement in funding decisions.

⁵ See Alexandra Wilson, 'Killing Time: Contemporary representations of opera in British culture', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 19.3 (2007), 249-70 (pp. 251-57).

⁶ Upchurch defines Keynes as a descendent of a set of Liberal utilitarian nineteenth-century reformers described by historian Noel Annan as the 'intellectual aristocracy'. Anna Rosser Upchurch, 'Keynes's Legacy: An intellectual's influence reflected in arts policy', *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 17.1 (2011), 69-80 (p.74).

⁷ Cons and Baylis founded their company to engender social improvement (see Gilbert, pp.1-19). Sarah E. Taylor writes about the nineteenth-century 'climate of improvement' whereby 'music [...] came to be regarded as one of the most important means of achieving moral elevation'. 'Finding Themselves: Musical revolutions in nineteenth century Staffordshire', in *Music in the British Provinces, 1690-1914*, ed. by Rachel Cowgill and Peter Holman (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp.223-35 (p.225).

and Universal Child Benefit.⁸ In August 1946, a Royal Charter was issued, and Keynes in his post-war radio broadcast speech of July 1945 (referred to by Upchurch as ‘the BBC address’⁹) presented an Arts Council ‘greatly concerned to decentralise and disperse the dramatic and musical and artistic life of the country, to build up provincial centres and to promote corporate life in these matters in every town and county’.¹⁰

Economic arts policy researcher David Ranan has analysed the policy of the Arts Council specifically on opera, bemoaning its lack of ‘clear, explicit objectives [...] for the funding of an art form which has in some years received up to 40% of the Arts Council’s total grant-in-aid’.¹¹ Ranan stated, in 2003, that ‘the Arts Council has not produced a policy document on opera’,¹² and in 2016 this is still the case. However Ranan distilled, from various sources including Royal Charters, discussion papers, annual and committee reports, and general arts policy documents, the following Arts Council objectives for opera:

1. Excellence and high standard of production
2. Access: geographic, financial and social
3. Development and nurturing of artists
4. Experimentation and innovation
5. Education
6. National pride
7. Joy and entertainment.¹³

Many of these extracted objectives are relational to one another, and will be touched upon during the course of this thesis. ‘Access’, of all these, is the primary *raison d’être* for Opera North, which was set up in 1978 as a regional branch of ENO, in order to relieve the touring strain on that company, and potentially to be ‘the start of a really effective regional policy for opera and ballet’.¹⁴ With a focus on regionality there comes the association of socio-economic catchment, and so access must be addressed in all of the three ways presented here by Ranan.¹⁵ In a conversation with me in 2012, Nicholas Payne, the second General Director of Opera North

⁸ These measures came out of the 1942 report on *Social Insurance and Allied Services*, known as the ‘Beveridge Report’, which was a foundation for the modern welfare state.

⁹ Upchurch, p.75.

¹⁰ John Maynard Keynes, ‘The Arts Council: Its policies and hopes’, in *Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes. Vol. XXVIII*, ed. by Donald Moggridge (Cambridge: Macmillan, 1982), pp.367-72 (p.370). Originally published in *The Listener*, 12 July 1945, London.

¹¹ David, Ranan, *In Search of a Magic Flute: The public funding of opera – Dilemmas and decision making* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2003), pp.62-63. Ranan makes explicit that the highest Arts Council percentage was granted to opera from 1952-65, with a subsequent material decrease, standing at only 17% in 2000.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.62.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.87.

¹⁴ ACGB, *Thirty-third Annual Report 1977-78* (ACGB: London, 1978), p.24, quoted in Ranan, p.81

¹⁵ Ranan details his definitions of ‘geographic, financial and social’ access issues (p.80).

(who had also previously worked for the Arts Council) stated that the company was set up to ‘replace the old idea that opera toured from a national centre to the “unwashed” people of northern England’ and ‘to encourage operatic habit [in the north] by being there’. He spoke of the importance of ‘building up trust with the audience’ and an educational imperative for a new opera audience that was conveyed ‘in the way one wrote programme notes’.¹⁶

Education, while it appeared as an objective in the original Royal Charter of 1946, became an active priority for the Arts Council around the same time as the founding of Opera North, with the appointment of the first Arts Council Education Liaison Officer reported in 1977 as ‘a first major step in the implementation of our chartered duty’.¹⁷ It could also be concluded that educational principles in the opera house flow out of a concern for increasing social access. Both access and education are also interlinked with the concept of innovation, and the objective of bringing of new work (new compositions and novel production ideas) to an audience that has been made ready for them, and is able to access them. As the 1978 Arts Council report asserts ‘it is perhaps even more necessary to bring those with conservative tastes to a better understanding and enjoyment of new developments in the arts’.¹⁸

Ranan notes that since 1997, and the election of Tony Blair’s Labour government, there has been a growth in impetus for cultural institutions to serve objectives such as increased access and educational outreach. With reference to the government’s traditional ‘arm’s length policy’ of arts funding, in 2000 Devlin and Hoyle (former senior Arts Council officers) asserted that ‘while not (yet) stepping back from the arm’s length principle, [the Blair government] is clearly redefining the length of the arm’.¹⁹ My ethnographic research, speaking to those who were ‘on the shop floor’ at that time, substantiates this claim. Dominic Gray, who came to Opera North as head of a small Education department in 1996, which he went on to expand greatly, also told me in an interview that he had come into this job at ‘just the right time’, and that the priority of Blair’s Labour government for education meant that more funding was

¹⁶ Conversation with Nicholas Payne, *The Theory, Practice and Business of Opera Today* conference, University of Leeds, 12 April 2012, speech reported from notes.

¹⁷ ACGB, *Thirty-third Annual Report*, p.10, quoted in Ranan, p.86.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Graham Devlin and Sue Hoyle, *Committing to Culture, Arts Funding in France and Britain* (Franco-British Council: London, 2000), p.26, quoted in Ranan, p.15. A posthumous account of the cultural policy of the ‘New Labour’ era of government cultural policy is provided by David Hesmondhalgh et al., *Culture, Economy and Politics: The case of New Labour* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). The complaint of betraying or altering the arm’s length premise has arisen on other occasions, not least when William Rees-Mogg was accused, during Margaret Thatcher’s administration, of undermining the Arts Council’s independence, and weakening the arm’s length principle (Gilbert, p.358).

available for departments such as his: ‘Arts organisations that wanted to spend more on education, that was embraced and we were encouraged to do that.’²⁰

The financial climate for the arts has cooled since this era of ‘New Labour’,²¹ but the legacy of its policy means that opera and other institution-based arts find themselves with programmes that have been build up over the past fifteen to twenty years, with ring-fenced funding dedicated to these twin aims of increased access and education.²² In the case of Opera North, increasing access to opera was always at the forefront of the company’s agenda; indeed, an Education Officer has been present since the company’s inception, and it is the Education department that has grown significantly over the years and continues to grow.²³

We have now seen seventy years of the Arts Council, and the paradigm of access and education in relation to government funding of the arts has been so established as to be ingrained in UK opera practitioners at the highest levels. In a press interview in 2000, composer Harrison Birtwistle flippantly made the case for state subsidy to be concentrated at a cultural centre:

If you have at the centre a first-rate orchestra, properly funded, then everything else - folk-dancing, yoghurt weaving - comes into focus and flourishes. But if you neglect the centre, the rest falls apart.²⁴

As an example of an institution of ‘high culture’, we might well substitute the opera house for the symphony orchestra here. Indeed the sentiment is echoed (more elegantly) in Opera North’s mission statement, as recounted by Music Director Richard Farnes in a public talk in 2010, where he described Opera North as ‘more than an opera company’, with a mission to develop ‘artists, art form and audience’. With an interesting mixture of imagery, Farnes went

²⁰ Interview with Dominic Gray, Premier House, Leeds, 9 June 2010, from dictaphone. Hesmondhalgh et al. discuss the perceived burden on some cultural organisations of excessive instrumentalism under the Blair government, but interview other individuals who found it rewarding to receive ‘societal permission’ for the arts to tackle social issues (pp.93-97).

²¹ ‘New Labour’ is an unofficial but commonly used term for the UK Labour Party during its period of government between 1997 and 2010, as it presented itself to the electorate.

²² Hesmondhalgh et al. confirm that broadly, in terms of policy for the creative industries and creative economy, the 2010 Coalition government had ‘considerable continuity with New Labour’ (p.194).

²³ Twenty-three staff members of ON Education are currently listed on the company website: ‘About Us, Who’s Who’, *ON* [n.d.] <<http://www.operanorth.co.uk/about/whos-who>> [accessed 23 December 2015] (para. 8 of 12) as compared with six in the *Swanhunter* programme brochure of 2009. This will be reviewed later, in Chapter 3 (see Table 1 and Figure 3).

²⁴ Norman Lebrecht, ‘A Blast of Birtwistle’, *Lebrecht Report*, *La Scena Musicale*, 14 October 2000, <<http://www.scena.org/columns/lebrecht/001014-NL-Birtwistle.html>> [accessed 4 February 2014] (para. 11 of 30).

on to liken the company to a ‘spider’s web or maybe a teaching hospital’.²⁵ Indeed, into these two analogies we find packed the first five of Ranan’s distilled Arts Council objectives.

These inherited principles have become a paradigm of self-identity for Opera North: the institution of high culture, a concentrated centre of art (and of arts funding) whence flows the potential to foster arts and culture of all kinds, including folk and popular forms (albeit mediated by their association with the opera company). The company must include access to, and engagement with, a vast array of arts, potentially for everyone, including the uninitiated, the underprivileged and the very young. It is this identity, structure and function, as presented by the company, which is the starting point for this study.

This thesis will not examine in great detail the post-war politics of Attlee and Keynes, the priorities of the Arts Council, or the general developments in policy of British opera houses. It will make no claim that this Keynesian model of cultural organisation is the only one, the most democratic, efficient or the best. This is, however, the model presented by Opera North itself, and by the administrators (including the Arts Council and government) of culture. This model will be presented here, largely, but not uncritically, on its own terms, in the tradition of participant observation and from the premise of an interdisciplinary study of opera, beginning with the real-life work of an opera company.

There is a caveat to this tale of democratic ideals. Opera is a highly expensive art form which cannot survive on the returns of the box office alone, and therefore must receive subsidy of some sort in order to exist. In Britain between around 1780 and the 1820s, opera was scarce, privately funded by wealthy investors, and took place almost exclusively in London. It was organised around ‘ad hoc’ seasons, which were largely social occasions for those with the financial means to attend.²⁶ From this select history of opera, via other subsequent developments (rising suspicions of the theatre and of foreign culture; a growing divide between popular and ‘serious’ cultural forms²⁷), was inherited a public perception that opera might be a pastime for those of great means and social standing.²⁸ This view is one that modern popular culture and the mass media have, as a whole, taken no great pains to contradict.²⁹ On one hand, the efforts of the Arts Council and the opera companies are intended to counteract the notion of elitism. Yet

²⁵ Richard Farnes in conversation with Professor Stephen Pratt, *Britten in Context* conference, Liverpool Hope University, 10 June 2010, from notes.

²⁶ See Jennifer L. Hall-Witt, ‘Reforming the Aristocracy: Opera and elite culture, 1780-1860’, in *Rethinking the Age of Reform: Britain, 1780-1850*, ed. by R. Arthur Burns and Joanna Innes (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), pp.220-37.

²⁷ See Wilson, ‘Killing Time’, pp. 251-57.

²⁸ The Arts Council Annual report of 1971 told of successes in combating the view that ‘opera [...] was something suited to the tastes of foreigners, or an elegant addition to the lives of a small and wealthy section of society’. ACGB, *Twenty-sixth Annual Report, 1970-71* (London: ACGB, 1971), p.54, quoted in Ranan, p.86.

²⁹ This is discussed by Wilson in ‘Killing Time’, as will be explored further in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

associations of grandeur are not without benefit when opera companies must pursue additional funding from private individuals or corporate sponsors. So the publicly funded opera company must exist with a certain degree of social and functional contradiction. For some it remains the bastion of an old idea of the relative exclusivity of high culture. This sense of marked social status by association with opera must be allowed, quietly and partially, to remain, as is necessary to draw in funding from its traditional, wealthy benefactors and those less traditional, corporate donors who might wish to buy into an idea of exclusivity for their clients. But the opera company must also be an outreaching, educating, publicly accessible body. It is, in itself, a dichotomy, but one which must remain feasible. This is a paradoxical status quo that underlies the company's functionality in going about its various everyday businesses, and a contradictory paradigm for those who inhabit the social world of 'high-cultural' production.

In observing the commissioning and creation of two new works (*Skin Deep* and *Swanhunter*) in Chapter 3, I analyse the method of creators, and the means whereby audiences might be able to access these new works. In the case of *Swanhunter*, this relied on the work of Opera North's Education department as well as the Projects department (which had itself grown out of Education). In Chapter 4 I analyse how Opera North has presented its first Ring cycle, a work which has been seen as the 'coming of age' of any company producing it for the first time.³⁰ The focus here will be on access and education in the sense of overcoming audiences' 'fear of the threshold into Wagner'³¹ and the model of self-presentation of the company to its public in making a *Ring* for the north of England.

³⁰ Bryan Magee, *Music and Musicians*, May 1973, quoted in Gilbert, p.254-5. More recently an article previewing the ON Ring cycle was subtitled 'Opera North's Coming of Age'. Leeds Guide, 'Preview Wagner Der Ring Des Nibelungen, Leeds Town Hall: Opera North's "Coming of Age"', *The Leeds Guide* [n.d.] <<http://www.leedsguide.co.uk/review/preview/wagner-der-ring-des-nibelungen-leeds-town-hall/18665>> [accessed 4 February 2014].

³¹ Discussion with Martin Pickard, Leeds Central Library, 11 June 2012, from notes.

2 Methodology and Overarching Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

As is the case in any ethnographically based study, the focus of this doctoral thesis revealed itself gradually over time. After initially observing certain phenomena in the everyday work of Opera North, I reverted to other, literary sources to ascertain why the company and its work is thought of and presented in quite the way that it is, and what the origins of some of the institutionally ingrained assumed truths and paradigms might be. The result is a piece of work that began life as an ethnography, but diverged into contextual history. My aim for this contextual part of the study was that it should come full circle to elucidate the ethnographic fieldwork I conducted and inform the analysis of my first-hand observations of the work of Opera North and its modes of self-presentation. I will later refer to Georgina Born's suggested trajectory towards a new model of 'relational musicology' and will acknowledge this aspiration in the construction of my methods and my thesis.³²

In this chapter I have combined a literature review and methodology. The reason for this is the relationship between the methodologies outlined in some of the key texts, and my own methods of information-gathering and reporting. This relationship is most evident in the cases of Georgina Born's *Rationalizing Culture*, and Paul Atkinson's *Everyday Arias*,³³ which have remained my main overarching influences throughout the duration of this project, but it is also evident in other sources reviewed in this chapter. I should also note here that, owing to the interdisciplinary nature of this thesis and the broad range of sources used, it has not been possible to review all sources thoroughly in this chapter. Literature and methodology continue to be reviewed and reported in the body of the two main chapters which are case studies; firstly (in Chapter 3) of two Opera North commissions, and secondly (in Chapter 4) of the company's traversal of Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. These two chapters are quite differently focused in terms of the broader contexts within which my fieldwork is situated; the first is essentially political and the second more thoroughly historical. It is thus appropriate to review the literary sources relevant to each case study within their own contexts. Methodologically too, the ethnographic observations done of newly commissioned works (including, in the case of *Swanhunter*, educational workshops for children) were quite different to those done over four years as an audience was gradually inducted into the existing cultural megalith that is Wagner's

³² Georgina Born, 'For a Relational Musicology: Music and interdisciplinarity, beyond the practice turn', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 135.2 (2010), 205-43; Georgina Born, 'The Social and the Aesthetic: For a post-Bourdieuian theory of cultural production', *Cultural Sociology*, 4.2 (2010), 171-208.

³³ Georgina Born, *Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez, and the institutionalisation of the musical avant-garde* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Paul Atkinson, *Everyday Arias: An operatic ethnography* (Oxford: Altamira, 2006).

Ring cycle, and so methodological comment is also focussed at the opening of these two chapters, and interspersed throughout.

2.2 Origins

With regards to ethnographic method, Paul Atkinson and Martyn Hammersley raise the point that ethnography is a reflexive process, with researchers as a ‘part of the social world they study’.³⁴ It then follows that a degree of self-reflection is appropriate in assessing methodological choices and the circumstances by which these choices were arrived at. From my own perspective, this doctoral study came about by my having answered an advertisement early in 2008, for an AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Award studentship in ‘Opera as Adaptation’. With regards to a project that was interdisciplinary from the very outset, this introductory document quoted an assertion by opera scholar Herbert Lindenberger (writing in 1998) that ‘since opera has thrived from its beginnings as a collocation of otherwise distinct art forms, it seems only appropriate that diverse intellectual disciplines join each other to promote its understanding’.³⁵ Throughout the course of my project it has been my aim to explore scholarship from a diverse range of disciplines and to employ whichever was appropriate to my needs. My background was in musicology and education, but an approach of interdisciplinary exploration and mixed methodology never seemed anything less than thoroughly appropriate.

In 2006, Lindenberger asked the question in the title of a paper ‘Why (What? How? If?) Opera Studies?’ In this paper, which is constructed as a dialogue between ‘interlocutor’ and ‘author’, Lindenberger explores the problems evident in the approaches of the various disciplines to the study of opera, namely that they have been variously disconnected from each other, and that each discipline holds within itself a unique academic and cultural bias that prevents dialogue.

Each of the disciplines upon which opera studies draws has its own peculiar history, its own set of rules and conventions, even a particular mind set that colors the personalities of its practitioners. [...] Opera studies is in effect an orphan that cannot claim a natural home in any one of the existing humanistic disciplines.³⁶

³⁴ Paul Atkinson and Martyn Hammersley, *Ethnography: Principles in practice, 3rd Edition* (London: Routledge, 2007), p.14.

³⁵ Herbert Lindenberger *Opera in History: From Monteverdi to Cage* (California: Stanford University Press, 1998), p.10.

³⁶ Herbert Lindenberger, ‘Why (What? How? If?) Opera Studies?’, in *Operatic Migrations: Transforming works and crossing boundaries*, ed. by Roberta Montemorra Marvin and Downing A. Thomas (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp.253-63 (pp. 253-54).

Lindenberger goes on to accuse each of the different disciplines of having ‘pursued its own agenda’ and of having ‘talked past one another’.³⁷ He accuses literary studies and musicology of ‘hidden ideological biases’ that include national bias, and musicological studies of opera of getting ‘lost in minutiae without much concern for the larger questions’.³⁸ Lindenberger appears to advocate a wholly interdisciplinary approach to opera as the only way towards thorough and connected scholarship, teaching and general understanding of the form as a whole. He suggests that (at the time of writing) there may not be a practicable path through the disciplinary maze with a purposeful outcome in sight, and therefore refutes the viability of doctoral study in interdisciplinary opera studies.³⁹ However, this view refers most immediately to the academic climate in his native USA. The UK has recently seen political (and financial) manoeuvres encouraging and enabling meaningful collaboration between arts companies and academia;⁴⁰ this doctoral study has been supported by one such collaborative partnership, entitled ‘DARE’, between the University of Leeds and Opera North, as I will outline presently.

Since Lindenberger’s complaint in 2006, and over the course of this PhD study, there has been much growth in interdisciplinary communication on the subject of opera. *Operatic Migrations*, the volume containing his discursive chapter, was the beginning of Ashgate’s Interdisciplinary Studies in Opera series, which has developed the course of opera studies by broadening and connecting multi-disciplinary involvement. There have also been various academic conferences in recent years, in the UK and elsewhere, dedicated to discussion of opera, with delegates contributing perspectives from various academic fields, but additionally from opera professionals working in the industry.⁴¹ Indeed, ‘opera studies’ could be seen to be moving toward the collaborative area conceptualised by Lindenberger; there is certainly an ongoing discourse that seems to be facilitated by improved relations between the disciplines that

³⁷ Ibid., p.255.

³⁸ Ibid., p.257.

³⁹ Ibid., p.261.

⁴⁰ In the opera sphere, Cardiff Interdisciplinary Research in Opera and Drama (CIRO), launched in 2012, involves partnered work with WNO. Partnerships are also emerging between ENO and University College London, and between ROH and Kings College London. The Guildhall School of Music and Drama has entered various partnerships, recently to run doctoral studentships with the ROH and the Barbican Centre. Orchestras are also entering into local academic partnerships; for example the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra with Liverpool Hope University and the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra with the University of Salford.

⁴¹ In 2011, the University of York hosted the one day symposium *Digital opera: New means and new meanings*; in 2012 there were two substantial UK conferences, *Love to Death: Transforming opera* run by the University of Cardiff with Welsh National Opera, and *The Theory, Practice and Business of Opera Today* at the University of Leeds; and in 2013 the University of Leeds hosted the conference *Richard Wagner’s Impact on His World and Ours*. The OBERTO group (Oxford Brookes: Exploring Research Trends in Opera) has organised a variety of events in recent years: *Beyond Press Cuttings: New approaches to reception in opera studies* (2011); *Operatic Masculinities* (2012); *Staging Operatic Anniversaries* (2013); *Beyond Black Tie and Bubbly: Rescuing opera from stereotypes* (2014); and *Opera and Celebrity* (2015). Liverpool Hope University held *Britten in Context* (2010) and *The Diva* (2011). This list is far from exhaustive, but indicates the growing interest in the field in the past five years.

might comprise it. With respect to an interdisciplinary PhD thesis, the possibilities for study might appear almost endless. The framework of interdisciplinarity for this study came from the disciplines of the institutions involved, the School of Music and the School of Performance and Cultural Industries at the University of Leeds. With regard to the kind of reflexive ethnography I have employed, Atkinson and Hammersley remind us that ‘the orientations of researchers will be shaped by their socio-historic locations, including the values and interests that these locations confer upon them’.⁴² To address this I will add some information on my own disciplinary bias, a background in music and musicology, which had already developed in the direction of studies of performance practice and of ethnography/ethnomusicology, and of addressing issues of performance in a wider sense. I also have a professional background in education.

2.3 Interdisciplinary ‘Opera as Adaptation’ project

As a part of a larger AHRC-funded project ‘Opera as Adaptation’, which also incorporated another PhD study, the premise for my doctoral scholarship in Leeds was interdisciplinary. The PhD studentships were drawn up by Dr Kara McKechnie in the School of Performance and Cultural Industries, and Dr Rachel Cowgill at the School of Music, and Opera North (chiefly by Projects Director Dominic Gray). These studentships are supported by Collaborative Doctoral Awards (CDAs) from the AHRC, and supervised by McKechnie, Cowgill (now Professor and Head of Music and Drama at the University of Huddersfield) and by senior staff members of Opera North, in my case Richard Farnes, Music Director. It was envisaged that these two PhD studentships, each run between two academic departments (and hence two disciplines) should be ‘inherently interdisciplinary’,⁴³ and it was apparent that this project might have the facility to tackle Lindenberger’s criticism of previously disjointed approaches to the study of opera, and the nature of collaborative creation and production. Additionally, as a premise of the project, I have been privileged to have been granted access over the course of my PhD study to the processes of a real life opera company, Opera North. This access has revealed the highly complex nature of the collaborative work done within this institution, and of the cultural work done by opera and the opera company in a social context. Many decisions made during the course of my research, particularly those around the focus on new works, new models of Wagner production and the results of collaborative creation and production, were responses to, and dictated by, the nature of the CDA scholarship and its interdisciplinary and interinstitutional

⁴² Atkinson and Hammersley, p.15.

⁴³ Kara McKechnie and Rachel Cowgill, ‘AHRC Collaborative Project: Opera as adaptation’ advertisement document (unpublished, April 2008).

aims.⁴⁴ Lindenberger's call for interdisciplinary collaboration and cohesion in opera studies effectively shadows an essential nature of opera and of the opera company itself.

The first PhD project of 'Opera as Adaptation', entitled 'Adaptation and the Libretto', was begun by Dr Adam Strickson in October 2007 and completed in 2014 with the thesis *The Librettist's Adaptation of Source in Collaboration with the Composer*.⁴⁵ My own project began in 2008 with the stimulus 'Adaptation, Source and Musical Realisation', although much adaptation has occurred in the title and the focus since the project began. The concept of adaptation, in its broadest sense, has remained a foundation of the work I have done at Opera North since beginning my studentship. Just as opera is often made up of many processes of adaptation (libretto from another literary text, score from source material and libretto) so the opera company itself adapts in its productions and its function for a changing society. In another framework, the once infant 'opera studies' (the 'orphan' of the humanistic disciplines, as Lindenberger described it) has adapted to its changing academic environment and continues to adapt with every interdisciplinary conversation.

2.4 Beginning with the opera company: an ethnographic approach to interdisciplinary opera studies

My own vision of interdisciplinary opera studies begins with the opera company itself, and the choice of ethnography as a key method in the study of opera, as it is produced and presented by the company. My ethnographic access to Opera North was enabled by an agreement between the company and the University of Leeds. This collaboration was initiated for the purpose of supervising the two PhD studentships, and consolidated by the formal partnership between the two institutions, 'DARE', which was also launched in 2007. This is a perhaps an unusual climate for an ethnographic study, where the object of study is a powerful partner institution of the educational establishment wherein the study is conducted. The potentially influential effect of this scenario on methodology and outcome must be acknowledged, although in the case of 'Opera as Adaptation' as an entirety, the personal connections and investment of researchers has seemed to have had more of a tangible effect, as I later discuss. Putting such complications aside for the time being, I will argue for the suitability of ethnography as a key method by which I might enter into an interdisciplinary study of opera, with the opera company itself at the centre. By observing the work of the opera company as a broad framework in the first instance, I was afforded the potential to cover various aspects of the company's work, and drew my points of interest, focus and analysis from that point on. Observing the various art forms of the

⁴⁴ See *ibid.*

⁴⁵ Adam Strickson, *The Librettist's Adaptation of Source in Collaboration with the Composer* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leeds, 2014).

opera house working in synergy and in a constant process of adaptation, and given opera's intrinsic intermedial and interdisciplinary character, my aim was that the nature of my academic analysis should then follow suit. I have used those disciplinary perspectives at my disposal (primarily from the traditions of musicology, education, ethnography and performance studies, with additional reference to history, politics and others) with the aim of being open to the possibilities of interpretations and analyses arising from sources that are familiar or that are new to me.

I begin with a premise taken from a 'naturalist' ethnographic standpoint; namely that the object of study can be introduced, at the outset, in the terms in which it presents itself.⁴⁶ Since my aim is an interdisciplinary study of opera beginning with the opera company itself, it seems coherent to begin within the framework of the company's own cultural world. However, as a reflexive participant observer, my study will not remain uncritically within this social frame.

In proposing a new model of what he terms 'Relational Ethnography', sociologist Matthew Desmond criticises the 'conceptual impartiality' in which he argues the objects of traditional group- and place-based ethnographies have been enshrouded.⁴⁷ His argument follows, that assumptions are made when we assign what we see as 'natural' boundaries to define groups or places: 'police officers, teenagers, Chinatown or General Motors'.⁴⁸ While I may present such groups and places as objective units for economy of words or concepts ('Opera North', 'creators', 'Wagner's circle' to name a few groups, and that pseudo-objective non-place, 'the North'), I have aimed to explore broader narratives that situate these economical and/or poetic descriptors in a wider context, and revealed degrees of relationality within them, and between them and their others. Any social ethnographic study is, of course, a complex web of subjective decision-making and observations in which we may aspire toward some small degree of objective truth, whilst never achieving impartiality (and usually acknowledging that impartiality would be undesirable, if not also impossible). Ethnomusicology, as a disciplinary whole, originally claimed a degree of impartiality in its scope, when compared to more traditional musicological studies. In *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-one issues and concepts*, leading ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl makes the following claim for the discipline: 'Although we take into account a society's own hierarchy of its various kinds of music, and its musicians, we want to study not only what is excellent but also what is ordinary and even barely

⁴⁶ Atkinson and Hammersley, p.7.

⁴⁷ Matthew Desmond, 'Relational Ethnography', *Theory and Society*, 43.5 (2014), 547–79, p.551.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

acceptable.’⁴⁹ Indeed, herein lies an issue in my study of *Skin Deep*, whereby its lack of acceptance amongst the company led to tensions when discussing this particular case study with its musically reluctant, but professionally obliged participants. Fundamentally Nettl reminds us that ‘ethnomusicologists are egalitarians’, although he also describes personal attachments to the music of certain people and places, ‘special loves’ and preferences.⁵⁰ My own northern enthusiasm for access to high culture in the north of England is not impartial, and yet there is a sense of levelling social opportunities, in which I advocate an alternative to an experience of opera reception that privileges London audiences. In this case my personal interest in the north and the increased impartiality of offering an alternative to London-centrism are not distinct.

My ethnographic research began observations in rehearsal rooms and around the company, taking diary notes of interaction and annotating piano scores with points of dramatic and musical interest. I was then granted access to interview participants and company members and permission to conduct audience questionnaires, an example of which is included as Appendix A. I have acknowledged the identities of my sources at Opera North, and quoted them with their informed consent (although for brevity full interview transcripts are not included here). It would seem illogical to conceal the identities of high-level and well-known workers, since job titles or roles must be revealed in order to contextualise their perspectives. Atkinson asserts in his study of WNO, ‘one cannot possibly write about an opera company under the cloak of anonymity and pseudonyms’, noting the absurdity of any attempt on his part to ‘write about “an international opera company somewhere in South Wales”’.⁵¹ The identification of subjects becomes more necessary in view of the fact that I have combined information from observations, personal interactions and interviews with talks, broadcasts and publications, all of which are already public.⁵² The comments of audience members have remained anonymous; indeed I made no requirement for names to be given on the questionnaire forms I provided, although they were sometimes freely offered. While I designed and made available questionnaires for many of the productions I have mentioned here (and for others) the responses of audience members have not been as central a part of forming my thesis as I initially imagined they might be. This is the case for several reasons. In order to capture the moment of opera attendance, I created paper questionnaires which were voluntarily taken up at venues, and returned to me in stamped, addressed envelopes. To retain the immediacy of the audience’s experience, to avoid overwhelming audience members with paper, and to reduce litter and loss, the questionnaires were designed to fit onto a single sheet of A4 paper. The responses given on

⁴⁹ Bruno Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-one issues and concepts* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), p.13.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.14.

⁵¹ Atkinson, p.xii.

⁵² This approach is advocated by Stephen Cottrell, *Professional Music-Making in London: Ethnography and experience* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp.19-20, as I will outline.

a form such as this are often brief, and while they give insight collectively, they seldom reveal a lot of depth individually (although, unprompted, some respondents have attached further information, or contacted me at a later date volunteering their thoughts for the benefit of my study, the details of which were outlined at the top of the paper survey). Working closely with those at Opera North who aided my access to the audience within the guidelines of company operations, there were also restrictions on the nature of questions I might ask, as suggested by managers at Opera North (although these restrictions were relaxed over time⁵³). In the spirit of maintaining the 'natural' reception experience of opera-goers, I felt it would be too intrusive to form audience focus groups in this context. When researching the reactions of children, I observed them primarily in school groups during workshops run by Opera North, and on performance excursions in the company of their teachers. Here I was working under the regulation of Opera North (as a collaborative partner in my doctoral award) facilitated by the company, also with the permission of the organising teachers. Occasionally I posed questions to a group about the activity, during the course of their workshop or performance trip. As a teacher myself, I was able to employ questioning techniques that encouraged reflective thinking about the activity in which they were involved, as is referred to in Chapter 3, on the production and reception of the family opera *Swanhunter*. Ethical consent was sought via the company and the schools for my presence in workshop and performance situations, although I was advised by staff at the University Interdisciplinary Ethics unit that informal questioning regarding the children's experience and enjoyment of a production or arts workshop did not, at that time, require formal ethical approval.

While ethnographic study was conducted primarily on the opera company in question, around its activities and productions, the ethnographic spirit has infiltrated other parts of the thesis that deal with contextual research. Consequently other modes of ethnography have emerged over the course of this study. I refer specifically to work done in Chapter 4, analysing the comments of customer/reviewers on the e-commerce Amazon websites, whereby the concept of the arranged/reduced Wagner recording is interpreted and reconstructed, and criteria are arrived at by which this community is able to make judgements. I elaborate more on the nature of this ethnographic method (where the internet site is effectively the 'field') and the theory on which it is based, later, in Chapter 4.

⁵³ For example, for my early questionnaires it was felt that I ought not to ask audience members to separate their thoughts on the music and the libretto, since Opera North wanted people to experience a cohesive art form. I believe that as I was compliant with such requests, and entered into the spirit of the collaborative arrangement with the company, such requirements were withdrawn over time.

2.5 Literature reviews and methodology: ethnographies of musical ‘high culture’

The two fundamental models for the design of my research were Georgina Born’s *Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez, and the institutionalisation of the musical avant-garde*, and Paul Atkinson’s *Everyday Arias: An operatic ethnography*. Born is, by her own description, ‘an unusual social anthropologist, one who works on Western cultural institutions’.⁵⁴ *Rationalizing Culture* is a seminal ethnography of, as the author describes it, a musical ‘high-culture institution’,⁵⁵ and as such was an early model for my study which began as another ethnography of an institution producing what we might term musical ‘high culture’. Born makes the following assertion:

Ethnographic method may have unique capacities to elucidate the workings of dominant western institutions and their cultural systems. Because these phenomena have the capacity to absorb and conceal contradiction, it takes a method such as ethnography to uncover the gaps between external claims and internal realities, public rhetoric and private thought, ideology and practice.⁵⁶

Using ethnography, Born analysed working lives and structures within IRCAM (*Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique*, the Institute for Research and Coordination in Acoustics/Music) in Paris, and the relationships between IRCAM and the outside world. She revealed tensions implicit in an institution that was funded largely by the state, but whose structures and communication with the public were often opaque. Contradictions were made evident between the rhetoric of founder (and then Director) Pierre Boulez, and Born’s observed realities. As well as her main focus, the subjugation of postmodern and other musical aesthetics, as she saw it, by Boulez’s unwavering trajectory of ‘high modernism’,⁵⁷ Born also revealed undemocratic power structures and worker exploitation, and raised political questions around the relationship between the state and this cultural institution, including IRCAM’s receipt of second-hand technology from the French military. The methodological tensions, tensions of ideology and the social difficulties in producing the IRCAM study are evident. Ultimately Born was highly critical of IRCAM (with its high levels of public funding) and the avant-garde’s failure ‘to find success with a broad public or to achieve wider cultural currency’.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Georgina Born, *Uncertain Vision: Birt, Dyke and the reinvention of the BBC* (London: Vintage, 2005), p.14.

⁵⁵ Born, *Rationalizing Culture*, p.10.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.7.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.3, 164, 174.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.4.

There are commonalities evident between Born's IRCAM study and my study of a publicly funded opera company.⁵⁹ In my study of Opera North, there is a fundamental parallel with Born's work on IRCAM in organisational and political terms: IRCAM is described as receiving both public and private funding, but the vast majority was from the government's Ministry of Culture, distributed through an intermediary body.⁶⁰ Indeed Born describes IRCAM as 'handsomely funded by the French state'.⁶¹ Underlying her ethnography is a soft focus on the responsibility of the institution to the public that is created through this funding model. Born's assertion is that, in its being subsidised by the state, culture is centralised, rationalised and legitimised. She asks, 'in a cultural sphere defined not by the market but by judgments of legitimacy fueling cultural policy and subsidy' (which she views as 'very necessary') 'the question then becomes: what kind of legitimacy judged how and by whom, how instituted, how productively, and with what status vis à vis other cultural orders?'⁶² Public opera in the UK, deemed to be worthy of subsidy since 1945 by the Arts Council (a quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisation or 'quango', funded, but not run directly, by central government) is, like IRCAM in France, defined by exactly the same judgements of legitimacy as Born outlines. Consequently the very questions posited by Born must also, at some point, be asked of public opera. Indeed, in 2003, in his monograph *In Search of a Magic Flute: The public funding of opera – dilemmas and decision making* (to which I shall return presently) cultural economist David Ranan considered the awarding of such cultural legitimacy to opera through public funding. He reflected that 'subsidies for opera, an art-form which appeals to only a small fraction of the population but which, because it is very expensive to produce, needs public subsidy to survive, are not easy to justify'.⁶³

My thesis does not go so far as to question directly the legitimacy of the opera company, as Born's work questions IRCAM. It does go some way to explain the political history of this legitimacy in the set-up and the aims of publicly funded opera, and in the objectives of Opera North in its productions. It outlines the success criteria that are set for productions, how they arise and how they are communicated, and by extension, how this legitimacy is continually judged and maintained. Thus these questions around the nature and judgement of legitimacy are broadly, if sometimes indirectly, addressed.

⁵⁹ In IRCAM's highly legitimised relationship with the state, there were more than abstract parallels with opera. Born reveals that the Head of Administration at the outset of IRCAM was a high state official who was wanted in post 'because he'd done all the statutes for the big Opera scheme' (ibid., p.106).

⁶⁰ 'IRCAM receives both public and private financing but the overwhelming majority comes from the state, specifically the Ministry of Culture, distributed through the linked institution, the Centre George Pompidou' (ibid., p.107).

⁶¹ Ibid., p.1.

⁶² Ibid., pp.10-11.

⁶³ Ranan, p.13.

IRCAM, as described by Born, is an institution where invited composers produce commissioned work using the centre's resources, but the centre also offers concert programmes and educational courses. These two functions are summarised by Born as 'cultural production and reproduction', and assigned high and low status accordingly.⁶⁴ Similarly Opera North, a large producer of cultural work, offers educational programmes, although as we shall see in Chapter 3 on the commissioning of *Swanhunter*, the work of creative production and the work of education are often happening simultaneously, and do not function as the same sort of dichotomy that Born discerned. Born also reports on the position of the lower-level IRCAM workers who professed a need for an 'education into understanding' for the public of the traditions behind the aesthetic of the avant-garde music produced at IRCAM;⁶⁵ she thus elucidates IRCAM's neglect of the development of its potential audience, and the institution's erstwhile lack of engagement with the general public.⁶⁶ This studied gap in practice has provided me with a contrast and a focus: in the work of Opera North, concerns about potential audience's fears in accessing opera, or certain kinds of opera, are routinely addressed (as we shall see in the case studies). By revealing the perceived need for this introductory educational work at IRCAM, Born's ethnography has opened a door for me to interrogate the ways in which this kind of work is done and with what results at Opera North.

Although, unlike IRCAM, Opera North does not exist mainly for the purpose of commissioning composers to create new music, this is one function of the company, as is illuminated in Chapter 3. Consequently questions raised by Born around the politics of musical composition in 'the sphere of subsidized cultural life' remain relevant,⁶⁷ most crucially the question 'to what extent composers are aware of the relation between their aesthetic and the likely fate of their music in terms of public reception and economic subsidy'.⁶⁸ This relation, and composers' awareness of it, is a question that underpins the analyses in Chapter 3 of the commissioned operas of David Sawer and Jonathan Dove, and the way in which they were conceived by their creators and received by their audiences.

Like Born's study, my work on Opera North, which started as an ethnographic account, had to expand its methodological reach. While Born's ethnographic reporting became embedded in work that encompassed sociology, cultural theory, art history, and psychoanalysis,⁶⁹ my own study expanded into the fields of history and politics, even touching theological thought. Born frames her mixed methodology as 'moving "beyond"' the discourse of her subjects 'in order to

⁶⁴ Born, *Rationalizing Culture*, p.2.

⁶⁵ Ibid., pp.123-32.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p.126.

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp.5, 14.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p.14.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p.8.

trace its embeddedness in certain historical and contemporary social and cultural formations’,⁷⁰ whilst also (in a more traditionally ethnographic frame) ‘moving “behind” and “across” their discourse in order to elucidate gaps and contradictions’.⁷¹ This was also my aim. In my study, for example, the immediate and present Wagner discourse was moved beyond, in order to reveal how it was situated in broader narratives around Wagner and difficulty, and Wagner and ‘guilt’, and how Opera North’s Ring opera productions could be read as an ‘access solution’ amongst various efforts (historical and contemporary) to increase the accessibility of the Ring cycle, and of this composer’s work. Opera North’s Ring productions are also embedded in a history of Ring cycles in Leeds. Additionally, the performance design specifically for the home venue, Leeds Town Hall, draws the Opera North *Ring* into another history: that of this concert venue and its political *raison d’être*. I hope I have also moved ‘behind’ and ‘across’ the discourses of my subjects, and revealed certain incongruities, although as an embedded researcher and student, it has often been my inclination to elucidate and explain the reasons behind such contradictions as much as the contradictions themselves. It may be unsurprising, then, that discrepancies between word and deed are most exposed in the *Skin Deep* creators, David Sawyer and Armando Iannucci, who were commissioned by, but not as a part of, the company. I have also sought to reveal contradictions more often in the public words of my subjects than in the information that they have revealed to me privately, since it would appear that it is more important to analyse the consistency and meaning of the messages that are broadcast the most widely.

I have outlined here an admittedly subjective bias, but an inevitable one, given the integrated relationship of myself and other researchers with the company (particularly, working on the ‘Opera as Adaptation’ project, Kara McKechnie and Adam Strickson from the School of Performance and Cultural Industries). We are embedded within this company, its work, and its position as a beneficial cultural force in our regions. At times we feel a personal involvement. As Atkinson said of Welsh National Opera:

I feel proud for them all when things seem to be going well. I worry for a singer who doesn’t seem to be in top form. I feel disappointed because something they’d worked hard hadn’t quite worked as it should.⁷²

McKechnie writes of the “protective enthusiasm” which develops with the growing closeness between researcher and company⁷³ and which affects the ethnographer’s judgement: ‘One wills

⁷⁰ Ibid., p.10.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Atkinson, p.7.

⁷³ Kara McKechnie, *Opera North: Historical and dramaturgical perspectives on opera studies* (Bingley: Emerald, 2014), p.4.

the performers to perfect something they have spent months, sometimes years working towards and one wills the audience to be able to read what the production is trying to convey.⁷⁴ In short we are invested. Here is a slightly different focus to that of Born in her aim to interrogate critically the power relations of IRCAM and the avant-garde.⁷⁵ Ours is an acknowledged critical solidarity with our object of study.

In the opening of the first chapter of *Rationalizing Culture* Born noted ‘an absence of empirical social research on contemporary high culture and cultural institutions, on cultural production, and, specifically, on these in regard to serious music’.⁷⁶ Perhaps partially owing to the longitude of the study necessary for its depth, and to some of the tensions involved in producing a study such as this (which would be keenly felt in the process of conducting ethnographic research) the quantity of ethnographic studies of other such institutions of ‘high culture’ does not seem to have increased proportionally in the intervening twenty years since Born’s study was published (or indeed the three decades since it was researched).⁷⁷ Born’s description of this hitherto ‘absent’ field of research is not perfectly fitted by my study of Opera North. Not all the culture that the opera company produces is wholly contemporary in its aesthetic in the way that the culture produced at IRCAM is. However Opera North’s production of culture is done within a contemporary framework in terms of the considerations of the company and its audience. Not all the music that is created by and for Opera North is entirely ‘serious’ in nature; indeed in Chapter 3 I look at the tensions implicit in the creation of ‘operetta’ and ‘family opera’ which might be considered, each in its own way, to be ‘lighter’ or ‘less serious’ than other operatic forms. But generally this study began in answer to Born’s complaint, and is greatly indebted to the spirit of her work at IRCAM. Also of some resonance with my own work is her study of the BBC, *Uncertain Vision*. While this study is not musical in nature, there are parallels between the BBC and Opera North in terms of the history and the nature of public funding.⁷⁸ In Born’s study of a period beginning in 1996, the dynamics of

⁷⁴ Ibid., p.217.

⁷⁵ Born describes her IRCAM study as ‘an exercise in critical hermeneutics, one that focuses on interrogating power in relation to cultural forms and their social and institutional bases’ (*Rationalizing Culture* p.10).

⁷⁶ Ibid., p.13.

⁷⁷ Born describes informants that are ‘formidable intellectuals with their own complex grasp of the problems being discussed in this study’ and the consequent potential for a ‘profound tension’ between the interpretations of author and subjects. She concedes that ‘publishing an ethnographic study of a well-known institution is a sensitive business’ (*Rationalizing Culture*, pp.10 - 11). In *Uncertain Vision* there are overt references to the author’s worries around critiquing powerful agents: she is ‘warned off’ by an ex-BBC employee, and reveals her subconscious concerns in a violent dream about the controller of the BBC. ‘I wake feeling terrified of the subtexts. Am I being toyed with? What vulnerability of mine is he playing on?’ (pp.18-19).

⁷⁸ Born quotes Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff on early broadcasting, ‘a public utility to be developed into a national service’, as defined by the state (*A Social History of British Broadcasting 1922-1939*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p.6, quoted in *Uncertain Vision*, p.27). Born describes the ‘paternalistic origins’ of the BBC, and Director-General John Reith’s conception of broadcasting as a ‘social, cultural,

cultural instrumentalism brought about by Tony Blair's 'New Labour', and the tensions and the trajectories of that political era are richly detailed; Born's political findings with relation to New Labour and the BBC are paralleled in the opera world, including the manoeuvres and behests of public opera's intermediary funding body, the Arts Council.

In accord with Born's complaint regarding the relative absence of ethnographies of high culture and its production (particularly music) anthropologist Paul Atkinson in his study of WNO notes sociological studies of opera that he calls 'sociology at a distance', that is without a focus on involved, empirical method, and concerned with the text rather than the 'event' of opera.⁷⁹ In closer resonance with his own work, Atkinson cites Tia DeNora's sociology of the place of music in everyday life, noting the lack of such work in what he terms 'high' cultural settings.⁸⁰ He then calls for the 'need to apply principles of analytical symmetry in the analysis of culture and its organizations'. Atkinson's concern is that social research has favoured 'profane and popular culture', thereby granting it 'greater interest and legitimacy than more intellectual forms of culture'. Additionally he summarises that 'the ethnomusicological approach to popular music genres has generated a more vigorous ethnographic literature than can be found applied to "classical" music'.⁸¹

One notable exception to this particular claim by Atkinson is Stephen Cottrell's *Professional Music-Making in London: Ethnography and experience*, although there have been some others.⁸² Cottrell gives an account of professional classical musicians in London in their working lives, and the contradictions inherent in a profession that he describes, with reference to Alan Merriam's chapter on 'The Musician', as having 'low status but high importance'.⁸³ It is

educative and moral force', to 'entertain [...], inform and educate', and to lead, rather than follow, public tastes. This precedes the philosophy behind Keynes's Arts Council and the public funding and expectations of opera, as will be outlined in Chapter 3. Born quotes Reith's 'Memorandum of Information on the Scope and Conduct of the Broadcasting Service' of 1925: 'He who prides himself on giving the public what he thinks the public wants is often creating a factitious demand for lower standards which he himself will then satisfy' (*Uncertain Vision*, p.27). This is echoed in the words of David Lloyd-Jones on Opera North, in the ENON Opening Season Brochure, 1978, quoted in McKechnie, *Opera North*, p.31. There is insufficient time to go into the role of the BBC in opening up access of classical music and opera in the UK, in this thesis; see Kate Guthrie, 'Democratizing Art: Music education in postwar Britain', *Musical Quarterly*, 97.4 (2014), 575-615.

⁷⁹ Atkinson, p.33. Atkinson is particularly critical, within this frame, of David T. Evans, *Phantasmagoria: A sociology of opera* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), and Roseanne Martorella, *The Sociology of Opera* (NY: Praeger, 1982).

⁸⁰ Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), cited in Atkinson, p.37.

⁸¹ Atkinson, p.37.

⁸² Examples of ethnomusicologies of Western classical music include Henry Kingsbury, *Music, Talent and Performance: A conservatory cultural system* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988); Bruno Nettl, *Heartland Excursions: Ethnomusicological reflections on schools of music* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995); and Kay Kaufman Shelemay, 'Toward an Ethnomusicology of the Early Music Movement: Thoughts on bridging disciplines and musical worlds', *Ethnomusicology*, 45 (2001), pp.1-29.

⁸³ Alan P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Illinois: NUP, 1964), pp.123-44. Cottrell, p.29.

'Merriam's paradigm' also mentions the allowance of 'deviant behaviour' in musicians; a claim also investigated (with a lesser focus) by Cottrell.

interesting that in Cottrell's study, defined within the tradition of ethnomusicology, the author cites Born, noting her IRCAM study as 'a detailed ethnomusicological study' ('my description', he reminds us, 'not hers'⁸⁴). More specific to opera, although not to its production, Claudio Benzecry's thorough ethnography of opera audiences in Argentina sheds light on the sociology of the opera world from a different angle.⁸⁵

Atkinson and Born have defined themselves as anthropologists rather than ethnomusicologists, and yet it seems apt to mention the debt of my study, and Born's (since Atkinson focuses more on theatrical than musical performance) to the tradition of ethnomusicology, a method that has historically been used for the study of non-Western, folk and traditional musics, but which is an influence being drawn upon to study the musics of elite and powerful Western institutions.⁸⁶ For a fuller discussion of what lies within or without the increasingly fluid and disputed boundaries of this discipline, I will refer back to Cottrell's discussion of the nuances of ethnomusicology, new musicology and the anthropology of music.⁸⁷ For a range of scholarly views on the current debate, see Henry Stobart's edited volume of 2008, *The New (Ethno)Musicologies*.⁸⁸ Jonathan Stock's 1998 paper, 'New Musicologies, Old Musicologies: Ethnomusicology and the study of Western music' sheds some light on the tensions that were coming to the fore at that time (and that are still relevant today) within and between the disciplines of musicology and ethnomusicology when studying Western music.⁸⁹ While acknowledging that this is a complex, historically aligned and politically sensitive area of distinction, I will agree with Cottrell, and for my current purpose remain aware, but largely 'untroubled', by the distinctions of discipline whilst putting an ethnographic or ethnomusicological approach into practice.⁹⁰ Born's argument in her 2007 Dent Medal Address for what she terms a 'relational musicology' is very appealing. Here Born describes a 'reconfiguration of the boundaries between the subdisciplines of music study', notably to incorporate anthropological and historical sources, amongst others, in order to 'render

⁸⁴ Cottrell, p.6.

⁸⁵ Claudio E. Benzecry, *The Opera Fanatic: Ethnography of an obsession* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

⁸⁶ In lieu of a definition of ethnomusicology, Bruno Nettl has listed the following elements: a belief 'that music must be understood as a part of culture and as a product of human society'; a concentration on 'music that is accepted by [...] [a] society as its own; a belief 'that fieldwork, direct confrontation with creation and performance, with the people who conceive of, produce and consume music, is essential'; study of 'all of the musical manifestations of a society [...] - not only what is excellent but also what is ordinary'. Bruno Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-one issues and concepts* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), pp.12-13. In addressing powerful institutions of western music-making as objects of study, these elements might all still be present. In my musical analysis, in Chapter 4, of Timothy Burke's workshop arrangement of *Das Rheingold*, the influence of ethnomusicology is evident.

⁸⁷ Cottrell, pp.2-7.

⁸⁸ Henry Stobart, ed., *The New (Ethno)Musicologies* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008).

⁸⁹ Stock, Jonathan P.J., 'New Musicologies, Old Musicologies: Ethnomusicology and the study of Western music', *Current Musicology* 62 (1998), 40-68.

⁹⁰ Cottrell, p.2.

problematic the music/social opposition and achieve a new interdisciplinary settlement, one that launches the study of music onto new epistemological and ontological terrain'.⁹¹ These interdisciplinarity and relational connections serve me well, since the position of my own work within these fields is further problematised by the physical location of its subject in a theatrical setting as well as a musical one. Yet, more broadly, I seek to consider the setting of my subject in its social, geographical, historical and political locations as well.

Paul Atkinson's *Everyday Arias: An operatic ethnography* is a text whose subject (an ethnographic account of a regionally based, national opera company, Welsh National Opera) most closely matches my own, superseded only in 2014, towards the end of my studies, by Kara McKechnie's *Opera North: Historical and dramaturgical perspectives on opera studies*. Atkinson elucidates the mundane, every-day, collective labour that happens in the rehearsal and production of opera, and the way in which this work is social and, very broadly speaking, performative. Atkinson's work is a true ethnography, with rich, descriptive accounts of the author's experience and observations interwoven with analysis of the performative modes of the opera company and those within it, in and out of the rehearsal room, and on and around the stage. I did not ultimately take this approach in the thorough way exemplified here by Atkinson, although there are traces of the rehearsal-room style ethnography, particularly in the account of the public 'Sing ON: Wagner!' workshop in Chapter 4. Having written some ethnographic accounts of other Opera North events – rehearsals, performances and workshops – that I attended, it was unfortunate that these could not be included directly, but the trajectory of the thesis took me elsewhere. Atkinson gives meaningful accounts of the performative working lives of singers and directors. For my own purposes of assessing how Opera North forms and addresses its access agenda, the individual subjects of primary interest were strategic decision-makers, such as commissioners, creators (composers and librettists) responding directly to commissions, and those in musical positions of creative power at the company. At Opera North, principal singers and stage directors are not company employees, but contracted workers; their artistic decision-making is thus a step removed from the cultural policy that informs decisions at a high level of the company structure. Although I focussed on individuals in different (more politically informed) positions, Atkinson's study informs my own; there is a remarkable symmetry in subject matter, and, to an extent in authorial positioning and degree of involvement. However, this element is far from straightforward, as I will now outline.

Cottrell, in relation to his own study and others, describes the rise of the 'native anthropologist' and even the 'native ethnomusicologist' whereby the scholar is a member of the

⁹¹ Born, 'For a Relational Musicology', p.242.

group to be studied.⁹² Yet the distinction between being an ‘inside’ member of a group and an ‘outsider’ (between ‘emic’ and ‘etic’ perspectives⁹³) is not clear-cut, and often a matter of degree. Prior to my study, I was a musician, a producer and consumer of Western ‘high culture’ and yet I was not a member of this opera company, nor had I worked professionally in a comparable institution. So my perspective is at once emic and etic, or could be understood to exist in a liminal position, moving fluidly along a spectrum between the two, dependent on the activity under observation. It is interesting, in this framework, to compare my own position at Opera North with that of Atkinson at WNO. Cottrell describes an emic familiarity that ‘excludes the learning process that comes with *not* being familiar, and the insights which may arise from this learning’.⁹⁴ Indeed Atkinson observes technicalities of the opera theatre and of performance which he then analyses with extraordinary detail. He is able to chart the minutiae of the activity of singers, producers and stage-managers, noting the kind of detail that I might have liked to include in my own study, but as a musician in possession of vocal training and theatrical experience (although to a lesser degree than those I observed) I was disinclined to note the observed nuances in this area of practice due to overfamiliarity. Perhaps in Atkinson’s accounts of the mundane work of creating performance I find the mundane in my own experience, which I am then subjectively wont to ignore. Essentially here is the feeling of emic knowledge through my own historical involvement in comparable activities. Yet Atkinson was able to attend the most glittering of WNO functions and to play a round of golf with various professional rugby stars and the celebrated baritone Bryn Terfel: in this instance, his established position and status as a professional academic facilitated a greater degree of social access than I might have enjoyed, and made his position more emic, in one respect, than mine. It is indeed the case that every ethnographer must negotiate their own position in the field in which they are working, but it is important to note that there are many situations in which one is neither quite ‘insider’ nor ‘outsider’ or where one is both; McKechnie, for example, places herself in rehearsal observation as a ‘privileged in-between’.⁹⁵ The distinction here is relative and perhaps not even particularly important when the western scholar looks through an ethnographic lens at a domestic institution of western culture.

There were also initial observations that I made at Opera North that were, in fact, so very similar to Atkinson’s that his text has made my detailed re-documentation of them unnecessary. In *Everyday Arias* Atkinson describes a ‘talk-through’ event of production concepts for WNO’s *Queen of Spades*. At this event Richard Jones, referred to by Atkinson as

⁹² Cottrell, pp.15-16.

⁹³ These terms ‘emic’ and ‘etic’ were coined by linguist, Kenneth Lee Pike, *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behaviour* (The Hague: Mouton, 1967).

⁹⁴ Cottrell, pp.16-17.

⁹⁵ McKechnie, *Opera North*, p.216.

the ‘opera producer’, outlined his vision and ideas for the production to the cast. Jones was the stage director for Opera North’s *Skin Deep*, which I believe to be the same role as Atkinson refers to as ‘producer’ in the case of WNO’s *Queen of Spades*. The ‘talk-through’ event is the standard first meeting of an opera cast, where production ideas are shared, although musical coaching and rehearsals will have happened (and often been completed) prior to this. In the case of Opera North, this event is known as a ‘model show’, since this when the miniature set model was traditionally revealed. This is often still the case (as it was, conversely at WNO’s *Queen of Spades* ‘talk-through’) although today a similar effect can be created by digital means, and at the *Skin Deep* ‘model show’ there was actually a PowerPoint projection displaying set and costume designs. Like other directors, Richard Jones has, as Atkinson outlines, ‘his own idiolect of gestures, references, and tropes through which he works with singers in creating a distinctive dramatic world’,⁹⁶ and his own *modus operandi* in communicating with the cast and crew. This came into focus for me, having watched Jones direct at Opera North, then later coming to Atkinson’s account of his work at WNO, which could have been a description of the event I witnessed, from the seating arrangement ‘in a semi-circle, on plastic stacking chairs’,⁹⁷ to the account of Richard Jones’s faux-self-deprecating motto about his talk-through event:

Richard concludes the talk-through by reaffirming, ‘I’m not a believer in these things.’ [...] The collective amusement acknowledges that despite his overt statements to the contrary, Jones has given a long, detailed and graphic account of his conception of the opera in general and his projected production in particular. This is, indeed, an unusually explicit version of a producer’s talk-through.⁹⁸

This is also a strikingly exact description, down to the very words spoken, of the manner in which Jones presented the *Skin Deep* model show, and the way in which he presented himself at the event. While I did not ultimately include a great quantity of this sort of detailed ethnographic diary account in my thesis, these are the sort of observations from which I drew some of my material. Most often observations sourced from my original ethnographic diary have been interspersed with interviews, text-based analysis and commentary.

This leads to another, sometimes contentious topic regarding one method: the ethnographic interview. In her IRCAM study Born began as a very active participant observer, initially taking an introductory course at the centre, but also relying on ‘a substantial body of taped interviews’, including different groups within the organisation.⁹⁹ With those in whom she had a particular interest she conducted more interviews for what she describes as a ‘continuing

⁹⁶ Atkinson, p.134.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p.107.

⁹⁸ Ibid., pp.110-11.

⁹⁹ Born, *Rationalizing Culture*, p.8.

commentary on developments within IRCAM and on its history'.¹⁰⁰ We might judge these recorded events to be 'formal' interviews, in that they were planned and, to some degree, structured, but Born also refers to informal talks with informants that she might subsequently 'write up' as notes.¹⁰¹ Unlike Atkinson's *Everyday Arias*, Born's *Rationalizing Culture* is not written in the 'ethnographic present'. Born quotes her own field diary explicitly on few occasions, and these instances are far outnumbered by the accounts of interviews and direct speech.¹⁰² In *Everyday Arias* Atkinson takes a more cohesively diary-led approach, but there are also interviews conducted with opera singers on the matter of their voices. In the context of this emotive, subjective topic, and these accounts of voice-development which are essentially 'life histories', Atkinson makes it clear that his role is to 'examine some singers' autobiographical performances, which were displayed in the course of interviews I conducted with them'.¹⁰³ Atkinson is clear about his view of the limitations of the ethnographic interview, which he views as performative and useful primarily in conjunction with participant observation. However in his text book written with Martyn Hammersley, *Ethnography: Principles in practice*, an entire chapter is dedicated to 'Oral accounts and the role of interviewing',¹⁰⁴ and the student ethnographer is instructed not to 'shy away from the use of interview where these are viable',¹⁰⁵ but again advised to conduct such interviews alongside participant observation in order to gain a richly combined perspective.

In the most ethnographically based sections of my thesis I have reported on my observed experience of Opera North and the speech of my subjects, derived from both formally constructed situations and informal interactions. I have combined this ethnography with my own insights from broader research into the field, including historical and other contextual bases. As an aside, it is worth bearing in mind that discussions we might consider 'formal' in nature are normalised within a professionalised institution such as this, where people have 'meetings' in offices as a matter of course in their daily working lives, as compared with other, less business-like environments that have been subject to ethnographic study. On ethnographic interviews and their sometimes hidden context of lived experience, Atkinson and Hammersley use the example of Lewis Dexter, reflecting, in 1970, on his writing on United States Congress. Dexter mentioned his initial concern that he appeared to rely too heavily upon interviews in his elite field, but he later came to the realisation that his lived experience informed his information-

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p.8.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p.9.

¹⁰² In *Uncertain Vision*, however, Born's style has altered quite significantly. Into the main body of the ethnography is interjected a variety of extensive quotes from studied individuals, from interviews and from the author's field diary, all printed in an alternative font so as to make a marked distinction from the past tense accounts and analysis that form the main body of the text.

¹⁰³ Atkinson, p.161.

¹⁰⁴ Atkinson and Hammersley, p.97.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p.102.

gathering and analyses, which meant that his interviews came from a position of deep understanding and his analyses had enhanced credibility.

As I look back, interviews sometimes acquired meaning from the observations which I often made while waiting in congressional offices – observation of other visitors, secretarial staffs, and so forth. [...] Yet in the book we say little about all this; and in fact it is only now that I realize how much these other factors affected what I ‘heard’.¹⁰⁶

In elite, organised environments that are public-facing there are, of course, public interviews, statements, and the like, which are not given directly to the ethnographer, but of which the ethnographer can make use. In her IRCAM study, Born chose not to interview Boulez directly,¹⁰⁷ but his words are frequently cited, sourced from music media outlets and his own publications.¹⁰⁸ Cottrell notes the benefits of studying a literate culture whereby we might refer to ‘a variety of different media used for the dissemination of information’ to supplement our own interviews and observations.¹⁰⁹ Indeed in his study of classical musicians, Cottrell utilises press articles, television documentaries and books. ‘Such resources’, he reminds us, ‘not only provide information about what musicians themselves think and do, but also tell us something of the way in which their work is received and perceived within society at large.’¹¹⁰ Like Atkinson, Cottrell issues his own warning:

This kind of material must be handled with care; it is one thing to have a musician tell you directly what they believe they do (which itself may be quite different from what they actually do) and quite another thing to have information relayed, inevitably filtered and edited, by a third party.¹¹¹

I have aimed to view the ephemera and media-based material that I received, like many of the direct interviews I conducted, as performative, and engaged in the business of creating a specific impression upon its audience. Consequently I have not tried to highlight differences in form between social performances in speech and interview, and the outward communications in public talks, print, digital media and broadcasts which perform the role of the company and the role of opera, and which are received by audiences, potential future audiences, and stakeholders, as are the performances on stage. Information gathered from outward communications has been, as Cottrell outlines, filtered and performed, and this must of course be acknowledged. But this might not be the case to any greater degree than in a private interview with an elite manager or

¹⁰⁶ Lewis Dexter, *Elite and Specialized Interviewing* (Evanston, IL: NUP, 1970), p.15, quoted in Atkinson and Hammersley, p.102.

¹⁰⁷ Born, *Rationalizing Culture*, p.9.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.91-92.

¹⁰⁹ Cottrell, p.19.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp.19-20.

director, whose words may well be rehearsed and repeated for the occasion, just as much as if those words were being broadcast on the radio or reported in a blog or newspaper column.

2.6 Other over-arching sources

While some of the published ethnographies I have mentioned were of prime importance when considering my research design, there were other important texts that were not ethnographic in nature, but informative of the sphere in which my study was positioned. One key text was David Ranan's arts-policy analysis, *In Search of a Magic Flute: The public funding of opera – dilemmas and decision making*. Ranan uses six case studies to compare the way in which opera is publicly funded in the UK (through the Arts Council) and in Germany. The British case studies of the public funding of opera are the Royal Opera House, the now defunct Kent Opera, and Opera North. Ranan particularly concentrates on the decision-making process, from an economic point of view, that led to the establishment of Opera North (or English National Opera North, as it then was) in 1978. A complementary (and sometimes slightly contradictory) account can be found in Susie Gilbert's *Opera for Everybody: The story of English National Opera*. More thorough, with ethnographic detail and an insider's perspective on the northern company, is Kara McKechnie's *Opera North: Historical and dramaturgical perspectives on opera*. Together these three texts provide a very rounded picture of the foundation of the company from its parent, English National Opera, taking into account economic and political arguments, the role of individuals (not least Lord Harewood¹¹² but also Arts Council personnel, regional politicians and writers¹¹³) and the cultural *Zeitgeist* of a time in the mid to late 1970s where the economy was slumping, but an ENO Ring cycle toured to the north of England. The backstory to ENO, and its own formation and democratising ideals are also considered by McKechnie and Gilbert. Ranan offers the post-war history of Keynes's foundation of the Arts Council of Great Britain, and its ideology in the promotion and funding of opera for the masses; Ranan then investigates Arts Council policy with relation to opera (including Opera North specifically) in the following sixty years. My thesis does not focus explicitly on the formative years of Opera North, but rather the present day. Nevertheless it has become apparent from these texts, not least Ranan, that so many paradigms of access and education current in the company hail back to an earlier time; the ideological input of Keynes and the development in Arts Council policies under successive governments cannot be underestimated any more than the hard work of Lord Harewood and the consideration of the Opera North founders. I had begun field work at the company in 2008 before engaging with these texts fully, and was being drawn, by the company and my supervisors, to look at the production of new works, works

¹¹² George Lascelles, 7th Earl of Harewood.

¹¹³ For a thorough account, see McKechnie, *Opera North*, pp.23-30.

commissioned by the Education department, and productions which aimed to widen access to established works. Only with a thorough consideration of Ranan's *In Search of a Magic Flute* and later Gilbert's *Opera for Everybody* and ultimately McKechnie's *Opera North*, was I able to ascertain the reasons for this focus in the larger historical and political picture, and to map this history onto the observed imperatives of those working at Opera North in the present day.

From musicology, Alexandra Wilson's 'Killing Time: Contemporary representations of opera in British culture' offers a historical analysis of perceptions of opera in British culture, and charts the rise and fall in general popularity of the form over the last two-hundred years. Wilson reminds us that the charge of 'elitism' in the reception of opera that has pervaded the modern media (and which Opera North works so hard to counter, often by a strategic lack of direct acknowledgement) has not been a constant over the course of opera's history in Britain, and suggests that this perception of opera as 'high art' may be ripe to change again and to reclaim the public mantle of 'entertainment'. Wilson charts the history of opera's status from a social pursuit for the nobility in the early nineteenth century, to a serious cultural activity of musical interest to some members of the aspirational middle classes in the mid-nineteenth century, while still retaining the air of moral decadence and 'entertainment' status that came with the theatre, and associations of Italian frivolity. Indeed one keen demographic for mid-nineteenth-century opera in Britain was the working classes, and Wilson links this rise in popularity with the extracted arias heard in music halls and brass band arrangements, and with the touring companies bringing opera productions to the provinces. Paul Rodmell's *Opera in the British Isles: 1875-1918* charts a similar picture, focusing on operatic activity in Britain, including the provincial entertainment provided by such companies as Carl Rosa, Moody Manners, and (as shall be noted in my section on the history of the Ring cycle in Leeds) Ernst Denhof.¹¹⁴ Wilson documents opera's popular decline from around the start of the start of the twentieth century with the increasing dichotomy between popular and serious culture, the reclaiming of the form by the upper classes, and a political turn that brought to the fore a suspicious cultural xenophobia. The view of cultural 'elitism' is still propagated in various media. Indeed Wilson includes developments in the visual arts (the installation *Killing Time*, referred to in the title¹¹⁵), cinema, and television to give a rounded commentary on popular (and other) perceptions of opera in the UK. She includes reference to the current work of UK public opera companies (including sell-out productions, access and outreach projects, touring, broadcasts and the training of young singers) to site her argument in the current operatic and broader cultural milieu, and analyses the problem with the current fashion for participatory art forms for an art that is elite in production, whilst challenging charges of elitism in reception.

¹¹⁴ Paul Rodmell, *Opera in the British Isles: 1875-1918* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2013), pp.131-83.

¹¹⁵ Sam Taylor-Wood, *Killing Time*, 1994, video installation.

The article ‘Killing Time’ gives us what Opera North itself does not explicitly mention (and for strategic reasons): the negative perception of opera in popular culture, created, with historical basis, by popular and other cultural forms. One could view this perception as the basis for Opera North’s activities, which attempt to facilitate access to, and education around, opera, and which I analyse in this thesis. This view has not been made explicit in my thesis, since I have attempted to analyse Opera North largely on its own terms; on its own terms the company attempts to increase access to opera, without recourse to informing its audience that this is a battle being fought against the tide of the popular media or perceptions propagated elsewhere in the arts. But, while it is not the one I have chosen, this is one lens through which Opera North’s access agenda could alternatively be viewed.

My thesis concentrates on the role of the company and how it presents itself in relation to an access agenda within a variety of contexts. The work of Opera North as a company is, of course, so much broader than that which I have been able to represent here. Kara McKechnie’s *Opera North: Historical and dramaturgical perspectives on opera studies* goes much further toward capturing the extent of the company’s work over its lifetime thus far, the breadth of its activity, and the nuanced detail of performative and social action. McKechnie’s book is divided into three ‘perspectives’: a chronological account of Opera North productions from 1978 to 2013; a ‘backstage’ ethnographical perspective on the rehearsal process; and ‘the view from the auditorium’, an analysis of selected productions. The value of this text to my thesis cannot be overstated. Although not published until 2014, material and processes were shared with me throughout the researching of the book, in my supervision and informal meetings with McKechnie. As with parts of Atkinson’s ethnography, much of the ethnographic experience reported here is so similar to what I observed that it would be superfluous to re-document it myself; indeed in that I was inducted into dramaturgical thought and the sociological view of the theatre by McKechnie in her role as my supervisor, it is hardly surprising that her work feels to be so resonant with my own. Since we were researching the same company at the same time, including a focus at times on the same productions (notably the Ring operas) it is, in fact, surprising that more overlap did not occur in the respective write-ups. But the work of a company such as Opera North is so broad, and the interpretation of its meaning so shaped by the individual researcher that, as our foci diverged, it became apparent that, as researchers, we told distinct stories from similar sources. I am deeply indebted to McKechnie’s work, particularly her ‘Perspective 2’, which provides much of the rehearsal room social performance ethnography that I have not included here directly. Most specifically relevant to my own observations are the sections on rehearsals for the Ring project.¹¹⁶ In McKechnie’s third ‘Perspective’, her interpretative accounts of the first three Opera North Ring instalments (up to 2013) in

¹¹⁶ McKechnie, *Opera North*, pp.233-35, 265-67.

production could be read in conjunction with my own perspectives of the problems with, and drive for, increased access to *The Ring*.¹¹⁷ Malcolm Johnson's vibrant photographs of the productions referred to in McKechnie's book have also provided me with a visual reminder of my object of study: images of the musically and visually prominent orchestra on stage, and of the scenography in Leeds Town Hall that focussed so clearly on story-telling, display the access agenda of the Opera North *Ring* in action.¹¹⁸

From the field of literary reception theory I have referred to Hans Robert Jauss's *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. In this text the author develops the theory of the 'horizon of expectation', describing the pre-existing criteria by which readers judge texts at any given time.¹¹⁹ For a text to have a contemporary existence, the horizons shift as we move forward, and the expectations and meanings of a work change over time. In my chapter on the production and reception of Wagner's Ring cycle, I have used this model to illustrate how perceptions and expectations of *The Ring* have changed and how an opera company must respond to these changes in order to create a production that is bespoke for its time and place. Linked to Jauss's horizon theory is Jeffrey Kallberg's musicological 'generic contract of expectation' (from his work *Chopin at the Boundaries*) whereby the concept of genre is viewed through the lens of a contract drawn up notionally between audience and composer.¹²⁰ Audiences' expectations must then be met to a sufficient extent by the composer in order for the genre to remain intact. Kallberg's model is offered in the context of Chopin's generic boundaries; I have mapped this idea onto the generic contract of operetta and analysed how the contract was essentially broken in the Opera North commission *Skin Deep*. Although I have applied Jauss's theory to the Opera North Ring cycle, and Kallberg's to *Skin Deep*, there remains a common lineage of scholarship whereby we might use the various theories regarding audience expectation to assess judgements made regarding musical dramatic forms.¹²¹

It remains to mention the work of Bourdieu, its value and its limitations for the framework of my study. Both Atkinson and Born make use of Bourdieu, and the concepts of 'field', 'habitus' and 'cultural capital' in particular are important factors in underpinning their own observations and conclusions. Born also explores ideas that derive from Bourdieuan

¹¹⁷ Ibid., pp.333-42.

¹¹⁸ Johnson's photographs of the production can be found in McKechnie, *Opera North*, pp.234, 267, 339, 341-42, and, showing the orchestra onstage, pp.336-37.

¹¹⁹ Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. by Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

¹²⁰ Jeffrey Kallberg, *Chopin at the Boundaries: Sex, history, and musical genre* (Cambridge, MA: HUP, 1996).

¹²¹ Genre and the changing nature of expectation for opera has been addressed within the framework of historical musicology, for example see Rachel Cowgill, 'Mozart Productions and the Emergence of *Werktreue* at London's Italian Opera House, 1780-1830', in *Operatic Migrations*, ed. by Marvin and Thomas, pp.145- 86.

theory, but that are built within its gaps as well as upon its foundations, as she notes in her article ‘The Social and the Aesthetic’.¹²² Bourdieu’s concept of ‘habitus’, which he outlines in great detail in *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*, is the metaphorical space occupied by an individual, which in turn ‘creates’ the individual.¹²³ It encompasses the individual’s process of becoming himself, and disposes him to perspectives, actions and paradigms that create him and his place within a certain ‘field’ (a term Bourdieu uses to refer to an arena that may be social, generic or institutional, encompassing a network of relationships¹²⁴). Born, in her critique of Bourdieu, describes art works as produced ‘through the interaction between an artist’s habitus [...] and the field as a structured space of competing styles and genres, themselves resulting from the evolution of the field’.¹²⁵ In consideration of the obstacles to success inherent in the creation of *Skin Deep*, my overall conclusion refers to the habitus of the creators David Sawyer and Armando Iannucci at odds with the ‘field’ in which they were creating (be that opera, ‘operetta’, or the company Opera North).

In a discussion of a company’s attempts to increase access to high culture, reference must also be made to Bourdieu’s conception of ‘cultural capital’, also outlined in *Distinction*. Here Bourdieu expresses value which is given by the cultural authorisation of specific tastes and activities, and which works within a system of exchange in order to enhance social position.¹²⁶ Applied to the ideas discussed earlier in Wilson’s article, ‘Killing Time’, the historical upper class ‘ownership’ of opera as a form defines the notion of ‘cultural capital’ whereby access was reduced for those in possession of less cultural (and originally economic) capital. At times when the working classes were able to enjoy opera as entertainment, it was not through their increased cultural capital but effectively by culturally ‘cheapening’ the art form and focussing on opera as a functional (i.e. entertaining) theatrical form. In the case of the access agenda of Opera North, it is difficult to map Bourdieu’s theory onto a model that seems so far removed from the picture of class domination by the nineteenth-century, French bourgeoisie on which his position was founded. Indeed the disparities of status and cultural activity elucidated in Born’s study of avant-garde high culture in Paris are much better described with Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital than is the agenda of an opera company that was founded with public access to high

¹²² Born, ‘The Social and the Aesthetic’, p.177.

¹²³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*, trans. by Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 1984).

¹²⁴ The most extensive use of this term is in Bourdieu’s essay of 1983, ‘The Field of Cultural Production’ collected with other relevant essays in Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on art and literature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993).

¹²⁵ Born, ‘The Social and the Aesthetic’, p.177.

¹²⁶ In *Distinction*, Bourdieu aligns ‘cultural capital’ with ‘social trajectory’ (p.16) and continues to use the term extensively throughout the text. The term was initially used in an earlier article to analyse outcomes in the lives of Parisian school children. Pierre Bourdieu, ‘Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction’, in *Inequality: Classic readings in race, class, and gender*, ed. by D.B. Grusky and S. Szelenyi (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2006), pp.257-71 (p.257).

culture as a *raison d'être*. It is true that the opera world (or 'field' in Bourdieu's terms) maintains that there is more capital to be gained from the production and reception of some works, such as Wagner's Ring cycle, than others. This is evident in the repeated narrative of *The Ring* as milestone in the life of an opera company.¹²⁷ Yet Opera North worked essentially to gain this capital for the region (the north of England) and to distribute it widely, attempting to broaden the audience base and access to this work as far as possible. It may be stretching the metaphor to call this a 'Robin Hood' distribution of cultural capital, but it is certainly far removed from the conception of relative immobility based on class that Bourdieu outlines.¹²⁸

One reason that Bourdieu's model seems a less than adequate fit for my study is his neglect of history in the role of cultural production, which he subsumes into an account of the dynamics of the field in the ongoing present, as is outlined by Born in 'The Social and the Aesthetic'. In this critique Born notes the gaps in Bourdieu's analysis of institutions; her conjecture is that Bourdieu tackles organisation and ideology, but without focus on their 'historical effectivity in diffusing, consolidating or legitimizing certain [...] genres or discourses'.¹²⁹ In response to Born's call elsewhere for a 'relational musicology',¹³⁰ this 'historical effectivity' is to the fore of my specific concerns, as is evident particularly in my analysis of the history and politics of opera's access agenda, and how it is effected by Opera North today.

To return to Born's own ethnography, and resonating directly with my own work at Opera North, Born, again in 'The Social and the Aesthetic', sets out the reasons for her two institutional ethnographies of cultural production. Her descriptions of IRCAM and the BBC are, in this case, a perfect match for the subject of my own study, Opera North, and so, with my own subject in mind, I will quote her at length:

Specifically, both IRCAM [...] and the BBC [...] are national in their formation, international in their operations, and global in their ambitions. Both are exemplary institutions in their fields; both fields incorporate a set of rival institutions, and in both fields creative labour has largely been institutionalized. They [are] *symptomatic* institutions: sites in which are condensed the particular problematic to be examined [...]

¹²⁷ McKechnie describes 'a defining moment [...] or maybe a watershed'. McKechnie, *Opera North*, p.333. Susie Gilbert refers to contemporary comments on ENO's 1970s Ring: a 'com[ing] of age', and the company's 'corporate achievement' (pp. 255-57).

¹²⁸ Robin Hood is a figure in popular legend, who is said (in prominent versions of the legend, if not the earliest ballads) to have robbed from the rich to give to the poor. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu outlines how taste is an indicator of the social position of an individual from childhood, and uses the example of music: 'Nothing more clearly affirms one's "class", nothing more infallibly classifies, than tastes in music' (p.10).

¹²⁹ Born, 'The Social and the Aesthetic', p.180.

¹³⁰ Born, 'For a Relational Musicology'.

The driving motive of both studies, then, is emphatically historical: each responds to and problematizes a critical cultural historical moment in the respective cultural field. In addition, generally, because of their scale and scope and the heavy investment of resources that they demand, institutions intervene influentially in the history of the fields they inhabit, having often inertial effects on their reproduction, and yet also acting as the site of emergence, expression and magnification of crises or transformations within those fields.¹³¹

All this holds true for my study of Opera North. In this case ‘the particular problematic to be examined’ (to use Born’s terminology) is access to the work of the opera house for the public, including groups who have been marginalised historically, by dint of geography, social position, cultural background, or by messages formerly received about the nature of operatic culture itself. And while (as in Born’s work) there is a driving historical motive behind my study, there is equally a geographical one, for operatic culture in the north of England. As Opera North intervenes in and influences its field, this is important in terms of the history of the operatic field in the UK, but also the history of provincial high culture, as is made evident in Chapter 4 on Wagner’s Ring cycle. Inertial effects have occurred in conceptions and the reality of the reaches of possibility for a production designed primarily for a Victorian town hall in northern England, and I would argue that, in this respect, public expectations have been fundamentally altered.

¹³¹ Born, ‘The Social and the Aesthetic’, pp.189-90. Original italics.

3 Case Studies of New Commissions: *Skin Deep* and *Swanhunter*

3.1 Introduction, methodology and literature review

This chapter comprises ethnographic case studies of two new operas commissioned by Opera North, both of which premiered in 2009. These two contrasting new operas were created within quite different frameworks, each one with its own objectives and what might be termed ‘success criteria’. *Skin Deep* was a three-act ‘operetta’, written for Opera North’s Main Stage, and *Swanhunter* was a smaller, studio-based ‘family opera’ commission by the company’s Education and Projects departments.¹³² This chapter aims to investigate the focus of the company and the creators in the commissioning, writing and realisation of these works, and in communicating the works to their audiences. In exploring their creation and reception, I ask how the two works came to be situated within their respective frameworks, how their objectives and ‘success criteria’ were arrived at and to what extent they were fulfilled. In the case of *Swanhunter*, I also go on to discuss the changes in political and educational climate between the work’s premiere in 2009, and a subsequent Opera North production in 2015. I compare the effects of these changing contexts on the events surrounding the two *Swanhunter* productions, and analyse how the *Swanhunter* performances and programmes of related activities did the work of education, and fulfilled the label of ‘family opera’.

3.1.1 *Skin Deep*

The chapter deals with an ‘operetta’ and a ‘family opera’; the former genre has far greater coverage in literature than the latter. In *Operetta: A theatrical history*, Richard Traubner gives a particularly thorough historical, theatrical guide, which is as comprehensive as possible of the various permutations of the genre, while resisting a definition for ‘operetta’ itself.¹³³ Traubner describes the range of operetta, its basis in the function of entertainment, the other names by which it might go, and different national variants. This is an important context to my analysis of *Skin Deep*, not least when attempting to piece together the lineage of ‘lightness’ and of ‘satire’ which were mentioned by the composer David Sawer and librettist Armando Iannucci. Traubner’s history of Viennese, American, British (Savoy) and other traditions of operetta illuminates sometimes opaque references by *Skin Deep* creators, and provides an insight into some of the intentions of Sawer, Iannucci and stage director Richard Jones.

¹³² The Projects department was often colloquially referred to at Opera North as ‘Special Projects’ to distinguish its activities from other (non-artistic) projects going on at the company, such as the capital rebuild of the theatre.

¹³³ Richard Traubner, *Operetta: A theatrical history* (NY: Routledge, 2003).

In terms of ethnography, I observed rehearsals and performances of *Skin Deep*, conducted audience questionnaires, and a key interview with Conductor and Opera North Music Director Richard Farnes. I have also relied on my own critical reception of the production, and occasionally in this chapter I offer information that is derived from a phenomenological account of my own experience. I also attended various public events with audience members posing questions to creators, including an interview arranged by the University of Leeds/Opera North partnership DARE, where students from the University were able to question composer David Sawer. My very participation here was part of an access agenda, whereby the DARE partnership is in existence and University of Leeds students were, on this occasion granted special educational access to the opera company and to the composer. For this I am very grateful as during the opening months of my studentship, when this case study took place, I did not feel sufficiently embedded within the life of Opera North to request such meetings for myself. The involvement of DARE helped me forge a grounded beginning with the company, but within the somewhat safer and more familiar frame of the University. From this beginning I gained a footing and was able to request further access during the course of my study. I also relied on broadcasts and press interviews as a primary source of first-hand information, while recognising that the information gained from these media is performed and filtered. While I was granted access to the production in rehearsal, this access was often uncomfortable because *Skin Deep* was a difficult production for the company; often rehearsals did not seem to be going well, and ultimately critics and audiences found the work wanting in production. I witnessed tempers and tears in the rehearsal room. Indeed this is a very unusual state of affairs in opera, and particularly at Opera North, where a general awareness prevails that, for the singers, a calm atmosphere is essential for optimum vocal production. Additionally, this level of tension was unlike any other I witnessed conducting rehearsal observations at Opera North. Chorus and other company members confided in me that they did not like the work, or feel that it was a good piece. Some of the reasons for this will be explored later. Consequently many within the company appeared uncomfortable in the presence of an onlooker and outsider, and did not revel in the prospect of further discussions about their experience of the piece as the issues with the work and the production became gradually and increasingly apparent during the rehearsal period. It is notable that, when discussing *Skin Deep*, conversational diversions were often made to *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, the highly successful Dove and Middleton commission of 2007. This occurred even in the programme to *Skin Deep*, as I will highlight later.¹³⁴

I had privileged access to unpublished scores for *Skin Deep* and have carried out some musical analyses to explore dramaturgical issues. The frame of ‘musical dramaturgy’ as I have

¹³⁴ Richard Mantle, ‘Welcome’, *Skin Deep: An operetta*, programme brochure, ed. by Henrietta Bredin (Leeds: ON, 2009), p.3.

termed it, has become the primary lens, alongside that of Kallberg's 'generic contract' of expectation,¹³⁵ through which this work is viewed, as I will explain in some detail. Since the conceptual framework of dramaturgy can be applied to the social world as well as the stage, this approach has the potential to illuminate ethnographic observations, which through the course of this chapter become intertwined with observations on musical and theatrical construction.

There is a growing basis in scholarship for the dramaturgical approach; more broadly there has been a recent impetus to consider opera not only from an interdisciplinary perspective, but to study it as a living, working form, to ask how it works in creation and in reception and within a wider framework as part of the social world. With this in mind, dramaturgical perspectives, which have far longer been a concern in the study of theatre more generally, have been brought explicitly to the study of opera by such scholars as Kara McKechnie, Robert Cannon, and Laurel E. Zeiss.¹³⁶ Dramaturgical perspectives come in two guises: the shape of dramatic composition and realisation (first defined by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in the eighteenth century¹³⁷); and the adaptation of the term into a sociological context by Erving Goffman in 1959, to analyse everyday social interaction as performance.¹³⁸ Both are relevant to opera, in looking at: a) the construction of the work; and b) the activity of the opera company and its stakeholders (including creators, performers and audience) around the production.

Robert Cannon's *Opera* (in the Cambridge Introduction to Music series) is a very thorough guide which encompasses history and issues in opera, crucially in its construction and performance. Of great relevance to my study of *Skin Deep* is his chapter, 'The Dramaturgy of Opera', in which he outlines the history of the dramaturgy of opera in terms of the libretto, or as he demarcates it, in terms of 'words and structures'. Cannon tells us that, in an operatic context, 'Dramaturgy is [...] what allows narrative, action, character and [...] music itself to work; so that an understanding of it is not only vital for the complications of modern operas, but is a main key to the way in which all operas work as dramas.'¹³⁹ He goes on to elucidate structures and devices in various subgenres and works, outlining the developments in libretti that took place after Wagner, in terms of chronology, narrative, plot, and the disruption of all these elements.

In a chapter with the same title, within the *Cambridge Companion to Opera Studies*, Laurel E. Zeiss questions the dramaturgical workings of opera when contemplated as a synergy of multiple art forms, and examines its construction from 'dramatic and literary traditions with

¹³⁵ Kallberg, p.5.

¹³⁶ McKechnie, *Opera North*; Robert Cannon, *Opera* (Cambridge: CUP, 2012); Laurel E. Zeiss, 'The Dramaturgy of Opera', in *The Cambridge Companion to Opera Studies*, ed. by Nicholas Till (Cambridge: CUP, 2012), pp.179-201.

¹³⁷ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (Dinslaken: Athene Media, 2014).

¹³⁸ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin, 1990).

¹³⁹ Cannon, p.314.

vocal and instrumental music and the visual and plastic arts'.¹⁴⁰ She asks, 'In an artwork that brings together multiple and possibly competing expressive "systems", what creates structure, and makes an opera cohere?'¹⁴¹

For one answer, we can look back to Joseph Kerman's seminal text of 1956, *Opera as Drama*, where the author asserts that it is music that is 'the essential artistic medium in opera, the medium that bears the responsibility for articulating drama'.¹⁴² In his criticism of composers whose work he finds dramatically lacking, Kerman proffers the opinion, that only 'the best operas are dramatic', and that much operatic production has been, in his critical, musical terms, 'resolutely undramatic'.¹⁴³ Operatic dramaturgy, as defined by Cannon, problematised by Zeiss and heralded by Kerman is a key lens through which I will view David Sawer's 2009 commission for Opera North, *Skin Deep*. Related to the dramaturgical framework, I have also included reference to the work of musicologist Jeffrey Kallberg on generic expectation (noted in Chapter 2) and the contract with audience that arose with the creators' use of the generic label 'operetta' for *Skin Deep*.¹⁴⁴ These two conceptual frameworks – that of dramaturgy and that of genre – are closely linked in this case, in that there is a certain dramaturgical model implied by the generic label, and 'operetta' thus functions to create a certain dramaturgical expectation.

3.1.2 *Swanhunter*

Swanhunter was a commission by Opera North's Education and Projects departments. This is an example of an emerging area of work, which was here termed 'family opera'. Scholarship on this kind of development is sparse; I have thus relied heavily on ethnographic approaches, but also on journalism. Critical reviews reveal the often confused or ill-informed expectations of opera critics when faced with the dilemma of a 'new' generic label, 'family opera'. Alfred Hickling was, in his *Guardian* review, 'curious' as to why successful opera creators would down-scale their ambitions to a child-friendly work. In the *Telegraph* Rupert Christiansen compared *Swanhunter* unfavourably to the idea of *High School Musical* (which was not reviewed, or even seen here by the author), deciding, on behalf of the children he had not observed or surveyed, that the latter show would probably be more fun.¹⁴⁵ In addition to various press reviews, I have sourced a particular preview in the form of an article by the composer, Jonathan Dove – 'How to Write Family-Friendly Opera' – in which Dove outlines his own

¹⁴⁰ Zeiss, p.179.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p.214

¹⁴³ Ibid. p.204.

¹⁴⁴ Kallberg, pp.5-10.

¹⁴⁵ Alfred Hickling, 'Swanhunter', *Guardian*, 16 November 2009, <<http://www.theguardian.com/music/2009/nov/16/swanhunter-review>> [accessed 30 December 2015] (para. 1 of 5); Rupert Christiansen, 'Swanhunter, Leeds/Rumpelstiltskin, Birmingham', *Telegraph*, 16 November 2009, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/journalists/rupert-christiansen/6580662/Swanhunter-LeedsRumpelstiltskin-Birmingham.html>> [accessed 30 December 2015] (para. 6 of 9).

musical history and experience with children. This account, which includes self-criticism and his hopes for this work in production, can be read alongside the oral accounts of the process of commission and creation given to me by the composer, librettist and Education staff at Opera North.¹⁴⁶

As well as ethnographic observations of rehearsals, performances and workshops, I conducted three key interviews: with Rebecca Walsh, Head of Education at Opera North, on 26 October 2009; with composer Jonathan Dove and librettist Alastair Middleton, together at a branch of Café Nero in Leeds town centre on 14 November 2009; and subsequently with Dominic Gray, Projects Director at Opera North, on 9 June 2010. I also interviewed and talked with other Education staff, but these interactions contributed less significantly to my growing insight into the commissioning process and working paradigms; consequently they have not been mentioned explicitly. While there is little scholarship available on the purpose and construction of children's opera, there is a keen relationship between *Swanhunter*, the object of this case study, and policy, in that the activities of Opera North's Education department are indelibly linked to government priorities (via Arts Council priorities). The course of this PhD study has coincided with a financial crisis and the subsequent unfolding of a climate of 'austerity' in the UK, as well as three successive governments of various political hues.¹⁴⁷ This spectrum of political experience is a potentially rich source of investigation, and there is capacity for further research in this area. However, in mentioning the political currents directing the work of Opera North Education very recently, connections emerge as to the beginnings of Opera North (a company born of an access agenda) and to the paradigms of democracy that run through it, which are relevant now as they were then.

The political background to this chapter is set by David Ranan's *In Search of a Magic Flute*, already mentioned in the overarching literature review (Chapter 2), supplemented by a key original source, Keynes's radio broadcast speech upon forming the Arts Council, his 'BBC address'.¹⁴⁸ Background on the political motivations of Keynes and the context in which his ideas developed is explored by Anna Rosser Upchurch in her article 'Keynes's Legacy: An intellectual's influence reflected in arts policy', in which she concludes that cultural policies such as Keynes's 'reveal a society's longer traditions of political philosophy and economic

¹⁴⁶ Jonathan Dove, 'How to Write Family-Friendly Opera', *Guardian*, 12 November 2009, <<http://www.theguardian.com/music/2009/nov/12/family-friendly-opera>> [accessed 30 December 2015].

¹⁴⁷ Upon beginning my course of study, in 2008, a Labour Government was in office in the UK; 2010 saw the appointment of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition, and in 2015 the Conservative party alone were elected.

¹⁴⁸ Keynes, p.369.

concerns'.¹⁴⁹ This chapter projects those long-held concerns forward in time, from Keynes, into the issues and politics of opera production today.

In order to situate my account of *Swanhunter* in its historical and contemporary political context I have consulted political documents that reveal the changing priorities of government in funding arts and culture. Abigail Gilmore's *Raising Our Quality of Life: The importance of investment in arts and culture*, while being biased toward the ideals of the Labour government of 1997-2010, and against those of the subsequent Coalition, provides an analytical account of the instrumentalism that was embedded in cultural policy by New Labour and continued (excessively and 'unguarded' according to Gilmore¹⁵⁰) by the Conservative-led Coalition that began its terms in 2010, with a move, generally, to reduce state funding in the arts. The instrumentalist model sees a demand for social benefits in return for 'investment', which had previously been considered rather more simply as 'subsidy'.¹⁵¹ In the conclusion to this thesis I will return to Gilmore's view of New Labour's state-funded cultural instrumentalism in comparison with the retraction in state responsibility by the Coalition that followed. I reflect upon these as political moments in time, which nevertheless leave a legacy of policy that is, to an extent, ongoing, but where the focus of priority is wont to change. To gauge the focus of governments on these matters I have also consulted, from the New Labour era, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's 2008 McMaster report and the more current documents, the Arts Council's *Great Art and Culture for Everyone*, a ten-year strategic framework (2010-20, revised in 2013) and the consequent evidence review of 2014, *The Value of Arts and Culture to People and Society*. The 2010/13 strategy includes, in particular, two key goals that chime with the agenda of access and education: Goal 2, 'Everyone has the opportunity to experience and to be inspired by the arts, museums and libraries'; and Goal 5, 'Every child and young person has the opportunity to experience the richness of the arts, museums and libraries.'¹⁵² However, without solid or specific actions or evidence, *Great Art and Culture for Everyone* remains largely an ideological statement of intent.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ Upchurch, p.78.

¹⁵⁰ Abigail Gilmore, *Raising Our Quality of Life: The importance of investment in arts and culture* (London: Centre for Labour and Social Studies, 2014), p.4.

¹⁵¹ Ranan asserted that 'in Britain, the Labour government, which came to power in 1997, is combining the demand for accountability with the notion that culture should serve wider government objectives' (p.15). The educational impetus is clear, but, according to Gilmore (p.4), these 'wider policy goals' also included 'regeneration, economic development, social inclusion and health'.

¹⁵² ACE, *Great Art and Culture for Everyone: 10-year strategic framework 2010-2020*, 2nd edn (Manchester: ACE, 2013), p.39.

¹⁵³ ACE only vaguely outlines actions it will take, and evidence it will gather to support progress and success. *Ibid.*, pp.47-48, 59-60.

From the vantage point of my study, it is interesting to note that the 2014 review points to substantial ‘evidence gaps’,¹⁵⁴ acknowledging the Arts Council’s lack of qualitative data gathering in ‘the wider societal value of arts and cultural activity’;¹⁵⁵ most relevantly, ‘children’s arts participation and engagement’ is under-evidenced.¹⁵⁶ My study, broadly speaking, is placed within the evidence and methodological gaps that the Arts Council itself describes, with regards to the intrinsically cultural (rather than economic) value of culture, its experiential value for those upon whom the access agenda is most focussed, or as Gilmore describes it, ‘the importance of arts to the quality of everyday life’.¹⁵⁷

3.2 Background

3.2.1 The company

In the process of ethnographic observations and interviews at Opera North, it became apparent that Opera North has at its centre a public access agenda as well as key foci on education and the creation of new work that are evident throughout the entire span of company activity. The politics behind these foci are seldom made explicit, although Projects Director Dominic Gray talked to me about the effect of Prime Minister Tony Blair’s drive for education in the late 1990s, as mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis, and as will be explored towards the end of this chapter.¹⁵⁸ Access, education and innovation are as threads woven into the fibre of the company, through its history, and through the working consciousness and practice of those within it; threads that are so integral that they cannot be unpicked or viewed separately from any of the work that the company does. It seems that this point cannot be overstated: the company was formed from the impetus of an access strategy, and it functions with access as a paradigm at its centre. Opera North, or English National Opera North as it was, was originally a company subcontracted to ENO, as the touring activities of that company became strained, almost to breaking point, and the demand for an opera company to be based in the north was increasingly vocal. In her scholarly biography of the company, Kara McKechnie traces the birth of ENO, previously known as Sadler’s Wells (the ‘mother company’ of Opera North) in the early twentieth century as a part of the temperance movement, improving social and cultural experience by providing ‘civilising’ and ‘purified’ entertainment as an alternative to liquor and social degradation. Still performing today exclusively in English, ENO has carried the mantle of

¹⁵⁴ ACE, *The Value of Arts and Culture to People and Society* (Manchester: ACE, 2014), pp.38-44.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.39.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.42.

¹⁵⁷ Gilmore, p.5.

¹⁵⁸ Gray, 9 June 2010. Also published in Jennifer Daniel, ‘*Swanhunter: communicating the Kalevala and constructing the “Idea of North” for a young audience*’, *Musiikki*, 2 (2010), 22-40 (pp.26-27). Others have been critical of the Blair/Brown government’s ‘instrumentalism’ or ‘expectations of ensuring quantifiable “returns on investment”’ as described by Gilmore, p.4.

making accessible opera for a wide audience. From this parent company, English National Opera North was born, intended to relieve ENO of touring strain and to fill ‘a void [...] for operatic production across the North of England’.¹⁵⁹ Illustrating this attitude of serving and developing its specific audience, in the Opening Season Brochure for ENON, founder and Musical Director David Lloyd-Jones outlined his priorities for his audience:

Think of what you are giving your audience and think of what you should be giving them. The company should be run to suit its audiences, which is not the same thing as giving them what they want.¹⁶⁰

A company run for its audience (including its occasional audience, and even its potential audience) is concerned with accessibility. A regard that this agenda should consider the cultural development of audiences rather than an immediate fulfilment of popular demand, is indeed an educational imperative.

Lloyd-Jones here echoes the parental tone, and the sense of guiding and developing audiences and their tastes found in the words of John Maynard Keynes, thirty-three years earlier at the close of World War II in his ‘BBC address’.¹⁶¹ I will go on to outline how the paradigms set by Keynes in this broadcast on the formation of the Arts Council are fundamental to understanding the set-up, the priorities and the everyday workings of Opera North. Along with the additional influence of later governments (particularly that of Blair and Brown’s New Labour) this cultural and political lineage is important in forming an understanding of the creative framework in which new work is commissioned and made by the company, and in making informed judgements about this new work. In examining the ‘BBC address’, and additionally David Ranan’s analysis of Arts Council objectives for the funding of opera, and uncovering Opera North’s own history, via ethnography and literary sources, the origins of the company’s access paradigms come to light. This chapter, which focuses on two new Opera North commissions, is underpinned by Keynes’s post-war aims and the original objectives of the Arts Council for opera, and this is read in conjunction with Opera North’s own stated objectives. My intention is to situate the commissioning and creation of new works in a historical and political context, before engaging with perceptions of these new works and emerging criteria for and concepts of ‘success’ and ‘failure’. Such contextualisation is an

¹⁵⁹ McKechnie, *Opera North*, p.16. For fuller accounts of the formation of Opera North from the touring activities of English National Opera, see pp.15-41, and Gilbert, pp.310-12.

¹⁶⁰ David Lloyd-Jones, *ENON, The Opening Season Brochure*, quoted in McKechnie, p.31.

¹⁶¹ ‘In so far as we instruct, it is a new game we are teaching you to play –and to watch. [...] I am told that today when a good symphony orchestra concert is broadcast as many as five million people may listen to it. Their ears become trained. With what anticipation many of them look forward if a chance comes their way to hear a living orchestra and to experience the enhanced excitement and concentration of attention and emotion’ (Keynes, p.369).

important starting point, for the following reasons. Firstly, the often contentious issue of the heavy public funding of opera means that perceptions of success and failure are raised in debate in relation to the public purse.¹⁶² It then follows that we should attempt an informed understanding of the background in history and politics to such perceptions and judgements. Secondly, opera is seldom expected or intended to run into profit. While a public company might aim ultimately to break even, there is certainly no onus to do so per production. Projects Director Dominic Gray made this clear to me, saying in an interview, ‘The [...] thing of course about opera, whether it’s on the Main Stage or in a studio, is that the more performances you do, the more money you lose. You can’t actually get [it] back.’¹⁶³

In classical music and opera, new works generally attract smaller audiences, and so a new opera commission is usually expected to incur a significant expense. In contrast, more mainstream or popular works, such as musicals (for example Opera North’s 2012 production of *Carousel*, revived in 2015) or ever-popular operatic standards by composers such as Puccini, are expected to generate greater returns at the box office. In departments that could be seen (arguably) as peripheral, the loss-making model might apply even more pointedly. The work of Opera North’s Education department, for example, can be clearly understood as a public service, and an investment in the cultural development of children and other vulnerable groups, and is run as such, with ring-fenced funding.¹⁶⁴ In these contexts, there are no success criteria for opera that are based on profit (although there can certainly be financial ‘failure’ for a company more broadly¹⁶⁵). Certain specific initiatives can be judged ‘successful’ based on audience numbers, such as the drive to encourage first-timers with certain productions,¹⁶⁶ but if broader targets are set, then they are not publicly shared. So where a decisive judgement of success for new works may not lie in something quantitative, tangible or measurable, we must look at the context in which these works are created, and assess how well they may fit into the lineage developing out of historical aims. This, in combination with critical voices and the various success criteria that the company sets itself, gives us a framework by which we might

¹⁶² One *Guardian* review of *Skin Deep* contextualised the author’s disappointment thus: ‘Given in excessive costs, risks and complexities, opera particularly disappoints when it doesn’t deliver.’ Fiona Maddocks, ‘The Doktor Will See You Now, Sucker’, *Guardian*, 25 January 2009, <<http://www.theguardian.com/music/2009/jan/25/opera-review>> [accessed 14 February 2016] (para. 1 of 15).

¹⁶³ Gray, 9 June 2010.

¹⁶⁴ In the financial year ending March 2015, 6% of company expenditure was spent on the work of the Education and Projects departments (excluding the ‘In Harmony’ project, which is separately budgeted and funded); these departments made up just 1.75% of income. ON, *Review 2015*, p.14.

¹⁶⁵ ENO, for example has been put into ‘special measures’ by ACE for its heavy losses, and been penalised with reduced funding. Will Gompertz, ‘ENO Prepares For Another Six Months of Turmoil’, *BBC News*, 10 December 2015, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-35061080>> [accessed 4 January 2015].

¹⁶⁶ In 2014, 51% of the *La Bohème* audience were new Opera North attenders, as were 48% of the audience for *La Traviata* in 2015. ON, *Review 2014* (Leeds: ON, 2014), p.7; ON, *Review 2015*, p.7.

come to understand the nature of judgements made regarding a ‘successful’ (or less than ‘successful’) new work in production. The context for the creation of new works is, of course, a complex matter with various strands. It is, in part, a question relating to music and theatre, and it is a political question; I have outlined my approaches and the relevant literature for the study of these two elements. It is also a question about Opera North, its workers and its audiences, for the study of which I have employed ethnographic approaches.

3.2.2 The importance of development and of new work

With the post-war creation of the Arts Council of Great Britain, Keynes aimed to ‘stimulate, comfort and support’ the artistic life of the country via public subsidy;¹⁶⁷ to enhance the cultural position of London and to ‘build up provincial centres’.¹⁶⁸ Keynes announced, in 1945, what we might describe in today’s political terms as the ultimate public access agenda. The civic ideal for the arts that led, in 1978, to the inception of Opera North, can indeed be traced back to Keynes’s insistence on developing cultural and artistic life in the regions.¹⁶⁹ A crucial element of his ideology was the challenge of the arts to cultural inertia, and the importance of the new. Keynes praised the artist who ‘leads the rest of us to new pastures and teaches us to love and enjoy what we often begin by rejecting’.¹⁷⁰ He expressed hope for artistic innovation:

New work will spring up more abundantly in unexpected quarters and in unforeseen shapes when there is a universal opportunity for contact with traditional and contemporary arts in their noblest forms.¹⁷¹

David Ranan’s opera policy analysis *In Search of a Magic Flute* draws attention to the Arts Council objective of ‘experimentation and innovation’,¹⁷² which was always connected to ideals of public access and to educational aims for opera. Ranan argues that the connections were made explicit in the 1978 Arts Council report,¹⁷³ and that the importance of these connections was then highlighted again in the 1990 ACGB report:

It remains one of our priorities to help bring the work of living composers to audiences, and to develop an understanding of the music of today. The education officers now working with almost every major opera company and orchestra are key people who, as

¹⁶⁷ Keynes, p.368.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.370.

¹⁶⁹ More specific factors in the development of Opera North in Leeds include the work and enthusiasm of Lord Harewood, and other key individuals such as Richard Phillips of the Yorkshire Arts Association; further accounts are given by Gilbert, and McKechnie (in *Opera North*). Additionally the manoeuvrings of local government are documented by Ranan.

¹⁷⁰ Keynes, p.368.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.369.

¹⁷² Ranan, p.87.

¹⁷³ ACGB, *Thirty-third Annual Report 1977-78*, p.24, quoted in Ranan, p.86.

well as encouraging an interest in the new, will make the work of these companies more accessible.¹⁷⁴

It is also arguable that the Arts Council objective of ‘the developing and nurturing of artists’¹⁷⁵ might include creators and composers, and thus be another facet of the development of new works.

The DCMS 2008 McMaster report,¹⁷⁶ described by Upchurch as ‘Keynes recycled’,¹⁷⁷ was a review on ‘how public subsidy can best support excellence in the arts’.¹⁷⁸ It focused unequivocally on a model of excellence characterised by innovation and risk-taking, on increasing the reach and quality of audience’s engagement with the arts, and on a manageable system of monitoring whereby the success of these aims could be measured and increased.¹⁷⁹ The report, which was supported ‘wholeheartedly’ by the then Culture Secretary James Purnell,¹⁸⁰ was published just a year prior to the premiere of *Skin Deep*, and still within the same political term of office as the commissioning of *Swanhunter*. It is evident that the political climate and the cultural priorities of government facilitated the activities of Opera North in the commissioning of these two works and the aims that were integral to the construction of each.

The mission statement of Opera North, as publicised by Music Director Richard Farnes and others, is to ‘develop the artists, art form and audience’.¹⁸¹ It is no surprise, therefore, that the aim of Opera North in commissioning new works is not one of ‘arts for arts’ sake’, but that an agenda of development is always present in some form, be it educational development of audience members (young or old), a development of public access by bringing opera to new audiences, and/or development of the art form itself.

The historical lineage of the Arts Council and its priorities is the very ingrained reality that has been inherited by today’s established public arts companies and the arts professionals working within them. But there is an important caveat to this reality, which is that the history of Arts Council priorities for the arts, for opera and for the creation of new work is also contentious. Keynes was a product of his own background, and has been criticised for a set of historically Liberal assumptions inherited from the ‘intellectual aristocracy’ (a set of middle-

¹⁷⁴ ACGB, *Forty-fifth Annual Report 1989-90* (London: ACGB, 1990), p.18, quoted in Ranan, p.86.

¹⁷⁵ Ranan, p.87.

¹⁷⁶ Brian McMaster, *Supporting Excellence in the Arts: From measurement to judgement* (London: DCMS, 2008).

¹⁷⁷ Upchurch, p.78.

¹⁷⁸ McMaster, p.5.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.10.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p.4.

¹⁸¹ Farnes, 10 June 2010. Also see McKechnie, *Opera North*, p.154.

class, educated reformers of the nineteenth century as defined by historian Noel Annan¹⁸²) whose followers he envisaged taking the reins in the national administration of the arts. Keynes has also been criticised for funding preferences for what Upchurch describes as ‘established standards of high culture’ with great focus on the classical arts such as opera and ballet.¹⁸³ Additionally, despite his rhetoric, Keynes’s funding concerns were centred, during his lifetime, on London, and on Covent Garden in particular.¹⁸⁴ These criticisms notwithstanding, the inherited model of public funding has been directed toward established institutions of ‘high culture’, and Opera North owes its existence since 1978 to this earlier model. If the Arts Council funds the institution, rather than the art form, it falls to such an institution to broaden the definition of what sort of form the art it produces might take. Consequently Opera North as a company takes the mantle of artistic development into new realms, sometimes quite distantly related to opera, and becomes a mediator of public arts in a much broader sense. This work of programming opera, but also programming very broadly with arts ‘around’ opera is the work of the Projects department, which was a key commissioner (along with Opera North’s Education department) of the family opera, *Swanhunter*. The functions of these departments in creating new work will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter. *Skin Deep*, the first new work to be discussed, was conversely a commission for the Opera North Main Stage (and tour) for which the most visibly, fundamentally and consistently operatic work of the company is produced.

3.3 *Skin Deep*

3.3.1 Background and introduction

Skin Deep is an ‘operetta’ by David Sawer with libretto by Armando Iannucci, and was a co-commission by Opera North, Bregenz Festspiele, Royal Danish Opera and Komische Oper Berlin. It was premiered by Opera North in Leeds Grand Theatre on 16 January 2009 and toured initially to London, Newcastle, Glasgow and Salford Quays, and later to the Bregenz festival, Austria and to Copenhagen.¹⁸⁵ The story centres around the clinic of the nefarious cosmetic surgeon, Dr Needlemeier, and plays on the value that society places on looks, and our obsessive need to ‘perfect’ our outward appearance. The plot is humorously contrived with the stock device of mistaken identities (via face-swapping) and a magic potion of eternal youth.

¹⁸² See Noel Annan, ‘The Intellectual Aristocracy’, in *Studies in Social History* (London: Longmans Green, 1955), pp.241-87.

¹⁸³ Upchurch, p.78.

¹⁸⁴ Keynes’s negotiations around the Arts Council’s involvement in the Covent Garden site and its programming are documented in Robert Hutchinson, *The Politics of the Arts Council: The making of the English opera class* (London: Sinclair Browne, 1982), pp.63-66.

¹⁸⁵ Royal Academy of Music, ‘David Sawer’, *Royal Academy of Music staff finder* [n.d.] <<http://www.ram.ac.uk/about-us/staff/david-sawer>> [accessed 18 February 2015] (para. 6 of 7).

Ultimately the work champions the triumph of love and acceptance over obsessional concepts of physical beauty.

Skin Deep was a commission that sought to fulfil several ideals. In terms of Opera North's mission statement, for the work of the company 'to develop the artists, art form and audience' (as expressed by Richard Farnes) *Skin Deep* was an attempt to develop the form of 'operetta', as I will go on to discuss.¹⁸⁶ In marketing terms there was a definite drive for the work to appeal to an audience new to opera. So within the framework set out by Keynes, *Skin Deep* could be seen as an example and a product of the access agenda, as an explicit effort to bring new audiences to the public opera house, and to innovative, new work.

The production of opera is socially complex because of the number and variety of collaborative agents.¹⁸⁷ The opera company acts to homogenise the creative (and political) visions of various creative and administrative parties, and to devise and deliver outward communications that are well-formed and cohesive, and that build expectations that will be fulfilled by the production. The individual agency of creators is assimilated within a corporate agenda, but not exhaustively so. It is important to note how the artistic work of *Skin Deep*, and its underlying political drivers and objectives were rationalised in their presentation to audience by Opera North, but also to elucidate some of those individual agendas that were (arguably) not effectively co-opted by the machine of opera production and marketing. We might thus assess how *Skin Deep* was considered by its creators, how it was consequently constructed and communicated and ultimately how it was received. Such individual agendas included that of the composer David Sawer and of stage director Richard Jones; Jones played a crucial role in the inception of this piece, pitching it to Opera North alongside Sawer, and was more active at the outset than 'celebrity' librettist Armando Iannucci, who had no previous experience in opera, and was brought into the project once the idea for a piece about plastic surgery was already conceived. I will explore the implications of this later in the chapter. In the case of *Skin Deep*, visions of various stakeholders competed for prominence, creating a tapestry of aspirations and directions for the piece. From this backdrop, aims and objectives for the work in production were consolidated, communicated to the potential audience, and broadcast into the public realm. The piece would then be judged by audiences and critics against these effective statements of intent, as will be explained later in the chapter.

¹⁸⁶ In one event organised for University of Leeds postgraduate students, Sawer spoke about transforming what was initially number opera into a through-composed form in the second half. Premier House, Leeds, 14 January 2009, from dictaphone.

¹⁸⁷ Cowgill mentions the 'collaboration between [...] composer and performer(s), but also librettist, director, scenographer, choreographer, costume-designer, and so-on'. She adds that 'the high stakes involved in staging opera also require the factoring in of commercial, institutional, and political considerations' (*Operatic Migrations*, p.145).

Selecting and communicating a message that appears homogenous is a difficult task when applied to a newly commissioned work, since there are more creative agents involved from the outset than with a work that is pre-existing. Similarly, for new work, initial audience expectations are more of a 'blank canvas', and so the process of creating and managing these expectations is less predictable, and the marketing work of the company is perhaps more critical to this effect.

It is pertinent, here, to return to the framework of the dramaturgy of the theatre in terms of the sociological 'performance' of self, as Paul Atkinson termed it.¹⁸⁸ Through ethnographic method I have observed various social performances around the creation and production of *Skin Deep*. I have noted the variation in these performances between stakeholders, and the elements of cohesion and incongruence between what is socially performed, and perceptions of the work in production. Within this frame of sociological dramaturgy it is possible, for example, to elucidate how composer David Sawer outwardly 'performed' his role as a composer of 'operetta' in various forums, giving the impression of lightness and fun, with such claims as 'I don't do heavy',¹⁸⁹ and being 'a theatre person who writes music'.¹⁹⁰ In a talk organised by DARE for postgraduate students at Opera North's Premier House on 14 January 2009, Sawer referred (slightly diffusely) to the work of his contemporary, Harrison Birtwistle, making the comparison thus: 'It's just my sense of humour really. I mean there's composers who don't have a sense of humour who [*Skin Deep*] just wouldn't work with. And equally, you know, I wouldn't be able to write *The Minotaur*'.¹⁹¹ Here is Sawer's constructed identity as a composer of light opera. Omissions are also of interest, as he consistently avoided mention of the avant-garde influence on his work, which is clearly audible, as I will go to discuss.

The 'lightness' of *Skin Deep* and its status as an 'operetta' were part of a crucial agenda in the marketing of the production. With this 'operetta' programmed within a season of lighter works by Opera North, a message was communicated around the accessibility of the company and the accessibility of new opera and new commissions by Opera North. Considering all that Opera North had communicated with *Skin Deep* about new opera and accessibility, and about the company's objectives, it is important to analyse how the shape of this production failed to fulfil the expectations that were set out for it, and how this mismatch of expectation and experience arose.

¹⁸⁸ In *Everyday Arias*, Atkinson details the social performances of self, done by singers and those involved within an opera company (WNO), as the opera company also performs itself (pp.137-85).

¹⁸⁹ Sawer interviewed for broadcast 'Skin Deep', *Opera on 3*, BBC Radio 3, 2 May 2009.

¹⁹⁰ Lynne Walker, 'Tucks and Tremolos: Penis extensions meet operetta', *Independent*, 17 December 2008, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/tucks-and-tremolos-penis-extensions-meet-operetta-1192525.html>> [accessed 30 December 2015] (para.13 of 16).

¹⁹¹ Sawer, 14 January 2009.

3.3.2 *Skin Deep* as operetta

Constructing and communicating the ‘operetta’ were fundamental elements in Opera North’s drive to reach new audiences with *Skin Deep*, and in the company’s ambitions to innovate within the genre (the ‘development’ as Richard Farnes described it of art form and audience¹⁹²). More nuanced intentions for the work were, however, unclear. Sawyer spoke about the lineage of European operetta, and about drawing influence from the satirical operettas of Offenbach, Johann Strauss, Gilbert and Sullivan as well as Ravel, Rossini and Kurt Weill.¹⁹³ In various interviews, composer, librettist and director made points around the centrality and importance of humour in the libretto and its setting; this facet was frequently stated as a part of the definition of *Skin Deep* as an operetta.

The lineage of the operetta form and humour is evident in certain facets of the work, many of which will be analysed later in this chapter. Briefly, these include a speaking character, Susannah Dangerfield, commenting on the action; Gilbert-and-Sullivan-style moments, in Act 3, where the chorus echo phrases in response to a lead; and occasional, prolonged, melodic sections. Additionally, Sawyer utilises the operetta convention, quite distinct from opera, that ‘everyone on stage knows that they’re singing, and knows that the audience knows’.¹⁹⁴

In the introduction to the Radio 3 broadcast of *Skin Deep*, presenter Tom Service claims that Sawyer had attempted ‘to do something really ambitious in music theatre’ with his idea, ‘to resurrect the form of the number opera’ from the eighteenth century.¹⁹⁵ He described Sawyer’s desire to write ‘a twenty-first-century operetta, a successor to Offenbach, to Gilbert and Sullivan’, which would be ‘both funny and contemporary, casting a satirical light on the world around us’.¹⁹⁶ But this connection was not readily made by audiences or critics. Rupert Christiansen expressed his disappointment in the *Telegraph*:

¹⁹² Farnes, 10 June 2010.

¹⁹³ Oliver Rivers, ‘The Composer: David Sawyer speaks to Oliver Rivers’, *Skin Deep*, programme brochure, pp.12-14 (p.14); Sawyer, 14 January 2009.

¹⁹⁴ Rivers, p.14. In Act 3, No.25, Needlemeier sings: ‘Each of you sing for your survival’, to Donna’s nonsensical reply, ‘Why should I sing?’ (bars 81-89). In the same number self-reference is made by the chorus: ‘Choose for us, Needlemeier, Choose for your choir’ (bars 73-89); later in the work they sing ‘Sopranos and basses can have funny faces’ (No.27, bars 64-68). This convention works for as long as the ‘operetta’ form is more or less intact, but here, in Act 3, where much of the music is explicitly through-composed, one could argue that it is incongruent and awkward.

¹⁹⁵ Service contrasted this idea, somewhat scathingly, to ‘the through-composed soup that so many operas have been mired in since the late nineteenth century’. ‘Skin Deep’, *Opera on 3*.

¹⁹⁶ ‘Skin Deep’, *Opera on 3*.

How sorely his music lacks the smile, lilt and exuberance that are fundamental to operetta. [...] Bar by bar, it's arrestingly fresh and clean, but nothing is catchy, memorable or touching. [...] it's a flop. Worse than that, it's also a bore.¹⁹⁷

The music, reflected Christiansen, was not that which is fundamental to operetta; his disappointment was, at least partially, one of generic expectation created by the label and marketing. Creators and company failed to convince the public and critics that this piece worked in the way in which they had been led to believe it might. Audience expectation was built in a way that was unrealistic and unmanageable, and was ultimately disappointed, as I will go on to explore.

While Sawyer's interviews and Opera North's marketing of the production focussed heavily on this generic label, clarification from the creators as to what this actually meant was elusive, with composer, librettist and director at various points failing to provide a satisfactory definition or explanation of 'operetta'.¹⁹⁸ Sawyer defined his style, not specifically as 'light' but categorically as never 'heavy'.¹⁹⁹ He spoke, not of a thoroughly tonal style, but of the need 'to allude to tonality when you're writing a comedy' and the 'tonal elements' in his musical language.²⁰⁰ He also claimed the label of 'operetta' to be a matter of lineage, saying that he researched into history of the first of the commissioning bodies, the Komische Oper in former East Berlin, and its affiliation with operetta.²⁰¹ So *Skin Deep* is designated an 'operetta' because Sawyer claimed the influence of historical works of the genre, and originally composed the work for the Komische Oper (although ultimately this was not the opera house to give the work its premiere).²⁰²

'Operetta' is an old and well-established form, with its conventions effectively defining the genre. The attribution of a genre such as this to a work has persuasive effects on the experience of the audience, guiding listening responses. It also guides the decision-making of the composer (or the creators, more broadly) and frames the terms of the relationship between audience and composer, as is outlined by musicologist Jeffrey Kallberg:

¹⁹⁷ Rupert Christiansen, 'Skin Deep by Opera North at the Grand Theatre, Leeds – Review', *Telegraph*, 19 January 2009, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/4288438/Skin-Deep-by-Opera-North-at-the-Grand-Theatre-Leeds-review.html>> [accessed 9 May 2015] (para. 9 of 9).

¹⁹⁸ Sawyer, 14 January 2009; public interview of Armando Iannucci and Richard Jones by Charlotte Higgins, entitled *On Skin Deep*, Howard Assembly Room, Leeds, 16 January 2009, from notes.

¹⁹⁹ 'Skin Deep', *Opera on 3*.

²⁰⁰ Rivers, p.14.

²⁰¹ The Komische Oper is both theatre and resident company that was founded and led by Walter Felsenstein. Sawyer described Felsenstein as a post-war director whose new style of directing was 'towards the physical and visual'. Sawyer, 14 January 2009.

²⁰² *Skin Deep* has, as yet, never played at the Komische Oper.

The choice of genre by a composer and its identification by the listener establish the framework for the communication of meaning. [...] A kind of ‘generic contract’ develops between composer and listener: the composer agrees to use some of the conventions, patterns, and gestures of a genre, and the listener consents to interpret some aspects of the piece in a way conditioned by this genre.²⁰³

In analysing *Skin Deep* and its reception, we might assess the ‘generic contract’ entered into by the audience, the work’s creators, and the company, by way of the comprehensive use of the term ‘operetta’. In defence of Sawyer’s argument for his work as an heir to the lineage of this genre, we might borrow Michael Chanan’s description of Kallberg’s model of ‘genre’ as elastic, gradually changing within a framework, and connected to philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein’s ‘concept of a family resemblance’:

There is no particular defining characteristic of an artistic genre, which is, rather, composed of a cluster of features which are variously shared in different examples. [...] To employ a certain genre is to follow a model which belongs to a tradition – even though the earliest and latest examples of the tradition may turn out to be utterly different.²⁰⁴

Traubner, correspondingly, avoids an absolute definition of ‘operetta’, and instead refers to the ‘half-truths in many definitions’ and the ‘changes in meaning over centuries and from country to country’,²⁰⁵ merely making the suggestion that, overall, operetta is ‘an opera that [...] takes itself lightly’.²⁰⁶

It is clear that within the generic contract, there must be some room for manoeuvre away from the prescriptions of tradition. The reception of *Skin Deep* as an operetta seems to be presaged in Kallberg’s analysis here:

Generic contracts [...] may be broken; indeed, frustrated expectations often play a key role in the communicative process. Departures from perceived norms or expectations in genre have been a persistent stumbling block for many critics.²⁰⁷

Kallberg goes on to assert that, despite issues that critics perceive, prescriptions and norms ought not to restrict composers, but that ‘the rejection of prescriptions of a genre [...] can be seen as a major force in the promotion of change’.²⁰⁸ Indeed, this seems to have been Sawyer’s intent. But there is a tension within the framework of genre, as to where the boundaries might

²⁰³ Kallberg, p.5.

²⁰⁴ Michael Chanan, *From Handel to Hendrix: The composer and the public sphere* (London: Verso, 1999), p.39.

²⁰⁵ Traubner, p.1.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p.X.

²⁰⁷ Kallberg, p.6.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

lie, and how much flexibility they can accommodate in terms of compositional freedom and change. When I spoke to Music Director Richard Farnes about the problems inherent in *Skin Deep* a few months after its initial run, he was quite adamant that the ‘allusions to tonality’ that Sawyer mentioned were not sufficient to fit the brief for operetta. Farnes specified, ‘If you’re going to do an operetta, it needs big tunes, literally. Just that. They could be modern tunes, but they need to be recognisable.’²⁰⁹ But overall in *Skin Deep* this melodic compromise is sparse.²¹⁰ Without the framework of ‘big tunes’ that is expected of the form, the piece does not have the usual musical/dramatic shape and cohesion of an operetta. Contextually, as an ‘operetta’, and quite opposed to the promises made on its behalf, one might argue that the work is functionally lacking in entertainment.²¹¹

We might then ask why the generic label was applied so abundantly in marketing the production, and with many other cues given that this was an ‘entertainment piece’. One part of the answer to this question is that the planning and scheduling of an opera production begins years in advance, and in the case of a new commission, the production is often programmed before the work is completed. This was certainly the case for *Skin Deep*, where revisions were made by the composer even after the dress rehearsal. The marketing campaign for a production is also planned and its materials commissioned largely before the production rehearsals begin. In this case, marketing began not only prior to the completion of the composition, but was, to all purposes, finished before final revisions were in place, just in time for opening night. The idea that Sawyer would write an ‘operetta’ was established at the time of his and Director Richard Jones’s initial pitch for the work, and this plan was then agreed upon and marketed accordingly.

The production design was conceived as primarily pink, with associations of camp and of entertainment. This visual message also found its way to the advertising of the piece. Comical posters were created by Elmwood, a company advertising itself as ‘the world’s most effective brand design consultancy’.²¹² Elmwood described its own approach for Opera North:

A series of ‘mix and match’ faces were used on posters and leaflets to express the dark humour and intriguing peculiarity of the piece, showing how changing and combining random features

²⁰⁹ Interview with Richard Farnes, Premier House, Leeds, 22 April 2009.

²¹⁰ The most melodic passages and functional harmony is given mainly to the characters of Robert and Elsa, the young lovers, the harmony perhaps hinting at what is potentially the only functional relationship in the work.

²¹¹ ON General Director Richard Mantle advertised *Skin Deep* as ‘a brilliantly entertaining new work’. In reality this was Mantle’s hope for the work, as, at the time of his writing this, *Skin Deep* was incomplete. Mantle, ‘Of Thee I Sing and Let ’em Eat Cake’, in *Of Thee I Sing/Let ’em Eat Cake*, programme brochure, ed. by H. Bredin (Leeds: ON, 2008), p.1.

²¹² Elmwood, *Elmwood* [n.d.] <<http://www.elmwood.com/>> [accessed 23 May 2015].

can lead to an unexpected and ridiculous whole. Perforations were used to add an interactive element, allowing people to create their own bizarre face combinations.²¹³

On the official poster, the playfulness to which the production aspired is visually apparent (see Figure 1).

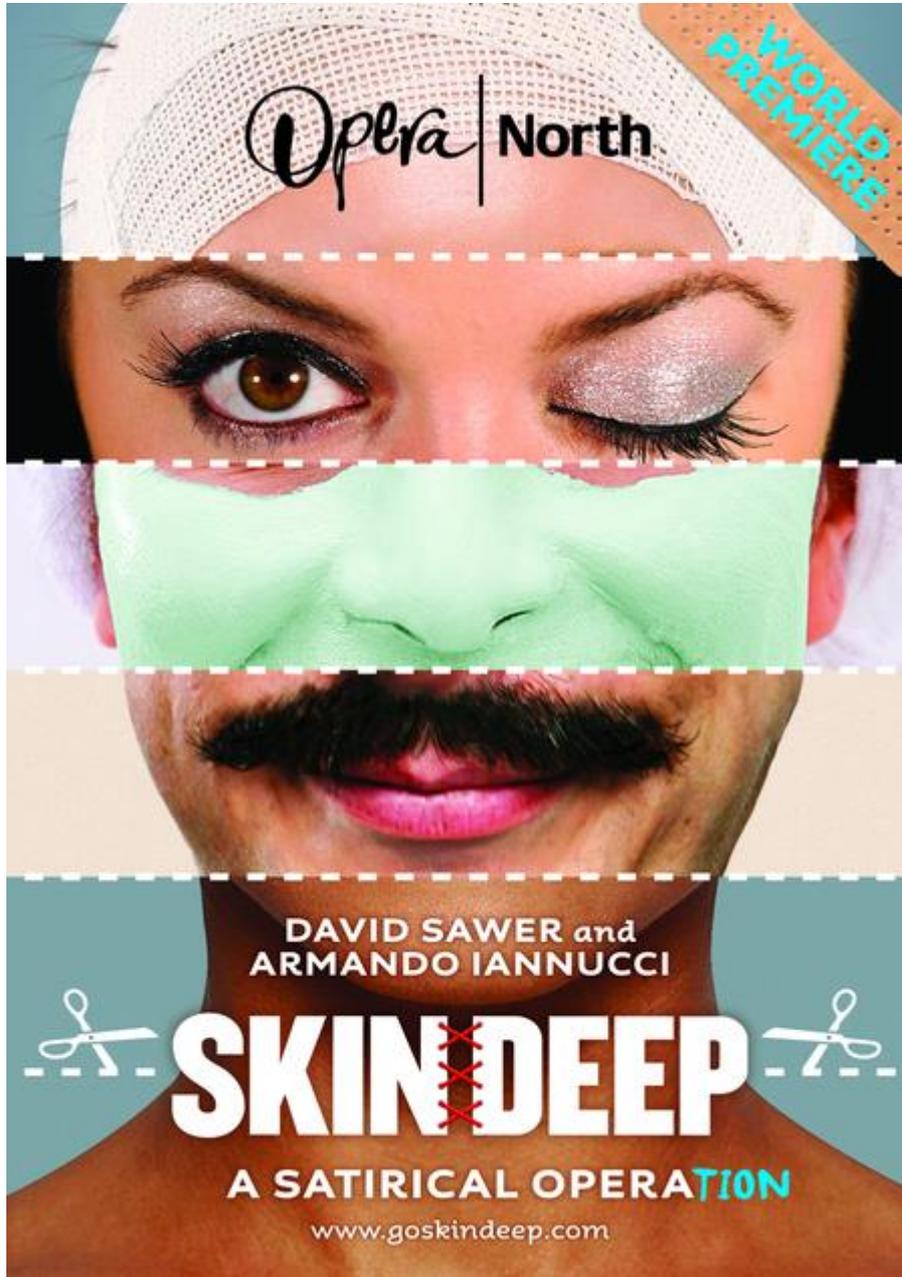


Figure 1: Publicity poster for Opera North's *Skin Deep* by Elmwood.

Elmwood, however, did not embrace the generic label 'operetta', and instead *Skin Deep* was whimsically sub-titled 'a satirical opera-tion' on the official poster (see Figure 1). Neither did

²¹³ Elmwood, 'Skin Deep a satirical operation for Elmwood', *Elmwood* [n.d.] <<http://www.elmwood.com/2009/01/skin-deep-a-satirical-opera-tion-for-elmwood/>> [accessed 23 May 2015].

Elmwood contribute to the programme brochure (see Figure 2), and so the official modes of communication with audience had two distinct flavours: Elmwood's references to popular culture and Opera North's marketing in which the tradition of operetta was promoted and discussed alongside issues of artistic construction and of genre.²¹⁴



Figure 2: *Skin Deep*, programme brochure (Leeds: ON, 2009), front cover.

Arguably, Elmwood's marketing approach for a young audience was quite at odds with the emphasis placed on the operetta tradition, particularly the explicit references that were made by Sawyer et al. to historical composers of operetta and light opera.²¹⁵ But the marketing done by Opera North also at times alluded to the 'fun' of the production with a specific website (now

²¹⁴ The programme brochure to *Skin Deep* included interviews with Sawyer (pp.12-14) and Iannucci (pp.15-17), and an article by Nicholas Payne, 'Stupider Than Jupiter: Some thoughts on satire in operetta', detailing a history of the form (pp.20-23).

²¹⁵ Rivers, p.14; Sawyer, 14 January 2009; Iannucci and Jones, 16 January 2009; 'Skin Deep', *Opera on 3*; *Music Matters*, BBC Radio 3, 10 January 2009.

defunct) <goskindeep.com> including an online computer game, where players must ‘cut out’ a body shape in order to enter a draw for vouchers for the high-street record shop, HMV.²¹⁶ Overall the advertising of ‘lightness’, ‘fun’ and ‘satire’ was communicated to the audience, or potential audience, before the work itself was even complete, and certainly before its shape was fully apparent.

In the introduction to *Genre Matters: Essays in theory and criticism*, Garin Dowd asserts that ‘in genre studies of popular music, the intervention will often seek to locate the popular musical form in a broader, cultural context’.²¹⁷ This is a relevant approach to *Skin Deep*, within two frameworks: the contemporary cultural context in which reception occurred, and the historical cultural framework of the genre. In a contemporary sense, we might consider the work within the framework of ‘satire’, as was proposed by its creators.²¹⁸ Indeed the celebrity status of Iannucci and his wider work as a satirist had an effect on audience expectation (and indeed on the composer’s expectation of the libretto he would produce). This was intensified, due to Iannucci’s other high-profile project that coincided with the operetta, as was reported in a *Skin Deep* preview in the *Herald*:

The Opera North production opens this Friday - six days before Iannucci's *In The Loop*, his debut feature film and cinematic ‘cousin’ to *The Thick Of It*, premieres at the Sundance Festival.²¹⁹

Sawer referred, in the *Skin Deep* programme brochure, to his admiration of Iannucci’s television satire, and Iannucci, also in the programme, took the opportunity to refer to his concurrent work.²²⁰ A third article in the programme, by Nicholas Payne, detailing the history of satire in operetta, ends with a reference to Iannucci’s ‘best known satirical creation, the chat-show host Alan Partridge’.²²¹ Thus Iannucci’s satirical work in television and film was a contextual factor for the reception of *Skin Deep*, invoking associations of popular culture that were absorbed into audience expectations.

²¹⁶ ON, *Go Skin Deep* <goskindeep.com> [accessed 14 January 2009].

²¹⁷ Garin Dowd, ‘Introduction: Genre matters in theory and criticism’, in *Genre Matters: Essays in theory and criticism*, ed. by Garin Dowd, Lesley Stevenson and Jeremy Strong (Bristol: Intellect, 2006), pp.11-28 (p.18).

²¹⁸ ‘It was operetta’s combination of topicality, satire and formal freedom that [Sawer] had found enticing. “I thought – what is the equivalent today? Television.” Specifically television satire.’ Rivers, p.13.

²¹⁹ Jay Richardson, ‘A Musical with Lots of Spare Parts’, *Herald*, 14 January 2009, <http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/12764933.A_musical_with_lots_of_spare_parts/> [accessed 10 February 2016] (para. 2 of 25).

²²⁰ Rivers, p.13; L. Walker, ‘The Writer’, p.16.

²²¹ Payne, ‘Stupider Than Jupiter’, p.22.

The historical-cultural context of operetta is offered by Traubner, who outlines the commercial history of the form, since the Parisian inception of operettas in the mid-nineteenth century, ‘as entertainments not for opera houses [...] but for boulevard theatres, for popular consumptions’. He clarifies the profit motivation:

These works were expected to show profits by running fairly substantial numbers of consecutive, or nearly consecutive performances. The subsidized patronage of royalty and the wealthy at the opera houses or court theatres of Europe did not create them; operettas from the start had to cater to the public’s taste. Profit motivation had as much to do with the conception of operetta as the artistic desires of its composers.²²²

This functional history of operetta as commercial entertainment presents us with a contradiction in the case of *Skin Deep*. Here, Opera North, a publicly funded company (because opera is not commercially viable, but is deemed culturally valuable) commissioned in a genre that has historically been reliant on commercial forces and public taste. The irony is particularly pronounced in terms of the duration of the creative process: Sawyer reported that the work took three and a half years to write to Lynne Walker for the programme brochure and the *Independent*, and also in a talk to students,²²³ although he told the *Telegraph* of *Skin Deep*, ‘it takes seven years to write an opera’.²²⁴ In either case, the commercial concerns outlined by Traubner would indicate that historically, the creation of an operetta would need to have taken substantially less time. These issues aside, the commissioning of *Skin Deep* in the once-commercial genre of operetta can be viewed as a part of the access agenda to engage a wider public with the company’s work. Although Traubner asserted (in 2003, just six years before *Skin Deep*) ‘it would be considered box-office poison today to call commercial presentation of operetta just that’.²²⁵ As a publicly funded company, Opera North does not have exactly the same box office pressures that Traubner describes, but when considering the access agenda for opera and Opera North’s drive to attract new audiences, Traubner’s assertion could indicate that *Skin Deep* might struggle to fulfil these ideals.

Another, small-scale, cultural context in which to consider *Skin Deep* is the wider programming of Opera North around the time of its production run. In 2008-09, Opera North produced a collection of works that were generally much ‘lighter’ than might be considered usual for a company year. Eight main-stage works were staged during this year. Of the eight,

²²² Traubner, pp.viii-ix.

²²³ L. Walker, ‘The Writer’, p.17; L. Walker, ‘Tucks and Tremolos’ (para. 4 of 16); Sawyer, 14 January 2009.

²²⁴ Jasper Rees, ‘Skin Deep: Taking opera to the cutting edge’, *Telegraph*, 22 December 2008, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/opera/3902239/Skin-Deep-taking-opera-to-the-cutting-edge.html>> [accessed 23 May 2015] (para. 13 of 29).

²²⁵ Traubner, p.x.

two were Gershwin operettas, *Of Thee I Sing* in the 2008 autumn season, and its sequel, *Let 'Em Eat Cake*, following on in winter. *Paradise Moscow*, played in the spring of 2009, was an English version of Shostakovich's *Cheryomushki* and was advertised variously in company literature as an 'operetta', or as a 'blockbusting musical'.²²⁶ There was also, in the same season, an innovative production of Mozart's Singspiel *The Abduction From the Seraglio* with additional spoken text, written in English. Inserted into this overall annual programme, premiering in January 2009, was Sawer and Iannucci's 'operetta'. So the focus on operatic 'lightness' was not only advertised as per this work, but contextually enhanced by the company's programming. In terms of genre, 2008-09 was Opera North's year of 'light' opera,²²⁷ with yet more operetta planned for the following year, including *Ruddigore*, which would be the company's initial foray into the work of Gilbert and Sullivan.²²⁸ The agenda of increasing access to the company's work was evident in this choice of programming, as Music Director, Richard Farnes confirmed to me:

The hope is that we'll get our own audiences plus the potential 'G and S' that would have been *D'Oyly Carte* type audiences. And maybe by coming to that they may be interested in going to *Bohème* or another show that we're putting on, if you see what I mean.²²⁹

Skin Deep, the only 'new work' in the 2008-09 main-stage programme, it was hoped would appeal to an audience who were not necessarily accustomed or attracted to the more 'serious', or traditionally through-sung operatic forms, but also (conversely) to prepare an existing opera audience for more operetta to come.

As we have seen, 'operetta' is a term with fluid boundaries. It was perhaps strained of Opera North to present a year of lighter works as having cohesion, as was attempted by General Director Richard Mantle in another programme brochure of the same season:

Two themes underlie the programming of our 2008/9 season, political opera and satirical operetta. [...] Along with the Gershwins we present satirical operettas of the British and Russian varieties this year. In the New Year there's a brilliantly entertaining new work called *Skin Deep* from leading British composer David Sawer and writer and

²²⁶ Mantle commented on *Paradise Moscow* as an 'operetta' in one programme brochure (*Of Thee I Sing/Let 'em Eat Cake*, p.1). In the programme brochure to the production itself, the work was termed 'a block-busting musical comedy'. *Paradise Moscow*, programme brochure, ed. by H. Bredin (Leeds: ON, 2009), p.1.

²²⁷ The year also comprised a lesser degree of traditional operatic repertoire: Puccini's *Tosca*, Bellini's *I Capuleti e i Montecchi*, and Verdi's *Don Carlos*. Additionally there was a concert version of Richard Strauss's *Elektra*.

²²⁸ *Ruddigore* directed by Jo Davies was the first Opera North Gilbert and Sullivan production, programmed between September and November 2010.

²²⁹ Farnes, 22 April 2009.

broadcaster Armando Iannucci [...] and in the Spring there's Shostakovich's comedy *Paradise Moscow*, an exuberant portrait of Moscow life in the 1950s.²³⁰

Later in 2009, in the programme to *Paradise Moscow*, Mantle continued to draw these works together, claiming that 'breaking down the artificial barriers that are sometimes erected between works of music theatre is something of an Opera North speciality'.²³¹ But regular Opera North attendees found that *Skin Deep* was not operetta in the vein of the two Gershwin works running alongside it in the same season, which are far closer to the stage musical than grand opera. Nor, in fact, is it structurally anything like Shostakovich's *Paradise Moscow* (*Cheryomushki*) which is musically (if not politically) a much lighter piece.²³²

With clarification from the creators as to what might constitute an 'operetta' proving elusive, we might then ask how the elements of *Skin Deep* that were, to borrow Kallberg's description, 'departures from perceived norms or expectations' arose, and what the lineage of these departures might be. From Sawyer's self-identification as 'a theatre person who writes music',²³³ it might seem reasonable to infer a tendency to prioritise dramatic shape and function. In fact it was the dramatic shape and function (including what Joseph Kerman regards as the music's responsibility for the drama²³⁴) in *Skin Deep* that did not match the expectations presented by its given generic label. In order to look at these tensions and the less explicit influences on Sawyer, I will employ a dramaturgical perspective, as outlined at the opening of this chapter.

3.3.3 Issues in construction, dramaturgy, and musical influence

Many operas follow a curious dramaturgical shape. Robert Cannon points to problems and solutions encountered in terms of plot, retrospective narration, revelations and disruptions. He asserts that 'whatever the opera, composer, or style, it is the overall dramatic purpose and function that will determine the aesthetic structure within it which is to be understood'.²³⁵

Cannon shows how, through the ordering and emphasising of incidents, an opera is

²³⁰ Mantle, 'Of Thee I Sing and Let 'em Eat Cake', *Of Thee I Sing/Let 'em Eat Cake*, programme brochure, p.1.

²³¹ Richard Mantle, 'Welcome', *Paradise Moscow*, programme brochure, p.3.

²³² Opera North's *Paradise Moscow* had arrangements by Gerard McBurney and Jim Holmes, described by Holmes in the programme as 'laced with comic effects'. Shostakovich himself wrote the original work *Cheryomushki* for the Moscow Operetta Theatre. Holmes describes it thus: 'the [...] confection – call it "operetta", "revue", or "musical comedy" as you will – is an amalgam of instantly accessible vocal numbers, dance and dialogue, blatantly using strophic song forms and the device of reprise to send audiences humming into the night [...]. It may deal with the serious social problem of housing construction but (to use the composer's own words) it does so in a "gay and sprightly manner".' James Holmes, 'A Talented Din', *Paradise Moscow*, programme brochure, pp.8-11 (p.10).

²³³ L. Walker, 'Tucks and Tremolos' (para.13 of 16).

²³⁴ Kerman, p.214.

²³⁵ Cannon, p.324.

constructed.²³⁶ He advocates the libretto's 'dramaturgical rather than literary function' and maintains that the librettist will 'select incidents from the story and arrange them in a way that creates a particular sense and emphasis'. Through this process, Cannon maintains, the 'meaning' of an opera, which he defines as 'its reliable impact on an audience', depends on these choices of how the story is told.²³⁷ However, there is little evidence given by either composer or librettist that the overarching dramatic shape of *Skin Deep* was intentionally constructed through such thorough, structural choices around story-telling.²³⁸ Rather, it seems, the focus of the creators was on the moments, or the minutiae of musical and poetic construction. This is the message that Sawyer and Iannucci communicated to the audience in talks, broadcasts and the programme, as I will go on to outline.

Iannucci considered himself to be a novice in opera, and was happy to be led. 'Mine is literally the first word,' he told the *Herald*, 'I'm not precious about it; I told David to just chop away.'²³⁹ In the programme brochure he admitted to 'not being a poet or a dramatist', and allowing Sawyer to shape the text, cutting syllables and lines to fit the music. 'In the end', he maintained, 'it's the music that is important.'²⁴⁰ Indeed, the traditional role of the librettist in constructing the drama (as outlined by Cannon) does not seem to have taken place in the usual manner. Iannucci spoke in the *Telegraph* of his appreciation of the parameters imposed upon him, saying 'It's very good [...] to be told there are three people here, by the end of the scene they've got to have done this, and could the lines be six syllables long please.'²⁴¹ Quite openly, Sawyer and Director Richard Jones arrived at the theme of the work before Iannucci was involved. The librettist's participation in the project arose from Sawyer's interest in a satirical and televisual-style input; but the very model of this work for TV where editing happens after the story and dialogue is formulated made Iannucci reticent to engage in the editorial process. He proposed that 'with a film it's all in the editing but with something as theatrically alert as an operetta the composer has got to supervise the cuts'.²⁴² Sawyer, in the programme, acknowledged his control over the shaping of Iannucci's material, and the primacy of the music over the libretto:

I thought Armando could give me exactly the material that I needed. [...] the rhythmic language he has devised suits my music well. He was very unprecious, and very

²³⁶ This by Aristotle's definition, equates to the plot (ibid., p.314).

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ In the programme to *Skin Deep*, Armando Iannucci recounts the process of writing *Skin Deep* with Sawyer, whereby each shared initial rudimentary ideas and then 'the setting and the characters just began to evolve'. L. Walker 'The Writer', p.15.

²³⁹ Richardson (para. 16 of 25).

²⁴⁰ L. Walker, 'The Writer', p.16.

²⁴¹ Rees (para. 6 of 29). Iannucci and Sawyer both recounted processes whereby Sawyer suggested how Iannucci might proceed at various points, including the outset of the project.

²⁴² L. Walker, 'The Writer', p.16.

responsive. I would say ‘I need a page which starts off with four syllable words, and then the words get progressively shorter’ [...] and he could give me that. [...] he would always be happy to rewrite.²⁴³

While Sawyer was concerned to match words to his musical processes, the architecture of plot received less attention. He admitted that upon starting the piece ‘we didn’t really know what we were doing, and then gradually, it all..., it does clear itself’. He offered the explanation that the narrative line evolved from the development of characters, and after certain numbers had been written, saying ‘I asked Armando to write solo arias for each of the characters [...] and then the narrative out of that. So [...] really the narrative was driven by the characters.’²⁴⁴ It seems unlikely then that the plot could be moved forward in these numbers, since it was effectively created post-hoc. Sawyer elaborates on this process whereby they had created disjointed ideas of certain isolated events, only later attempting to tie them into a story:

One of the things also that [Iannucci had] written down was ‘a chorus of ugly people turning into beautiful people’. And this was way back at the beginning. And then I said ‘I want an avalanche’. So we had these sort of things to aim for on the story, but they’re just excuses really to do what you want.²⁴⁵

Sawyer insisted, in various forums, that he was more interested in musical moments than the story-telling and dramaturgical shape. In the programme to the work, he asserted that one ‘doesn’t have to go narrative, narrative, narrative, all the time. [...] you can pull back and maybe just say “well let’s just explore this moment”’,²⁴⁶ and speaking to students in Leeds, he said that ‘the narrative is just an excuse, to write a show, to explore a moment’.²⁴⁷ His claim in the *Independent* was that changing mood or pace could be an alternative to focusing on the narrative, and that instead of telling a cohesive story, one might ‘add a level of artificiality common to variety and revue sketches’.²⁴⁸ Such stated preferences, of course, contribute to what Goffman described as a presentation of self,²⁴⁹ or what Atkinson might describe as a ‘performance’ of Sawyer’s compositional identity,²⁵⁰ as previously discussed, and do not mean that there was absolutely no concern for the shape of the story. Yet it is notable that Sawyer’s ‘moments explored’ (the instrumental interludes between dialogue and song) seldom advance

²⁴³ Rivers, p.13.

²⁴⁴ Sawyer, 14 January 2009.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ ‘Skin Deep’, *Opera on 3*.

²⁴⁷ Sawyer, 14 January 2009.

²⁴⁸ L. Walker, ‘Tucks and Tremolos’ (para.13 of 16).

²⁴⁹ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.

²⁵⁰ Atkinson describes ‘autobiographical performances’ by singers of their lives and voices. However, one could argue that this ‘performance’ of musical skill or talent is also apt in other spheres, such as that of the composer (p.161).

character or plot; even when mood is created it is for its own sake, and not integrated into the line of the story. Such moments are thus (as Kerman might have it) ‘resolutely undramatic’.²⁵¹

Sawer also indicated that he wrote music that was then ‘staged’ by Richard Jones, rather than considering action when writing:

For instance there was a ballet of transplant organs, and there’s an interlude conducted by puppets. Those were my ideas and, as orchestral numbers [...] I wanted those to be musically in. I didn’t know how they were going to be staged. But then we managed to put them into narrative. [...] So I wasn’t so specific about what the theatre was going to be there. [...] I know Richard Jones, and we’ve worked together before, and also the designer and the choreographer, so [...] there is a point at which you just have to completely trust what they’re going to do, and you say ‘Look, I’m just...’ not *just*, but, ‘I’m responsible for the music’.²⁵²

In terms of his musical, structural design, Sawer indicates a conscious move away from his original aim of ‘number opera’ by the beginning of Act 3:

The second half is more through-composed, because I wanted it to be like one big number really. [...] And there’s not so much dialogue. Because I felt the problem with operetta is Act Three. [...] I wanted the feel of the second half is more like a conventional opera.²⁵³

He said in the *Telegraph*, ‘It’s closest to something like *The Magic Flute*’ (where, like *Skin Deep*, the third act becomes less episodic).²⁵⁴ But nowhere was the process of shaping the story into an arc through the ‘episodes’ that are scenes, numbers and dialogue recounted in any more detail.

Sawer’s much-repeated mantra around prioritising musical moment over action or narrative is in stark contrast to the attitude outlined by Robert Cannon, and exemplified by composer Alban Berg, who explained his motivation in writing *Wozzeck*:

The music was to be so formed that at each moment it would fulfil its duty of serving the action. Even more, the music should be prepared to furnish whatever the action needed for transformation into reality on the stage.²⁵⁵

²⁵¹ Kerman, p.204.

²⁵² Sawer, 14 January 2009.

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Rees (para. 19 of 29).

²⁵⁵ Douglas Jarman, *Alban Berg: Wozzeck* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), p152, quoted in Cannon, p.324.

Ultimately, Sawyer and Iannucci's reversal of this dramaturgical hierarchy meant a lack of connected musical drama. Sawyer's priority, then, might seem strange in the context of music on stage generally, and in comparison to those intentions outlined above (particularly as Sawyer cited Berg as an operatic influence²⁵⁶). It is also difficult to see how such a priority might fit within the usually relatively prescriptive and highly constructed dramaturgical framework of an 'operetta' or a 'number opera', whereby both musical numbers and dialogue tend to advance the plot, within a structure where songs are clearly distinct from one another and from the dialogue. Nevertheless there is some heredity behind Sawyer's way of thinking about non-linear musical moments on stage,²⁵⁷ most obviously via the composer's former composition teacher, Mauricio Kagel.

Kagel's musical work is highly theatrical, but aesthetically aligned with the avant-garde, rejecting the conventions of the theatre as well as the institutions and forms of the musical world. Paul Attinello describes his works as structured on 'subversive rhetorical gestures such as paradox, disjunction and irony'.²⁵⁸ Kagel's first opera (or 'anti-opera') *Staatstheater* (1967-70) is highlighted by Attinello in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music* as 'the most important and extended example of [a] compositional technique' whereby Kagel composed (and recorded on cards) a collection of potential actions, which would then be assembled into a whole work, and where 'music functions as only one of a number of symbolic elements, competing for primacy with visual and textual domains'.²⁵⁹ The composer himself described the work as 'not just the negation of opera, but of the whole tradition of music theatre'.²⁶⁰ Attinello describes it thus:

Each of its nine sections involves performers [...] in a set of actions that subverts the normal performance hierarchy: members of the chorus sing overlapping solos; soloists sing in ensemble; and non-dancers perform a ballet.²⁶¹

Attinello also points to 'anti-musical sound' and 'sensuous, overwhelming "mass-scenes" at the end of the work [which] reverse the anarchistic chaos of earlier sections'.²⁶² These descriptions could as well be applied to *Skin Deep*. While sparse and less extreme, examples of 'anti-musical

²⁵⁶ Sawyer, 14 January 2009.

²⁵⁷ In these moments Sawyer's music aims to 'step out', as he put it, from the narrative and thus disrupts time in terms of the diegesis. Sawyer speaking on 'Skin Deep', *Opera on 3*.

²⁵⁸ Paul Attinello, 'Kagel, Mauricio', *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*. OUP (2009) <<http://0-www.oxfordmusiconline.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/subscriber/article/grove/music/14594>> [accessed 1 January, 2016] (para. 4 of 13).

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.* (para. 8 of 13).

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.* (para. 9 of 13).

²⁶¹ *Ibid.* Other commentators deny the existence of a chorus or soloists, see the performance group 'Verharren!'. Verharren!, 'Staatstheater', *Verharren Repertoire* [n.d.]

<<http://www.verharren.com/staatstheater/>> [accessed 3 January 2016] (para. 1 of 4).

²⁶² Attinello (para. 9 of 13).

sound' are evident, not unlike some used by Kagel. Sawyer employs the chorus, on one occasion, as 'groaning zombies'.²⁶³ In another example, the non-singing reporter shouts single words over the chorus, subverting the musical aesthetic to dramatic and comic effect.²⁶⁴ Sawyer also composed balletic interludes, labelled as such in the score, but set by Director Richard Jones with garish representations of surgical procedures rather than dance. In terms of Kagel's structure, *Staatstheater* has been described by its performers as a series of 'vignettes' without plot.²⁶⁵ This description could also be applied to his other works written with the same technique, described above.²⁶⁶ Here is a clear influence on Sawyer's ambition to explore musical moments, without recourse to considering the narrative structure.

Kagel, in rejecting the forms of music theatre and creating an 'anti-opera', stepped outside the bounds of the establishment and of established genre, and as such, set no expectation of convention or form (although with regard to *Staatstheater*, Attinello describes, perhaps unsurprisingly, a 'tumultuous reaction at the opera's first performance'²⁶⁷). This reactionary stance in relation to form is in sharp contrast to Sawyer's claims for 'number opera' or 'operetta', which proved to be a very solid conceptual framework in the minds of audience members, particularly, perhaps, when influence is claimed, not explicitly from Kagel, but from Gilbert and Sullivan, Offenbach, Johann Strauss and the rest.²⁶⁸ It was perceptive of Andrew Clark in the *Financial Times* to note, while complaining of the music's lack of 'fluency, tunefulness and charm', that Sawyer was 'too stuck in a post-modernist mould to animate a traditional number opera'.²⁶⁹ And yet, Sawyer's lack of engagement with the narrative structure (and Iannucci's, as a first-time librettist) allowing it instead to develop organically from the series of 'moments', did not seem to be a convincing reaction against convention, but rather a case of dramaturgy unconsidered. Indeed, the intentions of the creators and their control of the audience experience (described by Cannon as all-important²⁷⁰) were hazy. Sawyer admitted, 'Even as I'm writing it

²⁶³ David Sawyer, *Skin Deep: Operetta in Three Acts*, 3 vols (Vienna: Universal Edition, 2008), III, p.42 (No.22, 'Scene').

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, I, pp.168-69 (No.9, 'Reporter and Chorus').

²⁶⁵ Verharren! (para.1 of 4).

²⁶⁶ Attinello gives the following examples: *Kommentar + Extempore* (1966-67), *Hallelujah* (1967-68). Attinello (para.8 of 13).

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.* (para. 9 of 13).

²⁶⁸ L. Walker, 'The Writer', p.14; Sawyer, 14 January 2009.

²⁶⁹ Andrew Clark, 'Skin Deep, Grand, Leeds', *Financial Times*, 18 January 2009, <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/abc252a2-e57d-11dd-afe4-0000779fd2ac.html>> [accessed 13 February 2016] (paras 8 and 12 of 15). Herein is an echo of Adorno's warning that Mozart's *Magic Flute*, in which the utopia of the Enlightenment and the pleasure of a light opera comic song precisely coincide, is a moment by itself. After [this] it was never again possible to force serious and light music together'. Theodor Adorno, 'On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Musical Listening', in *The Culture Industry: Selected essays on mass culture*, ed. by J.M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991), pp.29-60 (p.32).

²⁷⁰ Cannon, p.314.

[...] I'm sort of enjoying the comedic situations that are set up, but... I don't know where the laughs are going to go.²⁷¹

Richard Farnes, somewhat politely and indirectly, expressed the view that the story-telling in *Skin Deep* was not considered thoroughly from the outset; he made a comparison to working with Jonathan Dove, whom he thought would be more reluctant to concede to suggested cuts than Sawyer, 'partly because he would have thought very carefully about it in the first place'.²⁷²

Where structural rises and falls in dramatic intensity can be identified in *Skin Deep*, their location appears to be haphazard rather than consciously placed. For example, many 'numbers' in this 'number opera', as Sawyer promoted it,²⁷³ lack clear musical division, as I will go on to outline. Even the division between what were stated to be Acts 1 and 2 lack structural integrity. The beginning of Act 2 was never a clearly defined moment; it runs on from Act 1 without a change of set. Act 1 does not end in any way climatically, nor Act 2 commence in a musically or dramatically arresting manner. Rather the work seems to 'drift' from one act to the next without marked event or feature. Farnes describes a 'sort of yodelling scene', saying, 'It was actually at the beginning of the second act, but you didn't really know it was the beginning of the second act, 'cause there was no break.'²⁷⁴ Here he refers to No.13b 'Do You Remember Su?'. This number was functionally another example of 'retrospective narration',²⁷⁵ a static 'moment' in time, or a vignette (as we see vignettes in Kagel's structure) which, for Sawyer, works alongside the main plot. After its initial run, *Skin Deep* toured to the Bregenz festival in Austria, for which No.13b was cut, for reasons of dramaturgical economy. Farnes's comments on the number support its musical quality, but also indicate a lack of longer-term dramaturgical consideration from the composer:

It was basically telling us about other things that Needlemeier had done. But I felt it was a little bit extraneous. But most of all people who'd seen it said that they didn't understand what was going on. It was a diversion, and I quite liked it, I mean it was really hard, musically. It had a certain sort of jauntiness, that I felt musically worked best, but the audience switched off for a bit because they couldn't understand what was going on.²⁷⁶

²⁷¹ Sawyer, 14 January 2009.

²⁷² Farnes, 22 April 2009.

²⁷³ L. Walker, 'The Writer', p.14; Sawyer, 14 January 2009.

²⁷⁴ Farnes, 22 April 2009.

²⁷⁵ Cannon, p.314.

²⁷⁶ Farnes, 22 April 2009.

The finale of the piece is also dramatically ambiguous. Farnes referred me to ‘three endings’, which are actually three sequences that occurred subsequent to one another at the end of the work, any one of which could potentially serve to finish the piece:

And then the ending, Number 26, at the top of Number 26 it says ‘finale’. But there’s also a Number 27, and a Number 28, and [...] therein lies the problem. It was never quite clear when the piece was going to finish.²⁷⁷

These dramaturgical problems in *Skin Deep* were contextually enhanced by the claims that were made for the work in educational talks and interviews and in company publicity. In explaining the direction he had taken with ‘operetta’, Sawyer again revealed his priority of static, momentary musical drama outside of the line of the narrative. Yet the similes he used (see below) seem linguistically far-removed from the qualities of his music, which, in the composer’s own words, rather than being tonal only ‘alluded’ to tonality,²⁷⁸ and one could argue gave a message of ‘lightness’ that was aesthetically misleading:

I think that the form of operetta allowed me to add another layer of artifice onto it, so that for instance one could almost step out yet further from what was going on onstage, and comment on it. So that it almost became like a musical or like a Vaudeville show, and I love that change of language.²⁷⁹

Sawyer did indeed step away from the on-stage narrative and make musical comment, as I will go on to discuss. However, in the light of these claims on behalf of ‘number’ operetta, it would seem fair to ask whether this assumed revival of number opera, as the structural and stylistic premise of the work, was clear, functional or understood.

3.3.4 Opening numbers

The following section contains some points of musical analysis on the opening numbers of *Skin Deep*, included in order to demonstrate some of the issues already outlined. This section pays particular regard to Kerman’s claim that in opera ‘music [...] bears the responsibility for articulating drama, [...] defining character, generating action, and establishing atmosphere’,²⁸⁰ since these were essentially the sentiments expressed by the creators themselves, as I will

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ Rivers, p.14.

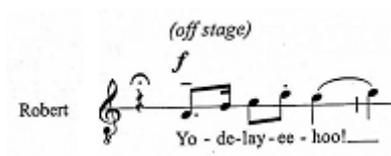
²⁷⁹ ‘Skin Deep’, *Opera on 3*. The notion of artifice and escapism is prevalent in various operatic forms. Examples relevant to Sawyer’s concept of ‘stepping out’ of the narrative here might include Franz Lehár’s romantic turn in nineteenth-century Viennese operetta, and the commenting chorus in the works of Gilbert and Sullivan.

²⁸⁰ Kerman, pp.214-15.

elucidate. In the case of operetta it is this dramaturgical responsibility of music that forms much of the contract of generic expectation, meaning the expectation of a framework of distinct numbers. In the following excerpts I will analyse the extent to which the music functions to create the structure promised, i.e. that of the ‘number opera’. This function includes the way in which tonality and sonority contribute to dramaturgy and structure. It also includes the effects of word-setting and of scoring (for voices and instruments) on dramaturgy and on the contract of generic expectation.

The ‘numbers’, as marked in the score, generally did not function as distinct musical entities in the way that one might expect of a ‘number opera’. Certainly the score being organised in this way was useful in the organisation of the many cuts and changes that happened during the rehearsal process up until the first night.²⁸¹ That said, moments of tension and release, which might serve to orientate the listener, and at times to indicate the transition from one ‘number’ to the next, were difficult to identify aurally, so it was not always clear where these ‘numbers’ began and ended. Scenographically too, many ‘numbers’ were joined together continuously; the entirety of Acts 1 and 2, for example, take place in the set of Dr Needlemeier’s alpine clinic, and the only physical set-change of the work is in Act 3. Dialogue divides numbers in places that could be considered arbitrary, and in Act 3, very seldom at all. To illustrate this point (which is pertinent to the whole of the work) I will analyse the overall shape of the first ‘numbers’ of the operetta. (For a full list of numbers, see Appendix B.)

Sawer initially labelled the Overture ‘No.1’. ‘No.2’ was a choral number which, shortly after the dress rehearsal on 14 January 2009, was cut completely since the work was already overly long, and this introductory number was deemed unnecessary. ‘No.3’ is designated a ‘solo’ for mezzo-soprano Donna, the receptionist, musically answering a variety of telephones, with an interjecting (male) chorus of patients. I will return later to this number, and the telephones in particular. The point of structural interest comes at the end of No.3, and the means of its merger into No.4. Only Donna and the male chorus have been on stage thus far, but six bars from the end of No.3, Robert, the delivery boy, is heard offstage, shouting an unpitched yodel. The yodel is notated in rhythm, with a vague pitch ‘shape’ along a single line (rather than a five line staff) (see Example 1).



Example 1: Unpitched yodel, bar 137 of No.3, ‘Solo and Chorus’, Sawer, *Skin Deep* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 2008)

²⁸¹ Such cuts were made so frequently and so fast that I was unable to document them systematically from my rehearsal observations and interviews.

This yodel is inserted between more conventionally notated writing for chorus and orchestra. After Donna's final musical line, there is an immediate punctuating orchestral chord on the first bar of No.4, leaving no room for an audible division of the two numbers.²⁸² Robert's first physical entry comes with a longer yodel, notated much like the first. This precedes a relatively lengthy spoken conversation with Donna, the first dialogue of the work (see Example 2).

The musical score for Example 2 consists of three staves: Donna, Robert, and Piano. The Donna staff shows a single high note. The Robert staff begins with a dotted quaver rest, followed by a yodel melody with the lyrics "Yo-de - lay-ee hoo! Yo-de-lay-ee ee hoo!". The Piano staff starts with a chord on the first beat, followed by a series of notes and rests. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 120, and the performance instruction is "Molto rubato".

Example 2: Opening bars of No.4, 'Dialogue, Duet and Chorus', Sawyer, *Skin Deep*
(unpublished piano reduction for rehearsal use)

These yodels (Examples 1 and 2) serve to remind us of the alpine location (thus conjuring associations of the Viennese tradition of operetta) and to introduce Robert's childish character, seeking attention. But straddling Nos 3 and 4, they function as a musical link rather than a clear division. Unsupported by the orchestra ('sung' a capella) and followed by dialogue, the second yodel in particular can be regarded functionally as part of the spoken dialogue rather than 'song'. Indeed, the pitch-shape of the yodels was interpreted liberally by tenor Andrew Tortise. The orchestra begins No.4 (in terms of the score) with a chord that, for the listener, serves to signal the end of No.3. No.4 proper then contains a long spoken conversation of retrospective narration, to establish information about the nature of Robert's relationship with Elsa (Needlemeier's daughter), Donna's recent skiing accident and resultant facial scar, and hints at her affair with Needlemeier.

Sawyer organises his score, throughout the operetta, to include dialogue within what he terms the 'number', not as a separate entity between numbers. Here is an attempt at a dramatic

²⁸² The chord is not notated on the first beat, but after a dotted quaver rest. Richard Farnes expressed to me the difficulties of such off-beats, without a point of rhythmic reference (an audible down-beat). 'You might as well just write it on the beat. There's no perception to the audience that it is off the beat.' Ultimately such chords were positioned by Farnes, the Conductor, on the beat, for purposes of ensemble. Farnes, 22 April 2009.

coherence or ‘flow’, whereby dialogue extends without definite break into, and out of, the musical action. Donna is already on stage in No.3, answering phones, and continues to do so as No.4 begins, with Robert cheekily interrupting her phone conversation. So there is little distinction of action, plot or emotion between these two numbers, or between song and dialogue. After a section of speech in No.4, Sawyer’s original intention was then to extend this conversation in musical dialogue, as Robert was to unpack his delivery of chemical equipment, and he and Donna were to describe the items; however this section was removed. The effect of this edit is that the orchestra returns gradually, with instrumental punctuation creeping in after a period of absence, then a half-sung, half-spoken phrase from Donna: ‘Herr Doktor [sung], will be over in a minute [sung], have you got the deliveries? [sung]’ (see Example 3).

The image shows a musical score for two parts: Donna's vocal line and piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked as 108. The vocal line starts at bar 9 and ends at bar 14. The lyrics are: "Herr Dok-tor will be o-ver in a min-ute Have you got the de-li-ve-ries?". The piano part features dynamics like *fp*, *p*, and *ffp*. The score includes a box around the number 14.

Example 3: Bars 9-10 of No.4, ‘Dialogue, Duet and Chorus’, Sawyer, *Skin Deep* (unpublished piano reduction)

In fact, most of the music in this ‘number’ was cut, and what remained of No.4 was mainly the spoken dialogue that had originally framed a duet and chorus. Only Robert retained seven bars of recitative-style sung dialogue at the end of No.4, listing the chemical products, while his lover Elsa silently creeps up behind him. Ultimately there was no duet between Robert and Donna after their spoken conversation. The chorus too was disposed of. My purpose in outlining this example is to draw attention to the lack of ‘number’ as such within this ‘number’ operetta, as it is organised in the score, and as it has been described by Sawyer and Farnes amongst others. No.4 is not a clear entity in itself; musically and dramatically it serves only to continue what came before.

The ‘linking’ rather than the distinct division of numbers is continued into No.5 similarly. Elsa enters and says ‘Boo!’ two bars before the end of the No.4 and thus her ensuing love duet with Robert (No.5) which begins with a line of spoken dialogue for each of them, is a

continuation, relying on the characters, action and words of the previous ‘number’; Robert opens No.5 by referring back to No.4, ‘Elsa! Watch out. That’s expensive stuff’.²⁸³ This duet is a mixture of sung conversation and interspersed spoken dialogue. As a piece in itself, it is intricately constructed: the nervousness of the characters at being discovered in an illicit embrace is audible in the broken nature of their speech and song; they are given briefly soaring melodic fragments, hinting at a frustrated relationship. Overall, the music retains a disjointed aesthetic for an extended period of time. Conventionally centred tonality is presented in brief moments, then snatched away. Lyrics pass quickly, set to fractured musical phrases, and go unrepeatd. This means that in a melodically disjunct setting of a crucial character exposition or plot development, words are lost. From my audience questionnaires, there were many responses complaining of a libretto that was ‘unintelligible’, and ‘words obscured by music’.²⁸⁴

In terms of the audibility of complex diction in operetta, there is a comparison to be made with the convention of the patter song as adopted by Gilbert and Sullivan.²⁸⁵ The patter song purposefully aligns all elements to make a fast and dexterous text comprehensible in a comic but virtuosic show of composer’s, librettist’s and performers’ skill. This is done in the following ways: regularly structured verses with regular meter, repetitive melody and rhyming couplets in popular dance-like rhythms; light and harmonically simple accompaniment, restricted vocal pitch-range; and characters or chorus often echoing phrases sung by the protagonist. The very phenomenon of the operetta patter song indicates that for fast, complex diction to be audible, concessions have to be made in music and text.

In my own reception of *Skin Deep*, I strained to hear words, and in so doing often missed the detail of the plot. The orchestral writing is fragmented, musically separated from the voices, offering them little functional support, be that melodic, harmonic or emotional. It most often has a punctuating or ‘commenting’ role, reflective of the action, or appearing between the dialogue. Sawyer spoke of the orchestra as a separate character, asserting that he had composed in full score from the start of the writing process rather than constructing motif and harmonies and then later distributing parts, as many do; he considered his choices of instrumental timbre to be as important an element as any.²⁸⁶ It is evident in the score, and in hearing the work, that the orchestra was never relegated to a supporting role of the singers on stage. Sawyer has been

²⁸³ As with previous numbers, the title of No.5, ‘Elsa, You Nearly Made Me Drop It’ is subtly different to the dialogue, suggesting earlier changes.

²⁸⁴ Respondents to my audience questionnaires, 2009.

²⁸⁵ Perhaps the best-known example is ‘I Am the Very Model of a Modern Major General’ from Act 1 of *The Pirates of Penzance* (Gilbert and Sullivan, 1879). Shortly after *Skin Deep*, Opera North performed a very well-received *Ruddigore* (Gilbert and Sullivan, 1887) including, in Act 2, the trio patter song ‘My Eyes Are Fully Open To My Awful Situation’, involving (as Mad Margaret) Heather Shipp, who also played Donna in *Skin Deep*.

²⁸⁶ Sawyer, 14 January 2009.

praised for his concert works, not least for their dramatic nature.²⁸⁷ Nonetheless, the transition from the drama of the concert hall to the dramaturgy of the operatic stage can be easy to underestimate. On this point I will later refer to Carolyn Abbate's *Unsung Voices*, where the music of the concert hall is analysed in a dramatic (almost operatic) framework, and where the abstract drama of instrumental music and the explicit drama of the operatic stage, in their distinction from one another, are made to correspond.²⁸⁸

In addition to the problem of there being little in the way of sustained melody in the numbers I have outlined thus far (up to No.5) the narrative structure is also problematic, in that, up to this point, it has not moved forward: the same characters have been on stage, engaging in their 'retrospective narration' regarding backstory and relationships, but without recourse to action in the present. Short of the gradual addition and subtraction of characters, there has been no marked change since the curtain rose, as one number dovetails gently into another. This dramaturgical issue pervades the work.

3.3.5 Issues in vocal aesthetics

During the rehearsal period of *Skin Deep*, distinct tensions arose around the nature of some of the vocal writing. The contracted principals did not complain audibly (as some chorus members did); yet it was notable from my rehearsal room observations while following a score, that in various passages which one might describe as not having a cohesively tonal line, the notes that were sung did not always strictly match those on the page. Principals were essentially approximating the 'melodic' shapes given to them in the score. One chorus member whispered to me that he felt the female principals were 'winning' (i.e. the male principals were singing less accurately). Of course this sort of melodic approximation defies the expectation of the professional rehearsal room in the context of any traditional, operatic repertoire. However, the mood in these production rehearsals for *Skin Deep* (particularly at the beginning of the process) was one of singers doing their musical best, persevering, and creating a result that was presentable if not always entirely accurate.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁷ Rivers describes Sawyer's music as 'fastidious, glittering, agile and incisive [...], driven by intricately energetic rhythmic invention'. He describes the orchestral works *Byrnan Wood* and *The Greatest Happiness Principle* as achieving 'climaxes of shattering power', and continues: 'This is a language well-suited to dramatic expression, and it was hardly surprising that, after a series of highly-regarded works for orchestra and large instrumental ensembles, Sawyer should turn to writing music for the stage' (p.12).

²⁸⁸ Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and musical narrative in the 19th century* (Princeton: PUP, 1991).

²⁸⁹ The context here is that compositional amendments to the score took place up to opening night, so the rehearsal process was also fraught with uncertainty in terms of what may or may not be kept or altered.

Literary scholar Andreas Huyssen broadly termed the modernist art-work ‘self-referential, self-conscious, frequently ironic, ambiguous, and rigorously experimental’.²⁹⁰ *Skin Deep* comes close to fulfilling this description (although one might argue as to the rigour of its experimentation). Furthermore there is an attempt at the ‘paradox, disjunction and irony’ that Attinello attributes to Kagel’s work. These descriptions, which apply to reactionary movements in music and the arts, are resonant, if not a perfect fit, for Sawyer and *Skin Deep*.²⁹¹ *Skin Deep* is of course in conflict with the traditional function and form of operetta, but also with the assessments of scholars such as Wayne Koestenbaum, Sam Abel and Catherine Clément who emphasise the sensuous and hedonistic qualities of the operatic voice.²⁹² While these scholars have written, most generally, about the voice in relation to the operatic repertoire of the nineteenth century, this does not necessarily preclude much of what we now consider to be ‘operetta’, particularly that of the European traditions including Offenbach, Johann Strauss and Lehár (who had aspirations towards the verismo style of Puccini²⁹³).

Koestenbaum refers to the operatic voice as ‘the sound of nineteenth-century sexuality’, which ‘pretends to be polite but is secretly stressed’. He writes of an “‘I”-affirming blast of body that refuses dilution or compromise’.²⁹⁴ Abel follows Koestenbaum, and in *Opera in the Flesh*, extends these ideas into an explicit and all-encompassing sexuality. In Clément’s feminist account, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, she writes lyrically of the women who are bursting forth from their containment within opera at the hands of the men who write for and direct them. Clément’s perspective on the overwhelming power of operatic women, restrained, is one of immense but oppressed sensuality, as she writes of their music ‘inscribed in obsessive melodies’, their ‘ferment swelling rebellion’,²⁹⁵ and the emotional effect of this restrained power on her, the listener. ‘Women,’ she writes, ‘are [opera’s] jewels.’²⁹⁶ These authors refer mainly to the traditional repertoire of the opera house, but also they refer to the potential of the human voice, realised in operatic song. *Skin Deep*, in contrast, presents us with a disjointed musical language that is angular in character with little in the way of lyrical, sustained song. This musical language is, in terms of the potential of the voice, less than operatic, and one might argue that it therefore restrains the professional voices that sing it. The sensuous enjoyment,

²⁹⁰ Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, mass culture, postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p.53.

²⁹¹ Writer on contemporary music, John Fallas described Sawyer to me as ‘coming from the avant-garde, but not really belonging to it any more’. Conversation at University of Leeds School of Music Postgraduate Symposium, 15 December 2014.

²⁹² Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen’s Throat: Opera, homosexuality, and the mystery of desire* (London: Penguin, 1993); Sam Abel, *Opera in the Flesh: Sexuality in operatic performance* (Colorado: Westview, 1996); Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, trans. by Betsy Wing (London: Virago Press, 1989).

²⁹³ Traubner, p.244.

²⁹⁴ Koestenbaum, p.155.

²⁹⁵ Clément, p.175.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.5

described by Koestenbaum and Clément, is denied the performer and the listener. Herein lay the difficulty and performing tension in *Skin Deep*.

In addition to the frustrations outlined above, Sawyer's characters are not afforded the words or the music to say anything of emotional intensity; the critic Andrew Clements described them as 'paper-thin'.²⁹⁷ One key example of this is No.6a, the introduction of the central character, Dr Needlemeier, in his aria, 'When a Man's Kept Awake At Night'. The song is limited in its vocal range, and the voice is left unsupported; there is no instrumental doubling of melody, and no related harmony that might aid the vocal production or pitching of the singer, or the musical comprehension of the audience (see Example 4).

The image shows a musical score for five instruments: Clarinet (Cl.), Piano (Pno), Needlemeier (vocal), Violin 2/Viola (Vln 2/Vla), and Violoncello/Double Bass (Vlc./Db.). The score is in 4/4 time and features a key signature of one flat. The vocal line for Needlemeier is: "By the smell of age in his breath." The piano accompaniment includes dynamics such as *pp*, *p*, and *poco*. The Vln 2/Vla part is marked *p poco marcato*.

Example 4: Bars 11-15 of No.6a, 'Solo', Sawyer, *Skin Deep* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 2008)

The character is effectively pitted against the orchestra in musical opposition. This technique might have been intended to represent Needlemeier's particular megalomania, but the result is a character that is central to the plot but musically uninspiring, lacking in cohesive musical or poetic character. We hear of his achievements, but (as with the other characters) there is no introspection or self-exposure either lyrically or musically. Without emotional expenditure there is only another catalogue of past events, and no further dimension to the character is evident. Again, this was reflected in audience comments. One questionnaire respondent summarised: 'I have no sympathy with or interest in the characters.'²⁹⁸ Perhaps in his drive to cast the orchestra as a starring character itself (as is thoroughly appropriate in the drama of the concert hall) Sawyer

²⁹⁷ Andrew Clements, 'Skin Deep', *Guardian*, 19 January 2009, <<http://www.theguardian.com/music/2009/jan/19/classicalmusicandopera1>> [accessed 5 January 2015] (para. 2 of 5).

²⁹⁸ Anonymous respondent to audience questionnaire, 2009.

lost the facility whereby the orchestra might lend emotional depth to the characters on stage. The lack of combined musical cohesion between voices and orchestra was intended, but it presents difficulties in reception. Voices in the vastness of a theatre, without harmonic support, sound strained. Listening becomes labour-intensive, as the singers' work sounds difficult, fighting against the opposing character of the orchestra. This continues (with very brief moments of respite) throughout the work. The battle between the work of the singers and that of the instrumentalists is a barrier to comfortable listening and to the communication of the work; over a prolonged time period (almost three hours including interval) this is problematic for the audience. Again, this opposition of voices and orchestra is in stark contrast to almost everything we might now term as traditional 'operetta', including work by those composers that Sawyer cited as influences. As Traubner clarifies, 'operetta' as we speak of it today is a term applied retrospectively to various national schools of 'light' opera,²⁹⁹ and so it is difficult to speak cohesively about conventions of the genre. However, I have already mentioned the dedication with which Arthur Sullivan kept his orchestration subservient to the singers during the most lyrically humorous and complex patter songs. Coming at the peak of the Austrian operetta tradition, Franz Lehár's melodies are sweeping, sensuous and Romantic, with the Viennese waltz as staple. Lehár's background in military bands is audible in the orchestral pit, with a highly melodic and harmonically sumptuous but functional style that supports rather than conflicts with the vocal lines. I mention these two examples since Opera North went on to produce Gilbert and Sullivan's *Ruddigore*, and Lehár's *The Merry Widow* in the years following *Skin Deep*, and so Opera North's core audience too would experience this comparison.³⁰⁰

Female voices in *Skin Deep* are at once stressed in production and emotionally empty, but there are brief points of musical respite in lyric passages that are intensely thematically male. Luke Pollock the movie star, possesses some charisma and Hollywood majesty, with moments of vain, rising, self-declamatory song, as he sings of his affection for his (lost and then found) testicle (see Example 5).

²⁹⁹ Traubner, p.1.

³⁰⁰ Additionally, in 2008-09, a season of 'light' opera, *Skin Deep* audiences were able to experience a comparison with a variety of lighter operatic forms.

No.26
LUKE POLLOCK

$\text{♩} = 72$
60 *molto espress.*

Oh per - fect orb One true sphere

ORCH.

[B.Cl, Bsn, Str.]

[Str.]

Gol - - den globe that I hold dear

Example 5: Bars 60-65 of No.26, 'Finale', Sawyer, *Skin Deep* (unpublished piano reduction)³⁰¹

Robert (the narcissist) has the most lyrical music as he falls in love with himself, and throughout the work (Example 6).

$\text{♩} = 66$

Robert

Look

[Hr]

p *legatiss.*

[Hp]

Robert

Look. Lookat me. El - sa. You

[Hr]

p

Example 6: Opening bars of No.23, 'Solo', Sawyer, *Skin Deep* (unpublished piano reduction)

³⁰¹ Although No.26 is titled 'Finale', there are two subsequent numbers in the score.

Robert and Luke Pollock have certainly the most touching and characterful writing, even winning occasional moments of harmonic support from the orchestra (see Examples 5 and 6). The tonality that Sawyer said he ‘alluded to’ is most evident in these examples.³⁰² In Example 5, the word ‘orb’ (bar 61) is set quite clearly to a D major chord which functions to anchor the passage within an otherwise shifting tonality. After passing through a minor tonic with seventh and returning, then changing to cluster chords of ambiguous tonality, the phrase ends (on ‘dear’ towards the end of bar 65) with a dominant chord (A major) in the orchestra. While the whole phrase present in Example 5 thus functions as a protracted imperfect cadence, the tonic itself is also present in the vocal line, set almost against the final chord.³⁰³ Essentially, the egotistical Luke Pollock has returned to the tonic despite the orchestra, at least in part, pulling elsewhere.

In Example 6, Robert, the village boy, is afforded a simple horn accompaniment, moving initially around open fifth, with associations of the Swiss alphorn and the pastoral setting. This figure firmly plants an E minor characteristic; there are allusions to chord V (B minor) in bars 3 and 4, chord IV7 (A7) in bar 5. Like Luke Pollock, Robert’s vocal returns to a firm tonic by the end of this phrase (an unsupported perfect cadence leading up to bar 7) while the orchestra then meanders ambiguously around the key structure beneath the singer.

Respondents to my questionnaires complained variously, with the vast majority of responses overwhelmingly negative. Here are a few examples, the sentiment of which was much repeated: ‘nothing to go home whistling’; ‘screeching’; ‘the music- lack of lightness and humour’; ‘boring, nonsensical, discordant’; ‘surreal, disjointed, long’; ‘music too jarring for a long piece’. Most common was the complaint that the libretto was unintelligible, or obscured by the music. Many said it was ‘dreary’ or ‘boring’. Perhaps the most damning simply stated: ‘lack of soul in the music’.³⁰⁴

In consideration of the opinions offered by audience and critics, we might conclude that the reception of *Skin Deep* at its premiere was perhaps an experience less traditionally ‘entertaining’ than was expected of an ‘operetta’; one might even perceive a reflection of Nietzsche’s concern regarding the ‘tyrannizing’ effect of modern art.³⁰⁵ For a production lasting close to three hours, advertised under the ‘contract’ of operetta, even with set and costumes in camp shades of pink, such musical tyrannising was unexpected, if not harsh and painful, or ‘screeching’ and ‘jarring’ as audience members described it.

³⁰² Rivers, p.14.

³⁰³ However, the tonic D is doubled, perhaps to aid the singer, making the dominant chord essentially a V4, or a V11, but also containing a ninth (B).

³⁰⁴ Anonymous respondents to audience questionnaire, 2009.

³⁰⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. by Walter Kauffman and R.J. Hollingdale (NY: Vintage, 1967), p.437.

3.3.6 An economical score of ‘moments’

While publicity and previews in the national press willed this new work to succeed, critics were ultimately disappointed. This disappointment was nonetheless nuanced with insightful remarks, particularly from Andrew Clements in the *Guardian*, who reflected (with a double-edged sword):

The programme for *Skin Deep* makes it very clear that this is ‘an operetta’ - presumably in case anyone should be inclined to approach David Sawer's new theatre piece [...] too seriously, or expect his elegant, economical score to assume any real dramatic or emotional responsibility.³⁰⁶

This is a dramaturgical criticism of the experience of reception, and yet Clements acknowledges this skilfully delicate score, a score that might not, perhaps, get so lost in the sea of dramatic camp if it were made, instead, for the concert hall. In support of Clements’ guarded praise, I will now return to No.3.³⁰⁷ Here we find Donna, the receptionist, answering multiple telephones, created in sound with a humorously skilled piece of instrumental onomatopoeia, and a section of libretto packed with amusing rhymes. Each telephone ring has an individual character created with colourful writing for winds and tuned percussion (see Examples 7, 8, and 9).

The image shows the opening bars of No. 3, 'Solo and Chorus', for four instruments: Flute 1 (Fl. 1), Vibraphone (Vib), Piano (Pno), and Violin (Vln). The score is in 4/4 time with a tempo marking of quarter note = 120. The Flute 1 part features a melodic line with slurs and accents, starting with a *p* dynamic and a *flz* marking. The Vibraphone part has a simple accompaniment with a *p* dynamic and a *ped.* marking. The Piano part features a rhythmic accompaniment with triplets and a *p* dynamic. The Violin part is mostly silent, with a final chord marked *pizz. div.* and *f*.

Example 7: Telephone 1. Opening bars of No.3, ‘Solo and Chorus’,
Sawer, *Skin Deep* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 2008)

³⁰⁶ Clements, ‘*Skin Deep*’ (para. 1 of 5).

³⁰⁷ After the overture, No.3 became the opening number, since No.2 was eventually cut.

No. 3

Clarinet in B \flat

Xylophone

Example 8: Telephone 2. Bars 21-22 of No. 3, ‘Solo and Chorus’,
Sawer, *Skin Deep* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 2008)

No.3

Piccolo

Glockenspiel

Example 9: Telephone 3. Bars 28-29 of No.3, ‘Solo and Chorus’,
Sawer, *Skin Deep* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 2008)

These motifs are later woven together as the telephones ring at once. Donna’s pantomime conversations with different half-heard voices on the other end of the telephones are creatively engineered; ‘voices’ represented by various examples of muted brass complain in a brilliant instance of theatrical musicality (see Example 10).³⁰⁸

³⁰⁸ Once again there is a resonance with Kagel’s writing, an example of lower brass-writing with a ‘speaking’ tone (amongst others) can be found in his 1965 solo piece for tuba, *Mirum*. Mauricio Kagel, *Mirum*, online video recording, YouTube, 9 January 2011, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YgNtFJ-Bjwo>> [accessed 15 May 2015].

No.3

4 [♩ = 120]

Tpts (B♭)

Tbns

Donna

mf

The Need-le-mei-er Cli-nic put-ting right what Na-ture got wrong Do-nna speak-ing

7

Tpts

Tbns

p *mf* *p* *f*

con sord (harmon)

D.

Example 10: Bars 4-9 of No.3, ‘Solo and Chorus’, Sawyer, *Skin Deep* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 2008)

These elements are combined with comic strings mimicking Donna’s vocal inflections, in discords homophonic with her odd, jumping phrases. Here is the musical humour to which Sawyer refers.

Richard Farnes drew my particular attention to this section:

I think that there was some very clever... [...] the stuff with the telephones at the beginning; that is all [...] brilliantly done. [...] The people talking at the other end, all brilliantly clever. And you know he has got some brilliance about him in that sense, and a good imagination as well.³⁰⁹

Although Farnes was impressed with this writing, when he spoke about having cut the previous number, thus making No.3 the first after the overture, he said, ‘Even then [...] the plot didn’t really move forward exactly.’³¹⁰ Indeed such skilled and detailed musical moments failed to synergise into a whole with convincing dramatic pace or direction. We might refer back to the concerns of Robert Cannon for dramaturgical structure and the choices of creators in deciding how the story is told, in order to concede that the prioritising of ‘moments’, however skilfully constructed, over narrative or plot might prove to be problematic for reception. Cannon reminds us that dramaturgy is ‘the way in which the librettist’s and composer’s intentions control the

³⁰⁹ Farnes, 22 April 2009.

³¹⁰ Ibid.

audience's reactions and understanding'.³¹¹ We have seen reactions that were not under the control of the creators, owing to intentions that were fundamentally unclear.

3.3.7 Potential and problems in dramatic character and choral writing

Musically informed critics suggested that there were, in *Skin Deep*, elements that were artistically successful, or at the very least good ideas that were almost successful.³¹² I will now analyse some of the operatic musical potential in the work in terms of the choral writing and the writing of the non-singing character, Susannah Dangerfield, who acted as a musical foil for the chorus. I will also outline choral passages that were ultimately less than successful in reception. These following points generally support the aims of Sawyer et al. to revive the operetta but, where successful, they are more to do with the following of convention than the radicalisation of it. From an audience point of view, the excerpts I have chosen are perhaps mere moments, but from an analytical gaze, they are moments that held within them the problems and the potential of the work as a whole.

The spoken role of Susannah Dangerfield, reporting for *Global Glamour TV* was inspired in its design. The speaking role follows the operetta tradition utilised by Johann Strauss, Gilbert and Sullivan and Offenbach amongst others.³¹³ The idea of the character (like many of the ideas in *Skin Deep*) perhaps did not fulfil its potential, but was nevertheless quite effective practically. Susannah Dangerfield, played by Gwendoline Christie, commented, speaking directly to the audience, or supposedly, with microphone in hand, 'direct to camera'.³¹⁴ This 'larger than life' character, made for TV, and outside of the operatic diegesis tried in vain to meld herself into the operatic world wherein the action takes place. She is outside of the stage action (as are the audience) so arises an integral affinity; it is possible to invest in her to an extent, and she acts as a foil for the self-absorption of the variously unlikeable characters. Her dramatic speech juxtaposes Sawyer's harsh tonal language, as her spoken interludes provide relief, the language of American-style gossip TV an instantly recognisable medium of communication to the audience. Christie herself is Amazonian in frame, a natural six foot

³¹¹ Cannon, p.314.

³¹² Clements describes an 'elegant, economical score', but with too much text, and defends the composer working with a 'contrived, feeble plot'. Christiansen describes a 'highly gifted composer' with 'Stravinskyan clarity and economy' and 'a fine ear for orchestral texture and thoughtful word-setting'. He adds 'there is some particularly beautiful choral writing', but complains that 'nothing is catchy, memorable or touching'. Clements, *Skin Deep* (para. 1 of 5); Christiansen, 'Skin Deep by Opera North at the Grand Theatre, Leeds – Review' (para. 5 of 9). See also Clark (paras 8 and 12 of 15).

³¹³ Speaking roles in operetta include Frosch the jailor in Johann Strauss's *Die Fledermaus*, Public Opinion in Offenbach's *Orpheus in the Underworld*, and various characters in Gilbert and Sullivan operettas. Other 'light' forms such as Singspiel also often contain parts for speaking actors.

³¹⁴ Sawyer, *Skin Deep*, Act 1, No.9. Reporter and Chorus ('Hi, This is Susannah Dangerfield') and Act 3, No.20 Introduction and Duet ('Ages Have Past').

three,³¹⁵ enhanced by what looked to be six-inch heels. She towered, gargantuan, above the action, awkwardly looking down, and her attempts to meld in and disguise herself as a member of the chorus (playing uniformed clinic staff) were pure physical comedy. Cohesive with this image, Sawyer's joke in No.9 (Chorus and Solo: 'Hi, This is Susannah Dangerfield' / 'Apply, Smear, Soothe') is that Dangerfield cannot sing, and as the chorus hold forth with a rhythmically disjointed but highly accurate ensemble, listing cosmetic properties of a cream, Dangerfield echoes their words, shouting each word in a faux-sung fashion, placing it a split second after the 'correct' version (see Example 11). There is an audible influence here from Kagel who utilised the spectrum of vocal production between speech and song, incorporating elements of *Sprechgesang* and *Sprechstimme*, and drew upon the distinctions and mergers between those speaking and those singing.³¹⁶ The result here is the appearance of Susannah Dangerfield like an unmusical child, desperately trying to join in a choir practice; a vain attempt at the appearance of cohesion, with a result that is so obviously messy.

The musical score is for a piece titled 'No.9'. It is in 4/4 time with a tempo marking of [♩ = 84]. The score is divided into four systems. The first system is for Susannah Dangerfield, who has a single note on a whole rest followed by a half note 'Will'. The second system is for the chorus, with vocal parts for Soprano 2, Soprano 1, Alto, Baritone, Tenor, and Bass. The lyrics are 'These creams will wipe'. The dynamics for the chorus are *pp*, *p*, and *mp*. The third system is for the orchestra, with a string section marked [Str.] and dynamics *pp*, *p*, and *mp*. The fourth system is for the orchestra, with dynamics *p* and *mp*.

³¹⁵ 'I am 6'3" or 6'4 ½ ", depending on when you measure me.' Christie quoted in Esther Walker, 'How We Met: Gwendoline Christie and Polly Borland', *Independent*, 29 June 2008, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/extras/sunday-review/regulars/how-we-met-gwendoline-christie--polly-borland-854953.html>> [accessed 28 July 2009] (para. 11 of 17). Christie went on to be cast in action roles in film and television: *Game of Thrones*, *Hunger Games: Mockingjay* Parts 1 and 2, and *Star Wars Episode VII: The force awakens*. The Internet Movie Database lists her 'towering height' as her trademark. IMDb, 'Gwendoline Christie Biography', *Internet Movie Database* [n.d.] <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm3729225/bio?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm> [accessed 24 April 2015] (para. 3 of 5).

³¹⁶ This is evident in Kagel's *Anagrama* and in 'Ensemble', in *Staatstheater*.

The image shows a musical score for Example 11, consisting of four staves. The top staff is the vocal line, starting at bar 35. The lyrics are: "wipe a - way your fears". The dynamics are marked as *mp*, *mf*, *f*, and *ff*. The second staff is the piano accompaniment, with dynamics *mf*, *f*, and *ff*. The third staff is the piano accompaniment, with dynamics *mf*, *f*, and *ff*. The fourth staff is the piano accompaniment, with dynamics *ff* and *fff poss*. There are also markings for [Fl.] and [Timp.] in the fourth staff.

Example 11: Bars 22-38 of No.9, 'Reporter and Chorus', Sawyer, *Skin Deep* (unpublished piano reduction)

The Susannah Dangerfield character could be read as a spoof on a particular style of popular 'news' entertainment; ironic, perhaps, because it comes from Iannucci the television writer. And yet, this spoof of entertainment suddenly lifts us, because it *is* entertainment, and arguably the only really successful sustained element of entertainment in the piece.

The writing for chorus in *Skin Deep* was contentious and, one might argue, of variable quality. There are moments in which it is evident that the production of sound by a chorus was not understood in advance of the construction of words and music. Examples include No.21 ('Butchers and Bakers and Muslims and Quakers') in Act 3, with the line 'Shut the gate! Don't let us out! Out we hate! We like in!' (see Example 12). This was set in 6/16 (a highly unusual time signature with six semi-quaver 'beats' to the bar); it was sung just once, and set to various broken configurations of semi-quavers and demi-semi quavers; attacks and stresses were marked, but not placed on pulse beats (if, in fact, they could be said to exist). The accompaniment to this panicky outburst offers very little help, as usual punctuating rather than supporting. Accidentals are strewn around enharmonically as sharps and flats, without guidance as to any manner of tonal centre for the chorus. Besides the problems of reading and learning this for the chorus (again these problems pervade the whole work) it seems simply impossible that the diction here could ever be audible or understood by an audience.

No. 21

74 *ff sub.*

SOPRANO
ALTO

TENOR
BASS

HORNS

molto *pp*

ff sub. *molto* *pp*

p *pp*

Shut the gate! Don't let us out! Out we hate! We like in!

Example 12: Bars 74-75 of No. 21, 'Chorus', Sawyer, *Skin Deep* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 2008)

Another problem with audibility of diction and ensemble (as reflected in audience comments) came at the opening to No. 27 (see Example 13). This was very fast, and gave little in the way of introduction which itself was written in a rhythm that was arguably unnecessarily syncopated.³¹⁷ The chorus entered on the fifth quaver beat of a 6/8 bar, and had to contend with unmanageable leaps at that pace (for example, a diminished octave, beginning bar 5). Musical stresses did not match those of the words in speech, for example the first syllable of 'tinker' (bar 3) and of 'joker' (bar 4) fell on weak beats, and were easy to lose. Some stresses were placed strangely in time within the bar, some were created in odd places by a leap (often upward) onto a syllable that should not be stressed in speech, but where in ensemble singing, this leap would inevitably create weight on the note, as in the second syllables of 'tailor' (bar 4) and 'jailer' (bar 5). Having seen and heard the following number in many different spaces and circumstances, I never once heard the text clearly.

³¹⁷ Richard Farnes spoke to me about the piece being 'more difficult, mentally, than it needed to be' and suggested that rhythmically and enharmonically there were places where the notation had its 'knickers in a twist'. He added that 'the theatre creates its own issues' to do with rhythmic and ensemble issues ensuing from the distance from pit to stage, and that experienced, effective opera composers quickly learn that (22 April 2009).

No.27. Chorus ("Tinker, tailor, joker, jailer")

♩. = 128

SOP
ALTO

TENOR
BASS

ORCH.

[Pno, tbn, tba]

f pesante

3

Tin-ker, tai-lor, jo-ker, jai-ler

f

f staccatiss.
[Str, hn, ww]

Example 13: Opening bars of No.27, 'Chorus', Sawyer, *Skin Deep* (unpublished piano reduction)

It was Iannucci who, in the programme to the operetta, outlined what he had learned in writing for singers:

I want the words to be clear and the challenge of writing for singers as opposed to actors is in the time they require to produce the words and the audience takes to absorb them. In the end it's the music that is important so you really can't be too intricate.³¹⁸

Sawyer also commented:

With a libretto with this many words, and this dextrous, I've deliberately kept the orchestration very light. I really do want the audience to be able to hear every word.³¹⁹

In these numbers, however, the intentions of the creators did not come to fruition. Farnes put it

³¹⁸ L. Walker, 'The Writer', p.16.

³¹⁹ Rivers, p.14.

succinctly: ‘There’s too much, there are just too many words.’³²⁰

More successful are the very brief moments where conventions are followed knowingly. In No.22 (Scene: ‘All Good Things Come to an End’) the chorus has been beautified by drinking the elixir of youth, but are in regression and need more. They are moaning and groaning. In rehearsal, Richard Jones remarked on this scene’s ‘zombie qualities’ and said of the individual unpitched moaning, ‘The sound does you, not you do the sound, be like possession.’³²¹ So they are unified, all looking the same, in wigs and dress, the women styled as Donna, and the men as Robert. In block SSA harmony, the women sing ‘Take a Donna from us, Donna is true beauty’ (Example 14):

No.22
 23 *(entering, looking like Donnas and Roberts)*
 SOP1
 ALTO
 SOP2
 Take a Do - nna from us Do - nna is true beau - ty
 ORCH.
 mp
 [Db., Brass]

Example 14: Bars 23-26 of No.22, ‘Scene’, Sawyer, *Skin Deep* (unpublished piano reduction)

It seems odd that soprano 2 sings lower than alto, and the harmony is thinner than it could be, with sopranos doubling at the octave. Yet here are four bars where a block of sound from the female chorus serves to illustrate the dramatic point. There is a conscious nod to Gilbert and Sullivan, starting at bar 43 of the same number (Example 15). ‘Donnalike’ (a chorus member with a voice not as strong as that of the lead) sings for her survival; to avoid being thrown into the vat she outlines her weakness: ‘I’d love to jump in, But I think you should know, Though I’m attractive, I’m mentally slow.’ The ‘Donnalike’ is on a huge scaffold at this point, away from the rest of the action. With jumping time signatures of 7/16, 9/16 and 11/16 changing every bar (although these were often necessarily ‘smoothed’ into more natural beat patterns in performance) and a disjunct ‘melody’ it is unlikely that the audience would hear these words, but the chorus comes to the rescue with an echo of the phrase: ‘Though she’s attractive, she’s mentally slow.’ The rhythm of the ‘Donnalike’ is copied in the chorus, and the response is similarly shaped so that the audience might get a second chance to absorb those

³²⁰ Farnes, 22 April 2009.

³²¹ Richard Jones in rehearsal, Harewood Studio, Premier House, Leeds, 10 December 2008, from notes.

lyrics, placed again into the same rhythm. The chorus is required to be slightly less agile than the ‘Donnalike’ when leaping around intervals that are now shortened to make them feasible for an ensemble, and to raise the likelihood of audibility of diction for the audience.

No. 22

[♩ = 84] 43

Donnalike

f

I'd love to jump in But I think you should know__ Though I'm a - trac - tive I'm

SOPRANO
ALTO

TENOR
BASS

[Str. *f*]

ORCH

47

men - ta - lly slow

p Though she's a - trac - tive She's men - ta - lly slow

p Though she's a - trac - tive She's men - ta - lly slow

f

Example 15: Bars 43-49 of No.22, ‘Scene’, Sawyer, *Skin Deep* (unpublished piano reduction)

Such disjointed writing for voices in the theatre is risky indeed, particularly with a chorus, and given Sawyer’s stated aim that the audience might hear every word. Some risks paid off with moments of successfully innovative choral writing. The musical victories were enhanced on

stage by Director Richard Jones, and as a result, there were occasional choral moments that achieved a spellbinding synergy. In a moment opening audibly reminiscent of the opening of Kagel's *Anagrama*,³²² Sawyer's No.8, 'Mute Dance with Chorus' ('Hush the Time is Ready') begins with a solo violin, and chorus whispering 'Hush!' (see Example 16). Men and women are subsequently split to form two groups of commentators, singing one group after another with atmospheric harmony. Despite being notated without a key signature, this passage is essentially in the key of B flat major, although without focusing on a 'tonic' as such. Each phrase begins with the chorus in unison, and diverges to create Sawyer's cluster chords, created, in each instance, from a consonant interval (often a major third) and a dissonant interval (often a major or minor second).³²³ This combination of the known (diatonic) and unknown (dissonant intervals and lack of a certain tonic) within the harmonic structure creates an ambiguity in mood; there is consonance (additionally the chorus are acting together as an organised unit) but also uncertainty as to where this plot will go. High woodwinds join the fragile violin, floating bassless in a mesmerising moment, without harmonic roots, and with a drifting sense of plot direction. The mystical build up to Lania's birthday operation is set serenely to the candlelight of her birthday cake. The effect is ethereal, and it is an operatic moment of atmospheric magic.

No. 8 *Lania emerges from the rear of the stage. Beautiful but silent. The staff administer last-minute polishes to mirrors. As they finish up, Lania walks slowly forward, catching her reflection in the mirrors.*

whisper *poco f*
SOP ALTO
TENOR BARI BASS
ORCH. [Vln] *pp* *ff* 3 [Hp] *p*

Hush, the time is rea - dy
Hush, the time is rea - dy

Hush, she comes to - wards us Hush, can we hear her?
Hush, she comes to - wards us Hush, can we hear her?

[Vln] *pp* *ff* 3

Example 16: Opening bars of No.8, 'Mute Dance with Chorus', Sawyer, *Skin Deep* (unpublished piano reduction)

³²² Mauricio Kagel, *Anagrama*, online recording, YouTube, 1 May 2011, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWF1-BlhE4U>> [accessed 15 May 2015].

³²³ I have not included a musical example here because the passage is cluttered with accidentals and unnecessarily difficult to read (see Richard Farnes's comments in note 317).

The power of the chorus is utilised some way into No.27. This climax of drama and of musical texture felt, to me, as though it really should be the finale, but was not. The chorus sing about themselves and the wisdom of acceptance that they have gained through the farce of plastic surgery that we have witnessed. The chorus are heard in octaves (Example 17) then in two parts doubled at the octave. It is a powerful moment, enhanced by the humour of the uninhibited shedding of all their ‘clothes’ to reveal the hilarious implied nudity of somewhat unrealistic but anatomically complete body suits.

No. 27

SOPRANO
ALTO

TENOR
BASS

ORCH

f 65

So - pra - nos and ba - sses Can have fu - rny fa - ces

[Brass] *ff*

Example 17: Bars 64-68 of No.27, ‘Chorus’, Sawyer, *Skin Deep* (unpublished piano score)

In my numerous attendances at performances of *Skin Deep*, the audience found this exhilarating, and could yet have left on a high, if this climax had been the actual finale. However, subsequent to this is an entry by Lania (Needlemeier’s wife) then Robert and Elsa, to end the work. I posited my preferred ending to Farnes in a private interview, and he agreed, having made the suggestion of this cut for the Bregenz performance to come, with Sawyer’s agreement:

JD: *It did feel to me like the finale was...*

RF: Was that. [No.27]

JD: *There was a fantastic piece of choral writing, and then I thought, ‘ok that’s the end’. And then it just wasn’t.*

RF: Yes, that’s right. [...] And that’s what I’m proposing is perhaps the last number of the piece... that was that, the clothes stuff.

JD: *And then to get rid of that bit with the three of them at the end?*

RF: Yeah, exactly. And possibly the bit with Lania coming on. She came on after the chorus had taken their clothes off and did this sort of solo. And then there was the jiggling around bit that the three of them... you know, the two lovers at the end. And nobody ever knew when it had finished. [...] So David, interestingly... [...] I had

suggested in an email, whether we might look at this. I said ‘given that you were very keen to change things before we opened’ (I mean snipping here and snipping there). [...] But I knew that a lot of other people would be thinking along the same lines. And he came back to me saying, ‘Yes I absolutely agree, I think we need to think about taking that out.’³²⁴

However, for the initial production run, after members of the chorus have scattered and left the stage, Lania remains with a melodically disjointed, leaping passage giving a condensed moral of redemption. She then continues to moralise into No.28, where Robert and Elsa enter, resolve their differences and finally adjourn to their bed. The work ends with fragmented phrases of homophonic quavers in the orchestra ascending in cluster chords without a firm tonal centre. Here are the unnecessary endings that Richard Farnes referred to, which confused and weakened the finale of the piece during its first production run.³²⁵

3.3.8 Conclusions: dramaturgical issues and mismatched expectations of a genre

Skin Deep confounded its generic label in terms of its structure and function, and this presented problems for its reception. It did not, dramaturgically, fulfil the promise held in the term ‘operetta’, and the generic contract of expectation with audience was ultimately broken. This was reflected in the views of critics and audience-members, who found it a disappointing ‘operetta’, although acknowledgement was made that the story had humorous potential and the score was intelligent, if too delicate.³²⁶ There was a narrative structure to the work in that it attempts to tell a story and reflect on its outcome, as librettist Iannucci saw it:

I always like any production, whether it’s a piece of theatre or a film, where the point you arrive at in the end is one that at the start would have surprised you. But the journey has led you through that, and you’ve not protested at any point. You’ve been happy to go on that journey. And that’s what I like... I would like [the audience] to go out thinking that they must never have anything done to their physical appearance whatsoever. Not to feel bullied by the combined forces of all the style fascists who tell us what to wear and how to look.³²⁷

³²⁴ Farnes, 22 April 2009.

³²⁵ The ending was amended for Bregenz, with a reduction, but not a total removal of, the final trio.

³²⁶ Anonymous respondents to audience questionnaire, 2009; Clements, ‘Skin Deep’; Christiansen, ‘Skin Deep by Opera North at the Grand Theatre, Leeds – Review’; Maddocks, ‘The Doktor Will See You Now, Sucker’; Paul Driver, ‘Skin Deep: It’s mostly cosmetic’, *The Times*, 25 January 2009, <<http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/culture/music/opera/article145361.ece>> [accessed 5 January 2016]; Stephen Graham, ‘David Sawer: Skin Deep’, *Musical Criticism*, 20 February 2009, <<http://www.musicalcriticism.com/opera/on-skin-deep-0209.shtml>> [accessed 5 January 2016].

³²⁷ Armando Iannucci speaking on *Music Matters*, 10 January 2009.

With *Skin Deep*, Iannucci may have attempted to tell this story almost without the composer's interest, as Sawyer indicated in his prioritised attention to non-narrative instrumental writing and in his stated disinterest in dramatic plot.³²⁸ He also appeared to be less interested than Iannucci in giving the audience a reflective moral at the end of the show, when asked saying, 'Well, erm, no, I don't know, no I just hope that they have a good show.'³²⁹ This again defies the idea outlined by Cannon of music creating plot to underline a libretto, create emphasis and thus meaning, and ultimately for librettist and composer to ensure 'that the arrangement of the incidents leads the audience *not* to the end of a story from which they need to draw their own conclusions, but a statement of intent'.³³⁰ Sawyer's intent is an investment, as influenced by Kagel, in the instrumental 'moments', the points of inward-looking musical reflection that are not necessarily reflections on plot or character. Ultimately, when set to action, the instrumental interludes that constitute these 'moments' served only to give Director Richard Jones the space to explain to us in visual representation that something is happening, as I will explain presently.

Implied in Sawyer's declared interest in reviving the number structure is a reference to the 'gestalt' of the Baroque period, where action ceased in time, and moments were crystalised in arias of reflective emotion. But unlike those of Handel's *opere serie*, Sawyer's crystalised moments are not those of an emotion or even a character. They are non-linear, outside of the action, outside of emotion, and, as with Kagel in the work discussed previously, outside of the narrative. Musically, Sawyer excels in these moments, in his dramatic instrumental writing, but they do not, in themselves, serve the plot. There are several purely instrumental interludes in the work: In Act 1, No.6c, 'Operation Conducted By Puppets', and No.10, 'Interlude Under Anaesthetic', and in Act 2 No.12b, 'Ballet of Transplant Organs', as well as the original overture (which was eventually used for the bows at the end of the performance) and the new overture written to replace it. The orchestra is used incisively and sensitively. The operation, No.6c, is nimble and well-crafted, brimming with motifs, rhythmic and melodic, which are also heard elsewhere in the work. The telephone ring tones from No.3 are woven to form a sensuous and rich tapestry, and fragmented melodic shapes given to Elsa elsewhere soar atmospherically on violin.³³¹ Similarly there are fragmented punctuating phrases that suggest action and tension far more effectively here, instrumentally, in embryo, than when they are used for the chorus in fuller, extended form.

It is not without precedent that dramatic instrumental writing does not translate directly into operatic success. In *Unsung Voices*, Carolyn Abbate examines Mahler as a dramatist of

³²⁸ Sawyer, 14 January 2009; 'Skin Deep', *Opera on 3*; L. Walker, 'Tucks and Tremolos' (para. 13 of 16).

³²⁹ David Sawyer speaking on *Music Matters*, 10 January 2009.

³³⁰ Cannon, p.318.

³³¹ Elsa's passage in Act 1, No.11 Duet, bars 24-29, is reminiscent in shape of the violin line, bars 71-79, in No.6c.

‘Todtenfeier’, the opening movement to his second symphony, describing ‘certain *oscillations*’ that the symphony shares with the play that inspired its creation. Within this context, she speaks of the ‘transfiguring confluence of music heard and unheard, of singing sung and unsung’.³³² Abbate argues that although Mahler never wrote an opera, this symphonic instrumental writing contains within it the equivalent of narrative and drama. This must be more abstract in nature, less explicit than text. Sawyer too appears to work better dramatically without the explicit nature of text, but without narrative, in the moment, as if the nature of operatic collaboration is a jigsaw that never quite fits together for him.

In terms of Sawyer’s instrumental interludes, there are also parallels with other avant-garde composers. Chaya Czernowin uses her own developed instrumental language, extended into vocal language for her operas *Pnima...ins Innere* and *Zaide/Adama* in a type of non-narrative musicality that tells an internalised story, or rather paints an emotional tableau that develops within a point in time.³³³ Czernowin, like Kagel, is less interested in any concession to the existing conventions of an operatic form, but rather creates her own form to fit her language, and within it creates a sound world that is modernist and emotional, but that does not try to fit established operatic conventions. Both these composers provide what Cannon describes as a ‘discontinuous narrative’, using the ‘theatre as dialectic’: the theatre attempts to resolve the dispute inherent in the narrative and its form.³³⁴ Sawyer, in his dismissal of narrative, does this too, but as Cannon outlines, an appropriate balance is required ‘between a comprehensible sequence and an equally comprehensible disruption as part of the dramatic meaning. The focus [has] to be the real intention of the work rather than its narrative surface’.³³⁵ With the ill-fitting label ‘operetta’, the ‘real intention’ of *Skin Deep* is confused, and the balance between sequence and disruption is unhinged. ‘The theatre’, which is, in this case, akin to the form ‘operetta’, cannot be a dialectic or resolve the disputes of form here, because it is too steeped in its own historical solutions, and too mired in generic expectation.

The influences of modernism and postmodernism, of the ‘discontinuous narrative’ from the operatic (or ‘anti-operatic’) stage, as discussed, were variously compromised in their application in this operetta. Sawyer described a disrupted state of ‘pulling back’ from the narrative,³³⁶ but in so doing, pace and the reception experience of an ‘operetta’ were not

³³² Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, p.155.

³³³ Chaya Czernowin, *Pnima...ins Innere*, dir. by Claus Guth, Munich chamber orchestra, cond. by Johannes Kalitzke (Mode Records, 169, 2000); W.A. Mozart and Chaya Czernowin, *Zaide/Adama*, staged by Claus Guth, Basler Madrigalisten, Mozartium Orchester Salzburg, cond. by Ivor Bolton and Österreichisches Ensemble für Neue Musik, cond. by Johannes Kalitzke (Deutsche Grammophon, LC0173, 2006) [both on DVD].

³³⁴ Cannon, p.323.

³³⁵ Ibid.

³³⁶ ‘Skin Deep’, *Opera on 3*.

adequately considered. The instrumental interludes in *Skin Deep* are well-considered compositions of a static, yet descriptive nature. But, as one might expect from music influenced by minimalism and with what Oliver Rivers described as the ‘gradual transformation of small motifs, driven by intricately energetic rhythmic invention’, this music is delicate.³³⁷ Unlike a concert work, music written for the opera stage cannot be autonomous; something else has to happen. In these interludes the embryonic ideas for staging as described in their titles were not adhered to;³³⁸ Richard Jones chose to set them to a series of ‘operations’, rather than dances, whereby the procedures verbally described in other numbers were physically seen to be carried out, thus aiding audience understanding of the ailing narrative. So our attention was drawn away from the beautiful, if autonomous, sound-world Sawyer created, and to the pantomime of faces being garishly removed from dummies, a severed testicle held up by a pair of tongs and other such distractions necessary for the plot. One questionnaire respondent described these ‘anatomical’ scenes as ‘gory’, and others thought them unnecessary.³³⁹ Against this staging, the instrumental music in its delicacy could not hold the attention of many sufficiently to appreciate its intricacies. The visual competition to the music was overwhelming.

Skin Deep was a mismatch of generic expectation and audience experience. For those stakeholders (at the company and its funding bodies) whose agenda involved ‘access’, this was an opportunity lost. The decision of creators and those in marketing to focus on the ‘operetta’ label and all that is implied within it, created a promise that could not be kept by the work. Accessibility to this new work was thus compromised by confused expectation of form and function.

It is interesting to note that a more positive audience experience happened as the work toured to the Lowry in Salford Quays (Greater Manchester) for just one performance towards the end of its initial run, on Thursday 26 February 2009. I noted that I thought it worked best here, in the Lowry’s Lyric Theatre, and members of the company agreed that Salford was the ‘most successful performance’ of the run.³⁴⁰ Audience respondents to my questionnaires, while fewer in number, were proportionally far more positive than in Leeds, giving the following comments: ‘better than expected after poor reviews’; ‘great idea, fun’; ‘enjoyable’; music ‘imaginative and amusing’; ‘lyrical and quirky’; ‘was funny and not elitist, easy to follow -

³³⁷ ‘The attentive listener may detect the influence of minimalism, particularly in the way Sawyer constructs extended passages from the repetition or gradual transformation of small motifs, driven by intricately energetic rhythmic invention.’ Rivers, p.12.

³³⁸ No.6c Operation Conducted By Puppets, No.8 Mute Dance With Chorus, No.12b Ballet of Transplant Organs, No.18b Dance of the Seven Bandages.

³³⁹ Anonymous respondents to audience questionnaire, 2009.

³⁴⁰ I discussed this with Farnes, 22 April 2009, who agreed that the production worked better there. Head of Music Martin Pickard also told me (informally) that retired critic Rodney Milne had reported a similar response.

what I was after'; 'a light-hearted but accomplished introduction to opera'.³⁴¹ There are various reasons for a more positive reception in the Lowry, Salford, than in Leeds, which I will now outline.

Primarily, the acoustic in the Lyric Theatre (a larger space than Leeds Grand Theatre, usually much more difficult for singers, where orchestrally saturated scoring tends to smother voices) was actually favourable to the way in which *Skin Deep* was often quite sparsely scored. A clarity was achieved for individual lines (instruments and voices) here, where, in the more traditional home venue in Leeds, there is a far warmer, blended sound. Secondly, the more sizeable stage, and the stark, modern, plain black proscenium arches framed a contemporary production with a modern surround; additionally the audience were physically further from the stage. The Lowry's Lyric Theatre, with its vast expanses above and around the set, contrasts with the red and gold nineteenth-century theatre aesthetic of the Grand Theatre, Leeds, with its ornate scrolls and columns framing the stage; in Leeds the framework was far less congruent with the sparsely set modern production. In terms of association and perception, the architecture of the Lowry also worked in favour of the experience of *Skin Deep* as theatre; its open foyer, the clean, brutal lines and metallic materials frame a modern theatre experience, unlike the sumptuous historicity of the Leeds venue, which brings us into a nineteenth-century aesthetic and put us in mind of tradition, and the operatic canon, before the production even starts.

In my interview with him, Richard Farnes gave another perspective on how the scale of musical spaces impacted on the communication of the music:

It felt much better and clearer in Salford. [...] But then I think that it was possibly, from my point of view, it was the size of the pit, which is much bigger there. It's the only pit that we go to where we've really got room to manoeuvre. And there's a lot of percussion in *Skin Deep* [...] and there's never any space to put it. And it felt like [...] every player had space to breathe, and therefore the music had space to breathe. Now that's a conductor's explanation. I think there was more to it than that because there was something about the whole stage thing that worked better there [...] and I felt that the music breathed in a way that it couldn't when we were more enclosed, in a bit of a tight fit.³⁴²

This is an interesting way of describing the feeling of performance, where 'space to breathe' might refer not only to the physical space and comfort of the players, but the possibly consequent projection of individual lines; and the acoustic space for the music to be heard,

³⁴¹ Anonymous respondents to audience questionnaire, Salford Quays, February 2009.

³⁴² Farnes, 22 April 2009.

without the heavy reverberation and acoustic blending that happens in Opera North's older, smaller, regular venues.

The audience, as one might expect, also has a different character in touring venues, and a particular character in Salford. Opera North's audience in Salford is transient in many ways. There is not the felt 'ownership' of the company that is evident (through questionnaires and speaking to company members) in the home city, Leeds. Neither is there a felt ownership of opera as an art form, which only arrives here for a few weeks of the year. The Lowry was, in 2009, a liminal place that people might pass through for a theatre experience.³⁴³ The venue itself is host to a broad variety of productions of all genres, but unlike the Grand, programming is not weighted in favour of opera and ballet, so overall there is less expectation of genre, or of any particular operatic aesthetic. The reception experience is freer of expectation, of architectural history, of cultural baggage. Also the posters and local publicity that were pervasive in Leeds did not have the same presence in Salford. There was therefore less scope for disappointed expectation based on advertising because expectation was not as strongly set. But a singular performance in Salford at the end of *Skin Deep*'s initial run could not rescue the production from the overall perception that its avant-garde element was a cuckoo in the nest of the entertainment form, operetta.

To return to the post-war aims of Keynes and his Arts Council, a public opera company has the advantage over commercial entertainment, in that its artistic attempts exist within what Born termed 'the sphere of subsidized cultural life';³⁴⁴ they are of value in their own right, with less emphasis on the kind of financial success criteria that are applied elsewhere. There is a capacity built into the funding system for allowable 'failure', be that financial or critical. In 1989, speaking about the funding of new opera, the then chair of the Arts Council Lord Palumbo said:

We must give the artist the right to fail, we must invest, on occasion, in new and innovative work, knowing full well that the results may fall below the expectations of the artist and of ourselves; but knowing also that we may be helping to nourish a masterwork.³⁴⁵

By the time the programme to *Skin Deep* went to print, following a disappointing and uncomfortable rehearsal period, Opera North was justifiably concerned that the production would not be well received. On the opening 'Welcome' page of the programme for *Skin Deep*,

³⁴³ Since this time Salford Quays has become much busier and more inhabited, with large apartment and commercial developments, a tram link, the arrival of the BBC and other media and cultural companies, and a campus of the University of Salford.

³⁴⁴ Born, *Rationalizing Culture*, p.5.

³⁴⁵ Ranan, p.84.

General Director Richard Mantle perhaps sought to temper audience expectation by focusing on the success of the newly opened Howard Assembly Room,³⁴⁶ on the access agenda fulfilled by another recent new commission,³⁴⁷ and crucially, by echoing Lord Palumbo, and reminding the audience of the importance of risk-taking with new works:

The success of any new or innovative work cannot be guaranteed until the first public performances – and not always even then. [...] There are many, many examples of works of art now considered to be among the greatest in the canon that were rejected by critics or the public or both when they were new. But without artists, companies, funders and, not least, audiences being ready and willing to take these risks these works simply wouldn't exist.³⁴⁸

The message did not go unheeded, as one audience member responded to my questionnaire thus:

I always have low expectations of new operas, so I was not surprised. Sometimes, as last year, my low expectations are totally confused. Support 'new works' – it's a risk you have to take if opera is not to become stale.³⁴⁹

³⁴⁶ The HAR was a newly developed venue for Opera North in 2008-09, but not for this production.

³⁴⁷ 'It is only a little over a year ago that we gave another world premiere, of Jonathan Dove and Alasdair Middleton's *The Adventures of Pinocchio*. Such was its overwhelming success – not least in opening our doors to many new, and often very young, opera-goers – that our performances [...] were filmed and will be released shortly on DVD and Blu-Ray by Opus Arte. Mantle, 'Welcome', *Skin Deep*, programme brochure, p.3.

³⁴⁸ Mantle, 'Welcome', *Skin Deep*, programme brochure, p.3.

³⁴⁹ Anonymous respondent to audience questionnaire, Leeds Grand Theatre, 11 February 2009.

3.4 *Swanhunter*

3.4.1 Introduction

The subject of the second case study of this chapter is another new commission for Opera North, Jonathan Dove and Alasdair Middleton's *Swanhunter*. The work premiered on 13 November 2009 in the Howard Assembly Room a (then) new performance space adjoining the Grand Theatre, Leeds. The circumstances of its creation were quite different to those of *Skin Deep*. *Swanhunter* was commissioned not for Opera North's Main Stage, but the company's two smaller creative departments, Education and Projects. It promised to be a 'family opera'; quite a different premise to that of *Skin Deep*, for which marketing focused partially on contemporary satire, and the production included implied nudity and originally (although cut before the first night) a humorously rising, melismatic account of a 'penis extension'. In this section I assess how *Swanhunter* came to be, and analyse its function and perceptions of its success. I do this by investigating the preconditions under which this work was commissioned, the priorities of its commissioners and creators, and its reception by some of its target audience. There is also a brief comparison to a later Opera North production of the same work in 2015; by this time various agendas had moved on in the politics of culture, access and education.

There is a different angle of ethnographic observation for this case study as compared with the study of *Skin Deep*, since *Swanhunter*, its rehearsal and preparation proved to be more easily accessible to me within an ethnographic framework. There are three main reasons why this proved to be the case. Firstly, *Swanhunter* was commissioned and produced by two small, creative departments within Opera North, without the full external pressure, prestige or cost of a main-stage production. Effectively the activities of *Swanhunter*'s creators and producers were 'contained' to a degree within the administrative bounds of these two departments; with a very small cast and team of administrators, I was able to know and gain the trust of many of those involved. Secondly, the original *Swanhunter* production happened during my second year as an embedded researcher at Opera North. I was thus far more familiar and comfortable within the company, having formed relationships and having begun to understand ways of working and the nuances of company structures, as compared with my research period on *Skin Deep* at the outset of my studies. I was also more confident in requesting private, elite interviews with external creators (Dove and Middleton) as well as with high-level company members. Finally, *Skin Deep* had been a very tense rehearsal process; the work was rushed and difficult, and it became increasingly apparent to those involved that the reality of the piece and the production would not live up to its marketing and to public expectations. For *Swanhunter* in late 2009, this was not the case. With a much smaller production the stakes were not as high, and while there were public expectations set, this was done with a far lower profile.

In terms of its access and educational objectives, *Swanhunter* was successful on its own terms, essentially fulfilling the criteria of its creators, although these criteria were not necessarily shared with or by critics, who gave it a lukewarm reception. In 2015 Opera North Education produced a new, collaborative production of *Swanhunter*, with theatre company The Wrong Crowd, and this production enjoyed far greater critical success than the original. The Wrong Crowd created a scenographically enhanced production, and contributed much in terms of marketing. This company's background in puppetry and fairy tales brought a helpful association of productions for children. The childhood demographic, which had been key to the original production, was now brought much more clearly into focus. My account is not a comparison of these two Opera North productions of *Swanhunter*, although I will go on to note how changing national governments and structural changes in the Opera North Education department impacted upon the way in which events and activities around the productions were designed and run. This is an account of the creation of a work that was, in 2009, made for and by an Education department, with an educational agenda. It will include comment on the reception of the original production, within the context of the activities of Opera North's Education department around the production. This section addresses the question of how this work was commissioned, within what framework, and with what objectives or 'success criteria', and it assesses the extent to which these objectives were achieved and the success criteria fulfilled.

3.4.2 Preconditions

There are three main elements in what one might theatrically refer to as the backstory to the commissioning of *Swanhunter*, which are relevant throughout the remainder of the chapter. The first is the conformation of each of the commissioning Opera North departments: Education and Projects. These departments are a result of the direction and history of the company, which have already been covered in some detail. The Projects department functions to develop and programme work, now largely in the Howard Assembly Room (HAR), and as such enjoys a large amount of artistic freedom; the Education department fundamentally must react to the agendas of the Arts Council (and government). Thus the artistic, historical and political contexts in which these departments exist are, in themselves, preconditions for their contributions to the emergence of new work. Related to the development of these two creative departments, and to Projects in particular, was the second precondition for *Swanhunter*: the 2009 renovation of the Howard Assembly Room, a new studio performance space for Opera North, for which *Swanhunter* was written. *Swanhunter* was also the centre-piece for the HAR's programme-theme of Autumn 2009, the 'Idea of North'. Thirdly, the commission was offered to Dove and Middleton, who have an established, successful history as a writing team, including a particular

focus on opera for children, and a history of work for Opera North. Most notably and recently the pair was commissioned to write the 2007 main-stage production, *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, an important precursor to the *Swanhunter* commission.

I have mentioned the three preconditions here discretely, but they are of course relational, as will become apparent throughout this case study. As is the nature of an ethnographic study including the oral histories of participants, the interwoven character of these elements is sometimes presented perhaps untidily, but this presentation is integral to the story as it is told by its subjects.

The following subsection covers the first two preconditions as described above. Also presented here is the ‘Idea of North’, a programming concept that arose from the creative intersection of the Education and Projects departments and the new venue. The next subsection outlines the interaction of composer and librettist with the company, and the relationships by which the commission occurred.

3.4.2.1 Education and Projects, the Howard Assembly Room and the ‘Idea of North’

As mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis, Music Director Richard Farnes has described Opera North as ‘more than an opera company’ and likened the nature of the company, quite tangibly, to ‘a spider’s web or maybe a teaching hospital’.³⁵⁰ The opera company as teaching hospital seems, on one level, to be an obvious metaphor for the development of young artists on site, but it also encapsulates an essence of social awareness and public service. The spider’s web is an interesting image of a tightly packed centre and an expanding, broader, sparser reach. This simile could apply to the work of Opera North in its structure of artistic creativity, with its main-stage work at the centre, connecting out to other work; to its geography, based in Leeds, stretching ever outwards; or to the audience demographic it seeks to develop. We might also glean from the ‘spider’s web’ a sense of organic creativity and some self-governance in the organisation of labour, increasing as we move away from the tightly controlled centre. Farnes went on to explain that he sees it as part of the company’s mission to develop ‘the artists, the art-form and the audience’. The company thus contains creative departments and facets that are linked, but not always directly, to the main-stage operatic productions. The term ‘Main Stage’ is used by Opera North to refer to operas that are staged in the Leeds Grand Theatre, and later tour regular venues around the north of England. In addition to the high-profile Main Stage productions, and some separate concerts by the Orchestra of Opera North, the company contains a large and active Education department (which was, in 2009, headed by Rebecca Walsh) and

³⁵⁰ Farnes, 10 June 2010.

an unusual Projects department, directed by Dominic Gray. These two departments are separate from one another, although Gray had been Head of Education some years previously, then moving to lead the newly created Projects department. As Head of Education, during the late 1990s, Gray had overseen a period of considerable growth in his department, which, in a private interview in June 2010, he linked to the years in government of ‘New Labour’:

I came here as Head of Education in 1996, and it was quite a small department. [...] So Opera North Education then started to grow quite quickly, I mean you’ve got to remember then, that period, 1996 through to probably 2001 was the period of the first, the Tony Blair Labour government, you know, he was elected in 1997 with the slogan ‘Education, Education, Education’. And suddenly arts education had a lot more money available to it than it had had before. [...] Arts organisations that wanted to spend more on education, that was embraced and we were encouraged to do that. So [...] the department grew in size, we started to do much longer and bigger projects, we started to do small scale touring of work for children.³⁵¹

Gray also told me that subsequent to this, the creation of his new Special Projects department had been inspired, in around 2000-01, by an idea from a German orchestra run by Steven Sloane who then also worked as a Music Director at Opera North. The Bochum Symphony Orchestra had functioned to provide a wider artistic context in the city for the work of the orchestra, with related events such as art exhibitions. Based on this model, Opera North Special Projects had similar goals.

In 2009-10 when I observed the company’s work on the original *Swanhunter* production, Gray was Rebecca Walsh’s line-manager. A connection thus remained between Education and Projects in terms of the personnel structure, although Gray told me in June 2010 that this need not be the case for much longer:

I think we’re heading to a position now, in the next six to eight months where Becky [Rebecca Walsh] will probably be line-managed by Richard Mantle directly rather than through me, because she needs to be able to talk directly to the boss, in a way, rather than through me. So we’re heading towards that, I think.³⁵²

Indeed, Walsh did eventually become Education Director, towards the beginning of 2012 according to Gray, directly managed by General Director Richard Mantle, with her own place on the management team. She left Opera North in summer 2014, and was replaced by Jacqui Cameron, as Education Director from the outset. Thus the hierarchy of the Education

³⁵¹ Gray, 9 June 2010.

³⁵² Ibid.

department was advanced; with a senior manager working within the team came an increased degree of autonomy for the department.³⁵³ In my interview with him, Gray was keen to point out to me that the Projects department had grown out of the Education department, which pleased him, because, as he explained ‘there’s always a public-interest dynamic’. He spoke of the two departments having a kind of agenda that is not just ‘art for art’s sake’, and that they have other jobs to do as well as (and at the same time as) ‘creating beautiful art’. Gray gave varied examples of these jobs and agendas, which seem to alter over time, but there was much mention of ‘service’ and a sense that his *raison d’être* for the Projects department is connected to ideas of progress and improvement. Currently working within the Projects team is a Community Engagement Manager and a Community Engagement Assistant to do development and access work with disadvantaged communities across Leeds. Gray’s ideas on art with a social agenda, and on artistic and company development, resonate, on a social level, with Richard Farnes’s words regarding the whole company’s mission to develop ‘artists, art-form and audience’.³⁵⁴

The HAR is the main venue for the programming work of Gray’s Projects department; its renovation and new use as a performance space was a huge gain for this department in 2009. Adjoining the Grand Theatre (Opera North’s home theatre), it was renovated as a recital hall, but also as a flexible space with movable seating and staging, a balcony, and the option of natural light. The HAR was opened in January 2009; *Swanhunter*, premiering in November of the same year, was the first opera to be commissioned for the space.³⁵⁵ The public use of this space is built around the rehearsal schedule of the Orchestra of Opera North; in addition to it now being the home of Gray’s Projects department, the space is well-used for Education department events. The venue’s web page describes it as ‘a captivating, inspiring performance venue [with a] blend of Victorian and contemporary styling’,³⁵⁶ and a ‘flexible and eclectic arts venue programmed by Opera North’.³⁵⁷ In a recorded clip, Gray says that it is ‘joined at the hip with Opera North, but it also has its own unique qualities, [...] a very intimate feeling’ and, echoing his words to me about the social and democratic function of art, he says that the space

³⁵³ Financially too, the funding for Education department, which had long since been ring-fenced for specific purpose, became supplemented by allocations for distinct projects: the ‘In Harmony’ project, is a national initiative funded by the Department for Education and the Arts Council whereby the Leeds-based arm of the project is being delivered by Opera North; ‘Exchanging Notes’ funded by Youth Music also has a project which is delivered through Opera North Education.

³⁵⁴ Farnes, 10 June 2010.

³⁵⁵ ‘Jonathan Dove’s *Swanhunter* is the first piece of music theatre conceived, written and designed especially for the Howard Assembly Room and it forms the centrepiece of “The Idea of North” series.’ ON, *HAR leaflet, Autumn 2009* (Leeds: ON, 2009), p.2.

³⁵⁶ ON, ‘Howard Assembly Room, Venue Information’, *Opera North* (2011)

<<http://www.operanorth.co.uk/howard-assembly-room/venue-information>> [accessed 13 June 2015]

(para. 1 of 10).

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.* (para. 10 of 10).

is ‘essentially for anybody’.³⁵⁸ McKechnie, in her ethnographically informed *Opera North*, quotes Gray, saying he wanted the HAR to feel ‘a bit like a kitchen, a place where you make things, whether you are an orchestra or a bunch of nine-year-olds’.³⁵⁹

Gray told me that he had been waiting six years for this renovated space, in addition to the prior refurbishment of the Grand Theatre. Because of this lengthy period of anticipation, the ideas and themes for programming the HAR were plentiful, well planned and developed. Such was the ‘Idea of North’. Having waited so long for this venue, the hand-over may have come with a sense of reawakening for him and his department, as one can infer from these words taken from my interview with him:

With the redevelopment of the Grand Theatre and the opening of the Howard Assembly Room as a second performing space, we thought it would be a good idea to try to reclaim that name, ‘Opera North’, and look at what it means to be in the north. What does the word ‘north’ mean to people? We didn’t want to go down the kind of ‘flat caps and mill towns’ version of the north, we wanted to go north north north. And kind of the operatic north. So we started thinking about [...] Wagner’s Ring cycle and how that uses lots of Norse myths [...] and we thought a lot about Scandinavian composers and poets and so on. So we kind of tried to think of the area north of the sixtieth parallel [...] north of sixty degrees [latitude] where it’s icy all the time [...] and we decided it would be good to have a season in the Howard Assembly Room that explored that idea of the icy, frozen ‘operatic North’, where the landscape goes on forever, where it’s very white, where encounters between human beings are of an epic nature. So that was the idea and as a centre-piece to that season we wanted to commission something new.³⁶⁰

So in claiming this new performance space, there was a reclaiming, by the smaller departments, of the very name of the company. This is politically interesting, in the context of the company, whose original name, in 1978, was ‘English National Opera North’, since it was then a branch of the London-based English National Opera. Even within the shortened name that came, in 1981, with the company’s independence, there remains a sense of far-away ‘otherness’ bestowed by the London company upon that perceived rarity, an opera company based somewhere other than the capital.³⁶¹ As outlined by Gray above, in *Swanhunter* and the ‘Idea of North’, the ‘otherness’ of the label ‘North’ has effectively been pushed further away from the

³⁵⁸ ON, *Welcome to the Howard Assembly Room/Venue/Leeds*, online video recording, ON, 14 March 2011, <<http://www.operanorth.co.uk/howard-assembly-room/venue-information>> [accessed 13 June 2015].

³⁵⁹ McKechnie, *Opera North*, p.177.

³⁶⁰ Gray, 9 June 2010.

³⁶¹ The other ‘national’ opera companies in the UK are The Royal Opera and English National Opera, both based in London, Scottish Opera in Glasgow and Welsh National Opera in Cardiff.

north of England and into a northern ‘other’ beyond, a foreign Norse wilderness. Opera in the north of England is thus reclaimed and normalised, the label imposed by London having been subverted; ‘North’ itself has been diverted elsewhere.

Indeed there was, around this time, something of a *Zeitgeist* regarding ‘the Idea of North’. The title itself mirrored a 2005 book by Peter Davidson, which points to an elusive sense of icy exoticism and ‘otherness’. Davidson writes of ‘North’ itself being the ‘elsewhere’ that is north of where you are: ‘North is always a shifting idea, always relative, always going away from us [...] North moves always out of reach, receding towards the polar night, which is equally the midnight dawn in the summer sky.’³⁶² The title, ‘The Idea of North’, has in fact been much used by various artistic ventures. Gray believes that its origin is in the radio documentary of 1967 by Canadian pianist Glenn Gould for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and that the idea then became reworked into various artistic contexts.³⁶³ In what seems to be local *Zeitgeist* in Leeds, the City Art Gallery had, in 2000, hosted an exhibition entitled ‘The Idea of North’, and in 2008, as part of the 150th anniversary celebrations for Leeds Town Hall, the University of Leeds and Leeds Metropolitan University presented the conference *Music and the Idea of North*.³⁶⁴ It was Gray’s own ‘Idea of North’ that formed the basis for the beginnings of *Swanhunter*, but his colleague Rebecca Walsh was a crucial partner in the decisions around commissioning. Walsh’s ambition was that her Education department should commission a high-profile opera that was suitable for children. In the account she gave me, Walsh’s version of the ‘Idea of North’ proved to be closer to home, and perhaps more explicitly child-friendly, than Gray’s:

The other things we had in mind in terms of the story were the north of England [...] So when I say the north of England, that became more generally ‘the north’. And the idea was really thinking about those characteristics that northern people have, anywhere where you are in the north, you know northern Europe, northern England [...] the cold and [...] how that changes people. So we wanted to have something northern in quality that people would somehow recognise. It wouldn’t necessarily be a big deal, it wouldn’t be something you necessarily have to tell them before they came to see it [...] but

³⁶² Peter Davidson, *The Idea of North* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), p.8.

³⁶³ Such recycling of the ‘Idea of North’ is evident in Davidson, *The Idea of North*; Sherrill Grace, *Canada and the Idea of North* (Montreal: McQueen’s University Press, 2002); Dan Grimley’s talk ahead of the 2007 BBC Prom 43, ‘Music and the Idea of North, Grieg’s Piano Concerto’ (2007) <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/proms/2007/whatson/talks/shtml>> [accessed 14 October 2012].

³⁶⁴ University of Leeds, ‘Music and the Idea of North’, *University of Leeds School of Music* (2008) <www.leeds.ac.uk/music/research/north_final_abstracts.pdf> [accessed 14 October 2012].

somehow they'd feel attached to it because somehow it matched some of their own characteristics.³⁶⁵

At the time of the original *Swanhunter* production, the Education department, under Walsh was expanding, with six members of staff (see Table 1).

Role	Staff member
Head of Education	Rebecca Walsh
Education Manager	Helen Mahoney
Education Producer	Alex Bradshaw
Education Producer	Kathryn O'Doherty
Education Officer	Hannah Dilworth
Education Assistant	Laura Kestell

Table 1: Opera North Education staff at the time of *Swanhunter* 2009³⁶⁶

The expansion has since continued, with twenty-three Education staff members now listed on the company website (see Figure 3),³⁶⁷ and a claim to be 'one of the leading arts education departments in the country'.³⁶⁸

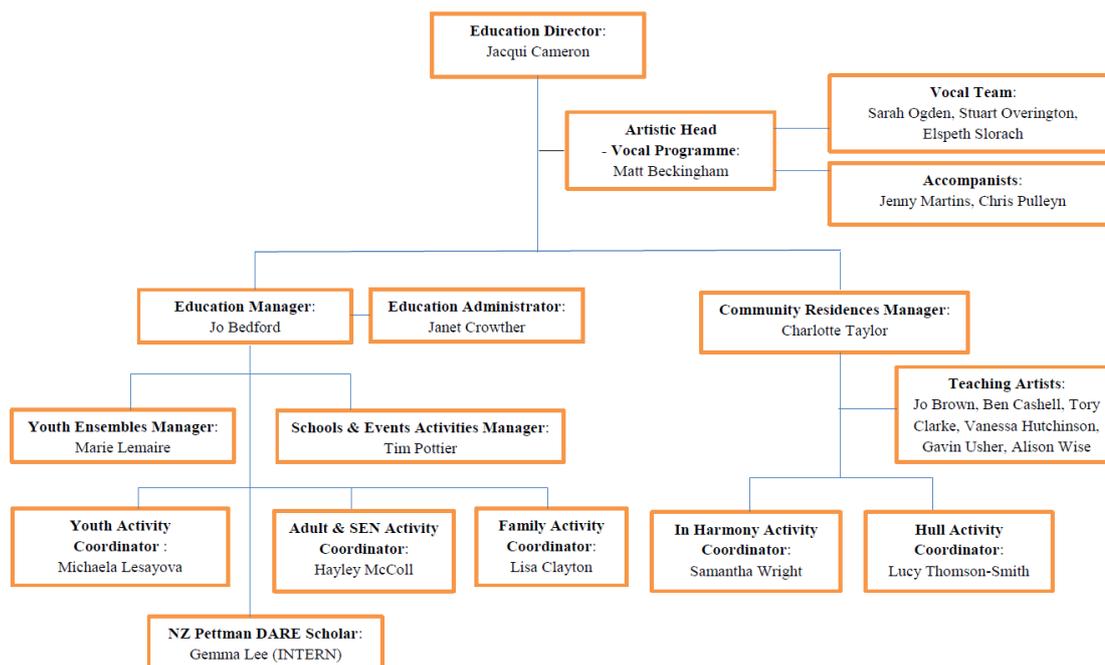


Figure 3: Opera North Education staff chart, 2015³⁶⁹

³⁶⁵ Interview with Rebecca Walsh at Premier House, Leeds, 26 October 2009, from dictaphone.

³⁶⁶ ON, *Swanhunter*, programme brochure, ed. by Alex Bradshaw and Becky Lane (Leeds: ON, 2009), p.14.

³⁶⁷ ON, 'About Us, Who's Who' (para. 8 of 12). Additionally two Community Engagement staff, an HE Co-ordinator, and a DARE Consultant are listed under the Projects department.

³⁶⁸ ON, 'About Us, Welcome to Opera North', ON [n.d.] <<http://www.operanorth.co.uk/about>> [accessed 23 December 2015] (para. 4 of 6).

³⁶⁹ Management structure emailed to me from ON Education Director Jacqui Cameron on 8 August 2016, included with permission.

The expanded Education department of the present day (Figure 3), its ethos and various activities can be contextualised by looking, briefly, at the education departments of the other four publicly funded national opera companies in the UK:

i. Royal Opera House

The Royal Opera House currently advertises a broad range of access and education-related projects on its website under the banner of ‘Learning’ (although some are related purely to dance as opposed to opera).³⁷⁰ In comparison with the Opera North ethos, many of the ROH projects appear to prioritise excellence of outcome over open participation, although there are projects that fit both agendas. A Youth Opera Company, started in 2010, operates by audition, with auditions being by invitation for those children or schools that have been involved in existing ROH projects.³⁷¹ This maintains a high degree of control for the company, and potential applicants are advised that speculative applications cannot be considered. The ROH ‘Welcome’ programme offers reduced price tickets (£5-20) to families who have ‘never been to a ballet or opera at the Royal Opera House before’.³⁷² ‘Family Sundays’ offer a variety of activities for children (aged six and over) and their families, although have been on hold since January 2016 for building work.³⁷³ ‘All Together Opera’ is a programme for those over sixty-five living in Camden and Westminster, with an extension of the project, the ‘All Together Opera Company’ for invited participants.³⁷⁴ These projects (as well as some online resources) are advertised under the sub-heading of ‘Families’, although it could be argued that only the Welcome performances currently cater explicitly for families, and that this could therefore be an area for development. Under ‘Schools and Colleges’ the ROH advertises the following: schools’ matinees; the ‘Chance to Dance’ ballet programme for Year 3 children (aged seven to eight); apprenticeships (paid employment with college day release) in all areas; a Design Challenge for Sixth Form or Further Education students; a fanfare-writing competition for pupils of secondary age; and a National Nutcracker project involving much teacher-training and matinee attendance for Key Stage 2.³⁷⁵ More Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for teachers to support

³⁷⁰ ROH, ‘Learning and Participation’, *ROH* [n.d.] <<http://www.roh.org.uk/learning>> [accessed 10 August 2016].

³⁷¹ ROH, ‘Youth Opera Company’, *ROH* [n.d.] <<http://www.roh.org.uk/learning/families/youth-opera-company>> [accessed 10 August 2016].

³⁷² ROH, ‘Welcome Performances’, *ROH* [n.d.] <<http://www.roh.org.uk/learning/families/welcome-performances>> [accessed 10 August 2016].

³⁷³ ROH, ‘Family Sundays’, *ROH* [n.d.] <<http://www.roh.org.uk/functions/family-sundays>> [accessed 10 August 2016].

³⁷⁴ ROH, ‘All Together Opera’, *ROH* [n.d.] <<http://www.roh.org.uk/learning/families/all-together-opera>> [accessed 10 August 2016].

³⁷⁵ ROH, ‘Schools and Colleges’, *ROH* [n.d.] <<http://www.roh.org.uk/learning/schools-and-colleges>> [accessed 10 August 2016].

matinee attendance for schools is advertised elsewhere on the ROH ‘Learning’ webpage.³⁷⁶ ‘ROH Thurrock’, since 2015 the location of the company’s Bob and Tamar Manoukian Costume Centre, has extended education and community provision, including a degree course in Costume Construction, in partnership with South Essex College and University of the Arts London.³⁷⁷ In another partnership, ROH Thurrock has been working with the local council since 2014 to deliver the ‘Thurrock Trailblazer’ programme in schools, addressing the need to deliver children’s ‘Cultural Entitlement’, which may otherwise have been missed; again, teachers’ professional development is included.³⁷⁸ The Manoukian Production Workshop also provides open ‘Initiative days’ where schools and groups can book to see behind the scenes, learn skills and take part in activities.³⁷⁹ The Thurrock ‘Young Vocal Leader Programme’ is a development idea, whereby young people train to lead singing; this development programme cascades skills to the choral singers ultimately being led by the programme participants.³⁸⁰ Thus, as with the teachers’ CPD, far more individuals go on to benefit from the training and development of a few. Thurrock also hosts a Community Chorus, and Big Sing Days for those aged eight to twenty-five in Thurrock.³⁸¹ Perhaps most structurally ambitious is ‘ROH Bridge’, a large project, begun in 2012, with many partners. It provides strategy and advocacy for cultural learning across Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire, Essex and North Kent and has ambitions for a broad reach, currently funded by Arts Council England up until 2018.³⁸² Also under ‘Learning’, the ROH promotes its archive, accessible to researchers by pre-arrangement, but with much digital information freely available online, and its ‘Insights’ events, including open rehearsals, public interviews, pre-performance talks, beginners guides, behind the scenes demonstrations and participatory workshops.³⁸³

It is evident that the ROH now seeks to integrate the concept of ‘Learning’ into the everyday work of the company, and that activities described are run by discrete teams within a

³⁷⁶ ROH, ‘Continuing Professional Development’, *ROH* [n.d.]

<<http://www.roh.org.uk/learning/teachers/cpd>> [accessed 10 August 2016].

³⁷⁷ ROH, ‘ROH Thurrock’, *ROH* [n.d.] <<http://www.roh.org.uk/about/thurrock/roh-thurrock>> [accessed 10 August 2016].

³⁷⁸ ROH, ‘Thurrock Trailblazer’, *ROH* [n.d.] <<http://www.roh.org.uk/learning/learning-in-thurrock/thurrock-trailblazer>> [accessed 10 August 2016].

³⁷⁹ ROH, ‘Inspiration Days’, *ROH* [n.d.] <<http://www.roh.org.uk/learning/learning-in-thurrock/inspiration-days>> [accessed 10 August 2016].

³⁸⁰ ROH, ‘Young Vocal Leader Programme’, *ROH* [n.d.] <<http://www.roh.org.uk/learning/learning-in-thurrock/thurrock-young-vocal-leader-programme>> [accessed 10 August 2016].

³⁸¹ ROH, ‘Community Chorus’, *ROH* [n.d.] <<http://www.roh.org.uk/learning/learning-in-thurrock/community-chorus>>; ‘Thurrock Big Sing Days’, *ROH* [n.d.] <<http://www.roh.org.uk/learning/learning-in-thurrock/thurrock-big-sing-days>> [both accessed 10 August 2016].

³⁸² ROH, ‘Royal Opera House Bridge’, *ROH* [n.d.] <<http://www.roh.org.uk/learning/royal-opera-house-bridge>> [accessed 10 August 2016].

³⁸³ ROH, ‘ROH Collections’, *ROH* [n.d.] <<http://www.roh.org.uk/about/roh-collections>>; ‘Insights’, *ROH* <<http://www.roh.org.uk/learning/insights>> [accessed 10 August 2016].

portfolio of activities. ROH Bridge, for example, is effectively a separate institution with its own aims and agenda, and the ROH Thurrock Learning and Participation team works locally and relatively separately from the main company and its education work, an hour away in Covent Garden. ‘Learning’ itself takes the form of various age-groups, from school-based learning to paid apprenticeships for adults, community singing for pensioners and professional research access to the archive. This is a slightly different model from that of Opera North with its main offices on site, and a centralised Education team and Projects department running almost all outreach opportunities. At ON, the Education team itself deals mainly with children. ‘ROH Learning’ includes a structural approach with much mention of the Continuing Professional Development of classroom teachers, as well as artistic development of community members such as Vocal Leaders, and the strategic development of the arts in a specific area. Thus there appears to be a strategic aim to maximise the effect of the company, and to spread the benefits of association with the company as far as possible.

ii. English National Opera

The ENO ‘Learn’ webpage is more clearly organised with regard to activities for various age groups. There is an overview of the umbrella ‘ENO Baylis’ programme which covers all educational activities, and four other sections: opportunities for five to eighteen-year-olds; opportunities for eighteen to twenty-five-year-olds; opportunities for adults; and recent projects.³⁸⁴ The children’s opportunities include ‘Opera Squad’, the flagship secondary programme, a ‘Youth Programme’ to develop the creative interests of secondary-aged children out of school, in-school projects, visits and family days for primary-aged children, and reduced price tickets for school and other groups.³⁸⁵ It is notable that ENO’s school work is directed primarily at secondary-aged children, whereas ON has thus far catered most prominently to younger children, although the age-range of activities by both companies has expanded. In the young adult bracket, ENO advertises its creative partnership with Higher Education, generally, and also specifically with University College London.³⁸⁶ ON has developed such partnerships with the University of Leeds, the Royal Northern College of Music, and the University of Auckland, New Zealand, but these are generally not considered under the remit of the Education department. ENO’s adult activities include open access ‘Know the Show’ day workshops, large scale community outreach projects, and pre-performance talks, all designed to increase knowledge in relation to specific operas on the main stage. There is also an open access

³⁸⁴ ENO, ‘Learn’, *ENO* [n.d.] <<https://www.eno.org/discover-opera/learning/>> [accessed 10 August 2016].

³⁸⁵ ENO, ‘Opportunities for 5-18 year olds’, *ENO* [n.d.] <<https://www.eno.org/discover-opera/learning/opportunities-for-5-18-year-olds/>> [accessed 10 August 2016].

³⁸⁶ ENO, ‘Opportunities for 18-25 year olds’, *ENO* [n.d.] <<https://www.eno.org/discover-opera/learning/opportunities-for-18-25-year-olds/>> [accessed 10 August 2016].

community choir. ENO, like ON deliver a local division of Streetwise Opera offering arts participation to people who have experienced homelessness.³⁸⁷ With its parent-company status and similar access agenda, it is perhaps not surprising that the organisation and priorities in ENO's education programme seems familiar in comparison to that of ON.

iii. Welsh National Opera

WNO's education and access work is advertised under the heading 'Explore: Take Part'.³⁸⁸ WNO Youth Opera 16-25 is formed biannually, and provides 'professional training and unique performance opportunities' for sixteen to twenty-five-year-olds. Various professional successes are listed from its alumni. There is also an open invitation to make contact with the company in order to be considered, and auditions are held nationally.³⁸⁹ Youth Opera 14-16 is in its second year and meets fortnightly in Cardiff, offering training opportunities for young singers of this age group without audition, and Youth Opera 10-14 meets weekly, requiring 'no previous experience, and [...] no auditions, all we ask is a regular commitment and enthusiasm for learning new skills and making new friends'.³⁹⁰ There is also a design challenge listed in relation to WNO's 2017 production of *Madam Butterfly*.³⁹¹ In the 'Community' section, WNO lists a community choir that is newly formed for every performance, sometimes auditioned and sometimes not.³⁹² An open access 'Come and Sing' event is also advertised for all, whereby 'everyone is invited to come along and sing'.³⁹³ Under 'Schools and Families' no events are currently advertised, but a contact number is provided to enquire about such opportunities.³⁹⁴ And under 'Partner Projects', WNO describes its professional development for artists with ArtWorks Cymru, and, as with ON and ENO, there is local involvement with a Streetwise Opera project.³⁹⁵

³⁸⁷ ENO, 'Opportunities for adults', *ENO* [n.d.] <<https://www.eno.org/discover-opera/learning/opportunities-for-adults/>> [accessed 10 August 2016].

³⁸⁸ WNO, 'Take Part', *WNO* [n.d.] <<https://www.wno.org.uk/takepart>> [accessed 10 August 2016].

³⁸⁹ WNO, 'Youth Opera 16-25', *WNO* [n.d.] <<https://www.wno.org.uk/youth-opera-16-25>> [accessed 10 August 2016].

³⁹⁰ WNO, 'Youth Opera 14-16', *WNO* [n.d.] <<https://www.wno.org.uk/youth-opera-14-18>>; 'Youth Opera 10-14', *WNO* [n.d.] <<https://www.wno.org.uk/youth-opera-10-14>> [both accessed 10 August 2016].

³⁹¹ WNO, 'Could you design a set for Madam Butterfly?', *WNO* [n.d.] <<https://www.wno.org.uk/news/could-you-design-set-madam-butterfly>> [accessed 10 August 2016].

³⁹² WNO, 'Community Chorus', *WNO* [n.d.] <<https://www.wno.org.uk/community-chorus>> [accessed 10 August 2016].

³⁹³ WNO, 'Come & Sing', *WNO* [n.d.] <<https://www.wno.org.uk/come-sing-0>> [accessed 10 August 2016].

³⁹⁴ WNO, 'Schools and Families', *WNO* [n.d.] <<https://www.wno.org.uk/schools-and-families>> [accessed 10 August 2016].

³⁹⁵ WNO, 'Partner Projects', *WNO* [n.d.] <<https://www.wno.org.uk/partner-projects>> [accessed 10 August 2016].

The unusual changing pattern described of the community choir could be viewed as a particularly Welsh phenomenon, reflecting the tradition of *Cymanfa Ganu* ('gathering to sing') whereby chapel communities come together occasionally for a choral event such as an oratorio in an event-based or festival pattern. Indeed WNO was formed in 1946 as a company of amateurs, and did not become fully professional until 1973. This spirit of access, which was originally chapel and community-based, is evident in the community focus of WNO's access agenda. WNO's focus on participatory singing, prioritised quite clearly over the other arts involved in opera, also reflects the Welsh cultural heritage, choral singing having expanded during the nineteenth century in accordance with a growing cultural nationalist movement, moving from the chapel to the *Eisteddfod* (Welsh festival).

iv. Scottish Opera

Scottish Opera is, since 2005, a depleted force in comparison with the other four national opera companies, no longer being in possession of a permanent chorus. Its education and access provision continues, also on smaller scale. The website advertises the company's Primary Schools Tour around Scotland, a day long musical workshop and performance by the children, and teacher professional development.³⁹⁶ The other available project, 'Opera Unwrapped for Children' is a backstage experience for similarly aged upper primary children.³⁹⁷ Under the title 'Join In!', Scottish Opera advertises its 'Connect Company' of fourteen to twenty-one-year-olds, making a chorus, orchestra and stage management team, participating in a year-long workshop programme. Interestingly, in August 2016, for the Aberdeen International Youth Festival, the Connect Chorus and Orchestra joined with the Opera North Youth Company for a Kurt Weill double bill.³⁹⁸ An open access Community Choir is in operation in Glasgow, and there are two 'Memory Spinners' groups, in Glasgow and Edinburgh, for people living with dementia and their carers, using music, storytelling, movement and visual arts to create performance from memories, and to form support networks.³⁹⁹

Thus we see that Opera North's assertion that it has 'one of the leading arts education departments in the country' is no small claim, considering some of the structures described above, but also given the £267 million ACE investment in music and cultural education

³⁹⁶ Scottish Opera, 'Primary Schools Tour', *Scottish Opera* [n.d.]

<<https://www.scottishopera.org.uk/schools/primary-schools-tours>> [accessed 10 August 2016].

³⁹⁷ Scottish Opera, 'Opera Unwrapped for Children', *Scottish Opera* [n.d.]

<<https://www.scottishopera.org.uk/schools/opera-unwrapped-for-children>> [accessed 10 August 2016].

³⁹⁸ Scottish Opera, 'Connect', *Scottish Opera* [n.d.] <<https://www.scottishopera.org.uk/connect>> [accessed 10 August 2016].

³⁹⁹ Scottish Opera, 'Join In', *Scottish Opera* [n.d.] <<https://www.scottishopera.org.uk/join-in>> [accessed 10 August 2016].

programmes since 2012.⁴⁰⁰ Opera North itself has had recent success, with Arts Council core funding increased to £10.4 million per year for the period between 2015 and 2018, amounting to 63% of the company's turnover.⁴⁰¹ Prior to that, in 2012, the company had become a major recipient of the DCMS 'Catalyst Endowment Fund', a donation-match funding award of £3 million. This sum contributed to Opera North's own 'Future Fund' set up in 2008, enabling the creation of new work for families, the continuation of the Opera North Children's Chorus, and outreach work such as that with homeless people (or those who have been homeless) for Streetwise Opera.⁴⁰² Opera North has also been successful in gaining independent funding for access work, including a substantial award from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation in 2013 to create a five-year Community Engagement project, with two associated staff, and a portfolio of activities engaging disadvantaged sections of the community.⁴⁰³ Small but significant philanthropic donations specifically for Education included a £10,000 grant in 2015 from the Anne Maguire Fund to enable schoolchildren to perform and attend opera, and in 2012 a £19,000 donation from Jimbo's Fund (from late local businessman Jimi Heselden) for work with young people with Asperger's Syndrome.⁴⁰⁴ Also a specific gain for Opera North Education was its selection, in 2012, and subsequent continuation as a provider of the national 'In Harmony' project, funded directly by the Arts Council and the Department for Education.⁴⁰⁵

The ON Education personnel chart (Figure 3) does not comprise all those who work on behalf of Opera North Education. The department functions as a creative, administrative framework, organising and contracting artists to work in various settings. Planned events includes workshops taken into schools and educational establishments; projects where children come into the company to participate in workshops and performances that are run in-house; and the touring of small-scale operatic productions designed specifically for young people. The *Swanhunter* commission was Walsh's first, but there were recent smaller-scale precedents in the department for commissioning and producing miniature operas for children, including Kate

⁴⁰⁰ ACE, 'Children and Young People', ACE [n.d.] <<http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/how-we-make-impact/children-and-young-people>> [accessed 1 September 2016] (para. 4 of 5).

⁴⁰¹ ON, 'News, Arts Council England funding announcement for 2015-18', ON [n.d.] <<https://www.operanorth.co.uk/news/arts-council-england-funding-announcement-for-2015-18--2>> [accessed 1 September 2016] (para. 4 of 6).

⁴⁰² ON, 'News, Opera North recipients of government Catalyst Endowment Fund', ON [n.d.] <<https://www.operanorth.co.uk/news/opera-north-recipients-of-government-catalyst-endowment-fund>> [accessed 1 September 2016].

⁴⁰³ Paul Hamlyn Foundation, 'Case Study: Opera North', *Paul Hamlyn Foundation* [n.d.] <<http://www.phf.org.uk/case-studies/opera-north/>> [accessed 2 September 2016].

⁴⁰⁴ ON, 'News, £10,000 grant from Ann Maguire Fund for young opera explorers', ON [n.d.] <<https://www.operanorth.co.uk/news/10-000-grant-from-ann-maguire-fund-for-young-opera-explorers>>; 'News, New funding for Verve project for young people with Asperger's Syndrome', ON [n.d.] <<https://www.operanorth.co.uk/news/new-funding-for-verve-project-for-young-people-with-asperger-s-syndrome>> [both accessed 1 September 2016].

⁴⁰⁵ ON, 'Education and Engagement, In Harmony Opera North (Leeds)', ON [n.d.] <<https://www.operanorth.co.uk/education/in-harmony>> [accessed 1 September 2016].

Pearson's *The Pied Piper* in 2005 and a *Little Magic Flute* in 2003. However the choice to commission Jonathan Dove, a renowned and established composer, meant that *Swanhunter* would not be affordable within the Education budget, even in combination with funding from Gray's Projects department. But within the working structure of Opera North this type of budgetary issue does not necessarily preclude smaller departments from making relatively big commissions. General Director Richard Mantle is known to be approachable by middle-managers such as Walsh with ideas and requests, as she outlined to me:

If we're going to do something quite high-profile like this, also when we want to have a high profile in the company, then we'll start to talk to Richard Mantle and various other people about it. And then [...] Richard might say 'Well actually I think you should ask Jonathan Dove to do this because...' [...] Actually *we* wanted it, but for us it was a budgetary thing that we couldn't really afford a commission within our show budget [...] So he [Mantle] paid; the commission came out of another pot of money.⁴⁰⁶

Gray later elaborated further on how this funding had been secured:

Opera North keeps a certain amount of money, a very small amount of money for contingency, for exceptional moments in the year. So nobody would expect Education to have enough budget to be able to commission a major composer like Jonathan Dove; I mean it costs tens of thousands of pounds. So that's where Becky [Rebecca Walsh] would talk to Richard and say 'Look, I think this is an exceptional opportunity, we should use some of that fund that you keep aside for exceptional opportunities and use it for that'.⁴⁰⁷

Walsh and Gray approached Mantle with this request, and the idea was deemed to be worthy of extra funding from what Gray describes as Mantle's contingency fund for 'exceptional opportunities'.

It is interesting to note that, despite my direct questioning about what did happen, both Walsh and Gray (interviewed separately) preferred to speak in abstract terms, as if these interactions with Mantle were theoretical. Walsh said, 'if we're going to do something [...] like this [...] Richard might say ...' and Gray continued, 'that's where Becky would talk to Richard and say...'. There are several possible reasons for this kind of verbal abstraction of real events, which appears subconscious. One is the separation in time between these conversations with Mantle, that actually took place around 2007, and my interviews with Walsh in 2009, and Gray in 2010. In reporting direct interactions so long after the event, they could have been concerned about the accuracy of their accounts, and so preferred to speak in abstract terms. Another

⁴⁰⁶ Walsh, 26 October 2009.

⁴⁰⁷ Gray, 9 June 2010.

potential reason is the delicate balance of ownership and power in creative collaboration; it is possible that neither interviewee felt comfortable in directly reporting events over which they felt someone else had more or equal creative ownership, and may remember or report differently. Such is the nature of the opera house, as I have observed it, where, for the highly collaborative, everyday work of creating and producing opera, words and relationships are very often considered acutely. It is also the case that once a piece is finally in production, or even in rehearsal, the work of the commissioners moves on, and that they are then more inclined to consider future commissioning (albeit sometimes influenced by what has gone before) than actively to reflect on past events in the detail that I am requesting of them.

Having looked at the long anticipated acquisition of the Howard Assembly Room for Gray's Projects department and his political reclaiming of the company name with his 'Idea of North', I now want to consider Walsh's ambitions for a high-profile Education commission. For Walsh, *Swanhunter* was important in order that children would see opera that was purpose-made for them on stage, but also for the continued artistic and professional growth of Education department, as she clarified to me:

I like the fact of our department making a piece of professional work. [...] Most of the work that we do is taking professional artists into schools and making work with the kids and the artists together. But it's a really good exercise, I think, for a department that's essentially an artistic department, to also make some work ourselves that's purely professional, but for those participants that we normally would work with. So I think for all of us, all of my colleagues in the department, it just allows us to understand, as well, how you make an opera, and that's really important for our job.

[JD: *So it's sort of professional development as well?*]

I think so, yep. I feel it is. I don't see how an education department, you know, a bunch of us can go out telling people how an opera is made if we don't... if we've not experienced that ourselves. So I think it's... for me it's [a] really healthy exercise.⁴⁰⁸

With *Swanhunter*, Walsh wanted to affect perceptions and understanding of Opera North staff and external stakeholders regarding the company's accessibility and democratic outlook, through the work of her department. This was her response when I asked about her overall aims for the project:

I think... for Opera North to be perceived as a company (from outside and inside, so I mean my colleagues here as well) that everyone sees Opera North as a company that sees

⁴⁰⁸ Walsh, 26 October 2009.

opera as an art form that should appeal to anyone, of any age, and makes [it] work, therefore, for anyone, of any age.⁴⁰⁹

Walsh also spoke of her goal to provide an enriching learning experience for children, and to arm them with the knowledge, before they see an opera, that might enable them to engage with it critically. She very much wanted these children to have a response to opera, whether positive or negative, but to have experienced it, and not to be ambivalent. To facilitate all of this, the idea of a custom-made work designed for children, of a length suitable for their attention-spans, with a strong sense of narrative and an appealing story, was central. So for Walsh the *Swanhunter* commission held the potential for several desired outcomes, artistic, educational and political. Most immediate was the education of children in the art form, and their cultural enrichment by way of engaging with the opera. The process of commissioning would also, she hoped, develop her young, professional team in the business of opera creation. In doing this work, she also hoped to make the access agenda prominently visible to those inside and outside of the company. Finally, in that the Education team would be affecting this access visibility, the department might then grow in profile within the company and beyond. In a department that had previously proved to be successful (without having a particularly high profile) for so long, it is understandable that Walsh should want to make her mark. In Gray's account of the growth of his Education department in the late 1990s, he credits a stroke of political luck in terms of the change of administration to Blair's Labour government, and its priority for spending on education, saying 'I hit this job at just the right time'. Some months after the initial *Swanhunter* production, in May 2010, Britain experienced another change in government away from centre-left 'New Labour' and into the unforeseen and unpredictable future of an unusual Coalition between the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties.⁴¹⁰ Thus the *Swanhunter* project lay, chronologically, at the end of a political era of government in the UK. I will later make a brief comparison with the workings of the same Education department in 2015, in the production of another *Swanhunter*. This production happened during the final weeks of Coalition government that ceased to be in May 2015, at which point the Conservative party was re-elected alone.

3.4.2.2 *Dove, Middleton and Opera North*

Besides the drive from Gray and Walsh on this project, and the benefit of a new performance space for Projects and Education work, there was also a third precondition that made this specific commission possible, and that led to the work that was ultimately created for the company. As with many operatic commissions, the lineage of choices and ideas can be traced

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁴¹⁰ Britain had not previously seen a Coalition government since World War II.

back through previous works and previous interactions between individuals. The story of the creation of *Swanhunter* thus begins part way through the creative journey of another work. Jonathan Dove and Alasdair Middleton had approached Opera North in 2005 with their idea for *The Adventures of Pinocchio*. According to Gray, the commission had actually been agreed with ENO, but this agreement had subsequently fallen through. Despite this, two commissioning partners (London's Sadler's Wells Theatre and Theater Chemnitz, Germany) were already secured. The existence of these partners then made Opera North's decision to come on board with *Pinocchio* much easier in financial terms, with each partner funding a third of the commission fee. Thus Dove and Middleton's approach to Opera North was successful, and the pair was commissioned to write a large-scale work based on the Pinocchio story by Carlo Collodi, which then premiered on 21 December 2007 in the Leeds Grand Theatre. *Pinocchio* was a huge production, the programme stating a running time of two hours and fifty minutes, with twenty-five named characters and thirty-five chorus members. The usual orchestra was augmented with a saxophone, a mandolin, and two accordions as well as a pianist (with celeste) four percussionists and a harp. It was also ultimately a commercial success (relatively speaking for opera, which seldom actually runs into profit) with the subsequent production of a commercial DVD,⁴¹¹ the selling of the work onto other companies, and an Opera North revival in December 2010. It was during the residency of Dove and Middleton in Leeds for the purpose of overseeing the production of *Pinocchio* that they were approached by Gray and Walsh. This approach consisted of the idea that the Education department might commission the pair again to write an short opera, with reduced resources, for 'families', but with the influence of a Wagnerian epic tale based on some kind of Norse legend. This operatic 'Idea of North' was then, after some consideration, adapted and transformed by Dove and Middleton, via a section of the epic national poem of Finland, *The Kalevala*, into *Swanhunter*.⁴¹²

Dove and Middleton are an established writing team, solidly legitimised as a partnership by much previous experience and success writing operas together for young people. An equally important aspect of their 'establishment' in this case was the very fact of their previous success at Opera North. The company is immensely proud of the success of *Pinocchio*, and a previous connection with Dove was also mentioned to me by Gray, whereby Dove had, around twenty years ago, worked for Opera North as a community animateur, engaging children in production and song. Gray implied that Dove's relationship with the company had prompted him to bring *Pinocchio* to Opera North after ENO failed to produce it. Certainly the decision to

⁴¹¹ Jonathan Dove, *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, ON, cond. by David Parry (Opus Arte, OA1005D, 2009) [on DVD].

⁴¹² Elias Lönnrot, *The Kalevala*, trans. by Keith Bosley (Oxford: OUP, 1989).

commission the pair to write *Swanhunter* was based upon their previous work for the company, as well as their developing international profile as specialists in children's opera.

3.4.3 Story-telling, source selection and the self-reference of song

The approach to Dove and Middleton, Walsh told me, was something that she and Gray had wanted even before the success of *Pinocchio*, but seeing that opera in production had confirmed their preference for the pair and persuaded General Director Richard Mantle to find the extra funds required. Walsh's clear preference for Dove and Middleton revolved around the idea of quality story-telling. She spoke about the ideas behind the construction of opera for children and her priority to have 'a really strong narrative'. She also wanted her relatively inexperienced Education staff to learn about the elements of dramatic and musical story-telling by working with these expert creators. She spoke about their need to find out 'what the elements should be, and what the nature of the story should be, and just trying to find something really solid'. In praise of Dove and Middleton's ability to do this she said, 'I think when we did this commission we wanted it to be absolutely right, to get all of those things right, to have the right resources, to commission two people who would absolutely know how to do that.'⁴¹³

Clarity of story-telling was a very consistent theme that ran through this project, as Dove and Middleton told me themselves.⁴¹⁴ The importance of story-telling was voiced internally in production rehearsals, and externally in press articles at various times by the Director, Conductor and cast members. The effort to be child-centred was notable, even in communications around the industry and construction of the piece. In the programme, Middleton gave his own poetic account for children of his dramaturgical choices:

I spend a lot of my time looking for stories that can be sung. Stories that can be sung are not always the same as stories that can be told or acted or read. Stories that can be sung have certain ingredients. Maybe some stories just prefer to be sung.⁴¹⁵

The premise of story-telling as a central component had begun while planning the commission, before the story itself was even selected. Walsh had hoped for a resonance with contemporary children's fiction. She mentioned the necessity of action, and of appealing to boys, whom she felt might be more difficult than girls to draw in. Walsh and Gray both raised the idea of the Wagnerian influence. When I interviewed Walsh prior to *Swanhunter* opening,⁴¹⁶ she recalled,

⁴¹³ Walsh, 26 October 2009.

⁴¹⁴ Interview with Jonathan Dove and Alasdair Middleton, Café Nero, Leeds, 14 November 2009, from dictaphone.

⁴¹⁵ Alasdair Middleton and Jonathan Dove, 'Words and Music', *Swanhunter*, programme brochure (2009), p.9.

⁴¹⁶ Walsh, 26 October 2009.

‘Dominic and I both had this thing that we kept saying [...] “Oh, you know we should do a kind of Ring cycle for kids”.’ Walsh spoke about getting the ‘flavour’ of a Wagnerian epic, to be done in miniature, with characters who are ‘bizarre [...] and mysterious’ but ‘strong’, and, more specifically, she revealed, ‘I think that [...] *The Ring* [...] was something we thought about.’ She also explained the central idea of a ‘quest’ as a strategic and central element of plot, which might hold the attention of a young audience and compel them to follow the narrative, because ‘as soon as you know from the very beginning that there’s a quest then you’re going to follow this person through their trials, aren’t you? It’s sort of addictive’. She also mentioned the importance of magic, but still with a certain level of believability for children framed within an opera that, crucially, was not too long.⁴¹⁷

Walsh, although slightly hesitant and guarded, commented on Dove’s musical idiolect, which she had previously experienced, and had felt would be right for her project:

I don’t know if I’m right about this, but I kind of thought, musically, that Jonathan was... [...] I’ve seen *Flight* and I’ve seen *Pinocchio* here and [...] one or two other things. [...] He does do this kind of ‘swirly mists’ kind of thing... there’s this kind of incessant thing about it, it just keeps going on, which in terms of story-telling is brilliant. [...] As a composer he was the person who we thought best fitted this story. So it wasn’t just thinking ‘Oh *Pinocchio* was great, let’s get Jonathan!’; it was thinking ‘OK, we want someone who can really tell a story with music, and who can get that kind of richness, even with only six instruments can really get that kind of dramatic quality into the music’.⁴¹⁸

Having analysed accounts of the collaborative and compositional process in *Skin Deep*, we can see in Walsh’s account here a far more dramaturgically robust approach. Essentially in looking for someone ‘who can really tell a story with music’ and who can ‘really get that kind of dramatic quality into the music’, Walsh was looking for high quality musical dramaturgy.

In addition to the dramaturgical implications, the initial commissioning concept, with a request for a miniature Wagnerian epic, is interesting from a company perspective. For one reason, it points the way to the Ring cycle that was begun by Opera North in 2011, less than two years after the original *Swanhunter*; the plans for a Ring cycle had, of course, been in development a good while longer. Although the Education department was not involved in work around *The Ring*, Walsh’s and Gray’s interest in 2007 and onwards indicates a certain linked artistic consciousness within the company, moving towards interconnected goals. It is quite

⁴¹⁷ The brief was given between seventy-five and ninety minutes; it played ultimately at around eighty.

⁴¹⁸ Walsh, 26 October 2009. Walsh also noted Dove’s textural and rhythmic achievements with minimal instrumental resources.

typical of Opera North that these connections arise, in many ways unsolicited, unplanned or unspoken, but that there is an artistic *Zeitgeist* whereby events seem to move, as if by an implicit consensus, in the same direction.

It is perhaps unsurprising that an operatic 'Idea of North' should elicit some mention of *The Ring*, or Wagner more generally. The German opera tradition, as exemplified by Wagner, is significantly more 'northern' than its Italian counterpart, and thus figuratively representative of a tradition of opera coming from northern Europe. *The Ring* is also imbued with the idea of nature, *Wanderlust* and a specific German landscape; this is a land 'other' than our own in the north of England (although ironically it is actually geographically less northerly). But these ideas are figurative, and representative of the 'North' of the imagination, in Gray's words an 'operatic North',⁴¹⁹ wherever that may be.

Walsh and Gray's priorities were conveyed during their initial meeting with Dove and Middleton. Dove had already, in 1990, created a reduced adaptation of Wagner's Ring cycle for the City of Birmingham Touring Opera. In fact the Wagnerian influence in *Swanhunter* was something Dove referred to in official publicity, and that is evident in the adaptation of the translated Finnish text and some of the motivic writing in the score. An example of this textual adaptation is the comb from the original tale (taken from *The Kalevala*) that Lemminkäinen (the central character and the 'swan hunter' of the opera's title) throws into his Mother's door, its bleeding signalling his death. In Middleton's libretto this comb becomes a knife, perhaps in an allusion to Wotan's spear from *Das Rheingold*. The music of the knife in the door later develops into the motif of mortal danger, blood and the hero's death. When the knife music is originally heard (the 'dripping' descending semi-tones from bar 89 in violin and accordion, see Example 18) Lemminkäinen is considering the possibility of a bleeding death, as advised by his Mother. While this musical idea has considerably less time to unfold, and consequently less subtlety than the gradual development of some of Wagner's leitmotifs, the idea of a motif that hints at a plot to be revealed later is certainly of Wagnerian influence.

⁴¹⁹ Gray, 9 June 2010.

Example 18: ‘When this wound bleeds’. Bars 89-92 of Jonathan Dove, *Swanhunter* (London: Edition Peters, 2009)

The miniature Wagnerian directive certainly seemed to have played a part in the ultimate selection of the Lemminkäinen story, and became embedded in the work. In one press interview, Dove had said:

I don't want to overstate the case, but *Swanhunter* also has the possibility of being a kind of introduction to the world of Wagner. It's Nordic, it involves a hunter-hero represented by the horn and features a big piece of sustained singing at the end. In a way it's preparation for Brünnhilde and Isolde – and also the antidote. They sing themselves to death, but Lemminkäinen's mother sings him back to life.⁴²⁰

The selection of the story itself was problematic, with many Norse legends, based on sexuality or incest, proving to be unsuitable for a children's story. Gray had bombarded Dove and Middleton with story suggestions, as he had felt worried that they would give up on the project if a good source could not be located. About six months after the initial meeting, Middleton recalled the tale of Lemminkäinen being sung back to life from *The Kalevala*, and the agreement on that source was then unanimous, according to Gray:

So we all said ‘Right, that's it!’ because [...] singing was an essential part of the story, so it became [...] a story that was impossible to tell without song, which makes it perfect for opera. The last time we commissioned an opera for children we did *The Pied Piper* which is another story that has music essentially within the story. And we like that with operas

⁴²⁰ John Allison, ‘Opera North's *Swanhunter* -- Jonathan Dove interview’, *Telegraph*, 20 November 2009, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/opera/6616799/Opera-Norths-Swanhunter-Jonathan-Dove-interview.html>> [accessed 3 January 2016] (para. 12 of 13).

for children, because the children then can't say 'Why are they singing all the time?' because the reason they're singing is because it's about song.⁴²¹

In Dove's account, he was slightly more hesitant, owing to the compositional pressure that was created by that musical element of the story. His concern centred on the somewhat complex issue of the musical dramaturgy, or how best his music might serve the action on stage, which is itself self-referentially musical. Regarding the aria for Lemminkäinen's Mother, singing her son back to life, Dove recalled:

I think it's a bit scary because you're going to have to think of something quite good for the singer to do at that point. So that lodged in my mind, and so afterwards Alasdair gave me the story to read. [...] But there's a handful of stories out there. [...] I thought, you know, he had good stuff, exciting things, [...] things that you could get into, things that you can imagine on stage, but this one [...] sort of planted a seed I suppose. You know, it was haunting me. And so eventually I said 'Shall we just do that one?'.⁴²²

As Gray noted, the self-referential aspect of the opera, where song itself equals life, is self-promoting for opera, physically advocating the virtue of song. Dove's sound-bite quotation on the deeply operatic subject-matter of the story was also used to this effect in advertising the piece: 'What could be better than a story celebrating the magical and healing power of human song?'⁴²³ But throughout the lead-up to the production run, Dove also maintained that the Mother's singing-back-to-life aria was a huge risk:⁴²⁴

Because there's more extreme singing. More, in a way what you might expect to get in an opera. People singing at the top of their voice, you know [...]. But the gamble... the idea was that if the adventures were exciting enough, they will be ok with the fact that there's sort of ten minutes of singing right at the end before he comes back to life.⁴²⁵

Ultimately, judging from my observations of performances in 2009, the singing was indeed 'extreme', with some voices of Wagnerian proportion, such as that of Yvonne Howard playing Lemminkäinen's Mother, more than filling the tiny venues to which the production

⁴²¹ Gray, 9 June 2010.

⁴²² Dove and Middleton, 14 November 2009.

⁴²³ This quotation from Dove appeared on the Opera North website <operanorth.co.uk> prior to the production run in November 2009. ON, *ON* [n.d.] <operanorth.co.uk> [accessed 31 October 2009](title).

⁴²⁴ Dove published the following in a national newspaper the day before the *Swanhunter* premiere: 'Swanhunter is taking a risk – we're holding our breath to see if it works. It's not funny. And it involves quite a bit of intense singing. The gamble is that Lemminkäinen's adventures will be so exciting that the children won't mind the Mother's rather long piece of slow music right at the end.' Dove, 'How to Write Family-Friendly Opera'.

⁴²⁵ Dove, 14 November 2009.

toured.⁴²⁶ Although *Swanhunter* is constructed as a through-sung piece without spoken dialogue, the work was performed with an explicit self-awareness of its operatic nature. Singing was acknowledged as singing, and this was very much a part of the diegesis. Accompanied by twinkling glockenspiel, harp and ethereal harmonics on strings, Lemminkäinen sings ‘I sing strong spells’, powering through his magic charms, acknowledging that he is ‘singing’ other characters into water, into stone and into ash, with wordless melismatic flourishes at the point of effecting this magic (see Example 19).

The image displays two systems of musical notation for Example 19. The first system, starting at bar 318, features five staves: Glockenspiel (Glock.), Harp (Hp.), Lemminkäinen (Lem.), Violin (Vln.), and Double Bass (Db.). The Glockenspiel and Harp parts are marked *mf*. The Lemminkäinen vocal line includes the lyrics 'You I sing you to ash.' with a melisma 'Ah!' following. The Violin and Double Bass parts are marked *arco* and *mf*. The second system, starting at bar 321, continues the instrumental accompaniment with the same five staves. The Lemminkäinen vocal line continues with the melisma 'Ah!'. The score is framed by double bar lines at the beginning and end of each system.

Example 19: Lemminkäinen sings a boy to ash. Bars 318-22 of Dove, *Swanhunter*

He tells his enemy, Soppo Hat, ‘You are not worth a song!’, in the process wounding him so deeply that Soppo Hat begins plotting a revenge attack, which later results in Lemminkäinen’s death. Animals too are represented in song and by instrumental music; variously their vocal sounds and their rhythms of movement are musically expressed. Most notable is the Swan,

⁴²⁶ Howard went on to sing Fricka in *Das Rheingold* for Opera North and Sieglinde in *Die Walküre* with the Hallé Orchestra.

which has a wordless, coloratura aria, soaring above an atmospheric harp and a solo violin. The effect is mesmerising in its modal exoticism (see Example 20).⁴²⁷

The image shows a musical score for 'The Swan' from Puccini's *Swanhunter*. It consists of three systems of music. The first system (bars 1149-50) includes a Harp (Hp) with a complex, arpeggiated accompaniment, a Soprano (Sw) with a long, wordless melodic line, and a Violin (Vln) with a solo line. The second system (bar 1151) continues the accompaniment and features a Soprano with a triplet melodic line and a Violin with a triplet melodic line. The score is marked 'senza sord.' and 'mp'.

Example 20: The Swan. Bars 1149-51 of Dove, *Swanhunter*

The element of self-conscious or ‘diegetic’ song (where characters appear to be aware that they are singing) is not unusual within opera: earlier in this chapter I described it done to comic effect in the operetta convention for *Skin Deep*, and Julian Rushton (in opposition to Edward T. Cone) outlines a number of self-conscious ‘songs’ across the range of the standard operatic repertoire, in his chapter on ‘Characterization’ in *The Oxford Handbook to Opera*.⁴²⁸ Unusually, in *Swanhunter*, it could be argued that characters appear to be perspicuously singing throughout, and indeed this provides a degree of ‘unrealistic realism’ or verisimilitude, whereby young audience members are not required to alter or suspend their disbelief that these huge operatic voices are self-consciously singing (I will, however, later refer to the use of puppetry in 2015,

⁴²⁷ The scale is evident here in Example 20, rising in step from B on the violin. It might best be described as a Phrygian-type mode with a flattened fourth and a doubly flattened seventh; two large intervals (three semi-tones wide) in the scale, between E flat and F sharp, and between A flat and B, give a highly unusual and thus exoticised temperament, and the lack of a directional ‘leading note’ creates an anchorless, floating effect.

⁴²⁸ Julian Rushton, ‘Characterization’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Opera*, ed. by Helen M. Greenwald (Oxford: OUP, 2014), pp.334-51; Edward T. Cone, ‘The World of Opera and Its Inhabitants’, in *Music: A view from Delft. Selected Essays*, ed. by Robert P. Morgan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp.125-38.

which conversely removed the voices visually from the singers in the case of the sung animal characters). In the Mother's aria (singing Lemminkäinen back to life) her voice is stretched to its full capacity. Dove wrote the part for mezzo-soprano Yvonne Howard, working with her in advance to understand all of her capabilities, as he explained:

Particularly I worked with Yvonne [...] to find the range of her voice, because I knew that we were going to use everything she could do for the 'singing back to life'. That was going to be a sustained piece of singing, and I wanted to be able to use all of her resources. [...] And I mean Yvonne's a very [...] unusual singer, because her range is much bigger than most mezzo-sopranos. She can go lower and higher. But she's also got more agility than you might have thought. So, you know, that florid thing which she sings towards the end, the thing might not have occurred to me if I was writing for any other singer. So they're very much my response to Yvonne's particular gifts.⁴²⁹

Dove felt that the relatively lengthy Mother's aria at the emotional peak of the work was crucial to the drama, and part of the larger sense of a Wagnerian influence that he had spoken of on numerous occasions. Here perhaps was a concession to the fact that, in the words of the Opera North season brochure, this family opera was 'for adults just as much as children'.⁴³⁰

3.4.4 Target audience - preparation and reception

In 2009, the model used for work in schools by Opera North's Education department was as follows. The department operated a pool of artists whom it trained and employed directly to go out into schools and deliver workshops around any given production that was felt to have an appeal for children. The content of the workshops was prearranged, and artists were essentially instructed in how the elements of the workshop could be organised, by attending an Opera North training event. Artists worked in pairs of one singer and one director, usually early in their careers. A 'director' going into a school for example, might work at the level of assistant director for an Opera North production.⁴³¹ The singers I witnessed, similarly, while professionally trained were beginning their careers, not yet taking leading roles on the opera stage. There was quite a cost implication for the company, since many of these artists were resident in London, and required costs and accommodation as well as a fee. A workshop would

⁴²⁹ Dove, 14 November 2009.

⁴³⁰ ON advertised *Swanhunter* on its website as 'commissioned and created specifically for families and children'. This theme of 'family opera' ran through the company's marketing campaign, although in the full season publicity brochure for 2009-10 the emphasis was on 'a family audience [...] adults just as much as children'. ON, *2009/10* (Leeds: ON, 2009), p.21.

⁴³¹ This was the case, for example, in 2009, when director Nina Brazier worked on school workshops for the Education department, but also as assistant director on ON's production of *Of Thee I Sing*.

last a whole day, for the equivalent of one class (around thirty pupils) and would cost the school £250. These workshops took place most often in primary schools, where a staff member would have contacted the company and bought the provision in. This cost would also cover thirty-five tickets (assumed to be allocated to the same pupils, with teacher attendance as well) for a schools matinee performance at a local venue. Although Opera North employees have often been loath to discuss financial matters with me, it is perhaps obvious that £250 was a nominal fee, and that this was a highly subsidised enterprise. A chart providing full details of Education department activities and related events (also from the Projects department) that took place contemporaneously with *Swanhunter* in 2009 is offered in Appendix C.

Prior to the production run of *Swanhunter* in 2009, I attended two *Swanhunter* workshops in primary schools, run by Opera North Education and delivered, in each case, by an opera singer and a stage director. These workshop leaders were not involved in the actual production, but their activities had been planned in communication with *Swanhunter* commissioners and creators. The workshops I observed were delivered to approximately one class size of children, with ages ranging between nine and eleven years, and involved activities relating to understanding the work of an opera company, and involving drama, music, singing, direction and design. These activities were themed to recreate the characters and the narrative of *Swanhunter*, and some of the song elements from the piece were learned and sung by the children. These children would then go on to see the production, around a week later, in a small venue, local to them. A condensed workshop also took place in the HAR, for the general public, and aimed at families. This event happened immediately before the second performance of the main run (14 November 2009) which followed on from the workshop event, in the same space. Working under the guidance of Opera North, I observed various workshops and took the opportunity to interact with the children and participate in the group activities. I did not interview children individually or in depth, but general observations and informal chats with small groups allowed me to see the reactions and interactions of the children in a natural way, without my being an interfering presence. As I visited primary schools along with the Opera North workshop leaders, most children I interacted with saw me as being linked to the company, and thus directly invested in the opera (although I made announcements about the nature of my project, about the University, and my being an observer). The perception of my involvement, or of holding some cultural value, borrowed perhaps from the company, could be problematic, when most children in an educational setting are motivated to give the ‘right answers’ and generally to please unfamiliar adults visiting their school. Children whom we might term to be ‘socially privileged’ or from backgrounds that could be described as ‘middle-class’ or relatively affluent, and those children with prior substantial experience of the arts have a greater social investment in cultural life (although the impetus for this investment comes from others, most

often parents). These children often consider that they ‘ought’ to display a liking and appreciation for the activities and the production. Observing children interacting in groups rather than interviewing them individually lessened this effect of their desire to prove their own cultural credentials to me as an adult.

Considering the motivation of many youngsters from affluent socio-economic groups to demonstrate their cultural engagement, perhaps the most interesting children I encountered were a group of nine and ten-year-olds from Raynville Primary School in north Leeds, which was described in its Ofsted report of March 2008 thus:

It serves an area of significant social and economic disadvantage. The proportion of pupils entitled to a free school meal is well above average. There is a well above average proportion of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.⁴³²

These children showed no evidence of any pre-existing cultural incentive to claim to like opera. However, after the workshop, and even more after the production, their reports were almost unanimously positive. Children who saw the production of *Swanhunter*, but who had been absent on the day of the workshop, had the benefit of reports from their peers. I asked workshop absentees their opinion of the production, wondering if their reports would be less positive. In fact, during the performance, these children were visibly less enthralled, checking programmes, shuffling in their seats and looking at peers on significantly more occasions than the rest of the group who had been involved in the workshop. But after the performance, the workshop absentees still expressed great enjoyment of the production, giving examples of favourite parts (a qualitative marker that their reported judgements are authentic) but all said that they wished they could have been at the workshop in order that they might have got more out of the production, as they had observed in their peers.

Immediately before the production I asked groups of young audience members what they were expecting. This question was designed partially to test what they had gained from the workshop experiences, and also to focus them slightly, so that they could better analyse later to what extent their expectations had been met. After the performance I posed very simple and carefully framed questions. Initially I asked ‘What was your favourite part?’. While this question may seem slightly closed, it focuses the child, since children of this age might not be inclined to hold a lot of comparative information in their minds to give a fuller discussion as an adult might. It also has the potential to draw out a wealth of information about what those elements that the child most values, since these are not necessarily already culturally embedded. Choosing a favourite part, and having to give reasons for preference, encourages them to report

⁴³² Ofsted, *Raynville Primary School Inspection Report 5-6 March 2008* (London: Ofsted, 2008), p.3.

their own authentic judgements, rather than a broader statement about what they liked more generally, which could be more easily borrowed from leaders and peers. The next question, ‘If you were in charge, what would you change?’ is a strategic one. Open qualitative judgements can be difficult for children, whose frame of cultural reference is not developed. This is a relatively open question, framed as an invitation to the child to use his/her imagination and to place him/herself in an active, decision-making role. Again where a child has actively to access his imagination in order to answer, and this is evident, we can assume a degree of authenticity in the answer itself. Unfortunately I was not able to conduct one-to-one interviews with children, but rather asked them questions in an informal setting, in small groups. Yet since the workshop and the performance were social experiences, it would seem fitting that answering questions about them might be a social experience for them as well, and questions were designed to gain authentic answers from individuals, even when speaking within a group, as I have outlined.

Upon being asked what they were expecting, often a full narrative of the story followed, children chipping in over one another to tell me what would happen next, even on occasion bursting into a song that they remembered from the workshop. Dove was right when he said that the Mother’s aria would stretch them. When I asked afterwards ‘If you were in charge, what would you change?’, almost all of those who could offer an answer said that they found this part difficult. Reports of the aria varied from ‘very long notes’ to ‘too many words’. Neither of these analyses is factually correct, but there were florid passages and much use of melisma. In analysing the discrepancy between these children’s descriptions (from untrained musical memory) of the aria and the musical reality of its construction, I believe that what was meant was that the (sparse) words were lingered upon in melismas with essentially what was felt to be ‘too many’ notes. Much of the rest of the work is structured in the rhythms of speech; melisma by contrast is not a natural formation of speech, and so there was some disorientation. The perception of clarity was important to these children, and one note per syllable was by far the preferred musical setting.

It is perhaps unusual that a target audience for an opera and the established opera critics have no demographic overlap, and hold no influence over one another whatsoever, but this was certainly the case for *Swanhunter*. Pre-teens are unlikely to read the broadsheet arts pages, and critics did not attend the same performances as these school groups, and so were unaware of their reactions. The views of opera critics and school attendees were correspondingly diverse. The idea of producing a miniature Wagnerian epic for children proved to be a difficult concept for critics to grasp, and reviews were mixed. Alfred Hickling in the *Guardian* thought writing of children’s opera to be ‘a marginal activity’, was critical of the financially limited scenography, and concluded that ‘*Swanhunter's* minor success is a result of its modest ambitions [...] this

feels like a rare instance of an opera company biting off less than it can chew'.⁴³³ He also made an unfavourable comparison with Dove and Middleton's *Pinocchio* (having, of course, the hindsight of this being a successful production):

For all its subtleties you can't help wondering if a young audience is more naturally inclined towards the story of a puppet with behavioural issues than a mythic quest for a bride who can make the sun sigh and the moon ache.⁴³⁴

Indeed with the puppetry featured in *Swanhunter* 2015, the focus of the production on children was clearer, and the reviews altogether more positive. George Hall in the *Guardian* mentioned 'moments of stratospheric vocalism and charming animal puppets'.⁴³⁵ Back in 2009, in *What's On Stage*, Dave Cunningham was critical of the 'few concessions' made to the young target audience, an 'unsatisfactory' story and a 'dull atmosphere', and concluded that it was 'a shame that *Swanhunter* could not have had a bit more colour and excitement'.⁴³⁶ Rupert Christiansen, although positive about the story and set, was scathing of the educational objectives for the project:

It's all very admirable, but squeaky-clean and educationally certificated to a fault. I fear that 99 per cent of 7-11s would have had more fun at High School Musical 2, and the awful thing is I think I'd be with them.⁴³⁷

My feeling, in 2009, was that for a young audience, there was a significant lack of colour and light, and set, costumes and props were largely uninspiring, and in informal conversations, many adults (particularly those without children in attendance) offered luke-warm responses. And yet, of several dozen children I observed who saw the production (including those in school matinees and those who attended with family members at evening performances, those who had been involved in workshops and those who had not) only one individual had given a slightly negative response, saying 'it wasn't really my thing'.⁴³⁸ As Hickling noted 'the fidget factor is a critical consideration',⁴³⁹ and my own visual observations of these children in the audience, their facial expressions and their apparent concentration, confirmed that the production was an overwhelming success in terms of engaging its young audience. While

⁴³³ Hickling, 'Swanhunter' (para. 5 of 5).

⁴³⁴ Ibid. (para. 2 of 5).

⁴³⁵ George Hall, 'Swanhunter Review – Moments of stratospheric vocalism and charming animal puppets', *Guardian*, 6 April 2015, <<http://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/apr/06/swanhunter-review-linbury-studio-london-opera-north>> [accessed 3 January 2016] (title).

⁴³⁶ Dave Cunningham, 'Swanhunter (Opera North – Salford)', *What's On Stage*, 14 December 2009, <http://www.whatsonstage.com/blackpool-theatre/reviews/12-2009/swanhunter-opera-north-salford_14864.html> [accessed 3 January 2016] (paras 1,3, 5 and 8 of 8).

⁴³⁷ Christiansen, 'Swanhunter, Leeds/Rumpelstiltskin, Birmingham' (para. 6 of 9).

⁴³⁸ Child observed at *Swanhunter* schools matinee performance, HAR Leeds, 18 November 2009.

⁴³⁹ Hickling, 'Swanhunter' (para. 5 of 5).

schools paid the modest sum of £250 for a workshop and tickets to see the show, children had to be turned away from these afternoon matinees by the school-party organisers. Evening shows did not sell out, but there is no doubt that *Swanhunter* had appeal for children age seven and over, and that the objectives of the Education department were met.

Some evening shows had more of a ‘family’ audience than others. The premiere audience was notably silver-haired, as was commented upon in the press.⁴⁴⁰ The second night, after the community workshop, was far more mixed. While the expectation of ‘family opera’ was met in a way that appealed to young audience members, by far the most enthusiastic audience members I encountered were the children attending with school, rather than families, particularly those who had been involved in the workshops. From this I can conclude that opera for children benefits from introduction, contextualisation and participatory understanding, and that the children benefit from having been offered a palpable expectation of what they will see and hear. In addition to the skilfully planned writing and story-telling of *Swanhunter*, the combination of highly subsidised school workshops and matinee tickets gave some of these children an uplifting cultural experience, and an introduction to an art that they may otherwise never have encountered. It was perhaps this othered ‘North’, this icy ‘elsewhere’ that helped contextualise the very alien art-form of opera for these children. The unnaturalness of perpetual song made more sense in an imagined environment so very far from home, with the excitement of singing magic spells and the universality of a tale of the relationship between a boy and his Mother. Walsh had told me that the *Swanhunter* project was ‘about the opportunity [for children] to see something, and to go in armed with the knowledge about it beforehand, so they know it a bit, so they can really engage critically with it’.⁴⁴¹ She maintained that her Education department was not about audience building (while making a concession to the aims of the Marketing department). While this type of work may not develop an audience in terms of the number of opera consumers, from the box office point of view (primary-age children having no financial capital and little power of choice over their own activity in the cultural sphere) it does develop these particular individuals, giving them a wider cultural experience than they might otherwise have had. Again, I am reminded of the aim of Music Director Richard Farnes, to

⁴⁴⁰ Ron Simpson wrote, ‘At the premiere [...] there was one element lacking: children. The enthusiastic audience belonged almost exclusively to the mature end of the age spectrum.’ Ron Simpson, ‘Swanhunter (Leeds)’, *What’s On Stage*, 15 November 2009, <http://www.whatsonstage.com/bradford-theatre/reviews/11-2009/swanhunter-leeds_15166.html> [accessed 3 January 2016] (para. 2 of 7). Christiansen revealed ‘We were a greying, balding audience, albeit an attentive and respectful one.’ Christiansen, ‘Swanhunter, Leeds/Rumpelstiltskin, Birmingham’ (para. 6 of 9).

⁴⁴¹ Walsh, 26 October 2009.

develop ‘the artists [and] the art-form’, but particularly in the case of *Swanhunter*, the very young audience.⁴⁴²

3.4.5 *Swanhunter* 2015

The coda to this account is a brief comparison with the work around the 2015 production of *Swanhunter* by Opera North and theatre company The Wrong Crowd. The production itself, directed by The Wrong Crowd’s Hannah Mulder, was quite different from that of 2009. Musically, the tempi in the 2015 production were faster, with up to fifteen minutes shaved from the overall duration (the show ran at around eighty minutes long in 2009, and around sixty-five minutes in 2015, both without interval). All performers were different, with no overlapping personnel in cast or crew; in fact the crew credited in the 2015 programme was much larger than in 2009.⁴⁴³ The central character, Lemminkäinen, was afforded a puppet representative to show his journeying action sequences. Other puppetry featured to show animals in action: the Devil’s Elk and the Devil’s Horse. These animals did not have their own voices but were sung about by the narrating chorus, as Adrian Dwyer, playing Lemminkäinen, battled and caught or tamed the large puppets. More controversial, from a traditionally operatic point of view, were the puppet representatives of animal characters that sang. In the more traditional production of 2009, these characters, the two Dogs of North and the Swan were represented visually in the usual way by the singers who voiced them. In 2015, the voices were removed from the singers, visually and figuratively speaking, and ‘given’ to the puppets.⁴⁴⁴

Perhaps most relevant for this thesis are the differences in modes of work around the production. *Swanhunter* of 2009 was central within two contexts. One was the ‘Idea of North’, the programming concept by Gray and his Projects department. Other artistic offerings within this theme included film, music, poetry, collaborative and mixed-media arts from the UK,

⁴⁴² Beyond opera, Opera North Education often centres on developing the individual and creates opportunities for children to access the arts more broadly. For the OPUS project of 2014-15, in addition to taking part in musical theatre work, children attended dance and theatre performances and art exhibitions. ON, ‘Education and Engagement, Opus’, *ON* [n.d.] <<http://www.operanorth.co.uk/education/young-people/opus>> [accessed 28 December 2015].

⁴⁴³ Twelve individuals with non-performing roles specific to the production are mentioned in the 2009 programme, and twenty-four in 2015. ON, *Swanhunter*, programme brochure (2009), p.14; ON, *Swanhunter*, programme brochure (Leeds: ON, 2015), p.14.

⁴⁴⁴ This could be perceived as problematic if one conceives of the operatic voice as integrally part of the operatic body, as has explored by a number of scholars: Abbate, *Unsung Voices*; Peter Brook, ‘Body and Voice in Melodrama and Opera’, in *Siren Songs: Representation of gender and sexuality in opera*, ed. Mary Ann Smart (Princeton: PUP, 2000), pp.118-35; Jelena Novak, *Postopera: Reinventing the voice body* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015). Comparisons might be made between puppets, which take on operatic voices, and opera on film, where voices are also removed from the reality of their source; see Marcia J. Citron, *Opera on Screen* (New Haven: YUP, 2000).

Canada, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Austria and Germany.⁴⁴⁵ Other than the family workshop on Saturday 14 November, and *Swanhunter* itself, The ‘Idea of North’ was a range of themed events, programmed in the usual way, in the evening, and aimed primarily at adults. In 2015 there was a similar programming theme from the Howard Assembly Room, this time less explicitly titled ‘Soundings’. Furthermore the explanation in the season brochure recalled something of the ‘Idea of North’: ‘Soundings: taking the musical temperature of Northern Europe, looking at place, tradition and the contemporary.’⁴⁴⁶ The 2015 programme consisted of the following: Northumbrian piper Kathryn Tickell and her band, the Side; Icelandic composer Ólafur Arnalds; Norwegian jazz trumpeter Arve Henriksen; and North German film *The White Ribbon*. Also included within the theme, and specifically for children was Opera North’s Early Years programme ‘Little Voices’, and a ‘Saturday Morning Sing’ for ages four and over, ‘focusing on the chillier climates of northern Europe’. In direct relevance to *Swanhunter*, there was an ‘Indoor Camping Adventure’ and ‘Interactive pre-show talks’. These child-focussed talks were presented by The Wrong Crowd, focussing on puppet-making, and allowing children to try the puppets. For more details on activities surrounding the *Swanhunter* production in 2015, including those from the Education department, programming by the Projects department and select talks from The Wrong Crowd, see Appendix D.

The inclusion of these child-centred activities, under the umbrella of the ‘Soundings’ theme, marked a shift from 2009, toward more Education department events being held in the HAR in advance of the production, and included within the HAR’s programme theme. Here was a move to prepare children and families for the themes of *Swanhunter*, if not for the performance itself. The ‘Indoor Camping Adventure’ was described in the brochure thus: ‘Story telling, tents and marshmallows. Join us on a camping adventure in this family-friendly workshop, exploring the story and songs of *Swanhunter*.’⁴⁴⁷ Although within the ‘Soundings’ theme, the ‘Indoor Camping Adventure’ was actually a separate event from *Swanhunter* altogether; at two and a half hours it was very long and, perhaps unsurprisingly, it did not happen on the same day as a *Swanhunter* performance. The HAR season brochure advertised it as suitable for aged seven and over (the same age recommendation as for the opera) but by the time the details were uploaded onto the Opera North website, the age recommendation of the Camping Adventure had changed to four years and over. Education Manager Jo Bedford later

⁴⁴⁵ The following were listed in ON’s *HAR leaflet, Autumn 2009*: a Norwegian film, *Insomnia*; a ‘Light Night’ collaboration between Norwegian composer Terje Isungset and Leeds-based media organisation Lumen creating ‘a distinctive experience evoking the lands far to the North’; an evening of words and music with poet and writer Kevin Crossley-Holland; Schubert’s *Winterreise* with film by Mariele Neudecker, Canadian film *Atanarjuat, the Fast Runner*; a talk (with music) by novelist Melvin Burgess; Susan Bickley and Iain Burnside performing *King Harald’s Saga* by Judith Weir, and songs by Sibelius and Francis George Scott; and Swedish duo, Wildbirds and Peacedrums.

⁴⁴⁶ ON, *HAR leaflet, Jan-Apr 2015* (Leeds: ON, 2014), p.2.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.28.

explained to me that there had been several enquiries about suitability for younger children, so this change was in order to accommodate those requests. Even then, I observed at the event that one Opera North employee successfully brought a two-year-old daughter along with her four-year-old sister. These very young children appeared engaged throughout, and seemed, along with all families in attendance, to enjoy the workshop a great deal. It was run and performed by a story-teller and a multi-instrumentalist folk musician, and included singing, movement, games and crafts as well as marshmallows, hot-chocolate and fruit for the children. It is unlikely, however, that the youngest would have enjoyed the opera itself; with figurative but also graphic representation of violence and death, a minimum age of seven would seem to be a sensible guideline. Bedford later told me that the Camping Adventure was ‘not an introduction, not a pre-show talk, but an event in itself’.⁴⁴⁸

In addition to these events in the HAR, the 2015 Education team ran a series of ‘fun, creative workshops’ in a local library, The Compton Centre in Harehills, Leeds.⁴⁴⁹ A company flyer advertised the Harehills events:

Activities are suitable for 4-7 year olds but the whole family, young and old, are welcome to join in the fun! [...] We’ll be exploring myths and fairy tales in celebration of this season’s family opera, *Swanhunter*, based on a classic Finnish folk story.⁴⁵⁰

These workshops were of particular interest, since the recommended age range of four to seven years barely overlapped with that of the production itself (seven and over). The flyer advertised three ninety-minute workshops on consecutive days over the February schools’ holiday. There was a story-telling and music workshop, an arts and crafts workshop, and a singing workshop, the last of which I attended with my four-year-old daughter. The singing workshop was highly accessible and enjoyed by the children, but was not designed particularly to draw them to the production (indeed, most of those present who fitted the recommended age range for the workshop would be too young to receive the production). There was much in the way of ‘acting’ cold weather, using percussion and singing songs related to the cold, from nursery rhymes ‘Here we Go Round the Mulberry Bush’ (‘on a cold and frosty morning’) to a song about chopping ice from the popular Disney animated film, *Frozen* (‘Frozen Heart’). Material from *Swanhunter* did creep in, but not explicitly. This was effected by the accompanying pianist Chris Pulleyn, who integrated passages from the *Swanhunter* instrumental music. For example, spell-casting music (derived from Example 18) accompanied the children transforming themselves into dogs (inspired by *Swanhunter*’s ‘the Dogs of North’) and characterful animal

⁴⁴⁸ Telephone interview with Jo Bedford, 23 April 2015, from notes.

⁴⁴⁹ ON, ‘Harehills Family Arts Festival’ flyer, 18-20 February 2015 (Leeds: ON, 2015).

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.

music from the production was played as the children galloped around as horses (reminiscent of ‘the Devil’s Horse’ character).

It is notable that there were eight participatory community events related to *Swanhunter* and its themes available to the public in 2015, and just one in 2009, when most Education work was centred in schools and matinee performances on tour. By 2015 the Education department had implemented quite a different working model. There was a new, strategic way of working, as was explained to me by Jo Bedford. Instead of going with a singer and a director into schools, Opera North ran a training session for various artists and held their contact details. Schools would essentially book the artists directly (not the ‘company’ as previously) the Education department essentially serving to ‘broker the relationship between artists and schools’.⁴⁵¹ This revised model came from a business plan of 2013-14, which was steered by Rebecca Walsh (although she had left the company by the time of the 2015 *Swanhunter* production). Bedford explained to me the economy of focus in the new way of working: ‘We decided there was too much money spent on heavily resourcing and only reaching a limited number of schools.’ She also voiced the concern that the same few schools would book the company repeatedly for different events, thus condensing even further the possible reach of the Education department’s work, and that the number of schools to benefit from a matinee was also limited by capacity. The new model is much more efficient to resource and reaches far more children (if, one might argue in less depth than the prior model). There was also a drive to increase online resources that could be used in schools by teachers, independent of direct involvement from the company or artists. The online *Swanhunter* resource pack is interactive, with high quality production values; it has pop-up boxes on story elements, characters, and instrumental sounds.⁴⁵² There was also an opportunity, linked from the resource pack, and the company website, to enter a spell-writing competition, in two age categories: seven to thirteen years, and fourteen and over.

Unlike in 2009, I was not able to observe schools workshops by artists in 2015, whose ties with the control structure of Opera North were becoming looser. I did attend several of the community events including the Saturday Morning Sing, the singing workshop in Harehills, the ‘Indoor Camping Adventure’, and a pre-show talk by The Wrong Crowd. Opera North’s Education department had effectively moved from a model of outreach work based in primary schools, to a broader-reaching and more publicly prominent community outreach model. This way of working, by accident or design, was essentially truer to Dove and Middleton’s original

⁴⁵¹ Bedford, 23 April 2015.

⁴⁵² Opera North/The Wrong Crowd, ‘Swanhunter Resource Pack’, *Page Suite* (2015) <<http://edition.pagesuite-professional.co.uk/launch.aspx?eid=4f3d99a7-dd44-43ce-beda-d269ce1184eb>> [accessed 12 June 2015].

aim with *Swanhunter* of reaching families, since parents or carers had to accompany young children to workshop events, and since younger siblings of those children in the target age-range also attended these events, participated and enjoyed the contact with the opera company.

The changing model of Education from one Opera North *Swanhunter* to the next is very much linked to the changes in the attitudes of government, although this was not made explicit in the accounts of any company members, in the way Gray was explicit about New Labour and Education funding in 1997. In her 2014 policy paper for the left-wing think tank CLASS (the Centre for Labour and Social Studies) *Raising Our Quality of Life*, Abigail Gilmore recalls the instrumentalism of the arts under New Labour whereby there was a shift ‘from subsidy to investment’.⁴⁵³ The concept of investment, of course, requires the hope for future returns or benefits, be they economic or social. Gilmore cites the ‘expansion of the aspirations of cultural policy and culture’s utility to a range of policy goals’, which included development of various kinds, including education, health and social inclusion, and ‘explicitly interventionist policies encouraging access, participation, inclusion and celebration of cultural diversity’.⁴⁵⁴ In her analysis of cultural policy under the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition (whose term began in May 2010) Gilmore asserts that this government had not radically diminished these expectations of ‘returns on investment’ in arts and culture, but that more investment was being encouraged from private sources, and there was a drive to reduce state subsidy and intervention. In our recent and current ‘age of austerity’ the government essentially requires more value from the arts for less funding, and this is a picture set to continue through the term of the current Conservative government. Hence we see a wider-reaching but less concentrated model of Opera North Education work in 2015 as compared with 2009.

In 2013, under the Coalition, ACE published a revised edition of its ten-year strategic framework (2010-20) *Great Art and Culture for Everyone*, in which five strategic goals were announced. Of most relevance to this case study is Goal 5 ‘Every child and young person has the opportunity to experience the richness of the arts, museums and libraries’.⁴⁵⁵ Gilmore outlines the history that ‘New Labour policy measures also focused on widening access and participation by targeting priority groups such as children, minority ethnic groups, the economically deprived and other hard to reach groups’.⁴⁵⁶ With the continued growth of Opera North’s Education department, and the increasing ‘access’ work done by the Projects department, we see a match with government and Arts Council policy, from New Labour’s targeting of ‘hard to reach groups’ such as children (who do not have the power of unfettered

⁴⁵³ Gilmore, p.9.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁵ ACE, *Great Art and Culture for Everyone*, p.58.

⁴⁵⁶ Gilmore, p.13.

choice over their own cultural consumption) to the increased instrumentalism of the Coalition, at the same time as Opera North Education attempts an increasingly economic approach to reaching children in schools and families in the community.

Gilmore argues for (amongst other things) the ‘intrinsic’ (by which she means participatory and experiential) value of the arts and affirms that policy should be about ‘providing resources for everyday participation within communities’ and ‘supporting communities to have access to the means of cultural production as well as consumption’.⁴⁵⁷ She quotes Article 27 UN Declaration of Human Rights 1948, ‘Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community and to enjoy the arts’ and Article 31 of the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child ‘Every child has the right to participate freely in cultural life and the arts’.⁴⁵⁸ This move to reaching people in their communities is reflected in the practice of Opera North Education in 2015. It is also no coincidence that three workshops for *Swanhunter* took place in a public library, while the Arts Councils remit was extended, since 2010, to include public libraries and museums, as agencies of culture. So the move to community access is reflective of a broader agenda of the Arts Council and of government. It is not the case that the changes in educational working practice happened in direct relation to the two Opera North productions of *Swanhunter*, but the two productions of the same work are convenient markers by which we might make a comparison of two models of work from the Education department of Opera North, and which are representative of a broader political picture.

3.5 Conclusion

To assess the success of newly commissioned works within the framework of Opera North’s activities, and to consider how perceptions of these new works might be formed, it is important to consider the history of the company and its chief funding body, Arts Council England. We must consider Opera North as a company born to fulfil an access agenda, created to begin in earnest the Arts Council’s work of increasing regional access to opera. Access and education were built into the modus operandi of the company at its birth, in order to ‘encourage an operatic habit’ in the north of England.⁴⁵⁹ This spirit of public access reflected the post-war attitude words of Keynes and his aims to ‘decentralise and disperse’ cultural provision throughout the country, with enhanced ‘provincial centres’.⁴⁶⁰

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid., p.23.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid., p.26.

⁴⁵⁹ Payne, 12 April 2012.

⁴⁶⁰ Keynes, p.370.

Via other political interventions (not least William Rees-Mogg's failed attempt, under Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government, to decentralise arts and increase funding for the regions with his paper *The Glory of the Garden*⁴⁶¹) the paternalism of Keynes's post-war Arts Council has most recently been superseded by the Blair/Brown government's aspirations for the utility of arts and culture, and then the enhanced instrumentalism and 'value for money' philosophy of the Coalition.⁴⁶² The legacy of all these policies and ideologies is evident in the work produced by Opera North, particularly in its most creative facets, within frames of newness, be that the newness of an 'operetta' that is not an operetta, or the newness of a child's first operatic experience.

There are competing narratives on how cultural and artistic work can be judged to be successful, as we have seen through the course of this chapter. In the world of post-industrial capitalism, we might be forgiven for equating success with box office returns. This is an important source of income, but the public opera company is not run for profit and has no requirement to break even per production (although overall this should be the case per financial year).⁴⁶³ Critical opinion is an audible voice in the sphere of new opera creation, and yet critics tend to comment on production values as much as musical construction. For new opera, critics review the experience of audience as they see and hear it; the event is prioritised over the compositional work, and the nuances of work, performance and production are mentioned but briefly. To adequately tease apart the elements of a phenomenological experience is a task requiring more capacity than many newspaper columns can afford. The criteria Opera North sets itself is what it is often judged on, as we have seen in the case of the highly publicised *Skin Deep*. *Swanhunter* 2009 fulfilled its aim to introduce children to opera, but voices of its main target audience (upper-primary-aged children) were far from audible, and the hundreds of success stories (in terms of the experiences of these children) were not told very publicly in the media, which struggled with the concept of and criteria for the unfamiliar label of 'family opera'. Neither were they highlighted in company publicity. This is also a result of the creative

⁴⁶¹ William Rees-Mogg, *The Glory of the Garden: The development of the arts in England* (London: ACG, 1984). Rees-Mogg referred to Keynes's ideal for cultural decentralisation, and suggested that while the arts should be more accountable to market forces and less to centralised funding, local authorities ought also to become more involved in arts funding. Merger talks were suggested between Opera North and Scottish Opera, which were rejected outright. Ultimately, since Arts Council funds were constrained, ten weeks of touring opera to the regions was actually cut, and the Arts Council spending on opera was cut from 24.8% of its budget in 1984/85, to 17.7% in 1987/88, and *The Glory of the Garden* failed to increase opera and its funding in the regions as Ranan reports (p.69). Also see McKechnie, p.53, and Gilbert, pp.358-59.

⁴⁶² See Gilmore, p.4.

⁴⁶³ See ON, *Review 2015*, p.14 (and other annual reviews).

tendency of the company to look forward to future productions rather than back to analyse past successes and failures.⁴⁶⁴

In this chapter I have attempted to elucidate the connection between the objectives for new works in production and dynamic arts policy, and to map, broadly, the aims of new works onto the arts policy of the day. I have looked to ascertain trends in the aims of Arts Council and government that correlate with working models at Opera North in relevance to the productions I have outlined, particularly *Swanhunter*, which had a close relationship with instrumentalist policy aims. However, within the life-cycle of an opera the focus of public policy can change, become outdated or even redundant. It is the job of the opera company to create, and so ideas and processes are conceived of and presented by the company as series of artistic decisions. The relationship between government policy and the everyday, creative processes of the company (such as commissioning, creation and rehearsal) is indirect and intangible. ACE is said (arguably) to work ‘at arm’s length’ from government, and there is another arm’s length between the Arts Council and Opera North. It is, of course justifiable to judge broad correlation between policy and practice, but it becomes inadvisable to ask very specific questions about cause and effect, in that artistic freedom itself is a primary and fiercely protected element of operatic creation.⁴⁶⁵

I have assessed how judgements might be made around newly commissioned opera by considering elements of history and legacy, and politics. The working paradigms of the company can be another marker against which we might make such judgements. I have mapped Opera North’s public access agenda back onto the aims of Keynes’s post-war Arts Council, with reference to the policies of successive governments and the Arts Council, while also considering the history of the company, in order to elucidate working paradigms, and find criteria by which to judge new works. By these markers we might judge the ‘operetta’ *Skin Deep* to be less than successful (as did the company itself). The ‘generic contract of expectation’ was broken, since audience was led to expect something other than that which had been created, largely because the musical dramaturgical framework of number opera had not been constructed as is generally understood by the term ‘operetta’. Since this ‘operetta’ was advertised as a ‘fun’ and ‘light’, if not explicitly ‘popular’ in form, the breaking of generic contract was also a failure in terms of the access agenda for new works. However, with creativity comes risk, in the opera house perhaps more than with any other art form. As Lord Palumbo granted the artist the ‘right to fail’,

⁴⁶⁴ See McKechnie, *Opera North*, pp.5-6.

⁴⁶⁵ McKechnie has described to me ON’s approach to protecting musical excellence and the production process, whereby production rehearsals are allocated a greater time allowance on stage and for revivals than is generally allocated in other comparable companies. ON has also succeeded in growing its chorus, and in protecting them from the kind of financial cuts that have removed the chorus of Scottish Opera, and that currently threaten the chorus of ENO. There is an understanding that chorus members will cover roles, and take on roles, e.g. Gillene Butterfield as Julie Jordan in *Carousel* in May 2015.

because of the real risks that must be taken for the benefit of creativity and new art, it seems fair that, despite the financial stakes and the current political trend for enhanced cultural instrumentalism, we might extend that right to the opera company.

Swanhunter was by far the greater success of the two works, although a much smaller production with less at stake, both financially and in terms of the public face of the company. Overall, the public reputations of opera companies have not historically been based fundamentally on their educational work, although this work is an important part of fulfilling the policy of the Arts Council,⁴⁶⁶ and, for Opera North, the ethical criteria of wider public access. The work of an opera company is broad in cultural and social terms; as Projects Director Dominic Gray told me, there is other work to do besides producing beautiful art. Yet when an Education commission is also a public production ‘for adults just as much as children’,⁴⁶⁷ as was the case with *Swanhunter*, expectations arise from different quarters. While *Skin Deep* had a generic label that was overly familiar and laden with expectation, *Swanhunter* as a ‘family opera’ had a less embedded foundation: there was far less expectation of what ‘family opera’ might mean, in terms of its access and appeal for children, but also for adults. The critic Alfred Hickling in reviewing the original production in 2009 complained of Opera North’s ‘modest ambitions’⁴⁶⁸ with *Swanhunter*. Conversely, looking at the Education project as a whole, the ambition of introducing hundreds of children from the north and Midlands to opera for the first time at a nominal cost, and giving them the tools with which to engage critically with it upon entry, is highly ambitious. From my observations of children in 2009, I would conclude that this ambition was fulfilled, and extended for 2015 so that it might reach more children and their families. Christiansen’s 2009 comment that *Swanhunter* was ‘squeaky clean and educationally certified to a fault’ may have been a disparaging reaction against New Labour priorities, but it rather misses the point of the ambitions for life-long development that were harboured within *Swanhunter*. His comment that ‘99 per cent of 7-11s would have had more fun at High School Musical 2, and the awful thing is I think I’d be with them’ dismisses the benefit of Christiansen’s own education and experience and ability to make this choice.⁴⁶⁹ It is this awareness and choice that, through *Swanhunter* and Opera North Education, has been made available to youngsters of various backgrounds, from the day of the workshop and/or performance that they attended, and subsequently as they grow throughout their cultural lives.

⁴⁶⁶ ‘Goal 5’ in the revised 2013 ACE document, *Great Art and Culture for Everyone*, states ‘Every child and young person has the opportunity to experience the richness of the arts, museums and libraries’, p.58.

⁴⁶⁷ ON, 2009/10, p.21.

⁴⁶⁸ Hickling, ‘Swanhunter’ (para. 5 of 5).

⁴⁶⁹ Christiansen, ‘Swanhunter, Leeds/Rumpelstiltskin, Birmingham’ (para. 6 of 9).

4 Wagner's Ring: The fear, the threshold, and the crossing

4.1 Introduction and literature review

4.1.1 Introduction

In 2011, Opera North began a four-year traversal of Wagner's Ring cycle, a 'fully staged concert version',⁴⁷⁰ on the concert stage of Leeds Town Hall, then touring to various concert halls around the north and Midlands. This chapter explores the provision of this Ring cycle for the north of England through the lens of the access agenda, and investigates the issues of Wagner reception in the UK, particularly in what might once have been described as a 'provincial' setting.⁴⁷¹ The scale and success of Opera North's ambitions to facilitate access, and to overcome barriers to reception, is illustrated in this chapter.

When Opera North began rehearsing *Das Rheingold* in 2011, the company also started the process of carefully preparing its audience for reception of a Ring cycle spanning four years. This was done by a series of communications and events, aiming to address what the then Head of Music Martin Pickard described to me as the 'fear of the threshold into Wagner'.⁴⁷² The Opera North Ring productions themselves were designed to facilitate clear story-telling and ease of reception; in short this was a *Ring* that might be suitable for a beginner. However, while the company assumed and publicised its Ring cycle as a virgin experience for the Opera North audience and for Leeds,⁴⁷³ it became apparent that neither of these assumptions should be taken at face value. Further research revealed a history of two other Ring cycles in Leeds, and my own audience questionnaires conducted at performances of Opera North's Ring operas uncovered a wide breadth of Wagner experience. Additionally, the assumption of a new Ring audience was not found to be consistently held: in my interview with him in 2012, Martin Pickard acknowledged audience members who were 'Wagnerites',⁴⁷⁴ and before the second performance

⁴⁷⁰ This was how designer Peter Mumford described the concert version with acting and projections, speaking on 'Wagner's *Die Walküre*', *Radio 3 Live in Concert*, BBC Radio 3, 20 June 2012.

⁴⁷¹ The word 'provincial' is used here to mean a setting outside of and distinct from the capital, with an awareness of its use in the nineteenth century and what Cowgill and Holman describe as 'suggestions of otherness, dependency, and even cultural and intellectual stagnancy'. Rachel Cowgill and Peter Holman, 'Introduction: Centres and Peripheries', in *Music in the British Provinces*, ed. by Cowgill and Holman, pp.1-7 (p.3). Also see [Anon.], 'Hope for Provincial Opera', *Nation*, 12 March 1910, reprinted in programme notes for *Leeds Grand Theatre, Herr Ernst Denhof's Operatic Festival Performances: The Ring of the Nibelung*, 15 March 1911, p.9.

⁴⁷² Discussion with Martin Pickard at Leeds Central Library, 11 June 2012, speech reported from notes.

⁴⁷³ For examples, see Richard Mantle speaking on 'Wagner's *Die Walküre*', *Radio 3 Live in Concert*; and ON, *Richard Farnes Introduces Das Rheingold*, online video recording, YouTube (formerly linked from ON website), 9 March 2011, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dqj9zZ3JNlg>> [accessed 11 October 2012].

⁴⁷⁴ Pickard, 11 June 2012.

of *Siegfried* in 2013, Technical Manager Peter Restall anticipated ‘an audience of aficionados’.⁴⁷⁵

Any opera audience is likely to contain a wide demographic of first-timers, regular attenders and even ‘experts’. Opera North’s specific focus on Wagner beginners at the start of its cycle reflects the perceived problems of scale and cultural weight that might appear daunting for first-time Ring audience members. In functional terms, the longer the duration of a work in performance, the greater the personal investment required of a new or hesitant attendee. And, as Pickard outlined to me, the enthusiasts will, of course, come anyway.⁴⁷⁶ This chapter focuses, in part, on the access solutions that were offered by Opera North for first-time Ring audience members. But there are also problems associated with Wagner reception for those who are more experienced or knowledgeable, as I will also outline, although many of these issues were circumnavigated by Opera North, in favour of its focus on the Ring cycle beginner.

I began my research into Opera North’s Ring cycle with ethnographic observations of Opera North and its audience, aiming to take account of company priorities and audience experience. Upon hearing accounts of audiences’ probable fear of Wagner, and seeing the company so active in trying to counteract this perceived phenomenon, but without specifically communicating its origins, I set out to investigate the context of this concern. I am here reminded of the aims of Georgina Born in her ethnographic work, to ‘uncover the gaps’ between claims and realities, and to move ‘beyond’ the discourse of her subjects, to trace the origins of these discourses.⁴⁷⁷ Thus my research encompassed a wide range of sources; it addressed perceptions of obstacles to Wagner reception, but also problems with the established literature. I aimed to investigate issues concerning the Wagner beginner, and those of the ‘aficionado’, and to show the extent to which Wagner and his work are problematised within a variety of contexts. This chapter addresses the following questions:

What are the obstacles to the reception of the Ring cycle, particularly in the UK?

How have solutions to the problems of accessing *The Ring* been presented in the past?

How did Opera North prepare its audience to access the Ring cycle?

In which cultural and historical contexts was the company operating?

Broadly, then, this chapter aims to elucidate the background to the experience of reception of the Opera North Ring operas, and to investigate the experience of audience preparation by the

⁴⁷⁵ Informal conversation with Peter Restall, 19 June 2013, from notes.

⁴⁷⁶ Pickard, 11 June 2012.

⁴⁷⁷ Born, *Rationalizing Culture*, pp.7-10.

company. The chapter investigates some of the barriers to Wagner reception, and the reasons why audience preparation and a production aimed at ‘Ring cycle beginners’ might have been thought to be necessary. I address certain preoccupations of scholars; the problems inherent in accessing an enormous body of literature, where the original sources are themselves highly problematic; and, through my ethnographic data, the extent of Opera North’s engagement with Wagner debate. In addition to all these obstacles is of course the daunting magnitude of *The Ring* itself. Section 3 is an account of a range of what we might now term as ‘access solutions’ to the work, and is offered, with Section 2, as context for the approaches taken by Opera North towards promoting audience access to its Ring cycle. The second half of the chapter further utilises ethnographic method: Section 4 explores Opera North’s approach to its Ring and its audience, how members of the public were prepared for, and encouraged to receive these productions; Section 5 documents the relevance of a history of Ring cycles in Leeds; and Section 6 goes on to analyse the intertextual meaning in Opera North’s *Ring*, arising between the work and the history of the home venue, Leeds Town Hall. By offering these various contexts for reception, and for Opera North’s drive to optimise public access, I aim to respond to Born’s call for ‘relational musicology’ (as discussed in Chapter 2) which incorporates historical and anthropological sources, and informs the field that it interrogates. I aim here for a perspective on the way in which, with its Ring productions, Opera North ‘intervene[s] influentially in the history of the fields [it] inhabit[s]’.⁴⁷⁸

4.1.2 Literature review

Various texts and broadcasts have been used in this chapter, not referred to in the initial literature review for this thesis. The inclusion of various multi-authored volumes on Wagner reflects the enormous breadth of scholarship on the topic. I refer specifically to *The Wagner Handbook* edited by Ulrich Müller and Peter Wapnewski, *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner* edited by Thomas S. Grey, and *Penetrating Wagner’s Ring* and *Inside the Ring*, both edited by John Louis DiGaetani. These volumes naturally contain a degree of duplicated information regarding the narrative of Wagner’s life and the course of various events, but the quality of much of this scholarship is as in-depth as it is wide-ranging, and so despite there being numerous anthologies of Wagner scholarship in my bibliography, each offers its own foci. Additionally, in *The Wagner Compendium* edited by Barry Millington, short articles by various authors (aiming for coverage of all aspects of Wagner and his music) served as starting points from which to investigate more detailed scholarship.⁴⁷⁹ There are key chapters within the other

⁴⁷⁸ Born, ‘The Social and the Aesthetic’, p.190. Born is referring here to institutions; the particular subjects of her ethnographies were IRCAM and the BBC.

⁴⁷⁹ *The Wagner Compendium*, ed. by Barry Millington (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992).

collections to which I have referred. In Müller and Wapnewski's *Wagner Handbook* of 1992,⁴⁸⁰ John Deathridge's 'A Brief History of Wagner Research' has proven invaluable in elucidating the vast area of Wagner studies, including the notable biases and sentiment evident in so many authors in the field.⁴⁸¹ Complementary to this article is another by Deathridge, 'Wagner Lives: Issues in Autobiography', published in Deathridge's own *Wagner Beyond Good and Evil*, and again in Thomas S. Grey's *Cambridge Companion to Wagner*. This article alerts us to the way in which Wagner's own documentation of his own life has influenced and biased subsequent writers.⁴⁸²

In Grey's *Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, many perspectives are offered in various chapters on the matter of Wagner's anti-Judaism and its influences on today's reception and thinking,⁴⁸³ described by Grey as having 'indisputable prominence [...] in Wagner studies and public discussion over the past fifteen or twenty years'.⁴⁸⁴ This focus is defended by Grey and bemoaned elsewhere by academic and opera critic Michael Tanner, who presents an adversarial position against those who engage heavily with the issues around Wagner and Judaism, as I will also go on to outline.⁴⁸⁵ Yet there is a wide breadth of modern scholarship in Grey's *Companion* that goes beyond this issue. The chapter I have most cited is Glenn Stanley's '*Parsifal: Redemption and Kunstreligion*', which outlines the background to and ideology of Wagner's *Kunstreligion* (where art takes the place of religion).⁴⁸⁶ While Stanley's subject is Wagner's *Parsifal*, I have applied the research on *Kunstreligion* to the Ring cycle, and to the modern-day reception experience of it at Leeds Town Hall. I was aided in this pursuit by the doctoral scholarship of Rachel Milestone whose work has provided invaluable historical background to the ideals of civic pride and public improvement behind the construction and use of this building as a concert venue.⁴⁸⁷

⁴⁸⁰ This is a revised translation of the German language publication of 1986.

⁴⁸¹ John Deathridge, 'A Brief History of Wagner Research', in *The Wagner Handbook*, ed. by Ulrich Müller and Peter Wapnewski, translation ed. by John Deathridge (Cambridge, MA: HUP, 1992), pp.202-23.

⁴⁸² John Deathridge, *Wagner Beyond Good and Evil* (London: University of California Press, 2008); John Deathridge, 'Wagner Lives: Issues in autobiography', in *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, ed. by Thomas S. Grey (Cambridge: CUP, 2008), pp.3-17.

⁴⁸³ The term 'anti-Judaism' is used here to incorporate Wagner's anti-Jewish sentiment prior to and also concurrent with the anti-Semitic movement, thus including objections with a basis in interpretations of religious doctrine, as well as those based on the kind of 'genetic' categorisation that would later be described as 'social Darwinism'. Dieter Borchmeyer outlines this complex picture: Borchmeyer, 'The Question of Anti-Semitism', in *The Wagner Handbook*, ed. by Müller and Wapnewski, pp.166-85.

⁴⁸⁴ Thomas S. Grey, 'Preface and Acknowledgements', in *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, ed. by Grey, pp.xiii-xvi (p.xiv).

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid.; Michael Tanner, *The Faber Pocket Guide to Wagner* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), p.240.

⁴⁸⁶ Glenn Stanley, '*Parsifal: Redemption and Kunstreligion*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, ed. by Grey, pp.151-75.

⁴⁸⁷ Rachel Milestone, '*A New Impetus to the Love of Music*': *The role of the town hall in nineteenth century English musical culture* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leeds, 2009). Also highly

The two volumes edited by John Louis DiGaetani, *Penetrating Wagner's Ring* and *Inside the Ring*, are separated by twenty-eight years.⁴⁸⁸ Wagner studies is an immensely political field in nature, since it must deal with the changing directions of how we view the issues that Wagner's work engenders or is associated with. It is therefore of interest to note the inclusions by DiGaetani at different points in time, in volumes that aim (impossibly, one might argue) for a comprehensive overview. Of the chapters in DiGaetani's editions, Nicholas Vazsonyi's 'Selling the *Ring*' illuminates Wagner's own functional dilemmas in 'selling' his cycle, and sheds some light on his personal relations and his personality in the process.⁴⁸⁹ A fuller account by Vazsonyi can be found in his monograph, *Richard Wagner: Self-promotion and the making of a brand*.⁴⁹⁰ In the conflict between ideology and necessity, and in the compromises undertaken by Wagner in order to create the Bayreuth theatre, inconsistencies between his words and deeds are revealed. Bearing in mind Born's aims for ethnography to 'uncover the gaps between external claims and internal realities, public rhetoric and private thought, ideology and practice',⁴⁹¹ Vazsonyi's work could be seen as conceptually complementary to an ethnographic approach to analysing the communications and the production journey of an opera company performing *The Ring*.

Also an important general text, but comprising some very specific information, is John Deathridge and Carl Dahlhaus's *New Grove Wagner* of 1984.⁴⁹² This concise guide incorporates detailed charts containing historical information that I have not found in more recent texts. The lists of concerts and productions from the composer himself are dutifully collated, and contextual information on history and musical aesthetics offered, which is insightful although brief.

I have outlined here the texts to which I have most often referred. There are many others and, since much historical information within them is naturally duplicated, I shall not list them all here. Also, as Deathridge outlines, 'the bewildering variety of interests and standards in Wagner scholarship [...] is congenitally resistant to systematic study'.⁴⁹³ Just as a comprehensive review of Wagner's life and works and the issues pertaining to reception is proved impossible by the variety of volumes of scholarship, so an attempt at a comprehensive

relevant is Rachel Milestone, "'That Monstrosity of Bricks and Mortar': The town hall as music venue in nineteenth-century Stalybridge', in *Music in the British Provinces, 1690-1914*, ed. by Cowgill and Holman, pp.295- 324.

⁴⁸⁸ *Penetrating Wagner's Ring*, ed. by John Louis DiGaetani (New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1978); *Inside the Ring*, ed. by John Louis DiGaetani (North Carolina: McFarland, 2006).

⁴⁸⁹ Nicholas Vazsonyi, 'Selling the Ring', in *Inside the Ring*, ed. by DiGaetani, pp.51-68.

⁴⁹⁰ Nicholas Vazsonyi, *Richard Wagner: Self-promotion and the making of a brand* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010).

⁴⁹¹ Born, *Rationalizing Culture*, p.7.

⁴⁹² John Deathridge and Carl Dahlhaus, *The New Grove Wagner* (London: Macmillan, 1984).

⁴⁹³ *The Wagner Handbook*, p.202.

view of the scholarship, while not entirely relevant to my assessment of issues in Wagner reception, would also seem foolhardy. Indeed, the contradictions within Wagner scholarship are as complex as those exhibited by Wagner himself.

This chapter also refers to some of Wagner's prose works, and briefly to those of his contemporaries. Other primary sources include various talk events, broadcasts, journalism and ephemera. While not scholarly in most cases, these sources give a picture of the views of the media of the past and of today. They elucidate some common perceptions of the difficulties surrounding Wagner reception and some solutions that have been presented. In combination with ethnographic observations and interviews, this material reveals something more of the agenda and communications of Opera North.

4.2 Wagner reception today: barriers and the problem of perspective

4.2.1 Literary and scholarly obstacles and issues of biography: Wagner - the 'subject without end'

Writing on Wagner is prolific and, as one might expect from such an abundant field, it is also highly variable in focus, tone and quality. Some is well-researched scholarship, and some biographical writing is of a less rigorously academic nature. There is also evident acrimony between certain authors which, for some readers including those new to Wagner or to Wagner scholarship, could indeed be off-putting. Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker describe the issue thus:

The difficulties in surveying the Wagnerian field of play reside not in locating the participants but in sorting out the crowd, and complaints about the mass of verbiage that has attached itself to Wagner's life and work are by now an obligatory opening gambit in any book on the subject.⁴⁹⁴

Indeed, in 1979 Carl Dahlhaus pleaded that 'the story of Wagner's life has been told so often that it can be told no longer',⁴⁹⁵ a sentiment echoed by Deathridge almost three decades later, with a growing tone of desperation, stating that 'Wagner's biography has been researched to within an inch of its life'.⁴⁹⁶ In 1985, Ulrich Müller and Peter Wapnewski opened their editorial preface to the *Wagner Handbook* with a comment on the triviality of statements regarding the

⁴⁹⁴ Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, *Analysing Opera: Verdi and Wagner* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p.6.

⁴⁹⁵ Carl Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*, trans. by Mary Whittall (Cambridge: CUP, 1979), p.2.

⁴⁹⁶ Deathridge, *Wagner Beyond Good and Evil*, p.3.

volume of writing on Wagner,⁴⁹⁷ and yet in Wagner companions and anthologies similar opening statements continue to be made, as if any further attempts at collating scholarship or rehearsing biography require this disclaimer. The subject area is simply too vast and unwieldy to be manageable, at least for any individual, and yet it is necessary that we continue to reinterpret, to reprioritise, reanalyse and reorder, and so it continues to grow.

This chapter contains analysis of the issues and perspectives surrounding Wagner reception; it makes no claim to contribute significantly to the vast body of literature regarding the man himself. Yet to understand at least one of the main obstacles to accessing Wagner, account must be taken of this body of work. The extraordinary volume of literature that has been written on Wagner, his music, his philosophy and his own writings can be daunting for the casual browser. Deathridge, and Abbate and Parker also suggest that scholars are charged with a substantial task in ‘sorting out the crowd’.⁴⁹⁸ Thus arises the concept of the specialist ‘Wagner scholar’ rather than the more general musicologist, although in Anglophone research this term seems to be applied only to John Deathridge with regularity by his peers.⁴⁹⁹ According to Deathridge, in ‘A Brief History of Wagner Research’ and ‘Wagner Lives: Issues in autobiography’,⁵⁰⁰ the volume of Wagner literature is not the only problem, but that this scholarship (much of which he deems to be of questionable quality) contains such a variety of foci that it is ‘resistant to systematic study’.⁵⁰¹ Notably Deathridge criticises the ‘impenetrable ideological web’ erected and maintained by Wagner’s son-in-law Houston Stewart Chamberlain and his fellow ‘Bayreuthians’, the deeper-rooted ‘tension between partisan special pleading ([...] disguised as “objective” study) and the truly critical scholarship that runs beneath the surface of most writings on Wagner’, and research that is ‘clouded by hagiography, dilettantish scholarship [...] and intellectual pretentiousness’.⁵⁰² The reason for much of the inconsistency in what might pass for rigorous or objective scholarship is the autobiographical work of Wagner

⁴⁹⁷ Ulrich Müller and Peter Wapnewski, ‘Foreword to the German Edition’, in *The Wagner Handbook*, ed. by Müller and Wapnewski, pp.ix-x (p.ix).

⁴⁹⁸ Abbate and Parker, p.6.

⁴⁹⁹ *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner* describes Deathridge as ‘a leading Wagner scholar’ (p.ix) reserving the term only for him amongst fifteen contributing authors. On the book jacket to *Wagner Beyond Good and Evil*, Thomas S. Grey hails Deathridge as ‘one of the most authoritative, widely regarded Wagner scholars around’, and Said, in his review of *The Wagner Handbook*, names Deathridge as ‘the leading Wagner scholar of the English-speaking world’. Edward Said, ‘The Importance of Being Unfaithful to Wagner’, *London Review of Books*, 15.3, 11 February 1993, <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v15/n03/edward-said/the-importance-of-being-unfaithful-to-wagner>> [accessed 29 August 2012] (para. 1 of 3 available).

⁵⁰⁰ John Deathridge, ‘A Brief History of Wagner Research’, in *The Wagner Handbook*, ed. by Müller and Wapnewski, pp.202-23; Deathridge, *Wagner Beyond Good and Evil*, pp.3-17, republished in *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, ed. by Grey, pp.3-18.

⁵⁰¹ *The Wagner Handbook*, p.202. Edward Said responded in his review of the text, ‘If so learned and *au courant* a scholar as Deathridge is daunted by trying to make sense of Wagner research and interpretation, what about the rest of us?’ Said (para. 1 of 3 available).

⁵⁰² *The Wagner Handbook*, p.202.

himself, the attitudes of his family and the unquestioning discipleship of many who came after. Deathridge mentions the illusion of ‘self-biography by proxy’ given by Cosima’s diaries and the ‘legacy of sex, lies and invidious hype’ in the original sources that confronts the scholarly biographer,⁵⁰³ and Dahlhaus bemoans the tendencies of subsequent biographical scholarship:

Insofar as every book about him has been inspired not so much by the facts as by an earlier book about those facts, it is hardly surprising that historians and publicists alike have been challenged by Wagner’s own autobiographical writing to continue, to supplement and to emend the account of his life, but above all to repeat it tirelessly.⁵⁰⁴

Wagner was driven to document his own life repeatedly (in autobiography, writings, diaries and letters).⁵⁰⁵ Deathridge describes his ‘talent for weaving fiction with sometimes astonishingly accurate accounts of his life’ and charges him with ‘lukewarm interest in and scepticism about factual historical investigation [which] undoubtedly left their mark on his followers’.⁵⁰⁶ Added to inconsistencies are the problems of clarity. Bryan Magee accuses him of ‘a vocabulary intended to impress, unnecessary abstractions and elaborate sentence structures’.⁵⁰⁷ Magee complains that ‘many passages are intolerably boring. Some do not mean anything at all. It always calls for sustained effort from the reader to pick out meaning in the cloud of words’,⁵⁰⁸ and Millington has described William Ashton Ellis’s nineteenth-century translations as ‘impenetrable’.⁵⁰⁹

Much of Wagner’s original prose is structured like speech in written form. Indeed in the preface to *My Life* he reveals that ‘the contents of these volumes have been written down directly from my dictation, over a period of several years, by my friend and wife, who wished me to tell her the story of my life’.⁵¹⁰ These volumes are long and involved, written in meticulous, subjective detail. Wagner here had a captive audience consisting, at the point of dictation, of the person who most revelled in his every detail. The autobiography was designed for his most tireless followers, rather than for general consumption. Wagner is more broadly digressive, repetitive and tends to structure his ideas in a way that was perhaps immediate to

⁵⁰³ Deathridge, *Wagner Beyond Good and Evil*, p.14.

⁵⁰⁴ Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner’s Music Dramas*, p.2.

⁵⁰⁵ Jürgen Kühnel, ‘The Prose Writings’, in *The Wagner Handbook*, ed. by Müller and Wapnewski, pp.565-651 gives a comprehensive list and summaries of Wagner’s entire prose output. Barry Millington, ‘The Prose Works’, in *The Wagner Compendium*, ed. by Millington, pp.326-32, provides a more condensed catalogue.

⁵⁰⁶ *The Wagner Handbook*, p.203.

⁵⁰⁷ Bryan Magee, ‘Wagner’s Theory of Opera’, in *Penetrating Wagner’s Ring*, ed. by DiGaetani, pp.69-77 (p.69).

⁵⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p.70.

⁵⁰⁹ Barry Millington, ‘200 Not Out: Wagner the ultimate all-rounder’, conference keynote speech, 30 May 2013, at the University of Leeds conference *Richard Wagner’s Impact on His World and Ours*.

⁵¹⁰ Richard Wagner, *My Life* ‘authorized translation from the German’ (London: Constable, 1911), p.v.

him, but less than organised for the reader wishing to follow a line of thought. His style is at different points oblique, flowery, overly generalising, or tangled in the thoughts of the moment. In short, readers must already be committed to the writer and his import before engaging with his prose works, and yet demands are made of us to read the original texts. In an introduction to the new (and arguably clearer) translation of ‘The Artwork of the Future’ by Emma Warner, Keith Warner makes the following complaint:

We today seem hell-bent on riding the cart without ever appreciating the effort of the horse: in ignoring his voluminous writings about music-theatre, society and the arts in general, usually by declaring them boring, stuffy and unreadable, we reduce Wagner continually to the genius we want him to be, avoiding the genius that he is. However, it is really impossible to understand his operas from any critical stance, or more importantly, appreciate them fully as an audience in the theatre, without to some degree coming to grips with Wagner’s view of the function of music, text, acting and the other theatre arts.⁵¹¹

However, on beginning to read the treatise itself, we are faced in the opening line with an ambiguous Aristotelian analogy: ‘Humans are to nature as art is to humans.’⁵¹² Wagner follows this with around a thousand words of extrapolation on the matter before moving onto the second main paragraph. This extrapolation involves much generalisation, inconsistent, gendered personification of ‘nature’ and lack of clear definition as to what is meant by ‘nature’ or ‘art’ or various other abstract ideas such as ‘essence’, ‘consciousness’ and ‘necessity’. To understand this work, even at its outset, account must be taken of Wagner’s contemporaries, his influences and developing philosophical ideas. This treatise, held to be vital to the critical understanding of his stage works, is no place to start for a beginner.

Vazsonyi begins with the premise of Wagner’s writings as tools for self-publicity, cultivated in synchronism with the Romantic ideal of the artist’s autonomous voice, leading to the composer’s own overtly theatrical (yet somehow indisputable) narrative:

He relentlessly engaged in what we today call ‘spin’ by using every available medium of communication [...] to overwhelm and thus set the terms of the discourse. [...] Like an immovable object, Wagner’s own version of the truth continues to be the starting point from which most studies proceed.⁵¹³

⁵¹¹ Keith Warner, ‘Why read Wagner? Why not just listen? An introduction to the new translation of “The Artwork of the Future”’, *Wagner Journal*, special issue (2013), 3-8 (p.3).

⁵¹² Richard Wagner, ‘The Artwork of the Future’, trans. by Emma Warner, *Wagner Journal*, special issue (2013), 13-86 (p.13).

⁵¹³ *Inside The Ring*, p.61.

One could also argue that Wagner's public and vitriolic criticism of his peers also left its mark on Wagner scholarship, and that this could be discouraging to those new to the area.⁵¹⁴

Deathridge reflects thus:

My own description of the *Bayreuth Blätter* as 'dreadful' [...] is a good example of how tempting it is, especially in the heated vicinity of Wagner's reputation, to take sides on ideological issues while projecting partisan feeling onto the kind of scholarship associated with them.⁵¹⁵

Readers' letters published in response to a 1993 review of four Wagner texts by Edward Said, are testament to the anger between those who wish to comment.⁵¹⁶ The discussion contains a heated exchange between Paul Lawrence Rose (in defence of *Wagner: Race and revolution*), Tanner, and Said, with others, where beside genuine criticism, personal insults abound. Also amongst the authors recommended in the Opera North programme booklets, acrimonious opposition is evident. Tanner's *Wagner* in particular contains acerbic criticism of authors, Ethan Mordden, Rodney Milnes and Barry Millington, and *The Faber Pocket Guide to Wagner* is reproachful of Grey's *Cambridge Companion*.⁵¹⁷ In Opera North's 2013 'Siegfried: Inside Opera Special' Tanner was, in person, scathing with regards to Millington.⁵¹⁸ Amid a disparaging tone toward his peers, Tanner makes (and perhaps unwittingly demonstrates) a sound point: that some Wagner authors engage in a broadly unusual type of emotional hostility when considering their subject. By Tanner's own voice, this hostility extends to comments regarding one another. With such animosity arising from scholars, one might hope for a less emotionally charged account when writing is directed towards the more casually interested Wagner listener, looking for a way into receiving and understanding the work or its background and history.

Writers' concerns regarding the nature of Wagner's character and his anti-Judaism in particular, can be difficult to reconcile. The crucial, but not unbiased scholarship of Nietzsche (most prominently *The Case of Wagner*) and Adorno (*In Search of Wagner*),⁵¹⁹ has, in

⁵¹⁴ In 'Das Judentum in der Musik' of 1850, Wagner makes acerbic criticism of composers Giacomo Meyerbeer and Felix Mendelssohn. Richard Wagner, *Judaism in Music, and Other Essays*, trans. by William Ashton Ellis (Lincoln: Bison, 1995).

⁵¹⁵ *The Wagner Handbook*, p.204.

⁵¹⁶ Said reviews *Wagner in Performance*, ed. by Barry Millington and Stewart Spencer (New Haven: YUP, 1992); Paul Lawrence Rose, *Wagner: Race and revolution; Wagner Handbook*, ed. by Müller and Wapnewski; and Edmond Michotte, *Richard Wagner's Visit to Rossini and An Evening at Rossini's in Beau-Séjour*, trans. by Herbert Weinstock (London: Quartet, 1992).

⁵¹⁷ Tanner, *Wagner* (London: Harper Collins, 1996), pp.14-30; *The Faber Pocket Guide to Wagner*, p240.

⁵¹⁸ Michael Tanner, speaking at ON's 'Siegfried: Inside Opera Special', Howard Assembly Room, 13 July 2013, speech reported from notes.

⁵¹⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner, Nietzsche Contra Wagner, and Selected Aphorisms*, trans. by Anthony M. Ludovici (Edinburgh: T.N.Foulis, 1911); Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 2005).

combination, I would argue, come to shape many of today's debates around Wagner reception. Adorno most prominently makes the case that the *Nibelung* dwarves of the Ring cycle and *Die Meistersinger*'s Beckmesser are racist Jewish caricatures, and yet, like Wagner's own sentiment, Adorno is less than consistent.⁵²⁰ Nietzsche, in *The Case of Wagner*, is concerned with an immersed, congregational and devotional experience of his art that might rob the individual of his own power of decision-making.⁵²¹ Arguments around the ideas of Adorno and Nietzsche, and confluences of the two (effectively, that being so immersed, the audience is potentially propagandised into anti-Semitism) have now passed through generations of scholarship. The 'ethical effect' of Wagner is often discussed in a manner separated from his own historical context, with other histories and historical agendas (such as that of Hitler and his National Socialists) imposed upon the composer and his work, and even upon the modern-day reception of this work. The tireless continuation of the debate serves still to publicise the composer and his work, and it plays (even within the academic sphere) to agendas of blame, guilt and sensationalism. There is a perception, as voiced by Nicholas Lezard in a *Guardian* review of the 2005 edition of *In Search of Wagner*, that 'This is the crux of "Wagner Studies", then. Is the [stage] work itself infected with this poison?'.⁵²² Yet, as asserted by Thomas S. Grey in his *Cambridge Companion*, 'the real question has to do with the consequences' for us today of the evidence with which we are presented as part of the course of this debate.⁵²³

4.2.2 Opera North's engagement with the Wagner debate: in programmes, at satellite events, and at the company fringes

Wagner reception, according to Thomas S. Grey, 'involves not only critical attitudes toward the music over time, but considerable social, political, and ideological dimensions as well'.⁵²⁴ It is within the opera company that the decision and much of the power resides, to carry the echoes of the discourse surrounding Wagner reception to interested parties in its audience, or not. So, considering all the difficulties outlined in accessing Wagner scholarship, how did Opera North traverse a path through it for its new audience? For *Das Rheingold* in 2011, Opera North made a positive choice to focus its accompanying events on facilitating public access to the company's

⁵²⁰ Deathridge claims, reviewing Adorno's intent, that *In Search of Wagner* was not meant to incite debate on Wagner as a controversial figure, since in the 1950s and '60s Adorno referred to the work as a 'rescue' of Wagner's historical reputation ('Wagner and Adorno', *The Essay: Wagner's Philosophers*, BBC Radio 3, 13 December 2013). However, Slavoj Žižek describes *In Search of Wagner*, drafted in the late 1930s, as 'a part of Adorno's ongoing exploration of the ideological roots of Nazism', after which he 'gradually changed his position into a more positive appreciation of Wagner' (Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, p.viii).

⁵²¹ 'In [Wagner's] theatre, one becomes mob, herd [...] —Wagnerite: there, the most personal conscience is bound to submit to the levelling charm of the great multitude' (Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*, p.61).

⁵²² Nicholas Lezard, 'Music Beyond Words', *Guardian*, 13 August 2005,

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/aug/13/music>> [accessed 6 November 2012] (para. 4 of 7).

⁵²³ *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, p.203.

⁵²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.xiii.

production of the work, and to leave ‘weighty’ issues of philosophy and politics to the programme notes.⁵²⁵ Indeed, in the traditional function of the programme notes (since the time of Wagner) to elucidate elements of the work and its history, Kara McKechnie’s articles in the Opera North programmes to *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre* make significant mention of the composer’s vitriolic anti-Judaism in ‘Das Judentum in der Musik’ and the appropriation of Wagner’s music by the Third Reich.⁵²⁶ In the same two programme brochures, the general literature recommended includes Grey’s *Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, which, by the editor’s own admission, is heavily steeped with ‘debates over Wagner’s notorious anti-Semitism, its role in his posthumous influence, and how it might be confronted by scholars, critics, producers and audiences today’.⁵²⁷ Interestingly, another Opera North programme recommendation, Michael Tanner’s *Faber Pocket Guide to Wagner*, is heavily critical of the disproportionate inclusion of this theme.⁵²⁸ Grey defends his balance of content, calling it a ‘good index of the indisputable prominence of this topic in Wagner studies and public discussion over the past fifteen or twenty years’.⁵²⁹ This ‘repoliticizing [of] the “Wagner question”’, Grey defines as a reaction to the long, post-war period where Wagner scholars had to engage in ‘rehabilitating the figure of Wagner’, following its iconic appropriation by Hitler, and also coming after a period of ‘anti-Romantic and anti-Wagnerian polemics’ during the twentieth century.⁵³⁰

The recommendation of Grey’s *Cambridge Companion*, despite being but a sentence in programme booklets was, in fact, one of the main actions by which Opera North pointed its audience towards the debate on Wagner’s anti-Judaism. Prior to the final performance of *Siegfried* in July 2013, the company engaged with this ideological debate and issues arising, only in its programme booklets. The ‘staged concert’ performances were, in production terms, relatively minimalistic, and there was certainly no characterisation of Judaism imposed by a director. In fact, in as much as the ‘staged concert version’ was brought to life through somewhat abstract projections and lighting, the production was said, by Orchestra Director Dougie Scarfe in a pre-show talk, to be ‘unencumbered by a director’s vision’.⁵³¹ Pre-show

⁵²⁵ Stuart Leeks, ‘What Next’, in *Das Rheingold* programme brochure, ed. by Stuart Leeks (ON, 2011), pp.16-19 (p.17).

⁵²⁶ Kara McKechnie, ‘To Begin: *Rheingold* on stage: a selective production history’, in *Das Rheingold*, programme brochure, ed. by Stuart Leeks (ON, 2011), pp.11-15 (p.12); Kara McKechnie, ‘The Old to the New: Wagner and the forging of myths’, in *Die Walküre*, programme brochure, ed. by Stuart Leeks (ON, 2012), pp.11-13 (p.13).

⁵²⁷ *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, p.xiv.

⁵²⁸ Tanner, *The Faber Pocket Guide to Wagner*, pp.239-40.

⁵²⁹ *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, p.xiv.

⁵³⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵³¹ Dougie Scarfe in conversation with Stuart Leeks at the Sage Gateshead, 23 June 2012 (taken from notes by Kara McKechnie). For *Siegfried* in 2013, only three people were listed on the website under ‘creative team’: Richard Farnes as ‘Conductor’, Peter Mumford listed twice, for ‘Concert Staging’ and as ‘Lighting/Projection Designer’, and Joe Austin as ‘Associate Director’ (ON, ‘What’s On, *Siegfried*’, ON

events and broadcasts in 2011 and 2012 did not refer directly to debates around anti-Semitism or proto-Nazism. However, in 2013, Opera North's intellectual engagement with *The Ring*, encompassing the Jewish issue, increased substantially.⁵³²

Opera North regularly runs pre-show talks engaging with works in production, often explaining aspects of the productions or 'behind the scenes' glimpses into the life and work of the company. The more detailed 'Inside Opera' series focuses on one opera per season. Editor Stuart Leeks described the concept:

It's an event that's designed to give audiences a deeper insight into the opera in question and to the processes involved in getting a production to the stage. It happens live in person, giving the audience the opportunity to pose their own questions to the people behind an Opera North production.⁵³³

Affording a greater engagement with academic debate than usual for this format, even than this description might indicate, an 'Inside Opera Special' ran on 13 July 2013, prior to the final performance of *Siegfried*. This was a discussion between political commentator Matthew D'Ancona, philosopher and outspoken critic of the debate around Wagner's anti-Semitism Michael Tanner and Opera North then Head of Music Martin Pickard, moderated by Opera North Editor Stuart Leeks. This was by far the most direct engagement with academic debate that the company had shown throughout its Ring cycle journey thus far (putting aside fringe activity at the University of Leeds conferences, which I will describe shortly). The choice of Tanner as a guest speaker ensured that Wagner's anti-Semitism was not high on Opera North's agenda for this event.⁵³⁴ Tanner, described to me in advance of the event by Pickard as 'scarily high-powered',⁵³⁵ was known to be in firm opposition to the suggestion of anti-Semitism in Wagner's stage works, and indeed to the very existence of this debate, and so, while academic engagement happened around various other issues (as I will later outline) the contribution to discussions of the anti-Semitic Wagner was pre-disposed to be minimal. Indeed the issue did not

(2013) <<http://www.operanorth.co.uk/productions/siegfried>> [accessed 7 June 2013]. Peter Mumford is described similarly in all programme booklets for the cycle. This decision by the company might indeed have been conscious or subconscious, given the difficulties of directing Wagner caused by the debate around proto-Nazism.

⁵³² The engagement of Opera North with higher level academic argument in 2013 was perhaps paradoxical in that marketing of the *Siegfried* production in this year involved much repetition of the idea that an audience member could 'walk in off the street' and experience this production in the manner of a film, without prior knowledge or preparation.

⁵³³ Stuart Leeks, 'Inside Opera', *ON*, 12 October 2011, <<http://www.page-to-stage.co.uk/2011/10/12/stuart-leeks-inside-opera/>> [accessed 12 February 2014] (para. 1 of 5).

⁵³⁴ Michael Tanner has been outspoken in his disdain for any prolonged discussion of Wagner's anti-Semitism in academic publications, most vehemently opposed to the accusation of evidence of anti-Semitism in the stage works. The *Faber Pocket Guide* in particular was a recommended text in Opera North programme booklets for the Ring operas and in Stuart Leeks' verbal introduction to Michael Tanner on 13 July 2013.

⁵³⁵ Private email correspondence to me from Martin Pickard, sent on 14 June 2013, with permission.

arise until the final question from the audience. In this question the audience member requested the opinions of the panel on the character of Mime as an ‘expression of Wagner’s anti-Semitism’.⁵³⁶ The question was then paraphrased by Stuart Leeks who knowingly commented that ‘Michael is probably fuming’. Tanner at this point said that he had hoped for a whole hour’s discussion without mention of anti-Semitism, before dismissing the audience member’s question, with Matthew D’Ancona adding his opinion in support of Tanner.

Indicative of the varying priorities of different spheres of operatic engagement, the University of Leeds conference organisers had invited Barry Millington (Tanner’s primary adversary in the anti-Semitism debate⁵³⁷) as keynote speaker for *Richard Wagner’s Impact on His World and Ours*.⁵³⁸ This conference, which was held between Thursday 30 May and Sunday 2 June 2013, at the University of Leeds School of Music, advertised some involvement from DARE, also displaying Opera North’s logo on the cover of the programme booklet. In this conference various paper presentations touched on, or grappled with issues of German nationalism and anti-Judaism. A session on Friday 31 May contained the following papers: ‘Opera and Politics: *Die Meistersinger* at the intersection of New York City and World War II’;⁵³⁹ ‘“Our Wagner”: The reception of Richard Wagner’s music in England during the First World War’;⁵⁴⁰ and ‘“Went Up In Smoke The Holy Roman Reich/All the Same for Us Would Stay the Holy German Art”: Political implications of Hans Sachs’ final monologue in Wagner’s *Meistersinger* in Germany from 1867 to 1945’.⁵⁴¹ Another session on Saturday 1 June continued similar themes: ‘Wagner’s Re-conception of Weber’s German Nationalism’;⁵⁴² ‘Richard

⁵³⁶ Adorno referred to Wagner’s creation of ‘social character’ thus: ‘The gold-grabbing, invisible, anonymous, exploitative Alberich, the shoulder-shrugging, loquacious Mime, overflowing with self-praise and spite, the impotent intellectual critic Hanslick-Beckmesser – all the rejects of Wagner’s works are caricatures of Jews. They stir up the oldest sources of German hatred of the Jews’ Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, pp.12-13.

⁵³⁷ See Barry Millington, *Wagner* (London: J.M. Dent, 1984); ‘*Parsifal*: A work for our times’, *Opera*, 34 (1988), 13-17; ‘Nuremberg Trial: Is there anti-Semitism in *Die Meistersinger*?’, *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 3 (1991), 247-60. Others who have argued the evidence for Wagner’s anti-Judaism on stage include Thomas S. Grey, *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, ed. by Grey, pp.203-18; Robert W. Gutman, *Richard Wagner: The man, his mind, and his music* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1968); Paul Lawrence Rose, *Wagner: Race and revolution* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992); Hartmut Zelinsky, ‘Die “feuerkur” des Richard Wagner oder die “neue religion” der “Erlösung” durch “Vernichtung”’, in *Wie anti-semitisch darf ein Künstler sein?*, ed. by Heinz-Klaus Metzger and Rainer Riehn (Munich: Text und Kritik, 1978), pp.79-112.

⁵³⁸ The conference website gives the organising committee as Anastasia Belina-Johnson, Stephen Muir, Derek Scott, Julian Rushton, and Martin Pickard. University of Leeds, ‘About the Conference: Richard Wagner’s impact on his world and ours’, *School of Music, Events* (2013) <<http://music.leeds.ac.uk/events/richard-wagners-impact-on-his-world-and-ours/>> [accessed 22 Sept 2015].

⁵³⁹ Gwen D’Amico, City University of New York. Referenced from ‘Programme: Richard Wagner’s impact on his world and ours, 30 May- 2 June’ (2013) <<http://www.pvac.leeds.ac.uk/wagner2013/programme/>> [accessed 7 June 2013].

⁵⁴⁰ Jane Angell, Royal Holloway University, reference *ibid*.

⁵⁴¹ Aleksandar Molnar, University of Belgrade.

⁵⁴² Joseph E. Morgan, Boston, Massachusetts.

Wagner and the Discourse of National Identity in Musicology Around 1900',⁵⁴³ and 'Judaism and Germanism in Richard Wagner's Art'.⁵⁴⁴ Perhaps the most relevant to the impact of Wagner on today's world was the 'round table' session on Friday 31 May where an international panel discussed the controversy of Wagner's music in relation to Israel.⁵⁴⁵ The panel, convened by Dr Malcolm Miller from the Institute of Musical Research, comprised Dr Margaret Brearley (author of *Hitler and Wagner: The leader, the master and the Jews*⁵⁴⁶ and formerly Archbishop of Canterbury's Adviser on the Holocaust) Noam Ben-Ze'ev (music critic and journalist for Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*) and Professor Na'ama Sheffi (author of *The Ring of Myths: The Israelis, Wagner and the Nazis*⁵⁴⁷). Roberto Paternostro (former Director of the Israeli Chamber Orchestra and Musical Director of the 2012 Colón Ring in Buenos Aires) was due to participate but withdrew because of illness. The discussion, centring on the question of Wagner performance in Israel was in-depth, and born of much first-hand experience. Indeed, substantiating Grey's assertion of the 'indisputable prominence of this topic',⁵⁴⁸ the thread of Judaism and Israel was prevalent at this four-day gathering.

While the conference was advertised as being associated with Opera North, the company did not reciprocate in advertising this as part of its programme of Wagner events, but this conference was listed as belonging to a third institution, DARE.⁵⁴⁹ It would appear that this type of event, on the very outskirts of the umbrella covering Opera North activities, is advertised looking in toward the artistic centre of what the company does (the work of producing main-stage opera) but with little awareness from the centre itself.

On the other hand, for another 'round table' session, the front page of the conference website advertised a 'panel comprising scholars and practitioners from the University of Leeds and Opera North, considering Opera North's current Ring project'.⁵⁵⁰ This being the only link

⁵⁴³ Golan Gur, Humboldt University of Berlin.

⁵⁴⁴ Irad Atir, University of Bar-Ilan, Israel.

⁵⁴⁵ In November 1938, in the wake of the brutal and widely reported *Kristallnacht* pogrom, the Palestine Symphony Orchestra removed from its programme the Overture to *Meistersinger*, since when Wagner's music has been effectively banned in Israel by a consensus of musicians, venues and audiences. The ongoing implementation of this ban is increasingly controversial. Musicologist Pamela M. Potter writes of the 'psychological associations invoked by [Wagner's] image', and the 'horrible memories it conjures up in the minds of Holocaust survivors, who still form a vocal, if no longer numerous, part of the concert-going public in Israel'. Pamela M. Potter, 'Wagner and the Third Reich: Myths and realities', in *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, ed. by Grey, pp.235-45 (p.245). But speaking at the University of Leeds conference, Na'ama Sheffi argued that this current perception, while historically embedded, is not based on critical analytical thought in the majority of the population (31 May 2013).

⁵⁴⁶ Margaret Brearley, *Hitler and Wagner: The leader, the master and the Jews* (London: Institute of Jewish Affairs, 1988).

⁵⁴⁷ Na'ama Sheffi, *The Ring of Myths: The Israelis, Wagner and the Nazis*, trans. by Martha Grenzeback (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2001).

⁵⁴⁸ *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, p.xiv.

⁵⁴⁹ 'Events', *DARE* [n.d.] <<http://www.dareyou.org.uk/events/>> [accessed 7 June 2013] (para. 1 of 47).

⁵⁵⁰ 'Programme: Richard Wagner's impact on his world and ours'.

advertising the active participation of Opera North, the panel was due to consist of four speakers: Stuart Leeks (Opera North Editor), Martin Pickard (Opera North Head of Music), Kara McKechnie (University of Leeds Lecturer in Dramaturgy and Literary Management; resident researcher at Opera North), and myself as a collaborative doctoral scholar with Opera North. But after Stuart Leeks withdrew through illness, the remaining three were all also linked to the university as well as the company (Pickard having recently completed a PhD in the School of Music).⁵⁵¹ There was also a rather ad hoc agreement with Opera North, whereby conference delegates were able to attend an orchestral rehearsal for *Siegfried* during the course of the conference, and so a loose link between the university and the opera company appeared here.⁵⁵²

Ultimately, therefore, while those in charge of artistic policy at Opera North had decided consciously to circumnavigate the weightiest of political issues in relation to their Ring, these matters arose on the company fringes, through the activities of the University of Leeds as a partner institution, and DARE as a formal connection to the University.

There was various sign-posting to further reading, for those interested, within the Opera North Ring opera programme notes. This gave the impression of a relatively light academic touch within the programme booklets themselves. However, the recommended literature expanded over the course of the cycle, beginning, in 2011, with Stuart Leeks' original reading list of Grey, Tanner and Millington. In the programme booklets for *Die Walküre* in 2012 and *Siegfried* in 2013, George Hall echoed the choices of Leeks, and added books by several other authors: Bryan Magee's *Aspects of Wagner*, and *Wagner and Philosophy*,⁵⁵³ Ernest Newman's four-volume biography,⁵⁵⁴ George Bernard Shaw's *The Perfect Wagnerite*,⁵⁵⁵ Robert Donington's Jungian interpretation *Wagner's Ring and its Symbols*,⁵⁵⁶ and Wagner's own autobiography. While this list becomes slightly less approachable for the Wagner beginner, we might now assume a higher level of commitment on the part of the audience, having invested in

⁵⁵¹ Here I find myself in the strange position of assessing the strength of an ON link via the very evidence of my own participation. Charlotte Aull Davies in *Reflexive Ethnography: A guide to researching selves and others* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1999), Deborah Reed-Danahay in *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the self and the social* (Oxford: Berg, 1997), and others have compiled work on reflexive ethnography whereby an ethnographer observes her own participation in the event, process or other that she studies. While, as an AHRC collaborative doctoral student, I am a stakeholder in company activities, my involvement is also at the company fringes; I have generally avoided interpreting my own academic activities as evidence of an Opera North presence, due to problems regarding objectivity and my capacity to manipulate events and data.

⁵⁵² Informal discussion with Martin Pickard, 30 May 2013.

⁵⁵³ Bryan Magee, *Aspects of Wagner* (Oxford: Oxford Paperbacks, 1988); Bryan Magee, *Wagner and Philosophy* (London: Penguin, 2001).

⁵⁵⁴ Ernest Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner* (NY: CUP, 1976).

⁵⁵⁵ George Bernard Shaw, *The Perfect Wagnerite: A commentary on the Nibelung's Ring* (NY: Brentano, 1909).

⁵⁵⁶ Robert Donington, *Wagner's Ring and its Symbols* (London: Faber, 1963).

a second or third Ring instalment. Nonetheless Hall also recommends the website <www.wagneropera.net> as an immediately available, journalistic resource. What is conspicuously not mentioned by any source pertaining to Opera North is the large quantity of technical musical analysis that has been done on the work since Wagner's time. The 1877 Ring analysis by Wagner's disciple Hans von Wolzogen was the original motivic map, after which all others have been fashioned,⁵⁵⁷ and it was after Wolzogen's analysis that the term 'leitmotif' began to gain currency.⁵⁵⁸ As Abbate and Parker acknowledge, 'every time we make an apology for continuing to use Wolzogen's labels we acknowledge the unshaken force of his example'.⁵⁵⁹

Other commentators such as Deryck Cooke and Ernest Newman have recapitulated the leitmotifs into their own workings out,⁵⁶⁰ and lists of motifs are littered though more general literature, guides or textually based analyses on *The Ring*.⁵⁶¹ While keen Opera North audience members were expected to be familiar with the term 'leitmotif', as evidenced in the publicity for the 'Sing ON: Wagner!' event and a *Rheingold* pre-show 'Inside Opera' event led by Pickard introducing various leitmotifs,⁵⁶² they were not directed toward the original analyses, even by the programme booklets' suggestions for further reading.⁵⁶³ This is explicable in as much as the term is now common currency in talking about Wagner, but this is only the case for those with some existing knowledge. The neglect of the sources of formal, technical analysis by the opera company, primarily an institution of practical music-making and drama, is also contextual. The focus of general audience members is, of course, directed towards the activities of opera practitioners rather than academic analyses. As John Deathridge asserted in a review, regarding his preferred articles in DiGaetani's anthology *Penetrating Wagner's Ring*: '[Georg] Solti's

⁵⁵⁷ Hans von Wolzogen, *Guide to the Music of Richard Wagner's Tetralogy: The Ring of the Nibelung: A thematic key*, trans. by Nathan Haskell Dole (NY: Schirmer, 1895).

⁵⁵⁸ Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*, p.1.

⁵⁵⁹ Abbate and Parker, p.7.

⁵⁶⁰ Deryck Cooke, *I Saw the World End* (London: OUP, 1979); Ernest Newman, *Wagner Nights* (London: The Bodley Head, 1988).

⁵⁶¹ A few select examples include: Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*; Donington, *Wagner's Ring and its Symbols*; W.J. Henderson, 'The Music of the Trilogy', in *Penetrating Wagner's Ring*, ed. by DiGaetani; Rudolph Sabor, *Richard Wagner, Der Ring des Nibelungen: A companion* (London: Phaidon, 1997); Jack Stein, 'The Rhinegold', in *Penetrating Wagner's Ring*. There are many more. Conversely, Alfred Lorenz in the 1920s was concerned more with form than motive, although his work, attempting to find tonal unity over swathes of time, is highly disputed, in the main by Dahlhaus. 'The idea that aesthetic access to a work is gained through understanding of technique has become the ruling maxim (as questionable as are many of the pedagogical consequences).' Dahlhaus, *Das Drama Richard Wagners als Kunstwerk* (Regensburg, 1970), quoted in English in Anthony Newcomb, 'The Birth of Music out of the Spirit Drama', *19th-Century Music*, 5, 1 (1981), 38-66 (p.39).

⁵⁶² ON, *HAR leaflet, Spring 2011* (Leeds: ON, 2011) stated that the 'Sing ON: Wagner!' public workshop event would offer participants the opportunity to 'understand how the piece is put together and be introduced to the leitmotifs through actually singing them'. In the 'Inside Opera Special: *Das Rheingold*' pre-show event at LTH on 1 July 2011, Martin Pickard demonstrated leitmotifs at the piano and with the assistance of Opera North chorus members who sang excerpts from the Rhinemaidens' musical material.

⁵⁶³ Musical mention is made of 'Leitmotifs' in Andrew Fairley, 'The Music of *Siegfried*: An introduction' in the programme booklet to *Siegfried*, ed. by Stuart Leeks (Leeds: ON, 2013), pp.14-17 (p.15), but without reference to the original sources.

advice to young conductors on how to conduct *Das Rheingold* tells us more about the distribution of dramatic weight in the work than a host of high-minded analyses.⁵⁶⁴

In conclusion, the breadth of Wagner writing can prove difficult to navigate, and problems with the nature of some Wagner writing, outlined by Deathridge, Dahlhaus and others, could be viewed as discouraging.⁵⁶⁵ Opera North consequently provided suggestions for a point of entry. The attitude of the company was to provide ways in which its audience members might overcome any initial misgivings, and this approach was consistent across programme notes, educational and performance events surrounding *The Ring*, and the production itself, as will be explored later in this chapter. Less successful was the University of Leeds workshop ‘Wagner with feeling and understanding’, which was to be run by the University of Leeds Lifelong Learning Centre in association with DARE, but which had to be cancelled ultimately through lack of interest.⁵⁶⁶ Indeed, the opening sentence of the workshop’s advertising brochure, ‘Richard Wagner [...] is a subject without end’, highlights a particular problem whereby Wagner and his work might almost be presented as a subject without beginning, and arguably hints that a suitable point of access could prove difficult to locate. Here also Dahlhaus and Deathridge’s concerns regarding literary saturation (mentioned at the beginning of this section) present themselves at the very point of access to Wagner study and appreciation, an approach that Opera North itself intentionally took pains to avoid.

4.2.3 Musical megalith

The enormous verbiage surrounding Wagner’s work is, of course, reflective of the scale of the works themselves. At a total of approximately fifteen hours of music, *The Ring* is a musical megalith. The length of these dramas, the scale of the musical resources employed, and the weighty philosophical aims can feel daunting to the beginner, on various levels. Opera North, in the initial 2011 marketing of events surrounding *Das Rheingold*, attempted to combat the issue of intellectual weightiness, but also to exploit musical and dramatic importance and scale. The initial marketing approach was simple and direct, and left aside the historical, biographical and philosophical context of the works. The attitude that was communicated by the company was that the importance of *The Ring* resides in its musical and dramatic weight. In a publicity film entitled *Richard Farnes Introduces Das Rheingold*, Music Director Farnes is posed the question

⁵⁶⁴ John Deathridge, ‘Richard Wagner and the English by Anne Dzamba Sessa; *Penetrating Wagner’s Ring: An anthology* by John Louis DiGaetani; *The Wagner Companion* by Peter Burbidge; Richard Sutton; *Wagner: A biography* by Curt von Westernhagen; Mary Whittall’, *19th-Century Music*, 5, 1 (1981), 81-89 (p.82).

⁵⁶⁵ *The Wagner Handbook*, p.202; Deathridge, *Wagner Beyond Good and Evil*, p.3; Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner’s Music Dramas*, p.2.

⁵⁶⁶ ‘Music: Wagner with feeling and understanding’, advertisement leaflet for workshop to be given by Anastasia Belina-Johnson on 26 June 2012, University of Leeds Lifelong Learning Centre.

‘Why is “The Ring” such a famous piece?’. He answers, ‘Well the first thing is its size. It is the biggest piece of western art music that there is. There is nothing bigger in scale.’⁵⁶⁷ Chorus Master Timothy Burke told me in an interview that he thought that ‘Wagner’s music is seen as kind of megalithic [...], it’s kind of huge’.⁵⁶⁸ Farnes, in a Radio 3 broadcast, also compared his conducting experience of *The Ring* to a parachute jump he had done, whereby the enormity and gravity of the event is overwhelming if considered completely, or as a whole:

The minute I step back, objectively, from the podium and think ‘I’m in the middle of conducting this extraordinary Wagner opera with all these musicians in front of me, and behind me, an audience behind me and all this detail going on on the screens overhead’, I’d melt, I think.⁵⁶⁹

However, Pickard expressed to me a slight concern that the company may have overstated the monumentality and that there is an inherent problem in removing from this sort of statement a sense of foreboding or difficulty. ‘These,’ he said, ‘are the issues we tussle with.’⁵⁷⁰

Overstating the monumentality is indeed a risk; one such exchange took place on BBC Radio 3 around the 2013 BBC Proms broadcast Ring cycle,⁵⁷¹ whereby presenter Sara Mohr-Pietsch ‘confessed’ her inexperience of the works, saying, ‘It’s always felt like an absolutely huge undertaking that once it got to a certain point in my life and I hadn’t done it I thought well how can even begin now?’ She spoke of a ‘really, really daunting’ plot, which seemed ‘so long and complicated’.⁵⁷² While this exchange did not take place around the Opera North cycle, it is important as an example of a particular introduction to *The Ring* from BBC Radio 3, which, as the main public service broadcaster of classical music in the UK, has a crucial role in conveying these issues to the public. Additionally, a broadcast Proms concert such as this might be expected to engage a wider audience than other Radio 3 Wagner broadcasts, and so it seems that the producers have taken the decision to introduce it from the point of view of a fearful beginner with whom they envisage first-time Wagner listeners might identify. It is also possible that this narrative carries the subconscious objective of the radio producers to maintain a high degree of cultural value in the performance and its broadcast through reminders of the divide between those ‘in the know’, i.e. holding a high degree of what Bourdieu termed ‘cultural capital’,⁵⁷³ and

⁵⁶⁷ ON, *Richard Farnes Introduces Das Rheingold*.

⁵⁶⁸ Interview with ON Chorus Master Timothy Burke, at Premier House, Leeds, 1 September 2011, from dictaphone.

⁵⁶⁹ Richard Farnes speaking on ‘Wagner’s *Die Walküre*’, *Radio 3 Live in Concert*.

⁵⁷⁰ Pickard, 11 June 2012.

⁵⁷¹ Daniel Barenboim and the Staatskapelle Berlin performed the Ring tetralogy as Proms 14, 15, 18 and 20 of 2013.

⁵⁷² ‘Proms Plus Intro: Introduction to *Das Rheingold*’, *BBC Proms 2013 Season*, BBC Radio 3, 22 July 2013.

⁵⁷³ See Bourdieu, ‘Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction’, p.257, and *Distinction*, pp.10, 16.

those who know little upon beginning their reception of the performance. The result is then that we, as audience members, might be made deferentially grateful to the participating institutions of ‘high culture’ (including Radio 3) for increasing our knowledge and thus our ‘cultural capital’, or alternatively reassured that we were already in possession of a higher quantity than the semi-fictional radio presenter, as played by Mohr-Pietsch.⁵⁷⁴ In overstating this ‘huge undertaking’ Radio 3 effectively models the ‘fear of the threshold into Wagner’⁵⁷⁵ for its listeners.

Opera North’s *Ring* was initially spread over four years, but the ‘monumentality’ remained.⁵⁷⁶ The *Rheingold* experience was two and a half hours without interval, *Die Walküre* over five hours, including a half-hour and a sixty-five-minute interval, *Siegfried* almost six hours including a half hour interval and a seventy-five-minute dinner interval, and *Götterdämmerung*, with similar intervals, around six and a half hours total. A full *Ring* cycle in 2016 required yet more endurance of the company’s now well-inducted audience.

In the following section I will look at some solutions to finding a point of entry to *The Ring*, many of which reduce the duration of the reception experience.

4.3 Access points and the reduced Ring cycle

4.3.1 Introduction

With the event, in 2013, of the bicentenary of Wagner’s birth, there emerged a relative spate of *Ring* cycles, as is exemplified in the aforementioned BBC Proms cycle. Prior to this, a general opera-goer in the UK who might not consider himself to be, specifically, a ‘Wagnerite’, not being so inclined as to seek out productions (inter)nationally, would not necessarily find himself presented with a *Ring* that was readily accessible. *Ring* cycles, being large and expensive, have been relatively few and far-between in time and geography. Opportunities to access live performances have (since the time of Wagner) required enormous investments of time and energy. For those few opera houses that could be described as producing *Ring* cycles with any

⁵⁷⁴ Mohr-Pietsch engaged in an exchange with guests who reassured her she should ‘just go’. She also worried that she would need ‘a bit of a glossary’ to understand such terms as *Gesamtkunstwerk* and leitmotif. This play-acting phenomenon also raises issues around the ‘acceptability’ of a young, female voice of cultural authority in broadcast media, although this is outside the scope of this thesis.

⁵⁷⁵ Pickard, 11 June 2012.

⁵⁷⁶ This is not a unique approach. As previously referred to, the English National Opera’s *Ring* cycle that eventually toured to Leeds, amongst other places, in 1975 and ’76, was originally offered out of sequence, with annual instalments between January 1970 and February 1973. More recently Mark Elder and the Hallé performed *Götterdämmerung* divided over two evenings in May 2009, followed by *Die Walküre*, again divided between 15 and 16 July 2011, dubbed in anticipation by the review site *Intermezzo* as ‘the world’s longest and randomest *Ring* Cycle’. *Intermezzo*, ‘*Die Walküre* in Manchester’, *Intermezzo*, 1 October 2010, <<http://intermezzo.typepad.com/intermezzo/2010/10/die-walkure-in-manchester.html>> [accessed 11 October 2012] (para. 1 of 3).

degree of regularity, ticket prices can be prohibitive.⁵⁷⁷ How then have audiences or potential audiences, particularly outside of capital cities, overcome the problem of beginning to receive Wagner? Where, traditionally, might the Wagner novice start?

This section lists some reduced versions of Wagner's works that have been created in different ways and for various reasons, but could be described as 'access points' in that they have the potential to bring Wagner to the beginner in an approachable way. This list is partial and aims to serve as a contextual introduction to the ways in which Opera North has sought to introduce its home audience to the Ring cycle.

4.3.2 Arranged reductions for musical participation and for concerts

For reasons of approachability (amongst others) there is a great tradition of 'potted' or reduced Ring cycles in recordings, and increasingly for audiences of live events, as I will go on to outline. But for the amateur musician, seeking practical involvement, the availability of arranged Ring repertoire is sparser. Wagner features heavily in the array of nineteenth-century reductions for organ, but music from *The Ring* is not prominent. Similarly, choral arrangements from *The Ring* are not readily available (Wagner makes use of a traditional opera chorus only in the final work of the cycle, *Götterdämmerung*) although other Wagner choruses can be found in sheet music form.⁵⁷⁸ Social historian Dave Russell describes the adoption of Wagner into the amateur choral repertoire as a part of the developing movement of choral societies, and the secularisation of the repertoire. He describes the problem, during the nineteenth century, of a lingering English Protestant aesthetic that was 'stern' and that associated opera negatively with

⁵⁷⁷ Listings for the 2012 ROH full Ring cycle ranged from £44 (distant, restricted view and standing) to £1000. *Intermezzo*, 'Royal Opera House prices Hit New High for Ring Cycle', *Intermezzo*, 16 September 2011, <<http://intermezzo.typepad.com/intermezzo/2011/09/roh-ring-cycle-prices-revealed.html>>. In response to the demands of current economic climate, for 2012 ROH lowered or froze prices for many productions, but in order to facilitate this, ticket prices for some productions were higher than usual and audiences were warned that 'there will be an increase in seat prices for a few productions we know there will be a huge demand for tickets for such as The Ring'. Chris Shipman, 'Ticket Pricing for the 2012-13 Season', *ROH: News*, 21 March 2012, <<http://www.roh.org.uk/news/ticket-pricing-for-the-201213-season>>. Also within the English-speaking world, and the amongst the highest profile houses, the Metropolitan Opera, New York charged \$300 to \$2,650 for 2013 full Ring cycle tickets. Metropolitan Opera, 'Met Opera Ring Cycles', *Metropolitan Opera* (2012) <<http://www.metoperafamily.org/metopera/season/subscriptions/new/reserve.aspx?PackageID=9988>>. 'Ring leaders' can pay up to \$16,000 for special company access, dinners and programme billing. Metropolitan Opera, 'Become a Ring leader', *Metropolitan Opera* (2012) <<http://www.metoperafamily.org/metopera/season/ringleaders.aspx>> [all pages accessed 11 October 2012].

⁵⁷⁸ Arrangements of the Pilgrims' Chorus from *Tannhäuser*, the Bridal Chorus from *Lohengrin*, the Sailors' Chorus and the Spinning Chorus from *Der Fliegende Holländer*, 'Choral de Sachs' from *Die Meistersinger*, 'Roman War Song' from *Rienzi* are listed at 'Wagner Choral', *musicroom.com* [n.d.] <http://www.musicroom.com/search/find.aspx?searchtext=wagner+choral&lx_pagenummer=1> [accessed 5 July 2012].

‘Catholicism, the theatre and the passions’. But despite this, ‘by 1900, pieces of *Lohengrin* [and] *Tannhäuser* [...] had been attempted and been well-received’.⁵⁷⁹

The brass band was a similarly accessible form of music-making of that time in industrial England. According to Russell, ‘by the 1890s Wagner selections based almost exclusively on the early operas *Rienzi*, *Flying Dutchman*, and *Tannhäuser* were extremely common in the concert repertoire’.⁵⁸⁰ It is unsurprising that Wagner’s music, with its heavily orchestrated brass sections, is often transcribed for brass ensemble. Today there are such arrangements available of excerpts from *The Ring* that also match broadly the repertoire available for organ: most prominent are ‘Siegfried’s Funeral March’ (*Götterdämmerung*), ‘The Entry of the Gods into Valhalla’ (*Das Rheingold*), and the ‘Ride of the Valkyries’ (*Die Walküre*).⁵⁸¹

For the pianist, Liszt’s admiration for Wagner led him to ‘transcribe’ various selections from Wagner’s operatic works. The first to be so arranged was the *Tannhäuser* Overture, in 1849.⁵⁸² The only part of *The Ring* that Liszt treated, he labelled a ‘transcription’ of the ‘Valhalla’ music from the final scene of *Das Rheingold*, although as Charles Suttoni highlights, this is not a transcription of any one passage, and is rather ‘a kind of paraphrase or evocation that draws freely on the scene’s musical motives’.⁵⁸³ Liszt’s aesthetic, then, contrasts sharply with claims made on behalf of certain orchestral Ring arrangements (to be discussed) that they might be as faithful to the original material as possible, and that their musical content is ‘all Wagner’s’.⁵⁸⁴

A few select examples have been mentioned here. On specialist websites, many and various arrangements for bands and choirs afford the amateur musician the opportunity to perform Wagner’s music. The extraction of orchestral overtures encourages concert-hall performances, and virtuosic piano transcriptions and organ reductions facilitate the reception of Wagner’s work as chamber music. Historically, selections, such as those from *Parsifal*, have

⁵⁷⁹ Dave Russell, *Popular Music in England, 1840-1914: A social history* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), p.216.

⁵⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p.187.

⁵⁸¹ Published examples include: Richard Wagner, *Funeral March from ‘Götterdämmerung’* (Paris: Alphonse Leduc Ensemble-Brass [n.d.]); Wagner, arr. Howard Snell, *Entry of the Gods into Valhalla* (UK: Rakeway Music Catalogue [n.d.]); Wagner, arr. Adrian Drover, *Ride of the Valkyries* (Scotland: Adios [n.d.]). Detailed discussion of how Wagner reception has manifested itself in published arrangements over the years is beyond the scope of this study, but for a historical perspective on Wagner arrangements, the reader can access exemplars held in UK research library collections via <www.copac.ac.uk>.

⁵⁸² Charles Suttoni, ‘Introduction to the Dover Edition’, in Franz Liszt, *Complete Piano Transcriptions from Wagner’s Operas* (NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1981), pp.vii-x (pp.viii-vix).

⁵⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp.ix-x.

⁵⁸⁴ ‘Wagner- Ring Without Words: Product description’, *Amazon* [n.d.]

<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Wagner-Ring-Without-Words-Blu-ray/dp/B004DIPL3Q/ref=sr_1_2?s=music&ie=UTF8&qid=1341405924&sr=1-2> [accessed 3 July 2012].

even entered the music hall.⁵⁸⁵ Yet apart from those few examples mentioned, excerpts from *The Ring* do not feature heavily in these repertoire sets. One might conclude that, with the Ring cycle, Wagner was so successful in his pursuit of organic ‘unending melody’ (described by Deathridge and Dahlhaus as ‘avoiding bridges, caesuras and cadences’) that extractions without abrupt musical severance are difficult, and thus seldom attempted.⁵⁸⁶

4.3.3 Reception of musical recordings: the ‘potted’ *Ring*

Given the sparse nature of musical arrangements of Ring excerpts, as outlined above, it is the recording that has offered a way for new listeners to experience the music of *The Ring* without the commitment of attending a production. I will now investigate the ‘potted Ring’ tradition of recordings, which has developed for reasons of approachability for the listener and relative ease of reduction from original full versions. The phrase was originally used for a product dubbed the ‘HMV potted ring’, a collection of substantial excerpts recorded between 1928 and 1932. The intention was not for a complete, abridged Ring, as reviewer Robert Hugill asserts, but rather an anthology of excerpts by ‘the finest Wagner singers of the day’.⁵⁸⁷ The set thus includes excerpts from the whole Ring cycle, but also various overlaps and duplicates. Reduced, recorded Ring cycles produced in the years to come were altogether more cohesively planned, as I will go on to outline.

Much of the research in this sub-section was conducted on the e-commerce site <Amazon.co.uk> and uses examples quoted from customer reviews of various CD recordings purchased from the site (including its American sister site <Amazon.com>). Amazon reviewers are most often enthusiasts rather than experts, in the traditional sense, in the fields on which they comment; questions may certainly be raised regarding the validity and credibility of such opinion-based reviews, which are unedited and unmoderated by the site itself. In a paper entitled ‘The Online Customer Review as Valid Opera Criticism?’ given at the Oxford Brookes

⁵⁸⁵ Deborah Heckert, ‘Working the Crowd: Elgar, class and reformations of popular culture’, in *Edward Elgar and His World*, ed. by Byron Adams (Princeton: PUP, 2007), pp.287-316 (p.307). Heckert describes excerpts from *Parsifal* that occurred, in the early years of the twentieth century, ‘within the context of a normal night out at the Colliseum’; they were programmed after an overture and variety acts involving dancers, comedy and ragtime, and prior to a short play.

⁵⁸⁶ Wagner coined the term ‘*Unendliche Melodie*’ in his essay ‘Music of the Future’ (‘*Zukunftsmusik*’) in 1860, in which he described it rather esoterically as the ‘sounding silence’ of ‘that thing unspeakable’ that the poet has wisely left unsaid. Richard Wagner, ‘*Zukunftsmusik*’, in *Judaism in Music, and other essays*, trans. by Ashton Ellis, pp.293-347 (p.338). Deathridge and Dahlhaus elucidate further that an ‘infinite’ melody ‘on the one hand conjures up metaphysical associations of the kind that have gathered around the idea of “infinity” [...] and on the other hand admits of a [...] technical definition: [...] [avoiding] bridges, caesuras and cadences’, both of which aspects go into creating cohesive dramatic meaning in every musical moment. Deathridge and Dahlhaus, p.114.

⁵⁸⁷ Robert Hugill, ‘Wagner Siegfried Excerpts’, *Music Web International classic reviews* (2004) <http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2004/sept04/Wagner_Siegfried_excerpts.htm> [accessed 2 July 2012] (para. 2 of 8). Hugill refers to the Pearl box set, issued in 1995.

University conference *Beyond Press Cuttings: New approaches to reception in opera studies*, in September 2011, Simon Evans-White argued that qualifiers are in place when assessing the value of these reviews, based on author identity, conformity or otherwise to a general consensus, and the feedback and ratings of reviews by other customers. Evans-White likens this, loosely, to an academic peer-review process. He also proposes the following:

We treat the web much as an Ethnomusicologist might a tribal group, by engaging with it on its own terms and in the scope of its own rules and customs in order to incorporate a growing vista of consumer-centric criticism into our canon.⁵⁸⁸

The premise from which I begin, in incorporating the words of some Amazon reviewers on selected recordings, is that these reviews tell us as much about the attitudes and conceits of the reviewers (as individuals and *en masse*, engaging in a consensus based on compliance and conformity, as described by Evans-White) as they do about the objects of the reviews themselves.⁵⁸⁹

A search in the ‘music’ section of <Amazon.co.uk> for ‘Wagner Ring’ reveals various ‘highlights’ CDs and a ‘taster’ DVD,⁵⁹⁰ alongside box-sets of complete Ring cycles. User reviews on this website indicate that, of those who choose to comment, customers who buy ‘Ring highlights’ (which are most often recordings that have been reduced in post-production from original, complete recordings⁵⁹¹) are connoisseurs, claiming a high degree of familiarity with the musical material, and requiring Wagnerian refreshment on a more ‘every-day’ basis.

⁵⁸⁸ Simon Evans-White, ‘The Online Customer Review as Valid Opera Criticism?’ (unpublished conference paper given 13 September 2011, Oxford Brookes University, *Beyond Press Cuttings*).

⁵⁸⁹ Evans-White argues that by applying the theories of social conformity, arrived at by psychologist Solomon Asch through a set of social experiments during the 1950s, to the online customer review ‘it is possible to determine a causal link between the extent to which a review is in concordance with a generally accepted opinion (or the opinions of established reviewers) and the acceptance of said review as a valid piece of criticism’ (ibid).

⁵⁹⁰ Wagner, *Der Ring Highlights (Der Ring Des Nibelungen)*, Orquestra De La Comunitat Valenciana, cond. by Zubin Mehta (C major entertainment, 704608, 2010) [on DVD].

⁵⁹¹ Ring highlights listed on <amazon.co.uk> include various compilations of extractions from: Georg Solti’s recording for Decca with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, originally released between 1958 and 1966; Herbert von Karajan conducting the Berlin Philharmonic for Deutsche Grammophon, recorded 1966-70; Karl Böhm with the Bayreuth Festival Orchestra, recorded live in 1966 and 1967 on the Philips label; Bernard Haitink and the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra for EMI in 1988-92; and James Levine’s late ’80s recording with the Metropolitan Opera, New York. More recent Ring highlights CDs include: Richard Wagner, *Twilight Of The Gods - The Ultimate Wagner Ring Collection*, The Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and Chorus, James Levine (Deutsche Grammophon, 2012) and Wagner, *Der Ring Des Nibelungen (Highlights)*, State Opera of South Australia/Adelaide Symphony Orchestra, Asher Fisch (Melba, 2012). Notably there is one full Ring recording and a highlight CD of the ENO Goodall Ring, remastered from the EMI original (1973-77) for Chandos’s Opera in English series: Wagner, *The Goodall Ring Cycle English Language Box Set*, English National Opera Orchestra and Chorus, Reginald Goodall (Chandos, 2001); Wagner, *The Goodall Ring (Highlights)*, English National Opera, Reginald Goodall (Chandos, 2003). *Amazon.co.uk* [n.d.] <http://www.amazon.co.uk/s/ref=nb_sb_noss?url=search-alias%3Dpopular&field-keywords=ring+highlights+wagner> and related pages> [accessed 9 October 2012].

Frequent recommendations are also made to other users, regarding the merits of these recording packages as an introduction to *The Ring*. Those who are not experienced Wagner listeners are more likely to comment on their purchases of all-round Wagner compilations (not Ring-specific) often overtures and orchestral passage only, as is the case in the following customer review of the Naxos *Best of Wagner* CD:

This is a good place to start with Wagner and for those (myself included) that find the operatic vocals an acquired taste, I must really stress that ALL tracks are fully orchestral ONLY! There are no vocal performances on this CD whatsoever - just an approx hour's worth of GREAT music.⁵⁹²

While this expression might seem extreme, the sentiment is not uncommon, and much is made in reviews of similar products of the distaste for Wagner voices in those unaccustomed to opera, as well as love for Wagner's music but the unwillingness to sit through a whole opera.⁵⁹³ Although it might seem contradictory and limiting to appreciate only instrumental passages in opera, many of these reviews contain a high degree of analytical comment and comparison between different performances, recordings, and techniques of reduction, and the Wagner orchestral passage or reduction appears to be a widely appreciated genre in its own right, quite apart from any aspiration to experience an entire opera, recorded or live, let alone a complete Ring cycle. To satisfy such tastes, specific arrangements have also been made of *The Ring* that hold an appeal appearing to be more symphonic than operatic. While this purely instrumental approach is reductive, in terms of resources, it could be argued that such arrangements serve to broaden the popularity of Wagner's music. Such is the impression given by Amazon reviewers, and a small number of audience responses to my Opera North questionnaire that mentioned preparation for Ring opera reception involving these 'Ring reduction' recordings.

Leopold Stokowski, who recorded prolifically from 1917 and whose conducting career spanned almost seventy years, recorded his own 'Symphonic Synthesis' arrangements of *Das*

⁵⁹² 'The Best of Wagner; Customer Reviews; Most helpful customer reviews; Decent Place to Start with the Great Man', *Amazon.co.uk* [n.d.] <http://www.amazon.co.uk/The-Best-Wagner-Richard/dp/B0000014H8/ref=pd_sim_m_h__7> [accessed 2 July 2012].

Richard Wagner, *The Best of Wagner*, various orchestras, various conductors (Naxos, 1997). The track listing for this compilation comprises overtures from *Die Meistersingers*, *Tannhäuser* and *Der Fliegende Holländer*, the prelude to Act 1 of *Lohengrin*, the Liebestod from *Tristan und Isolde* and from *The Ring*, 'The Entry of the Gods into Valhalla', 'Ride of the Valkyries', and 'Siegfried's Death and Funeral March'.

⁵⁹³ 'Fotaki' reviews Richard Wagner, *Orchestral Music*, Philharmonia Orchestra, Otto Klemperer (EMI, 2002): 'Like most who love Wagner's music I find complete performances of his Opera's [sic.] difficult to sit through, so I tend to turn to orchestral compilations.' On the same CD, 'Steppes', another customer/reviewer, writes 'i fell in love with wagner's music after hearing the sublime tannhauser overture, surely one of the most beautiful sounds ever created by man. but am not a huge fan of opera, so what to do?' [sic.] *Amazon.co.uk* [n.d.] <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Wagner-Orchestral-Music-Richard/dp/B00006BCDJ/ref=pd_cp_m_h__1> [accessed 9 October 2012].

Rheingold and *Die Walküre* with the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1933 and 1934 respectively.⁵⁹⁴ To contextualise these recordings within Stokowski's populist career, the latter came just two years before the conductor's negotiations with Hollywood in advance of his appearance as co-star to Mickey Mouse in Disney's *Fantasia*.⁵⁹⁵ Subsequently, various orchestral syntheses were created from the whole cycle, condensing it into pieces of a length that could be slotted into a concert. These include Lorin Maazel's *Der Ring Ohne Worte* (1988), Henk de Vleiger's *The Ring: An orchestral adventure* (1991), and latterly Friedman Dressler's *The Symphonic Ring*.⁵⁹⁶ In all cases reviewers claim that the artists attempt to minimise substantial restructuring and 'arrangement' of Wagner's material, and to be as true as possible to those parts of the original as are selected. Maazel's official website, for example, gives a list of his compositions, yet *Der Ring Ohne Worte* does not appear on it,⁵⁹⁷ perhaps because, as the Amazon product description of the 2011 blu-ray release of the piece states, 'all the music is Wagner's, and even the transitional material is drawn from the original scores'.⁵⁹⁸ The most detailed of the Amazon CD reviews contain judgements based on the perceived degree of the arranger's interference with original material; the less of the arranger's creation, the better. Comparisons are also made between these recorded reductions. One reviewer of the de Vleiger *Orchestral Adventure*, Bryan Leech, is much relieved to perceive 'no hint of music by de Vleiger, what we hear is Wagner', and he praises 'an orchestral work which pays 100% respect to Wagner and his structures and orchestration'. Leech makes the unlikely assertion that 'I am sure Wagner would have given complete approval', and acknowledging the lineage of Ring orchestral syntheses, reminds us

⁵⁹⁴ Larry Huffman, '1933 Recordings of Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra: 1933 - Wagner - "Symphonic Synthesis" of Das Rheingold', *stokowski.org* [n.d.]

<http://www.stokowski.org/1933_Electrical_Recordings_Stokowski.htm>;

Larry Huffman, '1934 Recordings of Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra: 1934 - Die Walküre - "Symphonic Synthesis"', *stokowski.org* [n.d.]

<http://www.stokowski.org/1934_Electrical_Recordings_Stokowski.htm> [both accessed 3 July 2012].

⁵⁹⁵ Larry Huffman, '1939-1940 Recordings - Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra: The birth of Walt Disney's movie *Fantasia*', *stokowski.org* [n.d.]

<http://www.stokowski.org/1939_1940_Electrical_Recordings_Stokowski.htm> [accessed 3 July 2012].

⁵⁹⁶ Wagner/Lorin Maazel, *'Der Ring' Ohne Worte / 'The Ring' Without Words*, Berliner Philharmoniker, Lorin Maazel (Telarc Classical, 2008) *Amazon.co.uk* <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Wagner-Ring-Worte-Without-Words/dp/B000003CUJ/ref=sr_1_2?s=music&ie=UTF8&qid=1349800791&sr=1-2>;

Wagner/Henk de Vleiger, *The Ring: An orchestral adventure*, Royal Scottish National Orchestra, Neeme Järvi (Chandos, 2008) *Amazon.co.uk* <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Wagner-Ring-Orchestral-Adventure-Hybrid/dp/B0012DAC7A/ref=sr_1_sc_1?s=music&ie=UTF8&qid=1349801113&sr=1-1-spell>;

Wagner/ Friedman Dressler, *Dressler: Symphonic Ring*, Duisberg Philharmoniker, Andrew Darlington (Acousence classics, 2012) <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Symphonic-Ring-Duisburg-Philharmonic-Orchestra/dp/B003ZFHUE/ref=sr_1_2?s=music&ie=UTF8&qid=1349801356&sr=1-2> [all accessed 9 October 2012].

⁵⁹⁷ 'Lorin Maazel', *Compositions* [n.d.] <<http://www.maestromaazel.com/composition>> [accessed 3 July 2012].

⁵⁹⁸ 'Wagner- Ring Without Words: Product description', *Amazon.co.uk* [n.d.]

<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Wagner-Ring-Without-Words-Blu-ray/dp/B004DIPL3Q/ref=sr_1_2?s=music&ie=UTF8&qid=1341405924&sr=1-2> [accessed 3 July 2012].

that (in his opinion) ‘so would Stokowski!’.⁵⁹⁹ What is interesting here is not the degree of accuracy of the Amazon reviewers, who are customers rather than musicologists, but that a sub-genre is emerging, the ‘Ring reduction’, and that its appreciators are asserting an aesthetic preference (and at times being guided into that preference by the online marketing) for ‘trueness’ to the composer’s ‘intentions’. This preference is ironic, given Wagner’s documented disdain for the reduction of his music from its original form (contradictory though this was with some of his own practice⁶⁰⁰). Furthermore, issues in adaptation from one form to another, with consequent alterations, enhancements and loss, are not mentioned prominently, or seen to be in opposition to the concept of the sacredness of the composer’s will, or his supposed approval, however that is to be discerned, interpreted or reimagined.

Here is an interesting historical phenomenon at play. These Ring syntheses are wholly instrumental pieces; dramatic narrative provided by the libretto or the theatre is removed and what is left, it is argued, is the ‘pure’ instrumental music. Wagner himself held little regard for the earlier Romantic notion of the primacy of the purely instrumental nature of ‘absolute’ music, as he expressed in *Oper und Drama*.⁶⁰¹ It was in the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (‘total artwork’) that he found his ultimate calling. It is also true, as Deathridge and Dahlhaus assert, that he was ‘an instrumental composer of the highest rank, and his influence was as great in the history of the symphony as in the history of musical drama’.⁶⁰² However, he was only able to work consistently at that level within the context of the stage.

Jim Samson argues the influence of Wagner’s work on later symphonic writing, and that, specifically, his music dramas also matched the ethereal claims made for ‘absolute’ music, ‘that through its self-referential, autonomous qualities it had a unique capacity to access the infinite, [to] attain the transcendental’. Such properties of symphonic music are echoed in the cohesive, synergistic properties of Wagner’s music dramas; thus Samson presents Wagner, as

⁵⁹⁹ ‘A feast for Wagner enthusiasts or a superb introduction to him, and a sonic demonstration disk’, *Amazon.co.uk* [n.d.] <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Wagner-Ring-Orchestral-Adventure-Hybrid/dp/B0012DAC7A/ref=pd_rhf_se_p_img_3> [accessed 3 July 2012].

⁶⁰⁰ Wagner wrote to Liszt on 20 November 1851: ‘Of a separation of the materials of this great whole I cannot think without destroying my object at the outset. The entire cycle of dramas must be represented in rapid sequence’, after which Ring operas might be offered separately, Wagner continued, setting out the criteria, but only after two performances of the whole had taken place. Richard Wagner, ‘Excerpts from Wagner’s Letters and Prose Works’, in *Penetrating Wagner’s Ring*, ed. by DiGaetani, pp.41-61 (p.43). Yet despite his protestations, Wagner performed the text alone between 16 and 19 February in Zurich and a decade later conducted his own arranged excerpts from *The Ring*, which Vazsonyi describes as ‘hits’, a marketing tool or ‘preview of coming attractions’, later criticised by Adorno as the very commodification of *The Ring* that Wagner had publicly eschewed. *Inside The Ring*, p.61; Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, p.95.

⁶⁰¹ Wagner described ‘the distortion of all truths and nature, that we see practised on musical expression by the French so-called *Neoromantists*’. Richard Wagner, *Opera and Drama*, trans. by William Ashton Ellis (Lincoln, NE: Bison, 1995), p.69.

⁶⁰² Deathridge and Dahlhaus, p.110.

much as the symphony, as the ‘heir to an aesthetic of absolute music’.⁶⁰³ Stripped of theatricality and the poetic word, ‘pure’ instrumental music will be judged by the criteria of the symphonic tradition. This is different to the somewhat complex criteria of the opera theatre, which is open (particularly in Germany, since World War II) to directorial interpretation, visual re-imaginings and reinterpretations, as can be understood by the term *Regietheater* (‘director’s theatre’). Performance of symphonic music, on the other hand, has, since around 1800, according to Lydia Goehr,⁶⁰⁴ been subject to the growing concept of *Werktreue*, truthfulness or fidelity to the work, the subjugation of the performer to the composer’s intentions and the ultimate artistic autonomy of the composer (the ‘genius’ concept then cultivated particularly by Wagner and the German Romantics⁶⁰⁵). Goehr offers an explanation of this paradigm as outlined by E.T.A.Hoffmann in the early years of the nineteenth century:

The genuine [performing] artist lives only for the work [...] He does not make his personality count in any way. All his thoughts and actions are directed towards bringing into being all the wonderful, enchanting pictures and impressions the composer sealed in his work with magical power.⁶⁰⁶

Goehr later exemplifies a review by George Bernard Shaw from 1888, as a testament to the criteria for judging a performance under the remit of the *Werktreue* ideal. Shaw praised a piano performance by Sir Charles Hallé who gave ‘as little as possible of Hallé and as much as possible of Beethoven’.⁶⁰⁷ The three recorded Ring syntheses mentioned earlier (Maazel’s *Der Ring Ohne Worte*, de Vleiger’s *The Ring: An orchestral adventure*, and Dressler’s *The Symphonic Ring*) even in their titles draw attention to their status as ‘pure’ instrumental music. Despite their being, in reality, later musical reworkings by arrangers other than Wagner, the illusion is created that we should judge them by the supposed standards of the original composer

⁶⁰³ Jim Samson, ‘Nations and Nationalism’, in *Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Music*, ed. by Jim Samson (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), pp.568-600 (p.587).

⁶⁰⁴ Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An essay in the philosophy of music* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992), p.1.

⁶⁰⁵ A history of the concept of composer as ‘genius’ that ‘originated in the late eighteenth [...] and blossomed in the nineteenth century’ is offered by Anna Piotrowska, ‘Modernist Composers and the Concept of Genius’, *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, 38.2 (2007), 229-42.

⁶⁰⁶ Goehr, p.1. Original reference (alternative translation): ‘The genuine artist throws himself into the work, which he first comprehends from the point-of-view of the composer, and then interprets. He scorns the exploitation of his personality on any way whatever, and all his poetic imagination and intellectual understanding are bent towards the object of calling forth into active life, with all the brilliant colors at his command, the noble and enchanting images and visions which the Master with his magic power has shut up in his work, so that they may surround mankind in bright, sparkling rings and enflaming his fancy and his innermost feelings, carry him in wild flights into the distant spirit kingdom of sound.’ E.T.A. Hoffmann and Arthur Ware Locke, ‘Beethoven’s Instrumental Music: Translated from E.T.A. Hoffmann’s “Kreisleriana” with an Introductory Note’, *The Musical Quarterly*, 3.1 (1917), 123-33 (pp.132-33).

⁶⁰⁷ George Bernard Shaw, *London Music in 1888-9 as Heard by Corno di Bassetto (Later Known as Bernard Shaw) with Some Further Autobiographical Particulars* (London: Constable, 1937), p.42, quoted in Goehr, p.232.

and of ‘absolute’ instrumental music, as if written purely by him. The importance of the performer’s fidelity to the composer’s will under the *Werktreue* principle is here replaced by the arranger’s fidelity to the composer (although Maazel plays both roles, as conductor/arranger, as did Stokowski). So a contradictory set of criteria have been applied to the validation of the Ring synthesis: it must be judged as ‘pure’ or ‘absolute’ music (in which, ironically, Wagner voiced his own lack of interest as a composer) and must be true to the composer’s intention as an autonomous artist, or be as deserving of his (imagined) approval as possible.

The criteria are set: the composer’s musical autonomy (although no autonomy further than the purely musical - for example the importance of the text, the theatre or the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in its wholeness), the nineteenth-century ideal of fidelity to the composer, and the earlier German Romantic claims for the autonomous nature of ‘pure’ music.⁶⁰⁸ By arriving at and using these criteria in order to evaluate the Ring cycle concert reductions, Amazon reviewers are engaging in a manner of what Evans-White describes as psychological ‘compliance’ and ‘conformity’ with what they might believe are the general principles for judging: a) Romantic concert music; b) Wagner; and consequently c) orchestral reductions of Wagnerian music dramas.⁶⁰⁹ The act of considering and deciding upon these criteria (even if done subconsciously) gives a degree of credibility to these reviews, amongst a circle of potential customers for these recordings. The criteria hint at larger narratives relating to symphonic music and also to Wagner (despite those narratives being partly contradictory) where opinions based on similar aesthetic values may be voiced by more established commentators, or evidence may be found of a general consensus in relation to aesthetic standards.

4.3.4 Wagner’s arrangements for the concert hall

The attitude of seeking or imagining the composer’s posthumous ‘approval’ of the arranged concert reduction may also have arisen, in part, from the body of Wagner’s own work that he himself arranged and amended for the concert hall. Despite his pronounced opposition to the fragmentation of his great works, these arrangements were created for performances under his own baton at concerts that he had organised.⁶¹⁰ In *The New Grove Wagner*, Deathridge and

⁶⁰⁸ ‘It is the most romantic of all the arts, one might almost say the only really romantic art, for its sole object is the expression of the infinite. The lyre of Orpheus opens the doors of Orkus. Music discloses to man an unknown kingdom, a world having nothing in common with the external sensual world which surrounds him and in which he leaves behind him all definite feelings in order to abandon himself to an inexpressible longing’ (Hoffmann and Locke, p.127).

⁶⁰⁹ Evans-White, ‘The Online Customer Review as Valid Opera Criticism?’.

⁶¹⁰ Adorno is scathing of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, intimating that Wagner had planned the potential for these commercial extractions. ‘Even in Wagner’s lifetime, and in flagrant contradiction to his programme, star numbers like the Fire Music and Wotan’s farewell, the Ride of the Valkyries, the *Liebsteod* and the Good Friday music had been torn out of their context, rearranged and become popular. This fact is not irrelevant

Dahlhaus provide a table of Wagner's works, complete with alterations and amendments for concert programmes, and Wagner's own first performances of his arrangements.⁶¹¹ A key factor in the production and performance of these works was much-needed political favour for Wagner, who had been exiled from Germany following his public campaign to abolish the royal court and his part in the Dresden Revolution of 1849. He wrote new endings for the overture to *Der Fliegende Holländer* and the Prelude to *Tristan und Isolde* for the purposes of three Paris concerts early in 1860.⁶¹² The success of these concerts led, eventually, to an order from Napoleon III for a production of *Tannhäuser* at the Opéra. Having become the favourite composer of the diplomatic elite in France (particularly the Saxon ambassador, Baron von Seebach) by way of their persuasive powers Wagner was granted an amnesty, on 15 July 1860, throughout Germany, with the singular exception of Saxony.

Arrangements of excerpts from *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre* were produced for a series of concerts beginning in Vienna on Boxing Day 1862, in the *Theater an der Wien*. Deathridge and Dahlhaus describe Wagner's hope for, but general lack of, financial success with such ventures and note three important concerts in Vienna between December 1862 and January 1863.⁶¹³ Here Wagner conducted his pre-existing arrangements from *The Ring* and *Die Meistersinger*. Deathridge and Dahlhaus tell us that parts of *Das Rheingold* were included, and 'Ride of the Valkyries' premiered in one these concerts. But while comparable concerts were given by Wagner in Prague, Budapest, Karlsruhe and Breslau, these did not yield financial gain; only a concert series in the spring of 1863 in St Petersburg and Moscow was actually profitable, after which Wagner tried, in vain, to repeat this success.⁶¹⁴ More excerpts were created, including *Lohengrin* arrangements (now lost) for concerts in Zurich, and others for St Petersburg and Budapest (1863); revised extracts from *Die Meistersinger*; excerpts from the prologue to *Götterdämmerung*, performed by Wagner in 1875; and there was also a performance of the Prelude to *Parsifal* at Bayreuth on Christmas day 1878.⁶¹⁵ Although some are lost, many such excerpts are available for us to hear in concert today. In relevance to the work of Opera North and the reception of Wagner by the company's local audience, the January-August 2012 season brochure for Leeds Town Hall (Opera North's Ring cycle venue) advertised the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra performing Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* Overture in a January concert; so Opera North's *Die Walküre* was

to the music dramas, which had cleverly calculated the place of these passages within the economy of the whole' (*In Search of Wagner*, p.95).

⁶¹¹ Deathridge and Dahlhaus, pp.165-93.

⁶¹² Deathridge and Dahlhaus list these concerts as 25 January, 1 and 8 February 1860 (*ibid.*, p.43).

⁶¹³ 26 December 1862, 1 January and 11 January 1863 (*ibid.*, p.47).

⁶¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.47.

⁶¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.169-72.

not the first or only Wagner work to resonate within those walls during 2012.⁶¹⁶ For Wagner, whose artistic home was the theatre, the motivation for the arrangement and original performances of these works was generally political, and sometimes financial, rather than strictly musical or creative.⁶¹⁷ Vazsonyi argues that, although Wagner had no interest in profit, the ‘fund- and awareness-raising concerts’, for which these arrangements were created, were part of an innovative marketing campaign,⁶¹⁸ as these portions became well-known many years before Wagner’s dream of a complete Ring cycle performance could be realised.

Despite a number of forays into the concert hall,⁶¹⁹ Deathridge and Dahlhaus assert that Wagner’s ‘instrumental works, of which only the *Siegfried Idyll* has ever achieved popularity, are mere parerga’ and that, despite his symphonic skill, ‘pure instrumental music had no appeal for Wagner, since he regarded it as unclear and unspecific’.⁶²⁰ But in relation to *The Ring*, *Siegfried Idyll*, written in 1870 for Cosima on the occasion of her birthday, with themes common to Act 3 of *Siegfried*, was arguably more artistically motivated than those overture revisions and concert excerpts. However Wagner never intended the *Idyll* for a public audience, but rather composed it as a ‘private confidence [...] for the ears of initiates’,⁶²¹ although it was eventually published in 1878,⁶²² another artistic compromise (or a commodification, as Adorno argued⁶²³) for the sake of fund-raising, due to the financial pressures imposed by the huge expense of the Bayreuth project.

4.3.5 Stage reductions, ‘digital opera’, and expectation horizons

There have been various reductions of a more theatrical nature than those mentioned thus far, some of which I will now outline. Overlapping with these selected versions, I will discuss the access solutions that rely on the technology of the digital age, since, in some cases, digital technology facilitates a visual, theatrical experience without the expense of full staging. This was the case with Opera North’s *Ring*, which employed the use of digital projections. There are also prior models of Ring performances incorporating this sort of projection-based digital theatre, as I will go on to mention. Additionally, the advent of digital broadcasting and the internet has facilitated easier access to opera (including *The Ring*) than has previously been the

⁶¹⁶ ‘Saturday 28 January, City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra’, *Leeds Town Hall, What’s On, Your Guide for January – August 2012*, p.6.

⁶¹⁷ See Wagner’s letter to Liszt, 20 November 1851, reproduced in *Penetrating Wagner’s Ring*, p.43.

⁶¹⁸ *Inside The Ring*, p.53.

⁶¹⁹ See Deathridge and Dahlhaus, pp.175-78.

⁶²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.109.

⁶²¹ *Ibid.*

⁶²² *Ibid.*, p.178.

⁶²³ Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, p.95.

case, and this will also be discussed before an analysis of Opera North's approach to increasing access to its productions, in Section 4.

4.3.5.1 Stage reductions

The recently ailing global economy means that we have seen contrary demands with regard to the treatment of the Ring cycle. There have been widespread reductions in financing for the arts, from governments and patrons, and consequently an increased difficulty in staging this gargantuan work with its associated price tag.⁶²⁴ Despite this, in the time period approaching the bicentenary of Wagner's birth (2013) increased interest was aroused in staging *The Ring*, and indeed Opera North's protracted 'staged-concert' cycle was one answer to this problem. A seven-hour reduced Ring arranged by Cord Garben was staged at the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires in November 2012. This Ring was originally envisaged as beginning with the second Act of *Die Walküre* where the previous act and the story of *Das Rheingold* are reviewed. With a dramaturgical rather than musical explanation, Garben said that he had aimed to 'preserve the coherence and order of the argument and eliminate the long discussions, repetitions and other fragments with no impact on it'.⁶²⁵ However, ultimately the structure was changed to incorporate the four music dramas, each vastly reduced, in sequence.⁶²⁶

The reduced stage Ring is not a new idea. Jonathan Dove created the *Ring Saga* with Graham Vick in 1990, for the City of Birmingham Touring Opera. With just eighteen musicians, and at nine hours long, this reduction made the cycle manageable for smaller opera companies (and their audiences) and those groups who might tour to venues other than traditional opera houses or concert halls. Thus the audience-base is widened for a reception of the cycle as live, staged opera. Dove's version has been taken up by various companies including Longborough Opera, Oxford and recently toured across Europe by Théâtre et

⁶²⁴ In an interview with me, American *Heldentenor* Erik Nelson Werner, whose management company lists eight Wagner operas amongst his repertoire, admitted that his professional experience in singing the roles on stage was limited. Prior to his casting in Opera North's *Die Walküre*, he had performed Siegmund only partially, and other Wagner performance experience was in gala concert excerpts. 'No-one' he explained 'can afford to stage them!' Interview, Salford Quays, 13 July 2012, speech reported from notes.

For the Metropolitan Opera, New York, reported costs in various press sources for its 2012 Ring cycle range from \$20million to \$40 million. Jerry Floyd, 'Going For the Gold', *wagneropera.net* (2010) <<http://www.wagneropera.net/Articles/Metropolitan-Opera-Rheingold.htm>> [accessed 24 October 2012] (para. 7 of 21).

⁶²⁵ Jonathan Spencer Jones, 'Teatro Colón, Buenos Aires: 20th Century Heavy, The Traditional and New, and a "Colón Ring" in 2012', *S&HI*, 10 November 2011, <<http://www.seenandheard-international.com/2011/11/10/teatro-colon-buenos-aires-20th-century-heavy-the-traditional-and-new-and-a-%E2%80%9Ccolon-ring%E2%80%9D-in-2012/>> [accessed 5 July 2012] (para. 9 of 12).

⁶²⁶ Jonathan Spencer Jones, 'Controversial Colón Ring', *S&HI*, 6 December 2012, <<http://www.seenandheard-international.com/2012/12/06/controversial-colon-ring/>> [accessed 7 June 2013].

Musique.⁶²⁷ For the Opera Theater of Pittsburgh (in a joint production with Longbeach Opera, California and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra) Dove's band was re-augmented to a small orchestra of thirty-seven and supplemented with an organ, and the libretto replaced with Andrew Porter's (cut) translation. So an enhanced version of Dove's reduction was created for Pittsburgh, as could be accommodated by the resources available to the combined companies involved.⁶²⁸

In February 2012, as part of the Adelaide Fringe Festival, Melbourne company More Than Opera presented an 'animated Ring', a ninety-minute reduction with an animated screen, for three opera singers, wind band and the experimental, electro-acoustic Bent Leather Band.⁶²⁹ Official short clips of the performance are linked from the company's own website as a form of communal memory and a shared, lasting representation of the event.⁶³⁰ At the same festival, More Than Opera also arranged a 'Sing Your Own Wagner Choruses' day, with simplified arrangements for community singers.⁶³¹ This relied heavily on internet resource-sharing, with parts available for download from the company website in advance of the event, and, as with the animated Ring, a filmed clip of the participants' onstage achievement was later posted by the company on Youtube.com.⁶³²

Another Australian Ring event with a direct link to Opera North came in the form of poet John Kinsella's adaptation of *Götterdämmerung* for the Perth International Arts festival in February 2003, directed by Neill Gladwin using giant screens to depict visions of the Western Australian mountains as the Valkyries' rock, and Perth's Swan River as the Rhine. The event was also streamed live to a large audience in a park behind the concert hall. Opera North's Martin Pickard was assistant to Musical Director Lionel Friend. This event was a firm 'adaptation', particularly with regard to the libretto as well as the geographical resetting, with what Kinsella described as 'a new poem [...] but, as with Wagner, one firmly imbued with

⁶²⁷ The Wagnerian, 'Watch Now (on demand): The Ring Cycle Complete (Jonathan Dove and Graham Vick's 1990s reduced version) approx 9 hours' *Wagnerian*, 30 November 2011, <<http://www.the-wagnerian.com/2011/11/watch-now-on-demand-ring-cycle-complete.html>>; 'Biographie Antoine Gindt', *T&M spectacles* (2011) <http://www.theatre-musique.com/participant-biographie.php?participant_id=3> [both accessed 10 October 2012].

⁶²⁸ Paul Joseph Walkowski, 'Opera Theater of Pittsburgh Goes Where Few Have Gone Before', *Opera Online* (2005) <<http://www.operaonline.us/negusring.htm>> [accessed 3 July 2012].

⁶²⁹ 'THE.Ring.Wagner.Animated', *MTO* (2012) <www.morethanopera/events-and-productions/curse-of-the-ring/> [accessed 9 November 2012].

⁶³⁰ MTO, *The Ring Wagner Animated*, online video recording, YouTube, 17 June 2012, <www.youtube.com/watch?v=jPJNb4Z_H4I> [accessed 9 November 2012].

⁶³¹ MTO, *Sing Your Own Wagner Choruses* (2012) <www.morethanopera/events-and-productions/sing-your-own-wagner-choruses/> [accessed 9 November 2012]. The successful event was repeated in Diamond Creek in October 2012.

⁶³² MTO, *Sing Your Own Wagner Choruses with the Three Maestri*, online video recording, YouTube, 24 October 2012, <www.youtube.com/watch?v=WfVAMa-2QCc> [accessed 9 November 2012].

notions (and rejections) of tradition'.⁶³³ Kinsella describes the challenge of this transmutation of time and place 'with a contemporary, multicultural audience in mind'⁶³⁴ and the local 'issues of indigenous rights, multiculturalism and environment' that were implied by 'evoking a particular landscape or by juxtaposing a new setting against the traditional or original Wagnerian direction'.⁶³⁵ So this *Götterdämmerung* was designed with the setting of its performance and the realities of its audience firmly considered.

While there have been many others,⁶³⁶ I mention the two Australian events also as examples of 'Ring' performance events that used screens and digital projection to aid storytelling. Like the Opera North Ring performances, this was done, in both cases, in a concert-hall context where full staging was impossible, but companies and directors felt the need to communicate a vision that was not available in the audible elements of music and libretto alone (whether adapted or not). These two events could thus be seen as precursors to the Opera North Ring cycle; this is particularly true of the Perth festival production, with the overlapping of a key member of musical personnel.

4.3.5.2 *Horizons of expectation on stage*

In the reception of Ring reductions, I have already outlined the case of the Amazon reviewers of instrumental arrangements and Ring cycle syntheses. Collectively these customers appear to arrive upon a hybrid set of criteria based upon the ideals of 'absolute' music, and the *Werktreue* ideal of fidelity to the composer's wishes for this emergent 'genre', the orchestral Wagner arrangement. The criteria by which these recordings are judged are also emergent, coming from the combined 'groupthink' of the reviewers without direct, authoritative instruction on how one might receive and interpret this genre. Audience expectations for stage performances (including reductions) work differently, as I will now outline. This is owing, in part, to the 'event' nature of the experience, and to the mediation of the work by the opera company itself, since the company is able to communicate its aims and objectives for a specific production (whether reduced or not) to its audience members in advance of their experience. Thus it is the company that sets audience expectation and the success criteria for the performance.

⁶³³ John Kinsella, 'Rock Opera', *Guardian*, 8 February 2003, <www.guardian.co.uk/music/2003/feb/08/classicalmusicandopera.artsfeatures> (paras 2/3 of 16). The text is also available in an extended form, with parts of Kinsella's libretto at <www.johnkinsella.org/essays/wagner.html> [both accessed 9 November 2012].

⁶³⁴ Kinsella, 'Rock Opera' (para. 2 of 16).

⁶³⁵ *Ibid.* (para. 15 of 16).

⁶³⁶ Examples noted by Kara McKechnie in a 'round-table' session on 30 May 2013, for *Richard Wagner's Impact on His World and Ours*, University of Leeds, include the Royal Festival Hall Wagner concert on 22 May 2013, the Aix-en-Provence festival Ring, which ran from 2006-09, a 2010 production in Valencia by Catalan theatre group La Fura dels Baus, Keith Warner's Ring for ROH in 2012.

As was mentioned in the previous chapter, Kallberg outlines the idea and function of ‘genre’ as a kind of contract between composer and audience whereby the composer includes, and the audience consent to judge a piece by, a certain set of musical gestures or criteria. The nature of these criteria are pre-decided and agreed by the placement of the piece (usually by the composer) into a particular ‘genre’.⁶³⁷ When dealing with Wagner’s music dramas, however, it seems that the contract is drawn up in a different way. Pouring scorn on the musical content, structures and conventions of opera up until his own time,⁶³⁸ Wagner’s polemic was set out in his prose writings for those who might wish to anticipate the ‘rules’ or criteria by which to judge his great, synergistic aesthetic, the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the new ‘artwork of the future’. Deathridge and Dahlhaus assert that ‘unlike the Italian and French operas of the 19th century, Wagner’s works do not belong to any recognized genre’.⁶³⁹ Consequently, they suggest that the most appropriate comparison is with Berlioz, ‘whose works can also be viewed as essays in solving the problem of mediating between symphonic and dramatic music: the problem cannot be solved without overstepping the accepted boundaries of the genres, so that each work is *sui generis*’.⁶⁴⁰ In modern times, however, in the performance (and even rearrangement) of Wagner music dramas (with perhaps the Ring cycle as a generic category all its own) there is certainly what Hans Robert Jauss referred to as a ‘horizon of expectations’ in operation, a term coined to describe the criteria that readers use to judge literary texts at any given time.⁶⁴¹ This ‘horizon’ alters with the changing criteria of those receiving the work in successive time periods; thus the ‘horizon of expectations’ is fluid when applied to a work through time, so that meaning is not set by the author but brought also by the receiver.⁶⁴² Jauss’s theory becomes more relevant still when applied to the ‘live’ arts of music and of the stage. Indeed he goes on to say (of the literary work) that it ‘is much more like an orchestration that strikes ever new resonances among its readers and that frees the text from the material of the words and brings it to a contemporary existence’.⁶⁴³

With the arguable exception of recordings, music (and musical theatre) cannot be a ‘monument’ but must rather be lived, interpreted, performed, heard and experienced in ‘real’

⁶³⁷ Kallberg, p.5.

⁶³⁸ ‘As we found that from Rossini onwards the history of Opera had definitely narrowed itself to the history of operatic *melody*’ (Wagner, *Opera and Drama*, p.69).

⁶³⁹ Deathridge and Dahlhaus, pp.106-07.

⁶⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.107.

⁶⁴¹ Hans Robert Jauss, ‘Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory’, trans. by Elizabeth Benzinger, *New Literary History*, 2.1 (1970), 7-37 (pp.12-13).

⁶⁴² ‘A literary work is not an object that stands by itself and that offers the same view to each reader in each period. It is not a monument that monolithically reveals its timeless essence.’ Jauss, *Toward a Theory of Reception*, p.21. While this is a literary model, it can be applied equally to musical or stage works; in fact this is one of the models used by Kallberg (p.5) when developing his ‘generic contract’ theory.

⁶⁴³ Jauss, *Toward a Theory of Reception*, p.21.

time. The reception of Wagner's works could be perceived as resisting, to a degree, this model of fluid horizons of expectation over time, owing to the vast body of polemic and instructional writing left by the composer on the philosophy of his compositions, and consequently on the manner in which they might (or 'ought to') be received. If we are to be tied, as the Amazon reviewers suggest, to seeking the imagined approval of the composer, Jauss's fluid expectations might present us with a substantial problem in relation to Wagner's unchanging aesthetic, as Deathridge and Dahlhaus describe it, of 'art for art's sake, the idea that the audiences were servants of the work of art, thus ceasing to be "audiences" and instead becoming "congregations"'.⁶⁴⁴ Wagner was imbued with the 'work' rather than the 'event' paradigm, distinguishing between his 'authentic', imagined version, and those 'unavoidable accommodations to local circumstances' in actual productions, as described by Deathridge and Dahlhaus, citing the Vienna *Tristan*, 'which he [...] regarded as incidental'.⁶⁴⁵

In terms of the musical and theatrical experience (as opposed to the experience of a literary text) the relationship between composer and audience is seldom a direct one, despite Wagner's impetus to make it so. In the case of modern opera productions there are many agents between composition and ultimate audience reception: musical director, performers, stage director, choreographer, set and lighting designers, and so on, all of whom are simultaneously receiving the work, reinterpreting and communicating to audience and to one another their own individual 'horizons of expectation'. So a work such as an opera or music drama does not only change its 'face' (as Jauss would have it) for each time-period of reception, but for its socio-geographical place, and with each company that might reinterpret it.

The socio-geographical factors involved in reinterpretations of Wagner's music dramas began with the composer himself, exiled from Germany, arranging concert extracts to please those in political power and subsequently to raise funds and popularity around Europe.⁶⁴⁶ In the modern-day examples of Wagner reductions mentioned in this chapter, I have pointed to ways of reducing, as dictated by resources available to different companies in different places, and notably by companies making Wagner geographically accessible by touring: reducing costs and physically squeezing a *Ring* into smaller venues than the original would ever allow (there being few venues, certainly in the UK, suitable for a full and unrestricted *Ring* production). Jonathan Dove, in 1990, aimed, with City of Birmingham Touring Opera, 'to make opera available in places where there might not even be a theater', touring to the countryside around Birmingham at

⁶⁴⁴ Deathridge and Dahlhaus, p.95.

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid., p.106.

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid., pp.165-93.

minimal cost.⁶⁴⁷ In the case of Opera North, the northern concert halls chosen as venues influenced the size and style of the ‘staged concert’ production, none more than the home venue, Leeds Town Hall with its nineteenth-century democratising architecture (as I will later outline) and its relatively reverberant, saturated acoustic, for which Conductor Richard Farnes engineered his tempi. In Pittsburgh, the rearrangement of Dove’s ‘Ring Saga’ (with the instrumental inclusion of concert organ) was, quite conversely, not tourable, but marketed to a new and inexperienced audience as a unique production for the Byham Theatre, and a unique experience for Pittsburgh.⁶⁴⁸ Reducing performance duration, as in this case, also allows companies to tour a *Ring* to places away from capital (or even large) cities, where audiences might not be culturally invested in the time commitment to a whole eighteen-hour cycle. John Kinsella’s adaptation in Perth played heavily on pressing local issues and sensibilities around land ownership and indigenous people, and *Götterdämmerung* alone was chosen for this reason.⁶⁴⁹ And in Leeds between 2011 and 2014, with repeated exposure to the government’s rhetoric of ‘austerity Britain’, the idea of a ‘staged concert’, budget *Ring* without costly set, costumes and props was well-received.⁶⁵⁰ Opera North’s ‘beginner’s *Ring*’ was also a focus which rang true because of the geographical and temporal scarcity of *Ring* productions, this being Opera North’s first *Ring*, and the first in Leeds since 1976; a (partial) assumption of the Leeds audience’s inexperience allowed the directional focus on and narrative around the *Ring*-beginner to take place.

The alterations for the stage that I have described in this section, and the justifications and explanations offered by their creators, highlight an important point: that all performance events are a product of their own set of resources. Many *Ring* cycles are reduced in different ways in order to be affordable, to fit physically into venues, or to be viable in length, or approachable for particular audiences. Indeed, most of these reductions (or in the case of the Opera Theatre of Pittsburgh, a reduction that was later re-augmented) are tailored for the specific place, location, companies and audiences involved. The action of bespoke creation thus affords each of these productions a higher likelihood of success in terms of a unique set of criteria that the creators have set themselves, so long as this set of criteria, and the associated expectations, have been adequately communicated to, and shared with, the audience in advance of reception. Opera North’s sharing of the success criteria for its *Ring* with the public will be explored later in this

⁶⁴⁷ Andrew Druckenbrod, ‘Opera Preview: PSO, Opera Theater compress Wagner’s mammoth opera’, *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, 14 July 2005, <<http://www.post-gazette.com/frontpage/2005/07/14/Opera-Preview-PSO-Opera-Theater-compress-Wagner-s-mammoth-opera/stories/200507140513>> [accessed 7 September 2016] (para. 9 of 14).

⁶⁴⁸ *Ibid.* (paras 12 and 13 of 14).

⁶⁴⁹ Kinsella, ‘Rock Opera’.

⁶⁵⁰ Alfred Hickling, ‘Opera North Tackles Wagner’s *Ring* Cycle – Minus the Financial Dramas’, *Guardian*, 12 June 2012, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2012/jun/12/wagner-ring-cycle-opera-north>> [accessed 10 June 2013]; ‘Wagner’s *Die Walküre*’, *Radio 3 Live in Concert*.

chapter. The bespoke approach to reduction and production identifies and suggests back to the audience a set of expectations; thus a company is able to set and fulfil its own success criteria. It is therefore entirely appropriate that we find a plethora of Rings recreated with reduced length and/or resources, each made for its own unique location and circumstances and with its own subtly altered horizon of audience expectations.

4.3.5.3 *Digital broadcast solutions*

The events described earlier in this section, with digital projections, and in the case of the More Than Opera singing workshop, digital resource-sharing and digital remembrance, could be described as different instances of ‘digital opera’. This term might also be applied to the new phenomenon of the large-scale opera broadcast, as I will discuss. The term ‘digital opera’, still in its infancy, has entered the academic discourse, without a standardised meaning. In May 2011, a symposium took place at the University of York’s Department of Music, entitled *Digital Opera: New means and new meanings*, intended as a ‘provocation and exploratory gesture’ asking the question ‘What could digital opera be?’.⁶⁵¹ A year later, Jarlath Jennings of Trinity College, Dublin presented a paper at the University of Leeds conference *The Theory, Practice and Business of Opera Today* that posed the question ‘Can technology help keep opera alive and relevant to 21st Century audiences?’.⁶⁵² Jennings, who had been a marketing executive in Ireland, demonstrated the popularity and revenue creation of the relatively recent practice of broadcasting live operas, relayed to large public screens around the world. This is a practice that is used in the UK by the Royal Opera House, beginning in 2000 with one big outdoor screen in London, now expanded to over twenty screens across the country, including, in the north of England, Leeds, Bradford and Manchester. Public access is provided, free of charge, to these outdoor screened relays, currently sponsored by British Petroleum.⁶⁵³ Glyndebourne Festival Opera began screening productions in cinemas in 2007, and in 2011 streamed live onto the internet at <Glyndebourne.com> and <Guardian.co.uk> as well as the Science Museum Cinema with pre-recorded screenings at Picturehouse cinemas around the country. These cinema events, in contrast to the BP big screens, are priced and ticketed, and not weather-dependent. Glyndebourne General Director David Pickard predicted that the live relays would take the company ‘a step closer to realising our vision to create a digital Glyndebourne that is open to

⁶⁵¹University of York, ‘Digital Opera: New means and new meanings’ *The University of York* (2011) <<http://www.york.ac.uk/music/conferences/digital-opera/>> [accessed 8 July 2012] (para. 1 of 10).

⁶⁵²‘Programme: The theory, practice and business of opera today’ (2011) <<http://www.operaconference.leeds.ac.uk/programme/>> [accessed 8 July 2012].

⁶⁵³ROH, ‘BP and Royal Opera House announce funding extension’ *ROH, News*, 10 December 2011, <<http://www.roh.org.uk/news/bp-and-royal-opera-house-announce-funding-extension>> [accessed 8 July 2012].

opera lovers at any time, anywhere in the world'.⁶⁵⁴ Concern about the digital opera revolution has arisen from elsewhere in the UK, with ENO Artistic Director John Berry telling the *Stage* in May 2012 that cinema broadcasting 'doesn't create new audiences' and that 'this obsession about putting work out into the cinema can distract from making amazing quality work'.⁶⁵⁵ Indeed, live digital broadcasts of opera can work in the favour of those few companies (such as The Royal Opera and Glyndebourne) who very often play to a full house. The reticence of smaller companies to adopt such technology might be due to the danger of spreading themselves too thinly, or of risking ticket sales.⁶⁵⁶ Nonetheless, for those companies for which it can work, this 'digital' age broadcast of opera has the twin aims of increasing access and revenue. The shared, communal event is preserved with broadcasts to big screens and cinemas rather than television, and quality is prioritised via High Definition technology. For its first foray into 'digital opera' it is perhaps notable that Glyndebourne chose Wagner's operatically self-referential *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. It is the Metropolitan Opera, New York ('the Met') that has taken on the mantle of broadcasting the Ring cycle to the world, which is fitting, since their success broadcasting to cinemas since 2006 is the largest-reaching opera broadcast phenomenon. Even in opposition to cinema broadcasts, John Berry had to admit that the Met's international broadcast strategy 'has caught everyone else with their pants down' and that their overwhelming lead over the competition in the digital market was down to conviction and investment in the transmission process in addition to strong international brand recognition.⁶⁵⁷ The Met's Ring broadcast was initially protracted, with the original 'Live in HD' transmission of *Das Rheingold* broadcast on 9 October 2010, *Die Walküre* on 14 May 2011, *Siegfried* on 5 November 2011 and *Götterdämmerung* on 11 February 2012. 'Encore' dates were then given for the cinema repeats of these previously live broadcasts, worldwide. In the UK these were scheduled for 30 June, 1, 7 and 8 July 2012 in various cinemas around the country (also with a preceding documentary, 'Wagner's Dream' on 20 June) including branches of Odeon, Cineworld and Picturehouse. In the north of England, venues included Blackpool, Didsbury (Manchester), Warrington, Liverpool, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and in Yorkshire Sheffield, Harrogate and York, but notably not Leeds.⁶⁵⁸

⁶⁵⁴ Glyndebourne, 'New partnerships with The Guardian, Science Museum and Picturehouse', *Glyndebourne About us News* (2011) <<http://glyndebourne.com/news-article/new-partnerships-guardian-science-museum-and-picturehouse>> [accessed 8 July 2012] (para. 3 of 17).

⁶⁵⁵ Maggie Brown, 'ENO Chief Claims Opera Screenings Don't Attract New Audiences', *Stage*, 8 May 2012, <<http://www.thestage.co.uk/news/newsstory.php/36085/eno-chief-claims-opera-screenings-dont>> [accessed 21 July 2012] (paras 2 and 7 of 9).

⁶⁵⁶ This general position from Opera North management was reported to me, informally by McKechnie.

⁶⁵⁷ Brown (para. 4 of 9).

⁶⁵⁸ Metropolitan Opera, 'UK Ring encore dates', *Metropolitan Opera: Live in HD* (2012) <<http://www.metoperafamily.org/metopera/liveinhd/ring-hd-encores-uk-theatres.aspx>> [accessed 7 July 2012].

In 2013, for the Wagner Bicentenary, the BBC broadcast a concert Ring cycle as part of the BBC Proms, between 22 and 28 July. This digital broadcast was for radio and, unlike many high-profile Proms concerts, it was untelevised. Digital access was also available to surrounding material in the form of pre-show and interval talks, also broadcast on Radio 3, as well as *Guardian* blogs from presenter, Sara Mohr-Pietsch,⁶⁵⁹ and an issue of Radio 4's *The Moral Maze* dedicated to Wagner and anti-Semitism.⁶⁶⁰ Content focussed on monumentality, unapproachability, anti-Semitism, and the reception issues that Opera North, in its own preparation of audience, chose not to prioritise. But it should also be noted that Radio 3 has broadcast a variety of Ring opera performances, including those of Opera North in a series entitled 'Radio 3 Live in Concert; Live from Leeds Town Hall'. The 2013 BBC Proms Ring happened towards the end of Opera North's cycle, so would be unlikely to be thought of as 'prior experience' for the Opera North audience, and was never mentioned as such in my audience questionnaires. However, broadcasting is an important access solution, experience of the Met's 'Live in HD' broadcasts were cited as previous Wagner experience by a number of my Opera North audience questionnaire respondents.

From the variety of reductions and access solutions that have been offered, from the nineteenth century to the present day, we can deduce that there is a tension in Wagner reception for many who might wish to receive the composer's work (particularly the culturally and musically 'megalithic' Ring cycle) without submitting to the demands of commitment made by Wagner upon the audience of his day. In the following section I assess the ways in which Opera North viewed the audience for its Ring opera productions, and addressed the possibility of such concerns and hesitations. I will also refer back to Jauss's theory of a moving 'horizon of expectations', and to the bespoke nature of a Ring production for an audience of a specific time and place; these audience members will judge such a *Ring* by the criteria that have been offered to them. The following section outlines how these criteria were set and communicated by Opera North to its audience, and how expectations were thus arrived at.

⁶⁵⁹ Mohr-Pietsch, 'I Admit It: I'm a Ring virgin'.

⁶⁶⁰ Michael Buerk, *Moral Maze*, BBC Radio 4, 31 July 2013. This forty-five minute programme with nine contributors (presenter Buerk, *Daily Mail* commentator Melanie Phillips, former Conservative MP Michael Portillo, Claire Fox from the Institute of Ideas, Chief Executive of the RSA Matthew Taylor, Director of Interfaith Affairs Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein, Israeli Wagnerian Jonathan Livny, critic Norman Lebrecht and writer Will Self) contained a plethora of agendas issues, conflated by speakers, whose knowledge of and ideological positions on the work of Wagner varied considerably.

4.4 The Opera North *Ring* and approaches to ‘the fear of the Wagner threshold’

4.4.1 Introduction: Opera North’s *Ring*

In June 2011 Opera North began its first production of *Das Rheingold* and of Wagner’s Ring cycle, which was to play out in sequence, with one work programmed per year. These Ring operas were produced for the concert stage, primarily that of the great nineteenth-century monument to northern civic pride, Leeds Town Hall. They then toured to the Sage, Gateshead, Symphony Hall, Birmingham and the Lowry, Salford Quays.⁶⁶¹ The production was described by designer Peter Mumford as a ‘fully staged concert version’;⁶⁶² there were no sets or props, costumes were enhanced concert dress and the orchestra remained visible on stage throughout. In a rather two-dimensional space in front of the orchestra were positioned the singers, who, by a convention arrived at by Mumford, were required to act and sing ‘out’ to the audience, even when in conversation with one another. Their movement around the stage was choreographed, and they mimed imaginary props. A triptych of giant screens displayed images and text. These images were unusually abstract, described by Mumford as ‘painterly’.⁶⁶³ for example cinematic approximations of bubbling Rhine gold, cloudy mountain tops and, rather more concretely (in *Die Walküre*) the sword Nothung. Story text was taken from Michael Birkett’s literary retelling in English, *The Story of the Ring*,⁶⁶⁴ and integrated with the images on screen, helping to explain the background and actions that could not be shown on ‘stage’. The works were performed in German; English surtitles appeared for *Das Rheingold* on smaller plasma screens to the sides of the large projections, but after 2011 it was decided that the titling should be integrated into the large screen images and story text for clarity and cohesive viewing.⁶⁶⁵

4.4.2 The ‘fear of the threshold into Wagner’ and the crossing

In the course of my ethnographic investigations around the Opera North Ring cycle I conducted an informal discussion with Opera North Head of Music, Martin Pickard in June 2012.

Informally Pickard discussed with me his views on Wagner, Wagner’s followers and Bayreuth. Pickard’s perspective is that of a high-level worker in the opera field with experience working in different companies in the UK and Germany. His views are historically informed and educated, and also focused on the modern-day business of opera production. He spoke to me about what he perceived as the ‘cult of Wagner’, emanating from Germany, which he thought to

⁶⁶¹ Both the Sage, Gateshead, and Symphony Hall, Birmingham are partners in the productions. Of the four venues, the Lowry is the only regular touring venue for Opera North main-stage productions.

⁶⁶² Mumford speaking on ‘Wagner’s *Die Walküre*’, *Radio 3 Live in Concert*.

⁶⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶⁴ Michael Birkett, *The Story of the Ring* (London: Oberon, 2009).

⁶⁶⁵ Richard Mantle, ‘Welcome’, in *Die Walküre*, programme brochure, ed. by Stuart Leeks, (ON, 2012), p.i.

be understandable, on one hand from a musical perspective, but ‘on the other hand, unhealthy’. Echoing the concerns of Nietzsche (although not explicitly) he mentioned that there was a ‘shrine-aspect’ to modern-day Bayreuth and his opinion that in terms of this ‘very German cult of personality [...] the Wagnerites aren’t always a good advert for Wagner!’.⁶⁶⁶ However, he also found it interesting that Bayreuth productions have been ‘radical’ in ignoring the audience reverence to the historical Wagner, with some very modern stagings inducing what he humourously termed ‘tuts and boos’.⁶⁶⁷ He mentioned that, in the UK, Glyndebourne founder John Christie had looked to Bayreuth as a business model for his festival opera; ‘an experiential model for a rich audience – very clever marketing’.⁶⁶⁸ Having worked in many opera houses in Germany and the UK and having attended performances and rehearsals at Bayreuth, Pickard described the current Bayreuth audience as ‘top-end, wealthy patrons’ and in describing Wagner’s ideal of a free, spiritual, religious event modelled on ancient Greece, he offered the educated opinion that the audience profile of Bayreuth as it is today is ‘not what Wagner wanted’. While I will not examine the specific phenomenon of the Bayreuth audience in this thesis, it is evident from my talks with Pickard that these factors of wealth and exclusivity versus community and public serve as a backdrop in the company consciousness when approaching *The Ring*, and when making what Pickard described as the ‘absolutely positive choice’ to widen access to the work. From the very practical point of view those involved in opera, Pickard asserts that ‘workers want to play to the widest possible audience’ and that ‘we who put on opera have no interest in limiting our audience’ and he spoke of the company’s determination ‘to present [*The Ring*] in such a way as people don’t feel they have to have a degree in German philosophy to get in’.⁶⁶⁹ It was thus decided that Opera North would attempt to address what Pickard termed as audiences’ ‘fear of the threshold into Wagner’ and coax its potential audience over this threshold.

Audiences for the Ring operas, particularly for *Das Rheingold* in 2011, were offered various modes of preparation by Opera North. The company’s premise for this groundwork was a first-time Ring audience; this was a purposeful and strategic ‘assumption’ by Opera North, if not entirely accurate, as I will go on to outline. The company’s most prevalent approach to preparation was to recognise the ‘daunting’ nature of this German epic, and attempt to

⁶⁶⁶ Nietzsche’s break with Wagnerism came after his attendance at the Bayreuth festival, where he was appalled at the company of crowned heads of state, the wealthy and the social elite, as opposed to an audience of art-lovers undergoing the spiritually and transcendent communal experience of a theatre modelled on Greek antiquity, which had been his and Wagner’s ideal. Michael Tanner, *Nietzsche: A very short introduction* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), pp.21-25. For Nietzsche’s animosity, see *The Case of Wagner, Nietzsche Contra Wagner, and Selected Aphorisms*.

⁶⁶⁷ Examples of Bayreuth productions that have displeased the ‘old guard’ include Patrice Chéreau’s Centenary Ring cycle of 1976, and Wieland Wagner’s revolutionary post-war *Parsifal* of 1951. See Patrick Carnegie, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre* (New Haven: YUP, 2006).

⁶⁶⁸ Martin Pickard’s brother, David Pickard, was until 2015 General Director of Glyndebourne.

⁶⁶⁹ Pickard, 11 June 2012.

familiarise potential audience members in advance; essentially to set them at ease with the idea of experiencing these works in production. General Director Richard Mantle spoke publicly, in 2012, about ‘find[ing] new ways of bringing opera to people’ and ‘doing it in a way which is amazingly accessible for the person who’s not been to *The Ring*’. He made the company’s assumptions explicit, saying, ‘people get very daunted, don’t they, by long Wagner, or Wagner if they don’t understand it’, and offered what he described as ‘real engagement for the audience, particularly for those who are a bit daunted’.⁶⁷⁰ This engagement was effected by an explicit focus on clarity and story-telling in production. There was also a drive, from the beginning, to familiarise audiences with the cast and the company in advance, by highlighting ‘Britishness’ (in contrast to the German-ness of the works themselves, while still performing in German) and focussing on the ‘first-time’ experience for the company, which was portrayed as experiencing the ‘journey’ to Ring cycle production along with the audience.⁶⁷¹ Understandably, Conductor Richard Farnes spoke about familiarisation within a musical framework. Farnes highlighted the scale of the works, but also the regional nature of the company, the concept of Ring cycle scarcity in the region, and the benefits, in terms of musical production and company relationships, of the northern concert halls to which this cycle toured.

Emotional familiarisation was not the only approach to audience preparation; choral leader Timothy Burke arranged and led a public singing workshop, in June 2011, in order to enhance musical familiarity and enjoyment, as is discussed in the following section. In subsequent years the narrative around the productions, and the ways in which audiences were reassured and prepared altered, including an ‘austerity’ narrative for 2012, and increased academic engagement in 2013. This will be explored in Section 4.4.4. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Opera North’s two foci of emotional and intellectual (including musical) preparation overlap; as in Wagner’s works themselves, intellectual and emotional elements are often woven together.

The premise of the ‘beginner’s Ring’ was hinted at through the build-up to *Das Rheingold* in 2011, but became more explicit in 2012 around *Die Walküre*, and was positively promoted as *Siegfried* premiered in 2013.⁶⁷² In various broadcasts prior to all productions, the story was told that the ‘staged concert version’ presented the story clearly with its images and projected story text, focus on music, and ‘intimate’ audience reception of the singers. Radio 3

⁶⁷⁰ Mantle speaking on ‘Wagner’s *Die Walküre*’, *Radio 3 Live in Concert*.

⁶⁷¹ In terms of the experience of those in the company, this applied particularly to the orchestra, since the cast is contracted instead of being part of the standard ‘company’, and there is no chorus involvement until the final work of the cycle.

⁶⁷² Farnes speaking on ‘Siegfried’, *Radio 3 Live in Concert*, BBC Radio 3, 19 June 2013.

⁶⁷² John Tomlinson speaking on ON, *Siegfried: The forging of a hero (teaser trailer)*, online video recording, ON: Siegfried videos, 20 June 2013, <http://www.operanorth.co.uk/productions/siegfried#video_introduction> [accessed 25 June 2013]; Peter Espenhahn, *The Ring Fellowship*, advertising brochure (Leeds: ON, 2013).

presenter Adam Tomlinson in 2012 described ‘dramatic visuals’ integrated with English titling,⁶⁷³ and asked if Opera North was thus aiming to ‘make the production somehow more comprehensible to potential new audiences’, a view confirmed by Mantle.⁶⁷⁴ By the time of the premiere of *Siegfried* in June 2013, official leaflets were being distributed, advertising the ‘Ring Fellowship’, a high-level membership donation scheme in support of the Opera North *Ring*, in which the scheme’s founder Peter Espenhahn claimed that ‘the nature of the productions, semi-staged and with video and surtitles, has added to the enjoyment of the audiences, many of whom have not seen the Ring before’.⁶⁷⁵

During the rehearsal period before *Die Walküre* I had asked Martin Pickard why this focus on a *Ring* suitable for beginners was so important. Pickard’s answer was largely geographical: in that Opera North had not produced a *Ring*, their audience had not been provided with one and could not necessarily have been expected to see one elsewhere.⁶⁷⁶ It is certainly the case that Opera North has, in Leeds, a particularly loyal and fixed audience base,⁶⁷⁷ and Opera North’s home audience reside hundreds of miles away from any other comparable company, so it might be reasonable to assume their direct experience of live Wagner productions to be limited. Recent years approaching the Wagner Bicentenary (2013) have produced a comparative spate of *Ring* productions, but prior to this there is a sense in which *Ring* cycles have been few and far-between within the boundaries of our lifetimes and physical locations. Even Pickard who has worked in opera for well over thirty years, including a nine-year spell in Germany, told me that he had never worked on a complete *Ring* cycle, and that he had ‘always wanted to before I die’.⁶⁷⁸ Pickard (in his mid-fifties) seemed to acknowledge the sparse nature of *Ring* cycle productions and hence limited professional opportunities, in a prediction that he might only get to participate in one full cycle in the course of a working lifetime. In a pre-show talk to *Siegfried* in 2013, Pickard also spoke about the aim of this *Ring* cycle to create opportunities for potential Wagner singers in the UK, who might otherwise not get to perform this repertoire, scarce as these opportunities are.⁶⁷⁹ Similarly, for many audience

⁶⁷³ The integration of story text and English titling occurred from *Die Walküre*, in 2012, onwards.

⁶⁷⁴ ‘Wagner’s *Die Walküre*’, *Radio 3 Live in Concert*.

⁶⁷⁵ Espenhahn, ‘We invite you to join the Ring Fellowship’, *The Ring Fellowship*, advertising brochure.

⁶⁷⁶ Pickard, 11 June 2012.

⁶⁷⁷ For audience surveys conducted at a performance of *Das Rheingold* in LTH (2011), only two of twenty-eight respondents had not been to any previous ON productions. Nineteen of the twenty-eight gave long lists of the productions attended, replied that they had seen ‘virtually everything’ for a number of years. Some had subscribed for over twenty years, or even since the company was founded in 1978. More generally I have conducted audience questionnaires for a number of productions, and found this range of responses to be typical of ON audiences in Leeds.

⁶⁷⁸ Pickard, 11 June 2012.

⁶⁷⁹ Martin Pickard speaking at pre-show talk to *Siegfried*, LTH, 19 June, 2013. Two years later, in July 2015, Pickard told me in an informal chat that the company aimed to develop new Wagner singers throughout its *Ring*, perhaps beginning in a small role and developing into a larger role during the course

members, taking into account issues of geography and finance, this could, in real terms, be a singular opportunity, and so, in this context, a Ring cycle for beginners does not seem to be an unreasonable starting point. During the course of the cycle I designed audience questionnaires for each of the four works, and distributed them in Leeds and Salford. I found that many audience members responding to these questionnaires were actually very familiar with Wagner and with other Ring productions, and identified themselves as ‘Wagner’ audience members as much as ‘Opera North’ audience members, many having travelled considerable distance for the performance.⁶⁸⁰ These individuals might even be described as the sort of pilgrims that Wagner himself sought as members of his audience at Bayreuth.⁶⁸¹ While the presence of this kind of audience member seems contradictory to the narrative of a new Wagner audience expounded by Opera North, the company was wholly aware of this audience as well. Pickard told me that, in part there was ‘almost a different audience for this’, and that ‘when you put on Wagner, there’s partly an intellectual dimension; it attracts a demographic where you think “we’re not going to see you at *Bohème*”’,⁶⁸² and Technical Manager Peter Restall spoke to me, informally, about ‘an audience of aficionados’.⁶⁸³ But, as Pickard qualified to me, this sort of audience member will come anyway, and so it remains sensible for the company to cater, in terms of access and marketing, for those more locally that might otherwise not experience a *Ring*. My own audience questionnaires uncovered a lot of Wagner experience. However, these responses inevitably contain a large degree of bias, in that they are mainly completed and returned by those who have a prior interest in Wagner and an opinion that they wish to express, as well as an inclination to prior preparation; a disproportionate number of questionnaires were distributed at pre-show talks, since this approach ensures group of willing respondents.⁶⁸⁴ My findings show that, in 2011, for *Das Rheingold*, most respondents in Leeds and Salford claimed some level of familiarity with Wagner’s music and this particular work, through recordings and attendance at performances. In subsequent years I refined my questions to encourage more specific and detailed responses, but this general pattern of answers remained consistent in 2012, with sixty-seven of eighty-eight Leeds respondents and twenty-seven of thirty-six Salford respondents at

of the Opera North cycle. This was certainly the case for soprano Alwyn Mellor who was Sieglinde in *Die Walküre* in 2012, and Brünnhilde in *Götterdämmerung* in 2014.

⁶⁸⁰ In my 2013 questionnaires I asked audience members how far they had travelled in order to experience Opera North’s *Siegfried*. Sixty-six responses were given for this question after performances in Leeds and Salford. Of these, eighteen had travelled at least fifty miles in each direction, including nine who had travelled over ninety miles each way. Three respondents had travelled over 200 miles in each direction.

⁶⁸¹ *Inside The Ring*, p.51.

⁶⁸² Pickard, 11 June 2012.

⁶⁸³ Restall, 19 June 2013.

⁶⁸⁴ This was, in large part, due to the layout of LTH where the area functioning as a foyer surrounds the main concert hall on all sides. There are also multiple entrances. It is thus difficult to distribute questionnaires in a way that is unobtrusive and efficient. Advertising my questionnaires at pre-show talks was a viable solution. Questionnaires were also distributed elsewhere, but this method was far less efficient. Similar issues were present at the Lowry, Salford Quays, but to a lesser extent.

Die Walküre having returned after seeing *Das Rheingold* the previous year, the vast majority of these being familiar with Wagner and other Ring productions as well. By the time of *Siegfried* in 2013, in Leeds thirty-seven of fifty respondents (74%) had seen other Wagner (not Opera North *Ring*) productions, and twenty-seven of fifty (54%) had seen Ring operas performed by other companies. Listed venues included Bayreuth, Berlin, Metropolitan (New York) and Seattle as well as Leeds, Salford and Manchester. The 2013 Salford audience respondents comprised more experience still, where fifteen of nineteen respondents (79%) had seen other Wagner, and fourteen of nineteen (74%) had seen Ring operas elsewhere. In total four respondents had seen no previous Ring instalments and no other Wagner, but three of these admitted to preparation with books and CDs. One claimed no preparation, but had read the synopsis in the programme prior to his reception of the work. Opera North, however, audibly publicised the experience of the beginner, one key example being audience interviews that were broadcast as part of the Radio 3 *Walküre* programme. Conforming to the Opera North publicity model (and also referring to the austerity theme that was a feature of the Opera North narrative that particular year) one broadcast audience voice confirmed:

I've never seen any Wagner before but it was very accessible. You could follow the story. I think I got it all from what it was. I mean a stage version would be nice but obviously it's so expensive to put on and I think it's more important to have it accessible to people for cheap.⁶⁸⁵

I will return presently to the financial dimension mentioned here. With regard to the 'beginner's Ring', various narratives around the productions fed this particular focus, as the case was made for Wagner and for the first experience of the Ring dramas. Embedded in the Opera North webpage for *Das Rheingold* were two short video presentations, *Richard Farnes Introduces Das Rheingold* and *Das Rheingold: The journey begins*.⁶⁸⁶ These were created in-house and functioned as marketing tools but also as an introduction to *The Ring*. Appearing shortly after the premiere of *Das Rheingold* in June 2011, *Das Rheingold: The journey begins* was an introduction to the cycle and to *Das Rheingold*, presented as the outset of Opera North's traversal of the Ring cycle. A year later *Die Walküre: The journey continues* progressed in a similar vein with interviews with performers and those involved in the planning of *The Ring*.⁶⁸⁷ Appearing prior to the opening in 2011, the four-minute long *Richard Farnes Introduces Das Rheingold* featured Opera North Music Director and *Rheingold* Conductor Farnes answering a

⁶⁸⁵ 'Wagner's *Die Walküre*', *Radio 3 Live in Concert*.

⁶⁸⁶ ON, *Richard Farnes Introduces Das Rheingold*; ON, *Das Rheingold: The journey begins*, online video recording, YouTube (formerly linked from ON website), 5 August 2011, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oKcPIQeAW7E>> [accessed 14 August 2013].

⁶⁸⁷ ON, *Die Walküre: The journey continues*, online video recording, YouTube (formerly linked from ON website), 25 July 2012, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GMuce2JEv30>> [accessed 14 August 2013].

sequence of three questions. The questions were displayed visually in text on screen, after which Farnes elaborated on each in a broadcast interview style. This could be described as a didactic format, with the questions clearly set out, functioning as visual bullet points to break up the information, demonstrating what the film-makers thought the public might like to know and allowing Farnes to talk around each point in turn. The questions and answers ran as follows (see Table 2):

Question:	Summarised response (RF):
Why is <i>The Ring</i> such a famous piece?	Size and scale, ‘the biggest’ Wagner as a talked-about personality: ‘pop tabloid sensation’ equivalent of the nineteenth century Not regularly performed; not done here; ‘special’ event
Why is Opera North performing its Ring cycle in concert?	Size restrictions of orchestra pits in theatres Superior acoustic of concert halls Augmented orchestra is visually impressive
Why should audiences come to see Opera North’s Ring cycle?	Hasn’t been done here; audience request Immediacy and vitality of orchestra on stage British cast being brought to the repertoire

Table 2: Questions and summarised responses in the Opera North web video, *Richard Farnes Introduces Das Rheingold*

There is a sense in which the three ‘why’ questions seem almost child-like and naïve, particularly the first, with its appeal to popular culture and that which is well known. The second question, regarding the reasons for concert performance, is similarly direct, but the answer only addresses performance issues and logistics, while mention of cost-effectiveness is notably absent. The ‘austerity Ring’ concept came to the fore by the time of *Die Walküre* a year later when the acceptance of a large-scale economic down-turn had become more embedded in the psyche of the nation, as I will go on to discuss.⁶⁸⁸ The third question then allows the repetition of key points, discussion of anything remaining that has not been mentioned thus far

⁶⁸⁸ Hickling, ‘Opera North Tackles Wagner’s Ring Cycle’ (para. 11 of 11).

(such as the ‘mainly British cast’) and also brings us firmly and transparently into the marketing sphere. In all cases the questions and answers point to a communication strategy targeted at an audience of Ring cycle beginners.

In addition to online videos such as the one described here, preparatory information was also communicated via press releases and previews, an interview about the production and its processes on BBC Radio 3, and numerous blogs and podcasts, featuring administrators and artists, broadcast by Opera North on its own web page. The way in which the material was presented gave the appearance of intimate and direct communication by the company to its public. While such modes of outward communication served to promote the production, much of the content was informative, educating potential audience members about the piece and sharing the preconditions for the production. These communications gave an impression of the opening Ring opera as a very special and exciting event for the company, but did not allude to any heightened sense of what Bourdieu terms ‘cultural capital’ in presenting this music as culturally superior, or authorising the taste for this work over any other.

As is evident in *Richard Farnes Introduces Das Rheingold*, the message communicated around the scale and importance of the works encourages a sense of awe in new audiences, while points of access are offered simultaneously. Much of Opera North’s work for and with its audience in preparation for *Das Rheingold* in 2011 was not aimed at discounting perceptions of rigour, intensity and difficulty in the reception experience of *The Ring*, but rather dismantling, examining and rebuilding them. There was a strong sense of active audience inclusion in this process, and a drive to counter any sense of alienation that might be felt at the scale and relentless continuity of the work. Mention of cultural and political associations was strategically absent until the approach to *Siegfried* in 2013.

One major tool in the marketing of *The Ring* for the north was the concept of scarcity. In *Richard Farnes Introduces Das Rheingold*, Farnes highlights the relationship between Opera North and its audience, making the case for a regional experience of *The Ring* that had previously been lacking:

Well I think the interest about it [is], first of all [...] there hasn’t been a Ring cycle up in this part of the country. We’re always having people writing to us saying ‘Why don’t you perform the Wagner? It’s such stirring music, it’s so exciting!’⁶⁸⁹

This, as a broadcast sound-bite can be read as verbal shorthand for the new experience for the company and its regular audience. It is in keeping with the projection of community values and audience involvement. It implies a company response to public demand and also serves to

⁶⁸⁹ ON, *Richard Farnes Introduces Das Rheingold*.

enhance the cultural value of this production by underlining the issue of scarcity in the locale. It is emotionally appealing; with the ‘specialness’ of Leeds placed at the forefront, this message is a reminder of the city’s achievement in hosting a national opera company capable of delivering a Ring cycle, and the relationship of the public with that company. Farnes also refers to the excitement of the music, which is to be the central feature in the marketing and communication around this concert production.

I have already mentioned, in Chapters 2 and 3, Paul Atkinson’s ethnography of WNO in which he details the social performance that an opera company does of itself for the benefit of its audience, participants, and stakeholders. Performers, individually, are also in the act of performing themselves in the rehearsal studio and around the company.⁶⁹⁰ For this reason Atkinson doubts the value of interviews in ethnographic work of this type for revelation of a direct documentary truth, but rather sees them as an interesting extension of public performance. I have found information of great value in such interviews, more often with producers than singers, whilst also acknowledging the performative nature of the company and individuals in self-presentation. To document the widespread ‘performance’ of excitement around the Opera North *Ring* is not to doubt the validity of the emotion, but to acknowledge its enhancement, being homogenised, repeated, and projected into the public arena for a specific purpose. It should also be noted that the platforms of public ‘talk’ events, broadcast interviews, and company blogs facilitate an enhanced version of this performance of self, which is now capable of reaching a greater number of recipients.

In the assertion that ‘there hasn’t been a Ring cycle up in this part of the country’, Opera North is essentially performing its own importance, past and present, as the opera company for the north of England, and projecting this to its audience. Notably there was a full Ring cycle brought to Leeds in 1975 and ’76 by Opera North’s parent company, ENO, just a couple of years before Opera North was ‘born’.⁶⁹¹ Moreover the Hallé Orchestra in Manchester has recently performed an even more protracted Ring cycle, although without a preliminary *Rheingold*.⁶⁹² Here, the company’s ‘benign neglect of history’,⁶⁹³ as described by McKechnie,

⁶⁹⁰ Atkinson, pp.137-85.

⁶⁹¹ Although far less likely to be in Opera North’s collective cultural memory, in 1911 and 1912-13, Austrian musician Ernst Denhof toured a Ring production from Edinburgh to the Grand Theatre, Leeds. *Leeds Grand Theatre, Herr Ernst Denhof’s Operatic Festival Performance: The Ring of the Nibelung*, programme, 15 March 1911.

⁶⁹² Intermezzo, ‘Die Walküre in Manchester’; Hallé, ‘Die Walküre – Act II and Act III’, *Event Information, Stunning Hallé* (2010) <http://www.halle.co.uk/concerts-tickets-event.aspx?Event_ID=10035&pPk=cd2bf70d-f373-41e3-bd9d-668b9e145f8d> [accessed 14 August 2013].

⁶⁹³ Kara McKechnie, ‘Opera North: Knitting together history from ephemera’ (unpublished conference paper given 17 May 2013, University of Leeds, Brotherton Library). McKechnie elaborates in *Opera North* (pp. 5-6): ‘the impression forms of a company that has always had to charge forward and whose members hardly ever have time to look back and reflect on Opera North’s achievements. [...] the

prioritises the present, and creates a sense of immediacy for this cycle and this audience. Later in the film Farnes concedes that ‘we’ve never done it here, and that’s one of the reasons that makes it very special for us’. This approach serves to increase the experiential value or ‘specialness’, as it was presented, of a Ring cycle in Leeds and in the north. It is thus instrumental in building on existing concepts of civic pride.

Tied into the communication of ‘specialness’ is the broad concept of the opera company and audience as a ‘family’, and the sense of familiarity and community that we might gain by ‘knowing’ the artists. Conceptions of familiarity are also fed by a narrative around the Britishness of the singers (accurate only in some cases). Home nationality is highlighted in order to situate this Ring in local sentiment, as in this quote from Farnes:

We also have a fantastically talented cast [...], mainly a British cast; some really exciting new singers coming up. I’m very excited about Michael Druiett who’s singing Wotan. He’s a singer that I’ve known for quite a number of years, but he’s never done anything as big as this before. [...] It would be great to think that we’re finding new people to sing this repertoire who come from this country!⁶⁹⁴

Here we are introduced to a new Wagner singer, a new ‘find’, and one of our own. We are encouraged to feel national ownership of Druiett as a talent. We might believe that he will develop in this role throughout his career. We, in the north of England, are here at the beginning.⁶⁹⁵

The idea of enhanced enjoyment of an event through acquaintance with the artists was raised in a private telephone interview that I conducted with soprano, Yvonne Howard, a regular Opera North artist, singing Fricka in *Das Rheingold*. I asked her about the public masterclass in Leeds that she had undertaken with artistic consultant to the project, Dame Anne Evans on 11 June 2011, and what she felt the benefits might be for the audience attending such an event. After listing various aspects, such as the illumination of working processes for different voices, and the depth of focus on text, she also said of the audience, ‘It makes them feel more involved in it too, I think. It’s that thing of, you know, if you go to see a performance of someone you

Company always needs to focus on what is ahead – reflecting and ordering its legacy would almost seem a luxury, generating neither artistic achievement nor income to fund such achievement’.

⁶⁹⁴ ON, *Richard Farnes Introduces Das Rheingold*.

⁶⁹⁵ This focus on home nationality also happened around a previous Ring; local journalist and archivist Geoffrey Mogridge notes that in 1975 and ’76, ENO presented Leeds with a ‘home grown crop of world class Wagner singers’, listing Rita Hunter, Alberto Remedios, Norman Bailey, Clifford Grant and John Tomlinson. Geoffrey Mogridge, ‘Towards a National Opera Company for the North, 1970s’, *Discovering Leeds* (2003)

<http://www.leodis.net/discovery/discovery.asp?pageno=&page=20031110_356182278&topic=20031110_154781521&subsection=20031110_679348171&subsubsection=20031110_889217556> [accessed 8 March 2012] (para. 8 of 10).

know it's always more enjoyable than someone that's just a stranger because you feel more involved in it.⁶⁹⁶ The audience's emotional investment in the singers and consequent investment in the production is courted by Opera North, thus a sense of community is invoked and exploited.

Druiett, as a British singer and a developing Wagner voice, was much-used in company publicity. He consistently projected a sense of elation to be playing Wotan, keen to share his excitement with the audience, contributing in large part to *Das Rheingold: The journey begins* and another podcast, and writing two blog entries in 2011. In *The journey begins* he draws together the experience of performers and audience, saying of the Ring cycle, 'Being involved in it is a special thing for a singer and a special thing for the audience. It's a journey we all go on through this.'⁶⁹⁷ Echoing the sentiment expressed by Farnes, Druiett spoke at length about his experience as a developing Wagnerian, his relationship with Farnes and with Opera North, and the excitement of the music and the performance event:

I'm sensing a real buzz within the company, an excitement about it. [...] It's such a special event; it's such special, life-changing music. It's something that just grabs you and takes you on a journey and you discover so much about it. [...] It's just a love affair with it, that's all I can describe.⁶⁹⁸

His communications on behalf of Opera North continued similarly on his return in 2013 to play the Wanderer in *Siegfried*.⁶⁹⁹ Druiett presents the company and the music as central, viewed through a lens of child-like wonderment, or at the beginning of a life-long musical journey which we are all invited to commence.

The 'journey' is essentially another narrative technique that is used to allow access and to include audience in the company's conceptual preparation for and traversal through the Ring cycle. An inclusive atmosphere of musical revelation and personal discovery is created. In *Das Rheingold: The journey begins*, the company shares with the web audience the metaphorical journey of preparing the performance. Orchestra Director Dougie Scarfe tells us on 15 May 2011:

⁶⁹⁶ Private telephone interview with Yvonne Howard, 30 July 2011, speech recorded with permission.

⁶⁹⁷ ON, *Das Rheingold: The journey begins*.

⁶⁹⁸ Edward Seckerson, *Das Rheingold: Richard Farnes and Michael Druiett in conversation with Ed Seckerson*, online podcast, originally linked to the ON website (2010) <<http://html5-player.libsyn.com/embed/episode/id/1615685/height/100/width/360/autoplay/no/autonext/no/direction/forward/thumbnail/yes#.Ucl5uJpwbIU>> [accessed 14 August 2013].

⁶⁹⁹ ON, *Siegfried, the vocal and mental challenges of Wotan*, online video recording, ON, 10 June 2013, <<http://www.operanorth.co.uk/productions/siegfried>> [accessed 14 August 2013].

This is a really exciting day in Opera North's history because we have our first rehearsals for the Ring cycle. *The Ring* is one of those great, almost monumental operas, and one of the pieces which every opera company has to perform. [...] So it's really quite an extraordinary day for members of the orchestra, particularly [those] who've been here for a number of years, because I think a lot of us thought we'd never get a chance to do the Ring cycle. [...] It's a very exciting occasion.⁷⁰⁰

Here the 'journey' narrative, begins prior to the company's *Ring* experience, and presents a sense of being excited but also humbled at the facility to perform this great work. These performed emotions are then projected onto the potential audience members, by virtue of their own access to the work.

Also demonstrating audience inclusion, and related to familiarity, is the claim that was made for an enhanced relationship between stage and audience due to the nature of the 'concert staging' whereby singers sang out towards the audience, rather than directed towards one another on stage. In 2012 Alwyn Mellor (singing Sieglinde in *Die Walküre*) said in a broadcast that this staging meant that 'the audience feels connected with everybody involved'.⁷⁰¹ By the following year and the broadcast of *Siegfried*, the same idea was taken up by Radio 3 presenter Adam Tomlinson, who borrowed the company's mantra of audience inclusion from previous years, describing a 'unique concert staging [that] gives the audience of Opera North the chance to be part of a complete Ring cycle'.⁷⁰² He described the close proximity of the singers to the front row of the audience as 'creating the feeling that we are all in this together'.⁷⁰³

In one broadcast interview, in April 2011, Opera North is presented as a benevolent local employer, also developing relationships with northern concert halls. In this podcast on the company website, Farnes gave his account of the reasons for the concert staging. Primarily he said the orchestra were unable to fit into the pit of the Grand Theatre, Leeds, but there then followed an account of the concert performances of opera mounted in 2005, while the Grand was being developed:

We were absolutely determined that nobody was going to lose their jobs, that there were going to be no lay-offs. [...]. And during this potentially very difficult period we actually mounted some [...] concert performances. [...] And we began to develop a

⁷⁰⁰ ON, *Das Rheingold: The journey begins*.

⁷⁰¹ Alwyn Mellor speaking on 'Wagner's *Die Walküre*', *Radio 3 Live in Concert*.

⁷⁰² Adam Tomlinson presenting 'Siegfried', *Radio 3 Live in Concert*.

⁷⁰³ Ibid.

very good relationship with a number of different places, particularly the Sage concert hall in Gateshead.⁷⁰⁴

Farnes, who is foremost a musician, also goes on to extol the favourable acoustics of these northern concert halls, and the potential to have a visible orchestra as ‘the most important character in the entire cycle’ including the ‘physical sight of six harpists’ and the ‘fascinating instruments’ that Wagner created for this work.⁷⁰⁵

The home venue, Leeds Town Hall, and the concert halls to which the work toured were introduced in various media around *Das Rheingold* as the very *raison d'être* for this production: venues were presented as key characters in an unfolding dramatic narrative that played out regarding the pre-conditions for this Ring. *The journey begins* video displays shots of ornate, Victorian ceilings and imposing neoclassical statues, signifying a degree of nineteenth-century resonance with the work itself. Orchestra Leader, David Greed remarks that ‘this piece seems to me to be absolutely built for this wonderful hall, Leeds Town Hall’.⁷⁰⁶ Although this sentence seems slightly confused, it was retained; a reminder that Opera North’s Ring productions were indeed created for this great symbol of civic pride, the Town Hall. Towards the end of this chapter I will return to the experience of Leeds Town Hall as a home venue for this production. Here audience members were prepared emotionally for the reception of *Das Rheingold* and *The Ring*, with an enhanced message of civic and national pride, and a sense of their very special geographic place in the world that was host to this exciting musical work. This sense was extended further in the event of *Götterdämmerung*’s inclusion in the 2014 Yorkshire Festival, which celebrated the opening of the *Tour de France* in the county.

The marketing campaign throughout the Ring cycle revolved around the giving of preparatory information, and *The Ring* in many ways felt ‘offered’ rather than ‘sold’. We were not told that we would love the production or the work, and we were not dissuaded that it might be ‘hard work’: many Opera North broadcasts refer to its epic scale, the need for stamina in its performers, the ‘shock’ of two and a half hours performing without a break, and a ‘lifetime’ spent learning the music. We were, however, persuaded that it is enjoyable for the performers, that we have been with them on a ‘journey’, and that elation might be experienced at this pinnacle of a long and arduous process. The excitement we were encouraged to feel was at the musical experience, not at any tradition of cultural cachet afforded by Wagner or the background of German Romantic philosophy and art. This was a local experience, in the main a

⁷⁰⁴ Seckerson, *Das Rheingold: Richard Farnes and Michael Druitt in conversation with Ed Seckerson*.

⁷⁰⁵ This account was repeated in various media around *Das Rheingold*, sometimes including detail about Peter Mumford’s lighting design, screens and titling, presented as a novel, artistic use of technology, and as a tool for clarity of story-telling, for example in ‘Wagner’s *Die Walküre*’, *Radio 3 Live in Concert*.

⁷⁰⁶ ON, *Das Rheingold: The journey begins*.

Leeds Town Hall experience, and it was to be had at Town Hall prices, which in 2011 ranged from £17 to £45.⁷⁰⁷ We were reminded that this event was special and scarce, and we engaged in the almost operatic drama that this might not have happened here in Leeds, but that it did, and that the company was in a state of contagious excitement. Above all, we, the audience, were included and involved.

Then emotional impact of *Das Rheingold* and the opening of *The Ring* was communicated by Opera North to its potential audience in the following ways: invoking a sense of familiarity and community by allowing us to ‘know’ the artists; placing the geographical locale as centrally important;⁷⁰⁸ highlighting *The Ring* as an extraordinary event and emphasising scarcity; and including audience in the narrative of the company’s journey towards production during the preceding weeks, months, and even years.

4.4.3 Sing ON: Wagner!

As we have seen, outward communications by Opera North focussed largely on the emotional preparation of audience, addressing apprehensions surrounding the reception of Wagner. Additionally, there was a distinct drive to increase musical understanding in advance of the performances, particularly in 2011 for *Das Rheingold*. This follows the assertion of Richard Farnes of the company’s mission to ‘develop artists, art-form and audience’.⁷⁰⁹ In reference to the development of audience, this section will address work done within an artistic and educational framework: the preparation, and personal development of audience members, as distinct from the concept of ‘audience development’ used in marketing to mean increased attendance and revenue.

Martin Pickard has delivered several ‘Inside Opera’ talk events for the Opera North *Ring*, demonstrating structure and leitmotifs, sometimes with the assistance of chorus members (who might cover roles for the productions). Other enhancing events surrounding *Das Rheingold* included an evening workshop with Dame Anne Evans and singers Giselle Allen and Yvonne Howard,⁷¹⁰ a concert of horns and chorus entitled ‘The Cross in the Mountains’ led by Opera North Chorus Master Timothy Burke,⁷¹¹ performing what he presented as an evening of proto-Wagnerian music, as well as various pre-show talks. These events were well-attended and

⁷⁰⁷ Leeds International Concert Season, ‘Opera North Brings Wagner’s *Das Rheingold* to Leeds Town Hall’, *Leeds.gov.uk* (2011)
<http://leedsconcertseason.com/MODULES/NEWS/LICS_NEWSmoduleASP/NEWSMOD_newsitem.asp?type=&itemid=6267> [accessed 14 August 2013] (para. 8 of 8).

⁷⁰⁸ Leeds Town Hall; the Sage, Gateshead; Symphony Hall, Birmingham; and the Lowry, Salford Quays are all, at times, mentioned individually.

⁷⁰⁹ Farnes, 10 June 2010.

⁷¹⁰ 11 June 2011.

⁷¹¹ 25 June 2011.

successful, with positive audience reports and accounts of the helpfulness of pre-obtained information via these various media for the reception and understanding of the work itself in concert performance.⁷¹²

The Opera North Education department, whose role is often the preparation of a young audience (as we have seen in the previous chapter) did not play a part in audience development in advance of *The Ring*, in 2011. The activities of this department deal mainly with children, and with *Das Rheingold* at over two and a half hours without interval it is not difficult to imagine, on a practical level, why this might not immediately be considered a beginner's piece.⁷¹³ The closest thing to a directly educational event (although not billed as such) was a half-day public singing workshop entitled 'Sing ON: Wagner!' on Saturday 11 June 2011, devised and run by Timothy Burke. Access was not quite universal, but called 'for all singers who can read music'.⁷¹⁴

The following section is largely an ethnomusicological account of Burke's concept for 'Sing ON: Wagner!' and the event itself in June 2011. Burke has allowed me to publish excerpts from his musical arrangement, and I have used these in conjunction with information about the observation of participants. I have also quoted Burke at length, from an interview I conducted with him in September 2011. This is essentially an ethnographic attempt to capture the casual

⁷¹² Of twenty-eight respondents to my audience questionnaires after a performance of *Das Rheingold* in Leeds, twenty-three had attended 'Inside Opera Special: *Das Rheingold*' or a pre-show talk. (This figure is not proportionally representative of general audience members, as many of the questionnaires were distributed after a talk event.) Of the twenty-three, twenty-one made positive comments in terms of an enrichment of their experience of the performance. One also referred to Timothy Burke's 'Sing ON: Wagner!', another requested such an event (being unaware that it had happened) and one referred to the German Choral Music concert (Burke's 'The Cross in the Mountains', which took place on 25 June 2011) although he did not report an effect upon his reception of *Das Rheingold*. In Salford, of thirty-two respondents, sixteen had attended the pre-show talk there, and twelve found it to be an enriching experience for their reception of *Das Rheingold*, and a further two found the talk 'interesting' for its own sake but less enriching of performance reception. Opera North staff collated and reported various positive comments from their own in-house feedback questionnaires pertaining to the 'Sing ON: Wagner!' event, of which fifty-five were completed. This included a comment from some individuals from Birmingham, planning to attend *Das Rheingold* there, who had travelled some 120 miles to Leeds for this preparatory event.

⁷¹³ John Deathridge, asserts that The German Board of Film Censors routinely notes that video recordings of *The Ring* are suitable for those 'over the age of six', but deems this to be 'incautious advice' and warns that 'children are likely to be baffled' (*Wagner Beyond Good and Evil*, pp.47-48). Following the success of the 2011 'Sing ON! Wagner', however, Burke was contracted (having left the company in 2013) to deliver several young people's events (for pupils studying music, aged around fifteen to nineteen) in advance of Opera North's full cycle in 2016. The website stated: 'Tim Burke presents the story of Wagner's Ring cycle, at the same time as exploring the instruments of the orchestra, how to write for them, and the way music is used to enhance drama on stage.' ON, 'Education and Engagement, Schools Activity 2015-16', 2015, ON [n.d.] <<http://www.operanorth.co.uk/education/schools/schools-activity-2015-16>> [accessed 26 February 2016] (para. 3 of 4). The Education department, in 2016, runs more activities for secondary age children and adults than was the case in 2011; it also incorporates a model of educational practice that creates associations with productions as a vehicle for other activities. Burke's sessions for teenagers, therefore, were not necessarily intended to draw the participants to a full cycle in the first instance, but rather to educate them using some of the associations of *The Ring*.

⁷¹⁴ ON, *HAR leaflet*, Spring 2011.

but informative way in which he interacted with me, which contrasts with other elite interviews I have conducted where my subjects have been more formal in speech and seemed to be more guarded.

There had been mail shots for ‘Sing ON’ events from Opera North to various local choirs, and so the event was designed to appeal to people who were already interested, able and experienced singers to some degree. Burke told me in an interview subsequent to the event:

It’s not an access event in the sense of ‘let’s get people in who’ve never been to an opera’ or anything like that. It’s like ‘let’s get people in who are you know keen musicians in a way and let them do something different, let them do things our way’.⁷¹⁵

The Howard Assembly Room brochure advertised this event (with others) as an accompaniment to Opera North’s Ring cycle, as a way to ‘enhance your appreciation of Wagner’, and as ‘a unique opportunity to learn the piece from the inside and experience its amazing power first hand’, to ‘discover Wagner’s revolutionary harmonies, understand how the piece is put together and be introduced to all the leitmotifs through actually singing them’.⁷¹⁶ Herein lies an irony: in order to facilitate participants’ practical knowledge of the piece ‘from the inside’ and an understanding of how it is put together, it had to be taken apart and reconstructed. Burke’s ‘Sing ON: Wagner!’ workshop is thus effectively an acknowledgement of, and response to, the concern of Carl Dahlhaus, who argues that for an emotionally immediate experience of *The Ring*, there must first be an intellectual, musical framework on which to reflect: ‘The listener needs to be able to distinguish the musical motives [...], to recognize them when they recur, and to keep track of [...] their relationships and functions.’⁷¹⁷

This workshop was essentially a structural introduction to the musical framework, as well as a community ‘sing’. Burke had arranged *Das Rheingold* (which has no chorus) for mixed choir with a few short solo parts (sung by Opera North chorus members) and piano accompaniment. He had reduced the entire music drama down to around half an hour from the original two hours, forty minutes, by, he quipped, ‘cutting out all the inessential bits’.⁷¹⁸ The score with which we were presented was an amalgamation of the Edition Peters piano score (with an English translation) variously cut up, edited and photocopied, and Burke’s own arranged passages. While *Das Rheingold* has no chorus involvement, there had been much reorganisation of the score to ensure that leitmotifs that formerly appeared in the orchestra could

⁷¹⁵ Burke, 1 September 2011.

⁷¹⁶ ON, *HAR leaflet, Spring 2011*.

⁷¹⁷ Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner’s Music Dramas*, p.82.

⁷¹⁸ Timothy Burke, ‘Sing ON: Wagner!’ event, Howard Assembly Room, 11 June 2011.

be sung by the participants, having been given suitably direct and descriptive lyrics by Burke (see Example 21).

Example 21 shows a musical score for Basses and Piano. The Basses part is in 3/4 time and features the lyrics "See the sun shi-ning on the gold!" with a piano (*p*) dynamic marking. The Piano part is also in 3/4 time and features a fanfare motif in the right hand and a doubling in the left hand, also marked piano (*p*).

Example 21: Bars 88-90 of Wagner, arr. T. Burke, *The Rhinegold* (unpublished workshop material, 2011)

This example, occurring relatively near the beginning of Burke's arrangement, corresponds directly to bars 515-16 of Wagner's original score, where this fanfare motif is given to the second horn.⁷¹⁹ In the arrangement the shining gold of the fanfare is made explicit for workshop participants with lyrics, its depth illustrated in the choice of bass voices (as opposed to tenors, which might match the tessitura of the horn part more closely); the piano doubling in the left hand is added to aid pitching.

There are instances of more significant re-arrangement, as shown here in Example 22:

Example 22 shows a musical score for Piano and vocal parts. The Piano part is in 3/4 time and features a fanfare motif in the right hand and a doubling in the left hand, marked piano (*pp*). The vocal part is also in 3/4 time and features the lyrics "Ham-mer - ing Ni - be - lungs ham - mer - ing! Ham - mer - ing Ni - be - lungs ham - mer - ing!" with a piano (*pp*) dynamic marking and a tempo marking of "All".

Example 22: Bars 486-87, Wagner, arr. T. Burke, selected lines

The sung motif occurs, repeated in Burke's score under a longer line sung by the mischievous god Loge, tempting Wotan and Fricka to take the Rhine gold. Loge sings 'No husband dare to be false to his wife when she commands that glittering wealth that busy dwarves are forging,

⁷¹⁹ Richard Wagner, *Das Rheingold*, 2 vols (Mainz: B. Schott's Söhne, 1988), I, bars 515-16.

This figure is distantly reminiscent of the opening arpeggiac figure (in E flat major) of the work, which according to Ernest Newman, symbolises the primordial beginning of things, then slowly water and the Rhine (*Wagner Nights*, p.475).

ruled by the power of the ring'. The exact moment at which this 'Hammering Nibelungs' motif first occurs is concurrent with Loge's phrase 'dwarves are forging'. The original passage, with regard to Loge's line is bars 1478-79 of Wagner's score where the words, *Zwerge schmieden* ('dwarves forge') fall in exactly the same place on the musical phrase (see Example 23).

Oboe I

Cor anglais

Clarinet II in A

Horn II in E

Violin II

Viola

LOGE

Zwer - ge schmie - - den,

Example 23: Wagner, *Das Rheingold*, 2 vols (Mainz: B. Schott's Söhne, 1988), I, bar 1478 – selected lines

Here Wagner passes the 'hammering' motif though the orchestra, with no one instrument playing what Burke has presented, rather more blatantly, as a motif in its entirety. The first bar of the two has Cor anglais, Clarinet 2, pizzicato 2nd violins presenting a triplet figure on the first beat of the bar, followed by Oboe 1 and Horn 2 giving beats 2 and 3. Half the violas (pizzicato) give three triplet figures in the bar, but with rests on the central triplet quaver of beats 2 and 3. In Wagner's original, the 'hammering' motif (with a reversal of the placement of dotted and straight triplet rhythms) appears in its most exposed form slightly later, from bar 1853, where much of the orchestra including eighteen anvils present the hammering Nibelungs with direct sonic representation (from bar 1862). This instrumental figure is also vocalised in Burke's

arrangement of the passage, just as in Example 22.⁷²⁰ His explicit lyrics go some way toward solving the problem of the loss of the physical representation of hammering in the percussive anvils, by way of a sung, literal explanation: ‘Hammering Nibelungs hammering!’.

Burke acknowledged the priority of functionality over artistry in the process of giving original orchestral motifs new lyrics:

So I just wrote words for those ones so that we could do it, you know, so we weren’t just going ‘la la la la la’ [...]. And you don’t really know the difference, once you’ve translated it, because obviously once it’s in English you’ve got rid of the beautiful German anyway, and so it doesn’t matter if you put some more [...] English on the [orchestral motifs].⁷²¹

Burke does occasionally allocate an originally orchestral motif to his workshop chorus, without words. This is the case for the developing ‘Ring motif’,⁷²² but he does this only after he has transparently established its meaning with a lyricised version from bar 206 (see Example 24):

The musical score for Example 24 consists of two staves. The top staff is labeled 'All' and the bottom staff is labeled 'Piano'. Both staves are in 2/4 time and G major. The lyrics are 'for - ging the gold to a ring.' The music is marked with dynamics *p* and *pp*. The 'All' staff has a triplet of eighth notes in the final measure. The 'Piano' staff has a triplet of eighth notes in the final measure.

Example 24: Wagner, arr. Burke, bars 206-07

The first wordless permutation of the ‘Ring motif’ (see Example 25) comes at bar 218.

⁷²⁰ This happens variously from bars 606 to 634 in Burke’s score.

⁷²¹ Burke, 1 September 2011.

⁷²² The ‘Ring motif’ as defined in Newman, *Wagner Nights*, p.481.

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system includes parts for Sopranos, Altos, Tenors, Basses, and Piano. The vocal parts have lyrics 'ah' and 'mm'. The piano part features a triplet motif in the bass line. The second system starts at bar 5 and includes parts for Soprano (S.), Alto (A.), Tenor (T.), Bass (B.), and Piano (Pno.). The vocal parts in the second system have lyrics 'pp'.

Example 25: Wagner, arr. Burke, bars 218-25

The wordless motif shown in Example 25 functions here to build tension in preparation for an explicit lyrical rendition, introducing the Valhalla ideal, given immediately afterwards, from bar 126, with the opening lyrics: 'Valhalla's proud and shining walls'. The melodic passage shown

in Example 25 was originally scored by Wagner to two horns.⁷²³ Burke makes a register change (from women's voices to men's at bar 220) where Wagner does not (retaining the middle register of the horns throughout) but Burke's piano accompaniment echoes the consistent register of the original. This might be to balance previous choices of vocal register (immediately prior to this example Burke used different men's and women's voices to make a distinction originally made by different instruments). It is also possible that this was an attempt by Burke to ensure equal participation in the workshop by distributing music evenly between the voices.

After Burke's explicit vocal Ring motif mentioned above (bar 126 onward, 'Valhalla's proud and shining walls...') he scales the motif back to a wordless version once more, now placed in the background to Fricka and Wotan's conversation about the lust for power (this lust being symbolised by the underlying Ring motif).⁷²⁴ Burke's vocalised, wordless Ring motif also appears under Loge's tale of Alberich's theft of the gold, counter-balanced with the lyricised fanfaric Rhinegold motif (exposed in Example 21) now arranged across the choir,⁷²⁵ and as Loge tells Wotan how the gold can be forged to a ring.⁷²⁶ These uses of the developing Ring motif retain a degree of Wagnerian dramatic effect, but also, where the musical development is less evident, wordless permutations serve to link passages together cohesively in Burke's condensed version.⁷²⁷ Through all of these uses, the motif mutates and develops slightly; so workshop participants were given a taste of Wagner's orchestral and melodic technique via a practical participation.

In other passages, participants were afforded a practical understanding of the sung narrative via motifs that had belonged to particular characters, redistributed for this makeshift chorus. This 'Renunciation of Love' motif (as described by Burke) is first sung in Wagner's original by Rhine maiden Woglinde in bars 617-24 of the score, but is given to all the workshop participants in unison (see Example 26).

All

He must pro-nounce a curse on love, he must re-nounce all joys of
love be-fore he mas-ters the ma-gic to forge the gold to a ring.

Example 26: Wagner, arr. Burke, bars 166-73

⁷²³ Wagner, *Das Rheingold*, bars 761-68.

⁷²⁴ Wagner arr. Timothy Burke, *Part One: The Rhinegold* (unpublished arranged score), p.33, bars 281-85.

⁷²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.44, bars 427-29.

⁷²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.51-52, bars 509-12.

⁷²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.64, bars 597- 601.

None of the educating functions of Burke's arrangement were made explicit during the workshop itself. In the advance publicity, however, objectives of the session were communicated as a manifesto: to 'enhance appreciation', to 'learn the piece from the inside', to discover harmonies and construction and to be 'introduced to all the leitmotifs through actually singing them'.⁷²⁸ These aims were ultimately fulfilled by Burke's workshop. This match between publicity, potential and the actual activity itself highlights Burke's intention that his workshop would be musically developing, as well as enjoyable, for local amateur singers. This advance publicity (a brochure for the Howard Assembly Room's spring season 2011) went to press many months before this event happened, and certainly before the musical arrangement itself was finalised. The work of musical arrangement, and the creation of this workshop was driven by educational and developmental aims. The event was designed, according to Burke, to make the music more accessible and understandable to those who might find a Wagner opera to be a daunting prospect, rather than those who may already feel themselves to be seasoned Wagnerians. In a later interview, I asked him to tell me about the inception of the event:

We had this big round table discussion about events for the Ring cycle. [...] And I kind of knew I was going to bring to the meeting a suggestion. Which was, [...] 'You guys probably want an event which seeks to take the music to bits a little bit, [...] to look at how it's constructed.' [...] Because [...] Wagner's music is seen as [...] kind of megalithic, [...] it's kind of huge [...]. You either really know it and you're already a member of the Wagner audience in which case you're like 'ha ha well I'm fine!' [...] or you're not. And you're just thinking 'where am I going to start? [...] Surely I'm not going to just sit down and listen to a CD' because I don't think that would really ever work. [...] 'I'm not just going to go and commit to buying a really expensive ticket [...] either.' And so [...] I was thinking 'what can we do to break it up [...] to let people see how it's put together so they can kind of understand it?' 'Cause once you've understand how something's put together then you appreciate it in a completely different way. So I thought 'well we could have a really dry kind of lecture where you're saying "yeah well listen to this extract and now here's my projection and now I'm going to tell you what Wagner was thinking about at the time"', which if you do it in the right way can be amazing. But I just thought that [...] it would bring the kind of people in who mainly already know that anyway, and so I thought 'why can't we analyse it practically? Why can't we sing bits of it to see how it's constructed?' And the inspiration for that was that the way he structures the score, all the little motifs that [...] go through it.⁷²⁹

⁷²⁸ ON, *HAR leaflet, Spring 2011*.

⁷²⁹ Burke, 1 September 2011.

Although unmentioned by Burke, there is an evident lineage to the original analysis, mapping and naming of the leitmotifs that was done by Hans von Wolzogen in 1877, which has been much repeated and borrowed in musical analyses of *The Ring* ever since.⁷³⁰ While Wolzogen is not presented as a conscious inspiration for Burke's choral construction or 'practical analysis' concept, the advertising for this event pointed (without definition) to the participants' learning of the 'leitmotifs', the term coined by Wolzogen, that has now passed, without need for translation or explanation, into the language of general musical appreciation.

In actuality this objective of 'practical analysis', that was hinted at in the publicity brochure and later mentioned explicitly by Burke, was more concealed on the day itself. Participants were led to enjoy the singing and to be amused and charmed by Burke who is a charismatic choral leader. This style of performative leadership is effectively standard practice, since singers must be happy and relaxed in order physically to produce a good quality sound and be confident of doing so. A self-aware, intense academic learning experience might well be incongruent with a successful practical choral experience, and Burke asserted that a formal presentation would draw people whose knowledge might already be more advanced than those he wished to attract. So in terms of the marketing of this event, its structure and the resultant self-selecting criteria for attendance, love of singing and of music were prioritised over love (or knowledge) of Wagner. This implicit priority also meant that larger numbers could be drawn.

The opportunity for participants to sing with the entire Opera North chorus, who were evenly dispersed amongst the participants was a unique feature of the session, and had been advertised in advance. This ensured popular appeal as well as quality of musical outcome. Name tags made chorus members clearly present and identifiable, even approachable, before the singing began. Burke had led public opera singing workshops for The Royal Opera and ENO in the past, as a freelancer. However, in post at Opera North he expressed great pride in his inception of these workshops, which he developed as an extension of his official role. When I asked him how these public events fit into his job description as Chorus Master he replied, 'The job description doesn't talk about this at all, the Sing ONs, like that doesn't exist'.⁷³¹ So he developed the concept from what he saw as a gap in the company's public role. He was particularly proud of what he saw as the distinctive way in which these events are run by Opera North in Leeds, with the participation of the chorus to aid the singing and choral experience of the participants. Speaking of earlier Sing ONs that had happened before the Wagner event he said:

⁷³⁰ Examples include Deryck Cooke, *I Saw the World End*, and Ernest Newman, *Wagner Nights*.

⁷³¹ Burke, 1 September 2011.

And I... we came up with this format where you had eight [ON chorus members] who are [...] evenly distributed across the voices [...] and then we plant them [...] amongst [...] the participants [...], and they really help. And I don't think [other opera houses] really do that, because I've done big sings at Royal Opera, I've done at ENO as well and they normally have three or four chorus members, but they're the stars! They're the soloists. They come to be Papageno [...] or [...] Cavaradossi. [...] They don't come to sing the choral stuff. But I thought let's have that as the actual format of the event, and I think it's great because it gives people a lot more confidence.⁷³²

During Burke's comparisons with other opera houses of which he had direct experience, there arose a stark juxtaposition with relation to access in terms of personal finance:

TB: I mean ENO do massive... like big singing weekends [...] And literally they'll be about a hundred and fifty people or something. And they'll come for two days in a row, and they'll pay top whack [...]

JD: *How much do you charge for your [Opera North Sing event]?*

TB: Four quid or something, it's like a nominal fee.⁷³³

It was actually three pounds. In the same spirit of public access is the emphasis that Burke placed upon the quality of choral education and participation at his events, again drawing comparisons with his previous work as a contracted session leader in London, in what seemed to be a prescribed format:

What you do is you choose [...] four members of the Royal Opera Chorus [...] And you'd say 'Right, these four people are going to be [...] the four main characters in *Magic Flute*, and we're going to do [...] a version [...] that has a little bit of the participants singing something simplified', and then one of the soloists sings one of their arias and everyone goes 'Ah that's lovely!' [...] And so actually the amount that the people sing, the participants, is not very much [...] and it's very simplified. And I thought 'well actually let's do something choral, where they're actually singing', you know, the ladies are singing a different part than the guys; in some places actually you go to four parts; we've [...] got sopranos, altos, tenors, basses.⁷³⁴

It was, then, quite unique that Burke's Wagner event included the entire Opera North chorus. He described to me the importance of the participants feeling that they were joining a 'section', rather than a workshop that might incorporate just one professional soloist who would stand out

⁷³² Ibid.

⁷³³ Ibid.

⁷³⁴ Ibid.

as being ‘brilliant’, whereby participants would feel a marked difference with their own ability. The implication here is that this would not be a good confidence-building strategy. With more than one professional chorus member per section, he asserted, from a participant point of view, ‘it’s like “OK there are two really good sopranos, so I can just be one of the sopranos.” And I think that’s a big psychological difference’.⁷³⁵

It was the Wagner repertoire in particular that Burke felt required the participation of the whole professional chorus. They were also prepared in advance in order to ensure a quality outcome for everybody, as he explained:

Because it’s harmonically quite complex, it’s a big sound, you know. It requires long, sustained lines, and real impact, and forceful sound, and big dynamic changes. And when you’ve got all of that it’s really exciting to do it. When you don’t have all that it’s really hard work and it’s slightly pointless because you think ‘I’m not getting any of the thrills here, I’m just getting hard work’. And I thought if we had the chorus and if I taught the chorus the parts in rehearsals, you know we had several rehearsals leading up to it, then they’re going to come in on the day, perfect. [...] If everyone just stands in awe of the chorus [...] then it’s still going to sound great, you know. But then you add everybody into that, they’ll just slot into the right note. If you’ve got people around you singing the right note really loud then you’re probably going to sing it!⁷³⁶

I asked if the inclusion of the chorus was a trick to give participants the confidence to perform. Burke replied that the improved performance that happened from participants as a result of their proximity to the chorus was real. Effectively they had been led by example, their singing developed and improved. In an official Opera North participant survey that was conducted on the day of the ‘Sing ON’, 47% of the fifty-five respondents said that the most enjoyable part of the day was the ‘chance to sing with ON Chorus’ and a further 27% said that it was ‘everything’ about the day. In third place was ‘the music’, with 11%.⁷³⁷ While this is a telling account of how the participants view and rate their experience of the whole event, it is also true to say that these elements of singing with the chorus, ‘everything’ and ‘the music’ are inextricably linked in the experience of the event. Only one person in fifty-five responded to the multiple-choice survey with the answer that ‘learning new techniques’ was his/her favourite element. From my own participant observation in the workshop I would assert that this negligible response indicates that participants’ technical learning was implicit rather than non-existent, as the quality of sound did improve throughout the session, although the technical issues around individuals’ vocal

⁷³⁵ Ibid.

⁷³⁶ Ibid.

⁷³⁷ ON, ‘Sing ON: Wagner!’ participant questionnaire results, with permission, given by the Marketing department of Opera North.

production were not addressed explicitly. The ON survey responses also indicate that the learning focus was ‘the music’ rather than the technique required to sing it; this feedback matched the advertisement of the event, and was the planned aim, expressed to me by Burke.

There was also a degree of relaxed professional intimacy created by Burke and the staff. The rehearsal style when combined with the presence of the whole chorus allowed participants to feel that they were party to a ‘backstage’ environment. This was a performed re-creation of the real type of rehearsal that happens every working day at Opera North but was, of course, a special event for those visiting to be a part of it. Professional relationships were played out accordingly. Of the phrase initially heard from Woglinde but later arranged for the chorus, ‘*Weia Waga*’, Burke remarked to the group, ‘It’s a German la la’, then in his typically relaxed and collaborative manner checked with his pianist, ‘Am I right, Martin?’ Martin Pickard, a German opera expert and fluent speaker, elaborated that it was a kind of ‘watery la la’ with connotations of splashing. This exchange was amusing and relaxed (thus relaxing participants) the details lyrically informative and interesting, and the understanding of German onomatopoeia of benefit to participants who would later become the audience of *Das Rheingold*. In such exchanges, Burke demonstrated in microcosm the collaborative world of the opera rehearsal room, where the dialogue of consultation must flow freely, within a hierarchical framework of etiquette. Burke, who trained as an organist and then a répétiteur, also defers, on occasion to his singers. His attempt at singing the low E flat that opens the work was met with a nod of appreciation from Gordon Shaw, a low bass of the chorus. ‘Phew!’ Burke remarked to the participants at Shaw’s approval, with self-deprecating comic effect. This performance of a professional relationship was played as warm and light-hearted but serious in its attitude to musical performance, and it was self-consciously enjoyable theatre, allowing participants some small measure of access to the inner world of the opera company. From an educational perspective, this interaction also served to highlight the musical depth and gravity of this first note, which itself is used by Wagner to symbolise eternity, divinity, and the beginnings of creation.⁷³⁸

Burke’s charisma was evident throughout. He joked around a verbal phrase that he had written to create a choral leitmotif ‘He is Lord of the Ring’. ‘Notice there is no “S”’ he said. ‘We wouldn’t want to infringe copyright.’ The participants laughed. Such references to popular culture were occasionally used, as indeed they often are in the rehearsal room. Burke had chosen to have the room set out with women on one side on raked seating, facing in to him and the piano, and men facing in from the other side, so that women and men were facing each other as they sang. This seating design lent itself to individuals being simultaneously audience and

⁷³⁸ Newman, *Wagner Nights*, p.475.

singers. There was thus a feeling of reciprocal appreciation of other participants, and of interspersed chorus members whose superior technique was helpfully visible as well as audible. Burke occasionally encouraged us to applaud one another and receive applause, from the perspective of facing others: ‘Gents, aren’t the ladies marvellous?’

While this ‘Sing’ event was relatively unique in its material and its educational framework as Burke outlined, it would be remiss not to mention that there was, a few years previously, another participatory Ring event, for keen amateur instrumentalists, with no explicit connection to Opera North, run by the Northern Wagner Orchestra in Leeds. This series of four ‘come and play’ Ring opera weekends were spread over four years, from 2005 to 2008 and designed ‘to give musicians the opportunity to perform Wagner repertoire at Leeds University’.⁷³⁹ Perhaps unsurprisingly Opera North personnel were involved, although unofficially, in a professional capacity, Fafner in *Das Rheingold* being played by company chorus member Gordon Shaw ‘with kind permission of Opera North’.⁷⁴⁰ Indeed in Burke’s ‘Sing ON’ event, Shaw reprised this role as a giant for a brief solo. Sarah Estill who subsequently went on to sing soprano in the Opera North chorus, was a founder and key professional vocal participant in the Northern Wagner Orchestra events, playing Woglinde in *Das Rheingold*, Sieglinde in *Die Walküre* and Brünnhilde in *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*.⁷⁴¹

The events surrounding the Opera North *Ring* aimed to prepare audience members for, and enhance their experience of the Ring operas. However, the published narrative regarding how audiences might engage with the productions altered subtly over the course of four years. Initially various modes of preparation were offered, including Burke’s ‘Sing ON’, various talk and concert events, and publicity and web broadcasts. In 2012 there was a focus on the facility to produce and consume this epic with relative thrift in a time of austerity; and by 2013 claims that one could ‘walk in off the street’ without preparation,⁷⁴² as the following section goes on to outline.

4.4.4 Evolving narratives

As might be expected for a cycle that lasted over four years, company narratives around *The Ring* evolved over this time period. The communications of 2011 in advance of *Das Rheingold*

⁷³⁹ Michael Williamson, *Michael Williamson* (2010) <<http://michael-williamson.co.uk/>> [accessed 24 June 2013] (para. 2 of 3).

⁷⁴⁰ Northern Wagner Orchestra, ‘Previous Events: Wagner’s Ring Cycle - *Das Rheingold*’, *Northern Wagner Orchestra* (2011) <<https://sites.google.com/site/northernwagnerorchestra/previous-events>> [accessed 24 June 2013] (para. 2 of 14).

⁷⁴¹ Ibid.

⁷⁴² Farnes on ‘Siegfried’, *Radio 3 Live in Concert*; John Tomlinson speaking on ON, *Siegfried: The forging of a hero* (teaser trailer).

are largely omitted here, having been covered already in some depth, as audiences were prepared, in 2011, for the beginning of the whole cycle.

During *Die Walküre* in 2012, the financial benefits for company and audience of performing the work ‘in concert’ were acknowledged explicitly. This idea had been presented previously by journalists, but not affirmed or expanded upon by company members. For example, presenter Edward Seckerson had asked Farnes, in a 2011 podcast, ‘Why in concert? I mean apart from economical factors?’ Farnes gave the ‘very good principal reason’, that ‘we simply cannot fit an orchestra of this size into our pit’,⁷⁴³ the ‘economical factors’ assumed by Seckerson were thus circumnavigated. Also in 2011 Sean Rafferty on Radio 3 had made Wagnerian reference to the impending national recession in an interview with Farnes and Anne Evans:

It’s the lure of Valhalla, the palace that has been built basically on, well, if you made a comparison today, an irresponsible person taking out a vast loan, several billion pounds loan with no security to go and live their life of luxury! [...] Maybe a little lesson for the over-greedy in our times!⁷⁴⁴

Still this simile and its more practical reactive economic outcome, the savings to be made ‘in concert’, were not encompassed by the company’s own narrative until the following year, and Rafferty’s above comment went unanswered by Farnes in this broadcast.

In 2012 the concept of the ‘austerity Ring’ originated in the *Guardian* with Alfred Hickling, whose headline also noted that Opera North ‘keeps ticket prices down to draw Wagner virgins’,⁷⁴⁵ and who made much of the set of Wagner tubas that Opera North had acquired second-hand, and of performers wearing their own concert dress. Radio 3’s Adam Tomlinson asserted that the ‘austerity’ label was deemed to be controversial, but also drew attention to the ‘cost-effective decision’ not to stage the works fully, adding an access-themed disclaimer:

It’s not just about saving money. There’s a very strong creative vision behind the production and a belief that cheaper ticket prices will bring new audiences to Wagner, to Opera North and to Leeds Town Hall.⁷⁴⁶

Opera North General Director Richard Mantle also touched upon the matter of personal finance:

⁷⁴³ Seckerson, *Das Rheingold: Richard Farnes and Michael Druiett in conversation with Ed Seckerson*.

⁷⁴⁴ Sean Rafferty, presenting *In Tune*, BBC Radio 3, 15 June 2011.

⁷⁴⁵ Hickling, ‘Opera North Tackles Wagner’s Ring Cycle’.

⁷⁴⁶ Adam Tomlinson, ‘Wagner’s *Die Walküre*’, *Radio 3 Live in Concert*.

Coming into the concert hall we're able to charge a reasonable amount for the ticket. You don't have to take out a bank loan to go to even a performance of *Die Walküre*, you know. It's reasonably accessible.⁷⁴⁷

The 'austerity Ring' was part of a narrative that was, by 2012, coming to the fore, amidst budget cuts in the arts and perhaps in anticipation of another round of complaints about the public funding of opera. Indeed, it was not meant to discourage, as Hickling optimistically predicted a 'paradigm shift' in Wagner performance.⁷⁴⁸ Skilfully, with the precedent set by Rafferty the previous year, Mantle made bid for the relevance of the work to the concurrent financial crisis:

It may seem crazy, putting on the Ring at a time of global economic crisis. Yet the whole cycle is basically about what happens when the gods fail to keep up the mortgage payments on Valhalla. It really is an opera for our time.⁷⁴⁹

The idea of frugality was subsequently much repeated and even embraced by company members. By 2013, Richard Farnes's webpage with his management representatives, Ingpen and Williams, quoted Tim Ashley's *Guardian* review of *Die Walküre*: 'Less can be more when it comes to Wagner, and Opera North's "austerity Ring" – now on its second instalment in its second year – continues to enthrall and amaze.'⁷⁵⁰

2012 also saw a reduction in scenographic complexity. The amount of story text from Michael Birkett's *The Story of the Ring* was significantly reduced in *Die Walküre* as compared with *Das Rheingold* the previous year, and the additional English surtitles were moved from secondary plasma screens to appear with the projection designs on the giant triptych. Peter Mumford's lighting and projections were presented more thoroughly in verbal communications around the piece, notably in the pre-show interview on Radio 3 by the lighting designer himself.⁷⁵¹ The clarity of story-telling via the screens and production design was advertised more often and more explicitly by the company in pre-show talks and in the press than previously.

For *Siegfried* in 2013, a narrative arose that was in part organic, as a continuation of the 'clarity' element from *Die Walküre* in 2012, and in part rather contradictory to the introductory events that had marked *Das Rheingold* in 2011. It was said that an audience could 'walk in off

⁷⁴⁷ Richard Mantle, *ibid.*

⁷⁴⁸ Hickling, 'Opera North Tackles Wagner's Ring Cycle' (para. 11 of 11).

⁷⁴⁹ Richard Mantle quoted in Hickling, 'Opera North Tackles Wagner's Ring Cycle' (para. 11 of 11).

⁷⁵⁰ Tim Ashley, *Guardian*, 17 June 2012, quoted by Ingpen and Williams, 'Richard Farnes, Conductor: Reviews', *Ingpen and Williams, Artists* (2013) <<http://www.ingpen.co.uk/artist/richard-farnes/#reviews>> [accessed 25 June 2013] (para. 6 of 9).

⁷⁵¹ Mumford on 'Wagner's *Die Walküre*', *Radio 3 Live in Concert*.

the street' without preparation, and access the production as one might a film. Farnes outlined the company's vision on the Radio 3 live broadcast programme:

The idea being that somebody could come off the street, like they would going into the cinema and not really knowing what on earth this piece was about, and actually at the end of the performance have a very good idea what had been going on, and had been able to follow the narrative.⁷⁵²

This was echoed at various points, for example, in the *Siegfried* 'teaser trailer' by John Tomlinson the artistic consultant to the production, in almost identical terms to those used by Farnes: 'It's very accessible I think for a new public, for public coming to see *The Ring* for the first time. You could literally walk in from the street, sit down and enjoy this performance.'⁷⁵³

Siegfried was produced after the departure from the company of Chorus Master Timothy Burke, who had been instrumental in 'developmental' events around *Das Rheingold*, crucially the 'Sing ON: Wagner!' workshop and 'The Cross in the Mountains' proto-Wagnerian concert. The marketing of the 2013 production for a 'first time audience' became more explicit, while company members acknowledged to me more privately that there were many audience members who would be the very opposite (described by Martin Pickard as 'Wagnerites' and by Peter Restall as 'aficionados'⁷⁵⁴). Throughout the cycle, Wagner and *The Ring* had been described variously in terms relating to popular culture or using accessible and familiar terms and ideas. On Radio 3's *In Tune* in 2011 Farnes said, 'I mean, to be honest, some of the behaviour of the characters, of the giants, reminds me of my own two kids, and they're both under five!'⁷⁵⁵ In a web video Farnes introduced Wagner as the nineteenth-century equivalent of a 'pop tabloid sensation',⁷⁵⁶ and in 2012 told the *Guardian*, 'I don't think it diminishes *The Ring* in any way to say that it is like the most sublime film music ever created. [...] I have no doubt that if he were alive today he would be working in Hollywood.'⁷⁵⁷

The narrative of a first time audience was still repeated, increasing in prevalence by 2013, but simultaneously academic engagement was hinted at, and the material of those 'weighty philosophical tombs' avoided by Stuart Leeks in the *Rheingold* programme booklet in 2011 appeared fleetingly to audiences in pre-show talks and in broadcast journalism around *Siegfried*. For the BBC Radio 3 broadcast Nick Baragwanath of the University of Nottingham was invited to comment on such matters as Wagner's intentions for the piece in relation to this

⁷⁵² Farnes on 'Siegfried', *Radio 3 Live in Concert*.

⁷⁵³ ON, *Siegfried: The forging of a hero (teaser trailer)*.

⁷⁵⁴ Pickard, 11 June 2012; Restall, 19 June 2013.

⁷⁵⁵ Farnes, on *In Tune*, 15 June 2011.

⁷⁵⁶ ON, *Richard Farnes Introduces Das Rheingold*.

⁷⁵⁷ Farnes quoted in Hickling, 'Opera North Tackles Wagner's Ring Cycle' (para. 8 of 11).

‘staged concert’ production. Giving a hint of the history of the protracted composition of this work, he distinguished that ‘Wagner would probably have appreciated it by Act 3, because that was when he decided that music was at the centre of the Music Drama’.⁷⁵⁸

In the *Siegfried* pre-show talk, Martin Pickard touched on matters of philosophy, including Siegfried as an adolescent, undeveloped character in this work, which was intended as a precursor to the character’s completion in *Götterdämmerung*.⁷⁵⁹ Pickard expanded upon the nature music in *Siegfried*, and the moral philosophy centring on the title character.⁷⁶⁰ He also talked about the chronological break in Wagner’s writing of the work (which happened between Acts 2 and 3) and other chronological points regarding the composer from Wagner’s autobiography. But it was the ‘*Siegfried: Inside Opera Special*’ talk event on 13 July 2013 in which Opera North most audibly engaged with academic debate, in particular in the choice of Michael Tanner as speaker, who had also written an article for the programme that year.⁷⁶¹ The other panellists were Pickard, who expanded upon information previously given at pre-show talks,⁷⁶² and political journalist Matthew D’Ancona. This event could be described as ‘popular philosophy’ mixed with some musical introduction and discussion,⁷⁶³ and the audience was given extracts of the debates that have taken place in the scholarly world around *The Ring*, rather than in-depth involvement. Even then attendance was relatively low, around thirty-five, approximately twenty fewer than attended Timothy Burke’s ‘Sing ON: Wagner!’ event two years previously. Panellists Tanner, D’Ancona and Pickard initially outlined their personal routes into Wagner, a theme that was given some significance by chair Stuart Leeks. After this round of personal expositions, audiences were given an introduction to Wagner’s early revolutionary politics and his subsequent life events in relation to his writing of the Ring cycle, character analyses of Siegfried and Wotan, a brief discussion of the nature and attributes required of a ‘hero’, and some short musical analyses at the piano by Pickard. Audience questions then raised philosophical issues of love versus law, specific examples of performance practice with panellists’ preferences, and the controversial question of anti-Semitic characterisation of the dwarf Mime (as discussed earlier).

⁷⁵⁸ ‘Proms Plus Intro: Introduction to *Das Rheingold*’.

⁷⁵⁹ Pickard, 19 June 2013.

⁷⁶⁰ Pickard drew attention to the young Siegfried’s affinity with nature and absence of moral values: animals have no morals, but humans are expected to learn morals from childhood and adolescence onward. See George Bernard Shaw’s description of Siegfried as ‘a totally unmoral person, a born anarchist’, likening him to Wagner’s Dresden revolutionary friend Mikhail Bakunin (*The Perfect Wagnerite*, p.48).

⁷⁶¹ Michael Tanner, ‘*Siegfried* and Sigfried’, in *Siegfried*, programme brochure, ed. by Stuart Leeks (ON, 2013), pp.8-13.

⁷⁶² Pickard spoke to Stuart Leeks in pre-show talks for *Siegfried* on 19, 22 and 29 June and 6 July 2013 at various venues.

⁷⁶³ While Tanner has been an academic, his authored texts, *Wagner*, and *The Faber Pocket Guide*, are written for a general audience.

The University of Leeds conference *Wagner's Impact on His World and Ours* also had some small effect on the *Siegfried* audience, as the conference itself was attended not only by academics but also interested audience members, some of whom I met by chance on performance nights. This conference held both academic and cross-over interest appeal, with international scholars in attendance as well as opera professionals, journalists and authors such as keynote speaker Barry Millington. The event was linked to Opera North at the fringes of company involvement, as has been discussed previously, through the intermediary institution DARE. It is perhaps ironic that in this year, when the Opera North narrative around its Ring cycle promoted the 'filmic' experience of being able to 'walk in off the street' with no prior knowledge or preparation,⁷⁶⁴ the company engaged in the greatest degree of public academic involvement during its cycle.

In 2014, Opera North was significantly less involved in audience preparation than in previous years. Despite this, it was notable that *Götterdämmerung* was advertised as part of the Yorkshire Festival, which took place around the *Tour de France*. In contrast to the 'mainly British cast' of *Das Rheingold* in 2011, *Götterdämmerung* boasted a 'wealth of international talent'⁷⁶⁵ for 'visitors to Yorkshire' to enjoy.⁷⁶⁶ While there was a slight shift in marketing focus from a home audience to an audience of visitors, the inclusion of *The Ring's* epic finale into this festival for Yorkshire, itself a celebration of the county's hosting the opening of the *Tour de France*, seems to extend the civic pride engendered in Ring audiences since *Das Rheingold* in 2011.

4.5 History of the Ring cycle in Leeds

4.5.1 Introduction

In analysing the cultural work done by Opera North relatively recently in mediating the Ring operas, it is important to acknowledge that the company owes its existence, in part to another Ring cycle that toured to Leeds in 1975 and '76. However, this was not the first professional fully staged Ring cycle to appear in the city, as I will outline. McKechnie has mentioned Opera North's general ambivalence to the detail of its history;⁷⁶⁷ a company that exists for the creation of art, it is bound to face forward into the future rather than being overtly reflective of its past. I

⁷⁶⁴ Farnes on 'Siegfried', *Radio 3 Live in Concert*; John Tomlinson speaking on ON, *Siegfried: The forging of a hero (teaser trailer)*.

⁷⁶⁵ Yorkshire Festival, 'Götterdämmerung/ Twilight of the Gods, Opera North', *Yorkshire Festival (2014)* <<http://festival.yorkshire.com/events/g%C3%B6tterd%C3%A4mmerungtwilight-of-the-gods>> [accessed 31 May 2014] (para. 4 of 4).

⁷⁶⁶ ON, 'Götterdämmerung to be part of Yorkshire Festival 2014', *ON*, 29 January 2014, <<http://www.operanorth.co.uk/news/gotterdammerung-to-be-part-of-yorkshire-festival-2014--3>> [accessed 31 May 2014] (para.5 of 6).

⁷⁶⁷ McKechnie, 'Opera North: Knitting together history from ephemera' and *Opera North*, pp.5-6.

have witnessed this when interviewing company members, who are often loathe to talk about anything that has passed, even relatively recently (unless it attained much kudos and is likely to be revived in the future) and are far more inclined to project the artistic aims and outcomes of future work. Thus it is less likely still that Opera North might prioritise a narrative regarding the previous Ring cycles of other companies, particularly when such a revelation would contradict the narrative communicated around *Das Rheingold* of a first for the region. Nevertheless, the ENO cycle of the 1970s that toured to Leeds is of importance to various audience members who have reminisced to me that they were present for this event over thirty years ago.

1978 is a year of paramount importance in the history of Opera North, as the year when the company was established as ‘English National Opera North’, a branch of ENO based permanently in Leeds.⁷⁶⁸ Also in 1978, DiGaetani’s anthology *Penetrating Wagner’s Ring* was published with the editor’s preface beginning thus:

We are living during a Wagner Renaissance. The greatest and most exciting Rings are being staged now. One expects Ring cycles in Bayreuth, Berlin, Munich, London, and New York; yet within the last ten years Chicago, San Francisco, Seattle, Tokyo, Milan and Kassel have all staged complete Rings.⁷⁶⁹

Here DiGaetani affords us a glimpse of the socio-geography of the operatic landscape of that time. He presumes where we might ‘expect’ (in 1978, two years after the Bayreuth centenary for which many Rings were forged) to find a fully staged and complete Ring cycle. We are introduced to the wider geographical spread of this artefact, imbued as it is with an immense degree of cultural value whilst, in post-war years, being a bitter reminder of early ideologies of German nationalism. While DiGaetani presents us with an expanding map of where we might access *The Ring*, his list does not provide a comprehensive picture of those cities that had, by then, experienced a Ring cycle, particularly if we take into account the touring activities of opera companies at that time. This considered, this particular ‘Wagner Renaissance’ stretched out further still than one might have expected.

The history of *The Ring* in Leeds is surprisingly rich, and relevant to the activities of Opera North. Recent audience members in Leeds have revealed memories of Ring cycle attendance stretching back to the 1970s, which they hold to be particularly important to their own personal histories of opera reception and to their experience of the ON Ring. The following section aims to put Opera North’s Ring cycle productions into this local, historical context.

⁷⁶⁸ Full independence was achieved in 1981, see Gilbert, pp.310-12.

⁷⁶⁹ DiGaetani, ‘Preface’, in *Penetrating Wagner’s Ring*, ed. by DiGaetani, pp.9-17 (p.9).

4.5.2 1911: The Denhof Opera Company

Unmentioned by DiGaetani in his quoted introduction, Leeds had experienced the Ring cycle productions of two companies before the formation of ENON in 1978. The first of these was a touring production, not from London, but from Edinburgh. Ernst Denhof, an Austrian-born musician and teacher, formed a company in 1910, employing singers who had performed *The Ring* at Covent Garden, members of the Scottish Orchestra and some players from the Covent Garden orchestra, and German conductor Michael Balling ‘who, on the recommendation of Dr Richter, had conducted at the last Bayreuth Festival’ (1909).⁷⁷⁰ According to *The Times* the set-up of this project was remarkable for the following reasons:

It is due neither to the action of any organised body nor to the whim of a music-loving millionaire, but is entirely the outcome of the energy and enthusiasm of one man, Mr. Ernst Denhof, a local musician, whose first venture into the ordinarily thorny paths of operatic speculation this is. Unsupported by any guarantee, and unaided (or unhindered) by a committee, he has worked out all the details of the scheme himself.⁷⁷¹

This unlikely production in Edinburgh, organised by one individual of no great means was ultimately, according to *The Times*, ‘an artistic triumph’ and ‘a marvel of finished beauty’ with a crowded theatre in Edinburgh and high hopes that it would tour widely.⁷⁷² In an article entitled ‘Hope for Provincial Opera’, the *Nation* revealed its own impatience with the establishment that ‘we might have waited to doomsday’ before a full-scale Ring production.⁷⁷³ The article then echoed the sentiment expressed in *The Times*, offering ‘the highest praise’ for the performances, ‘which frequently had a more complete unity than that Covent Garden has given us in English during the last two or three years’.⁷⁷⁴ Adopting a tone of superiority over general regional opera productions, *The Times* judged Denhof’s to be ‘no mere “provincial” production, but a rendering of sustained excellence in every part’.⁷⁷⁵ It is perhaps unsurprising that these two articles were chosen to be reprinted in the 1911 programme for Leeds Grand Theatre.

Denhof brought his Ring cycle, performed in English, to the Leeds Grand Theatre in March 1911, boasting in the programme that ‘the Ring performances will be the first in their

⁷⁷⁰ [Anon.], ‘*The Ring* in Edinburgh’, *The Times*, 8 March 1910, reprinted in programme notes for *Leeds Grand Theatre, Herr Ernst Denhof’s Operatic Festival Performance: The Ring of the Nibelung*, 15 March 1911, p.8. Hans Richter had much involvement in the planning and set-up of the Bayreuth festival theatre and the first Ring cycle production. According to the programme, Balling presided over an orchestra of eighty-two, a number beyond capacity for the pit of the Leeds Grand Theatre, and must have included the use of audience boxes.

⁷⁷¹ [Anon.], ‘*The Ring* in Edinburgh’.

⁷⁷² Ibid.

⁷⁷³ [Anon.], ‘Hope for Provincial Opera’.

⁷⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁷⁵ [Anon.], ‘*The Ring* in Edinburgh’.

entirety in England outside of Covent Garden'.⁷⁷⁶ This Ring cycle ran over a week, with *The Rhinegold* scheduled for Tuesday 28 March, *The Valkyrie* on Wednesday 29, *Siegfried* on Thursday 30 March (having been moved forward from the Friday) ending with *The Twilight of the Gods* on Saturday 1 April. Denhof returned to Leeds in the 1912/13 season with another Ring cycle, this time conducted by Thomas Beecham.⁷⁷⁷ Unfortunately, with heavy losses after another tour in 1913, the financial strain was too much for Denhof, and his company was taken over by Beecham, but not before a great stride had been taken in the quality of large-scale opera productions outside of London, and hope had been raised for the development of such provision in the future. However, for Leeds, there would be a wait of two generations, through two world wars and a further thirty years, for the offering of another Ring in its entirety.

4.5.3 1975 and '76: ENO tours – picnic reception and touring strain

The ENO tour of 1975 brought *The Ring*, again in English translation, from the London Coliseum to the Leeds Grand Theatre under the baton of Sir Charles Groves. This production was then revived and returned to the Grand the following year under the musical direction of Nicholas Braithwaite, the cycle being again played out over the course of a week.⁷⁷⁸ The ENO orchestra was somewhat smaller than Wagner might have preferred, numbering sixty-five in total, and notably, although horns and Wagner tubas were plentiful, the orchestra included only two harps, one timpanist and two percussionists.⁷⁷⁹ At the Coliseum, ENO had originally offered the component music dramas individually and out of sequence: *The Valkyrie* premiered on 29 January 1970, followed by *Twilight of the Gods* a year later to the day, with *The Rhinegold* playing from 1 March 1972 and finally *Siegfried* from 8 February 1973. Later in that year the company's collated Ring cycle was performed, in sequence, from 31 July to 4 August. This happened fortuitously in advance of what would otherwise have been a competing

⁷⁷⁶ [Anon.], programme notes for *Leeds Grand Theatre, Herr Ernst Denhof's Operatic Festival Performances: The Ring of the Nibelung*, 15 March 1911, p.10.

⁷⁷⁷ There is a discrepancy between sources as to whether the year of the return was 1912 or 1913. Grove online cites 1912. Harold Rosenthal, 'Denhof Opera Company', *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, 2nd ed. (2001) <<http://0-www.oxfordmusiconline.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/subscriber/article/grove/music/O005261>> [accessed 12 October 2012] information also replicated in the *Oxford Dictionary of Music Online*. The year 1913 is given by Geoffrey Mogridge, 'Opera: The first Ring cycle in the provinces', *Discovering Leeds, Leeds Classical Music* (2003)

<http://www.leodis.net/discovery/discovery.asp?pageno=&page=20031110_356182278&topic=20031110_154781521&subsection=20031110_679348171> (para. 8 of 13) and 'Das Rheingold, Opera North, 18 June 2011', *Opera Britannia*, 23 June 2011, <http://www.opera-britannia.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=529:das-rheingold-opera-north-18th-june-2011&catid=8:opera-reviews&Itemid=16> [accessed 21 May 2012] (para. 2 of 12).

⁷⁷⁸ The ENO Ring revival of 1976 was performed in Leeds Grand Theatre on the following evenings: *The Rhinegold* on Monday 12 April 1976, *The Valkyrie* on Tuesday 13 April, *Siegfried* on Thursday 15 April, and *Twilight of the Gods* on Saturday 17 April.

⁷⁷⁹ [Anon.], programme notes for *Leeds Grand Theatre & Opera House, English National Opera present The Ring of the Nibelung*, April 1976, p.17.

production in Covent Garden, which, due to the sudden departure of imminent artistic director Peter Hall and ensuing personnel issues and contract negotiations, was delayed.⁷⁸⁰ Despite the economic climate of huge inflation during the mid-70s, inept financial control at ENO, habitual over-spends on sets, increasing budget deficits, a climate of industrial action in the theatre as well as elsewhere, and uncertainty over the company's future, the 1973 Ring cycle received extremely positive reviews. In *Opera for Everybody*, Susie Gilbert documents the thoughts of reporter Bryan Magee: 'With its *Ring* and other productions reaching a standard of which no opera house in the world would feel ashamed, the company, [Magee] declared, had come of age.'⁷⁸¹ Gilbert also reports the fascination of *The Times*'s William Mann with Ralph Koltai's sets,⁷⁸² and the opinion of the *Guardian*'s Philip Hope-Wallace that Norman Bailey 'crowned a noble interpretation with a warmth of voice and a glow of feeling recalling the greatest Wotans'.⁷⁸³ Magee's 'almost wordless [...] admiration' was for Rita Hunter as Brünnhilde and Alberto Remedios as Siegfried⁷⁸⁴ (replaced by Jon Weaver by the time of the 1976 tour to Leeds) while in the *Observer*, Peter Heyworth mentioned Emile Belcourt as Loge and Derek Hammond Stroud as Alberich (replaced by Malcolm Rivers in Leeds in 1976) and praised the integrity and cohesion of the production:

A clear-minded dramatic intelligence illuminates every crevice of this conversational saga and the characters in it are real, not merely because they are well thought-out and performed, but because they are part of an ensemble in which each is inextricably implicated in the actions of others, as are the themes in Wagner's score.⁷⁸⁵

With a tour inevitably in the pipeline, Desmond Shawe-Taylor (in *The Sunday Times*) was 'delighted that the provinces were going to have the opportunity to see *The Ring*'.⁷⁸⁶ Acknowledging the post-war tensions, whereby the provinces had experienced such a long absence of a Ring cycle, Shawe-Taylor held particular esteem for the performance of tenor Alberto Remedios as Siegfried, who was, he said, 'so overflowing with good humour and good nature as to banish all notion of the bullying proto-Nazi superman'.⁷⁸⁷

The excitement of a Ring tour to the north, after so long a drought, was acknowledged in the programme, and the Leeds audience appear to have appreciated the special quality of event in its entirety. In 1977, ENO also published a souvenir booklet, *English National Opera: The*

⁷⁸⁰ ROH's initial instalment of *Das Rheingold* did not premiere until 30 September 1974, and the full cycle emerged at the start of the 1976-77 season.

⁷⁸¹ Gilbert, p.254-5 (referring to Bryan Magee in *Music and Musicians*, May 1973).

⁷⁸² Gilbert, p.256 (referring to William Mann in *The Times* 1 August 1973 and 7 August 1973).

⁷⁸³ Philip Hope-Wallace in *Guardian*, 6 August 1973, quoted in Gilbert, p.257.

⁷⁸⁴ Gilbert, p.254.

⁷⁸⁵ Peter Heyworth in *Observer*, 5 March 1972, quoted in Gilbert, p.242.

⁷⁸⁶ Gilbert, p.237 (referring to Desmond Shawe-Taylor in *The Sunday Times*, 31 January 1971).

⁷⁸⁷ Desmond Shawe-Taylor in *The Sunday Times*, 31 January 1971, quoted in Gilbert, p.237.

opening seasons,⁷⁸⁸ in which Richard Phillips, Senior Arts and Music Officer for the Yorkshire Arts Association, writes of the company's touring activity in the north:

For those lucky enough to get seats for *The Ring* in Leeds in April 1975, there was indeed a holiday atmosphere. Memories of heated scenes at the box office the day when booking opened remind us that the cycle could have been sold out four times on that date alone. It's strange to relate that exactly a year later, the cycle did not play to full houses – providing yet another example for those engaged in 'selling' the arts that the marketing of our product does differ from selling, well, even Rhine wine!

That was what our party used to wash down sumptuous picnics in the caravette parked on nearby waste land in the long intervals as we discussed the heroes and heroines of the evening.⁷⁸⁹

Local journalist, Geoffrey Mogridge, who attended the 1976 performances at the Grand, recalls similarly atmospheric memories:

The long intervals during ENO's epic Wagner performances imparted something of the Glyndebourne Festival atmosphere. Many patrons in evening dress, open Danish sandwiches and chicken salads were on sale in the theatre bars while patrons occupying boxes popped champagne corks and tucked into picnic hampers full of delicacies.⁷⁹⁰

However, extensive touring was financially draining for ENO which usually operated a 'split company', simultaneously running two tours. The box office did particularly badly in the first week of the 1975 tour in Newcastle. This failure served to highlight the huge expense of touring (and touring twice at the same time) for audiences which varied considerably in number. The argument put forward to the Arts Council by Managing Director Lord Harewood was that a regional base in the north would be of far greater benefit to the company and the audience. In his introduction to *The opening seasons* booklet, he uses *The Ring* to make his point:

We tour to a pattern set us annually by the Arts Council [...] But here I find our line risks breaking, like the one the Norns work on so incompletely (but so musically) in *Twilight of the Gods*.⁷⁹¹

⁷⁸⁸ 'The opening seasons' here referred to were 1974-75, when the company that had been Sadler's Wells Opera was renamed and rebranded, and the following year, 1975-76.

⁷⁸⁹ Richard Philips, 'Touring to the North', in *English National Opera: The opening seasons*, ed. by Nicholas John (London: ENO, 1977), p.33.

⁷⁹⁰ Mogridge, 'Towards a National Opera Company for the North, 1970s' (para. 8 of 10).

⁷⁹¹ Lord Harewood, 'Introduction by Lord Harewood', in *English National Opera: The opening seasons*, ed. by John, pp.2-6 (p.4).

Harewood outlines ENO's split company pattern, mentioning castigation from regional critics and a 'frustrated and unfulfilled' company. He continues:

Personally, I should like to see a new pattern, with our big London productions – *The Ring*, *Salome*, *Mastersingers*, *War and Peace*, *Don Carlos*, *Bassarids* – going out in as near a Coliseum standard as we can manage [...] What Richard Phillips calls the Leeds scheme could do the trick – initially, a small new company (principals, chorus, orchestra, stage staff, conductors etc., assisted by principals from London), based in the North and touring some 10 or 12 operas in the year, perhaps two or three at a time, starting each short touring period from the same designated headquarters (Leeds is suggested), but going to different towns, smaller as well as larger, on each foray.⁷⁹²

Ring reception in Leeds was indeed favourable, and support for the ENO-proposed 'Leeds scheme' was consequently vocal. When the proposal for an ENO Yorkshire base was first announced in December 1975, *Yorkshire Post* critic Ernest Bradbury was in firm support, happily prophesising the inevitability of the move, 'especially' he explained, 'remembering the triumphant *Ring* tour of last Spring'.⁷⁹³ With these words we are reminded of the 'pinnacle' quality that a Ring cycle brings to a company's existence, as mentioned earlier in reference to the Opera North *Ring*.⁷⁹⁴ Here *The Ring* was used as one large justification for 'the Leeds scheme'. In this sentiment, Bradbury was certainly not alone. Richard Phillips was adamant in his demands and promises, restating in his account the absolute 'need' for a northern opera company, a 'top priority' trumped only by the matter of addressing the slumping national economy. Referring in part to the drop in sales from the 1975 to the 1976 Ring tours (having justified this with the public assumption that tickets would be impossible to obtain) he writes:

If it [...] comes as a surprise that when we do get opera in the North, not every seat is filled, it should be reiterated as an article of faith that what we need is a company to come and live in our region. Then we'll promise a success story like Scottish Opera. Before that company was launched there was no overwhelming evidence from the box office figures that such a dream would work. So, once this country's economic troubles are sorted out, a top priority must be the implementation of the English National Opera – Leeds scheme. Strangely enough there are now more signs than ever that the full value to the North of such a scheme is now recognised.⁷⁹⁵

⁷⁹² Ibid., p.6.

⁷⁹³ Ernest Bradbury in *Yorkshire Post*, 19 December 1975, quoted in Gilbert, p.287. (Gilbert dates this as 19 December 1974 in a footnote on p.631, but the text indicates 1975.)

⁷⁹⁴ Gilbert, pp.255-57; McKechnie, *Opera North*, p.333.

⁷⁹⁵ *English National Opera: The opening seasons*, p.33.

The realisation of these ambitions would come to fruition just two years after the 1976 Ring tour, with the establishment of ENON, based at the Grand Theatre, Leeds. It was the critical success of the company's most ambitious operatic venture, the advent of a Ring cycle, viewed by the company as its 'corporate achievement',⁷⁹⁶ and by critics as its 'coming of age',⁷⁹⁷ that cemented the newly named English National Opera in the nation's consciousness as a serious competitor to The Royal Opera. Ironically, it was the combination of artistic success and financial (and emotional) strain on tour that provided the impetus for the idea of a new branch of the company, to be based permanently in the north. The idealism and drive of Lord Harewood and ENO, and the hunger and enthusiasm of local audiences seemed to gain an unlikely triumph over the national economic downturn. But, as Harewood stated, "Now" is never the ideal time to put such a scheme into operation, but any cook will tell you that you cannot go on preparing for ever and a *soufflé* can only rise once.⁷⁹⁸

4.5.4 Living memories and direct lineage

Despite the surprisingly rich history of Ring cycle productions in Leeds, the narrative that was conveyed by Opera North in 2011 was one of this Ring cycle as a virgin experience for Leeds. Given the parental link between ENO and Opera North, the assumption can be made that the latter company was in fact aware of the previous Leeds Ring cycle, although the remembrance of Denhof's tours, a century ago, seems less likely.⁷⁹⁹ Local reviewer Geoffrey Mogridge testifies that ENO's 1975-76 Ring tours are, in fact, in living memory, in a review of Opera North's *Das Rheingold* on the website 'Opera Britannia'. Mogridge outlines a potted history of the Denhof tours and his own memories of the ENO production before giving a detailed (favourable) review of Opera North's 2011 *Das Rheingold*. He reminisces:

In 1975 and again in 1976, English National Opera toured a scaled-down version of their acclaimed *Ring Cycle* (also of course in English) to Leeds Grand. Sadly, this writer's hair has turned grey in the intervening thirty-five years from then until now. But I still remember the two giants - a young John Tomlinson as Fafner - bestriding the stage with what appeared to be upturned coal scuttles on their heads.⁸⁰⁰

⁷⁹⁶ Gilbert, p.257, referring to John Blatchley interviewed by David Fingleton, *Contemporary Review*, July 1973.

⁷⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.255.

⁷⁹⁸ *English National Opera: The opening seasons*, p.6.

⁷⁹⁹ My casual interactions with ON Head of Music Martin Pickard around March 2011 indicated that the Denhof Ring was not at the forefront of the company's collective consciousness.

⁸⁰⁰ Mogridge, 'Das Rheingold, Opera North, 18 June 2011' (para. 2 of 12).

Mogridge, a retired concert administrator, writes reviews such as this, occasionally nationally, but usually within the framework of local journalism.⁸⁰¹ This personal account can be read as a digitised version of the type of information that might otherwise be gained by an ethnographer from an ‘oral history’; it is emotionally important, providing a reported lineage of experience. It is a direct record that the ENO Ring tour to Leeds is in living memory, and provides a personal remembrance of opera in Leeds before Opera North. It is a generational passing of information that might traditionally happen (and may well be happening) in a more private, familial setting, from parent to child or grandchild, prior to or after a performance now. Here Mogridge widens the sphere of this generational information-passing, and via the internet puts it into the public domain, so that as a reader I imagine, in another reality, that I might be sitting at this new performance beside my parent or grandparent telling me of the last great Wagnerian event in our shared city, at a time before I was there. Hence my own reception of the contemporary *Rheingold* becomes part of a greater local narrative, even beyond its own Ring cycle, and takes on the significance of a history of receptions in this city that crosses generations.

This reading of Opera North’s Ring cycle as part of a historical lineage of Ring cycle experiences in Leeds is fed by current audience members who have revealed to me their presence at the ENO Ring productions of the 1970s. In addition to the Mogridge’s accounts, a delegate at the University of Leeds conference, *Wagner’s Impact on His World and Ours*, and his partner, both of whom I met by chance prior to a performance of *Siegfried*, were keen to outline the history of their own Ring opera attendance in Yorkshire and the North East since the 1970s. Woven into this impromptu oral history were accounts of house-moving and the arrival of their children, indicating that these points of Wagner reception were, for them, integral events within the context and frameworks of their lives. A significant number of questionnaire respondents also indicated a presence at the ENO cycle of the 1970s, and people were often keen to list their varied experiences of Ring operas. Notably the Scottish Opera production of the Ring cycle touring to the Lowry theatre, Salford, in 2003 was frequently mentioned by respondents in Leeds and in Salford.

⁸⁰¹ Mogridge also authored the opera pages on the local history website, *Leodis.net*, managed by Leeds Library and Information Service, and also loaned me a personal copy of his 1976 ENO Ring cycle programme, via the Leeds Central Library ‘Local and Family History’ department. He has written opera and concert reviews for *Ilkley Gazette*, *Airedale and Wharfedale Observer*, *Telegraph and Argus*, *Opera Magazine* and worked for Leeds International Concert Season amongst other organisations. He has attended concerts at LTH since 1966 and operas at the Grand Theatre for 50 years. His biographical details can be found here: Geoffrey Mogridge, ‘Contact us’, *Discovering Leeds, Leeds Classical Music* (2003)

<http://www.leodis.net/discovery/discovery.asp?page=&page=20031110_356182278&topic=2003128_786541164> [accessed 21 May 2012].

Testimony has been given here that both historical knowledge and living memories of Ring performances in the region exist, and that this is one context in which some audience members have received Opera North's productions. In the following section I look at the home venue for the Opera North *Ring*, Leeds Town Hall, the ways in which the history of this building resonates with some of Wagner's ideals for his Ring, and the contextual and intertextual reception experience that this resonance might create.

4.6 *Kunstreligion*, Wagner, the festival, and Leeds Town Hall

4.6.1 Introduction: aesthetics of Leeds Town Hall

It is significant that Opera North's 'fully staged concert' Ring cycle⁸⁰² was played out on the concert stage of a great monument to civic pride, Leeds Town Hall. From my own perspective, before Opera North's second performance of *Das Rheingold* on Friday 1 July 2011, I had not attended a performance event in this venue, so the majesty of what was once referred to as 'this 'municipal palace',⁸⁰³ swarming with excited audience members in waiting became bound with my experience of the work itself. My reception of *Das Rheingold* that evening was overwhelming (and indeed, this kind of description has been given by many in relation to the Ring operas).⁸⁰⁴ Musically, the degree of resonance in Leeds Town Hall's central space, the Victoria Hall, was perfectly complementary to Wagner's repertoire itself: dynamic levels and tempi had been refined by Farnes accordingly. The Town Hall itself was, in many ways, a contributory factor to the scale of this felt experience.⁸⁰⁵ This section will assess the possibility of intertextual meaning created by the developing relationship between the work and this historic venue. My aim has been to investigate the resonance of history, as experienced by audience members in this space, and the consequently nuanced way in which this building hosted this operatic venture.

⁸⁰² Mumford on 'Wagner's *Die Walküre*', *Radio 3 Live in Concert*.

⁸⁰³ Derek Linstrum, 'Broderick, Cuthbert', *Grove Art Online, Oxford Art Online*, <http://0-www.oxfordartonline.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/subscriber/article/grove/art/T011453?q=brodrick%2C+cuthbert&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1#firstthit> [accessed 28 November 2012].

⁸⁰⁴ At ON's 'Siegfried: Inside Opera Special' talk event on 13 July 2013, both Tanner and D'Ancona described their initial Ring cycle experiences as 'overwhelming'. Of the audience questionnaires I distributed at performances of *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre* and *Siegfried* in Leeds and in Salford, a vast number of respondents described their evening's experience as 'overwhelming'. Other recurring descriptions of the performance included 'awesome/awe-inspiring' and 'powerful'. There was a recurrence of words describing a very thorough engagement with the work such as 'absorbing', 'engrossing', etc., and various size-related adjectives such as 'momentous', 'massive', 'immense' and 'monumental'.

⁸⁰⁵ Leeds Town Hall has been described as 'the epitome of Northern civic bombast' having 'a grandeur that helps sustain the city's sense of its own importance'. [Anon.], 'Ten Town Halls to Visit', *Daily Telegraph*, 29 November 2008, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/3534951/Ten-town-halls-to-visit.html>> [accessed 21 August 2013] (para. 4 of 10).

In the BBC Radio 3 broadcast prior to *Die Walküre*, Farnes commented:

Leeds Town Hall is a spectacularly good venue for, not only this composer but also this cycle of work. I think Wagner works better in here than almost any other composer. Also I think if you're actually in this building looking at the architecture, I mean it's almost contemporary with the writing of *The Ring* anyway. It has that slightly sort of Valhalla visual experience to it.⁸⁰⁶

Leeds Town Hall is an imposing, mid-nineteenth century building in the classical style. Its towering columns, clock tower with dome and expansive entrance guarded by four stone lions were built as a competitive display of regional success in a time of 'boom', reflecting the local economic upturn of the industrial revolution at its peak. No less impressive is the interior, incorporating the main, multi-purpose central space and concert venue, the Victoria Hall, majestically named after the Queen's opening visit of 1858, and complete with a powerful and visually ornate concert organ. Marble statues of Queen Victoria, Prince Albert and contemporary social activists of the region grace the opening vestibule while, in the interior of the Victoria Hall, reminders of the transcendent ideology of the nineteenth century mingle with the grounded humility of the working-class movement upon whose labour this display of wealth and industry was founded. Ornate plaster inscriptions, highlighted in gold, placed in elevated archways on all sides of the hall offer uplifting and improving aphorisms, biblical and secular:

In union is strength;
 Honesty the best policy;
 Auspicious Melioris Aevi (an omen of a better age);
 Trial by jury;
 Labour omnia vincit (Labour conquers all things);
 Forward;
 Goodwill towards men;
 Magna Carta;
 Deo, Regi, Patriae (God, King and Country);
 Industry overcomes all things;
 God in the highest;
 Weave truth with trust;
 Virtue the only nobility;
 Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it;
 Except the Lord keepeth the city, the watchman waketh but in vain.

⁸⁰⁶ Farnes on 'Wagner's *Die Walküre*', *Radio 3 Live in Concert*.

From a star-spangled, painted night sky above the concert organ (reminiscent of Karl Friedrich Schinkel's famous 1815 stage set for Mozart's *Magic Flute*)⁸⁰⁷ statues of Greek goddesses gaze down, inviting us to raise our eyes and our souls to their celestial heights.

4.6.2 Wagner's *Kunstreligion* and nineteenth-century festival cultures

Central to *The Ring*, a tale of Gods and humanity, power, redemption and love, is the lofty creative concept of *Kunstreligion*. In functioning architecturally and in other ways as a secular cathedral (as I will outline shortly) Leeds Town Hall might also be subject to the application of such a term, were there to be an English equivalent. The concept of *Kunstreligion*, as mentioned previously, is outlined by Glenn Stanley in 'Parsifal, Redemption and *Kunstreligion*'.⁸⁰⁸ Stanley describes the 'slippery term – variously used to describe art in the service of religion, replacing religion as an outlet or devotion and contemplation, or simply appropriating religious themes'.⁸⁰⁹ In the late eighteenth century, religion (namely Lutheran Protestantism) was aligned with German-ness in the face of imported, secular Enlightenment ideals; such religion was in turn to be saved and its nationalism compounded by the experience of German art. This was the context in which Wagner's ideology developed, opposed as it was (at times) to organised religion.⁸¹⁰ While the *Kunstreligion* concept is attributed to Hegel (originally applied to the function of art in ancient Greek society)⁸¹¹ Deathridge and Dahlhaus argue that in Wagner, religion was no longer manifested in art, but art itself as a 'transcendent' and altering experience occupied the role formerly played by religion.⁸¹² In 'Religion und Kunst' (1880) Wagner postulated, 'Where religion becomes artificial it is reserved for art to save the spirit of religion by recognizing the figurative value of the mythic symbols [...] and revealing their deep and hidden truth through an ideal presentation.'⁸¹³ Through his late works Wagner appointed himself to this mission of redemption; *The Ring* particularly is described by Dahlhaus as 'the downfall of a world of law and force, and the dawn of a utopian age',⁸¹⁴ ruled by the unification of humanity, embodied in an all-encompassing love that might stem from something divine (although Magee argues that this might be 'a religion of the purely human', whereby humanity

⁸⁰⁷ Karl Friedrich Schinkel, *Stage set for Mozart's Magic Flute*, 1815, gouache, 463 x 616mm, Staatliche Museen, Berlin.

⁸⁰⁸ *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, pp.151-75.

⁸⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p.309.

⁸¹⁰ Influenced by Ludwig Feuerbach, Wagner accused sacred art of 'modern Christian dulness' [sic.], undermining the social purpose of true German art. Richard Wagner, 'Art and Revolution', *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, tr. and ed. William Ashton Ellis, Vol.1, p.44 <<http://users.belgacom.net/wagnerlibrary/prose/wagartrev.htm>> [accessed 21 August 2013].

⁸¹¹ See *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, p.154, and Deathridge and Dahlhaus, p.95.

⁸¹² Deathridge and Dahlhaus, p.95.

⁸¹³ Richard Wagner, 'Religion und Kunst', in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, trans. by William Ashton Ellis, 8 vols (NY: Broude Brothers, 1966), VI, pp.213, 223-24, quoted in *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, p.156.

⁸¹⁴ Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*, p.81.

is elevated to the position of the divine⁸¹⁵). To extend the argument of Nietzsche, as previously discussed,⁸¹⁶ the musical and total mechanics of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* by which this allegory is mediated are designed to engender such emotional response in the audience as might be representative of the fullness of the emotion portrayed on stage, and that within the redemptive story. In the argument put forth by Deathridge and Dahlhaus of the audience as ‘congregation’, servile to and complicit in the work,⁸¹⁷ the Ring cycle was designed as a religious experience of its own kind with Bayreuth as its grand cathedral (a factor that explains, on one level, the devotion and evangelism of Wagnerites since its time). Stanley triangulates the elements of Wagner’s cultural reform:

By the 1880s, Wagner’s thought comprised an intellectual synthesis that fused a Christian-based idea of *Kunstreligion* and a contemporary understanding of the functions of the theatre in culture and society of ancient Greece with the modern cause of German nationalism.⁸¹⁸

While these components came to be crystallised in *Parsifal*, they were already present in *The Ring* (although Stanley argues that the cycle was somewhat ‘Christianised’ by commentators after the event⁸¹⁹). Wagner’s festival concept for *The Ring* was based on a Romanticised model of ancient Greece, whereby ‘both the content and the occasion of performance had religious significance’.⁸²⁰ Despite this, its more tangible predecessor was the German music festival tradition, which according to Stanley, ‘provided a more immediate and successful example of *Kunstreligion* in practice than did the model of ancient Greece’, since such German festivals had been a ‘forum for the exercise of cultural nationalism and religious aesthetics’ with great German oratorios as featured works.⁸²¹ As well as the element of direct biblical material present as text, choral societies (the *raison d’être* for the German music festivals) were the embodiment

⁸¹⁵ See *Penetrating Wagner’s Ring*, pp.70-71.

⁸¹⁶ Nietzsche was a great disciple of Wagner during the writing of *The Birth of Tragedy* (1868), but by the time of *The Case of Wagner* (1888), the composer is said to embody a disease, and the *Gesamtkunstwerk* a means of transmission, whereby all facility of choice is removed. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. by R. Geuss and R. Speirs, trans. by Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: CUP, 1999);

Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*.

⁸¹⁷ Deathridge and Dahlhaus, p.95.

⁸¹⁸ *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, p.154.

⁸¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.156. Wagner’s original polemic, through his prose and music dramas, was that of redemption through the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, with the exposition and annihilation of all societal ills, and the birth of a new order. Specific calls were made (particularly in the final section of ‘Das Judentum in der Musik’) for Jews to relinquish their Judaism, but ultimately, as Dieter Borchmeyer argues, this ‘revolutionary process of self-annihilation and redemption’ had to apply to all of humankind ‘in consequence of our alienation from our true humanity’ (*The Wagner Handbook*, p.173). However, while the ‘self-annihilation and redemption’ offered to us in *Götterdämmerung* is mediated by the far-removed Gods of Pagan myth, *Parsifal* gives an explicitly Christian judgment on what this might mean. In any case, it could be argued that this very metaphor of death and transcendence is most familiar within the context of the Christian story, and thus more palatable for Christian society than it might be for its others.

⁸²⁰ *Penetrating Wagner’s Ring*, p.70.

⁸²¹ *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, p.154.

of the *Kunstreligion* ideal with collective national, religious singing, and their members unified, visible and representative in public life.⁸²²

Such festivals and choral performances as have just been described were not only the preserve of Germany, during the nineteenth century. The music festival in England was a much older tradition, as outlined by Frank Musgrove, with four-day festivals (including, in large part, the music of Handel) having developed in the eighteenth century in a few select cathedral cities.⁸²³ The nineteenth century saw the transition and expansion of such events from the cathedrals to the newly industrialised towns, with the secular grandeur of the new English town halls (such as Birmingham and Leeds) as concert venues.⁸²⁴ Musgrove points to ‘the northern industrial city with its new town hall’ as the festival’s ‘apparent home’.⁸²⁵ The festivals’ function consequently shifted from the religious to the civic. The industrial revolution had affected mass migration and population rise in the towns and cities and the creation of a new, urban ‘working class’ in addition to the rise in fortunes of middle-class industrialists. Owing in large part to a Victorian urge to control and moderate what were seen as social vices or the undesirable elements of working-class culture (mainly alcoholic consumption)⁸²⁶ there arose, nationwide, a mass of accessible, communal, musical activity, encompassing choral societies, brass bands, ‘people’s concerts’ and musical festivals.⁸²⁷ In particular the nineteenth-century musical festival, still mainly choral in essence, was seen as having the potential to cement relations between the classes, who might attend and participate together.⁸²⁸ Repertoire did not change altogether from the English festival’s prior sacred incarnation, and the staple diet of oratorios such as Handel’s *Messiah* (Handel being by far the favoured English national

⁸²² Ibid., p.155. See also Barbara Eichner’s chapter on German choral movements in *A History in Mighty Sounds: Musical constructions of German national identity 1848-1914* (Woodbridge, Boydell Press, 2012).

⁸²³ Frank Musgrove, ‘The Rise of a Northern Musical Élite’, *Northern History: A review of the history of the north of England and the borders*, 35 (1999), pp.50-76. Musgrove cites Hereford, Worcester and Gloucester; Norwich, and in the 1820s, York (p.72). Also see Pippa Drummond, *The Provincial Music Festival in England, 1784-1914* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

⁸²⁴ Rachel Milestone outlines how Birmingham Town Hall in particular was built as ‘a concert hall in disguise’ as a response to the problem of housing the Triennial Festival. Milestone, ‘*A New Impetus to the Love of Music*’, pp.65-66. This building then ‘set an architectural precedent for future gigantic town halls such as Leeds, making a purpose-built concert hall a prerequisite’ (p.244).

⁸²⁵ Musgrove, p.58. Musgrove generally contrasts the ‘North’ with the ‘South’, and by these broad brushstrokes includes the industrial Midlands in his ‘North’.

⁸²⁶ In 1844 Frederick Engels wrote of the working men in the English town: ‘Liquor is almost their only source of pleasure and all things conspire to make it accessible to them’. Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1892), quoted in *Music in the British Provinces, 1690-1914*, p.297.

⁸²⁷ See Russell, p.18.

⁸²⁸ ‘A competitive festival movement is responsible for much socialism, although of a very different kind from that conventionally associated with the word. A festival brings into pleasant contact people of all classes who, in the ordinary course of events, would probably not be on speaking terms.’ *School Music Review*, November 1909, quoted in Russell, p.20.

composer as well as originally German⁸²⁹) retained a link with the cathedral as well as a similarity with the German music festival.⁸³⁰ Indeed this music was seen as having moral efficacy in itself.⁸³¹ Similar moral statements were made about Leeds Town Hall, with a commentator from the *Leeds Mercury* in 1859 hoping that building itself might, throughout its long, cultural lifetime ‘silently reprove whatever is low and vulgar; [...] allure to all that is elevated and good; [...] draw up the aspirations of those who behold it to better things’ and ‘help mould the character of the people to strength, beauty and dignity’.⁸³² The move of the music festival away from the church did not signal a break with the aim for or promotion of moral improvement. The retention of the ideology of virtue in nineteenth-century civic music-making and concert-going was bound to the development of the town hall as concert venue because, as Nicholas Thistlethwaite concludes, ‘in architectural, cultural and social terms the Victorian town hall was a distinct phenomenon, wholly characteristic of the age and an uncompromising expression of some of its most cherished ideas’.⁸³³

This was essentially the story of the beginnings of concert life at Leeds Town Hall. While other provincial town halls such as Birmingham Town Hall had been constructed specifically as concert venues and as homes for their towns’ music festivals,⁸³⁴ Leeds Town Hall

⁸²⁹ *Grove Music* describes Handel as an ‘English composer of German birth’, having become a naturalised British subject in February 1727. Anthony Hicks, ‘Handel, George Frideric’, *Grove Music Online*, *Oxford Music Online*, OUP <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/subscriber/article/grove/music/40060pg6>> [accessed 7 December 2012].

⁸³⁰ Glenn Stanley lists featured works of the German festival as ‘oratorios by Handel, Haydn, and contemporary composers (Mendelssohn, Louis Spohr, Friedrich Schneider)’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, p.154. See also Chapter 3, ‘Music Festivals’ of Glenn Stanley, *The Oratorio in Prussia and Protestant Germany, 1812-1848* (doctoral thesis, Columbia University, 1988), pp.43-79.

⁸³¹ Sarah E. Taylor discusses nineteenth-century choral singing ‘with its perceived relationship to God and the church’, seen as a ‘means of achieving moral elevation’. *Music in the British Provinces*, p.225. George Hogarth, a critic of the time, praised the ‘spirit of industrious independence’ amongst the Yorkshire weaving communities: ‘They are religious in spite of the spread of infidelity; and they love their families and friends in spite of the attractions of the beershop. [...] The power to which these effects are, in a very considerable degree, to be ascribed [...] is SACRED MUSIC.’ George Hogarth, ‘A Village Oratorio’, in *Mainzer’s Musical Times*, 15 November 1834, pp.131-33, quoted in Russell, p.18. Even more specifically, advertising a local choral society performance in the Town Hall, the *Leeds Mercury* asserted that ‘“The Messiah” is the accepted musical embodiment of religious feeling in Yorkshire’. *Leeds Mercury*, 19 December 1883.

⁸³² *Leeds Mercury*, 6 December 1859.

⁸³³ Nicholas Thistlethwaite, *The Making of the Victorian Organ* (Cambridge: CUP, 1990), p.270.

⁸³⁴ In her doctoral thesis, Rachel Milestone asserts that Birmingham Town Hall was originally designed as a music hall, built in response to a request from the Musical Committee of the Birmingham Triennial Musical Festival to the Street Commissioners of Birmingham in 1827. Milestone, *A New Impetus to the Love of Music*, pp.65, 145. Another concurrent and similar venture, St George’s Hall in Liverpool had similar beginnings, according to its website: ‘the idea for the Hall came about in the early 1800s from Liverpool people who were concerned about the lack of a place for the triennial music festivals’. St George’s Hall, ‘About the Hall’, *St George’s Hall* [n.d.] <http://www.stgeorgesliverpool.co.uk/visit/about_the_hall/index.asp> [accessed 7 December 2012] (para.2 of 8). In both cases, the buildings were also put to civic and political uses.

was to be what Derek Linstrum termed ‘the first complete municipal palace’,⁸³⁵ incorporating all walks of civic life: corporate and judicial functions, local government offices, municipal businesses, public meetings, bazaars, banquets and social gatherings. Musical activity was most prevalent in the programme of events and the Town Hall’s central venue, the Victoria Hall, provided a home for music-making and concerts. According to Rachel Milestone, ‘although the Town Hall was not built for the holding of a musical festival, its erection enabled such an event to become a possibility’.⁸³⁶ It was decided that upon its opening in 1858 there should be a music festival to be combined with a high profile visit from Queen Victoria. This grand opening was designed to engage a national spirit in showcasing the new building and the town as well as the more regional civic pride.⁸³⁷ Indeed this sentiment was taken up by the local press, proudly proclaiming that Leeds had become, for a short time, ‘in a sense the seat of the Empire’ and calling for its inhabitants to act as ‘one of the most valuable constituents and bulwarks of the national strength and prosperity’.⁸³⁸

Notably the 1858 Leeds Music Festival opened with Mendelssohn’s *Elijah*, a sacred oratorio commensurate with the festival tradition, and also included a performance of that most favoured work, Handel’s *Messiah*,⁸³⁹ as well as a pastoral cantata, *The May Queen*, newly commissioned for the event. This work was written by the festival’s Yorkshire-born conductor (and professor of Music at Cambridge) William Sterndale Bennett. With a story incorporating May Day rituals and Robin Hood, and stylistic links with the work of Handel, the work had strong pastoral elements, invoking a national as much as regional spirit.⁸⁴⁰ Unusually for a festival there was also a final ‘People’s Concert’ to offer an affordable experience of the Town Hall to the working classes whose rates had, in part, paid for its construction.⁸⁴¹ Following this opening success, Leeds Town Hall eventually became home to the Leeds Triennial Festival, which, after a stalled beginning (owing to bickering within the political circles of local music-making) finally began in earnest in 1874.⁸⁴² In a move that seems to represent a national,

⁸³⁵ Linstrum, ‘Broderick, Cuthbert’.

⁸³⁶ Milestone, *A New Impetus to the Love of Music*, p.241.

⁸³⁷ Milestone summarises that ‘the opening of Town Hall was to be not only a celebration of the building but also of the town of Leeds and Britain as a whole’(ibid., p.171).

⁸³⁸ *Leeds Mercury*, 7 September 1858.

⁸³⁹ Milestone, *A New Impetus to the Love of Music*, pp.176, 179. Milestone also asserts that ‘for over a hundred years Handel’s *Messiah* had been the main work given at all provincial music festivals, and was normally the most highly attended concert’ (p.211). Mendelssohn too, having visited the British Isles extensively became a familiar favourite, as detailed by David Conway, “‘Short, Dark and Jewish-Looking’: Felix Mendelssohn in Britain’, in *The Jewish Yearbook 2009*, ed. by Stephen Massil (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2009) also online <http://www.academia.edu/170466/Short_Dark_and_Jewish-Looking_Felix_Mendelssohn_in_Britain> [accessed 7 December 2012] (para. 5 of 15). See also William Weber, *The Rise of Musical Classics in Eighteenth Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

⁸⁴⁰ Milestone, *A New Impetus to the Love of Music*, p.177.

⁸⁴¹ Ibid., p.182.

⁸⁴² Milestone thoroughly outlines the detail of the politics and disagreements surrounding the beginnings of the Leeds Triennial Festival (ibid., pp.199-215).

musical pride, commissions were issued to composers from all over England by the Festival Committee, vastly outnumbering more widely fashionable foreign commissions.⁸⁴³ Other musical events were prolific in the life of the Town Hall, as detailed by Milestone: ‘municipal’ events provided by the council being accessible and affordable or even free in order to encourage the attendance and taste for ‘improving’ music in the working people of the town; visiting musical and theatrical performances by groups hiring the hall, including operatic repertoire; performances by the numerous choral societies of Leeds and surrounding areas, including oratorios and operatic concerts; band and orchestral concerts; and fund-raising events organised by other charitable local bodies.

Here is a historical context that is both political and aesthetic for a twenty-first-century Ring cycle in Leeds Town Hall. This context is made visible in the architecture of the building, and made tangible in the various ways in which the Town Hall is still used today. In the following section we will see how the architecture of civic identity and social ideology connects to the experience of Opera North’s *Ring* by cultural lineage and by often subtle communications from the company to its audience, thus affording the possibility of another contextually informed reception experience.

4.6.3 Contemporary resonances

Perhaps it is not surprising that in Leeds Town Hall, a building whose birth and early life was contemporary with Wagner’s artistic output, we should find a degree of resonance with some of the ideas that influenced Wagner’s work. Both espouse a reimagined idea of ancient Greece. Wagner did this in what Deathridge and Dahlhaus term his ‘constant invocation of the theatre of Aeschylus and its rapt audiences’.⁸⁴⁴ This invocation included his argument for, and realisation of, the elevation of the combined art forms to their highest expressive potential (*Gesamtkunstwerk*); his use of myth to epitomise universal emotion and the human condition; his festival concept and design for the Bayreuth auditorium; and the *Kunstreligion* element he propagated for the role of his art within society. The classical Town Hall in Leeds invokes a broadly similar spirit of antiquity, surrounded by and filled with fashionable Corinthian columns and marble-esque statues. Exposed in the archway above the main entrance, for example, is a tableau of five female figures clothed in robes to appropriate the image of ancient Greece but representing the city of Leeds with all of its facets (see Figure 4).

⁸⁴³ Milestone details this phenomenon and its possible reasons (ibid., pp.204-11).

⁸⁴⁴ Deathridge and Dahlhaus, p.95.

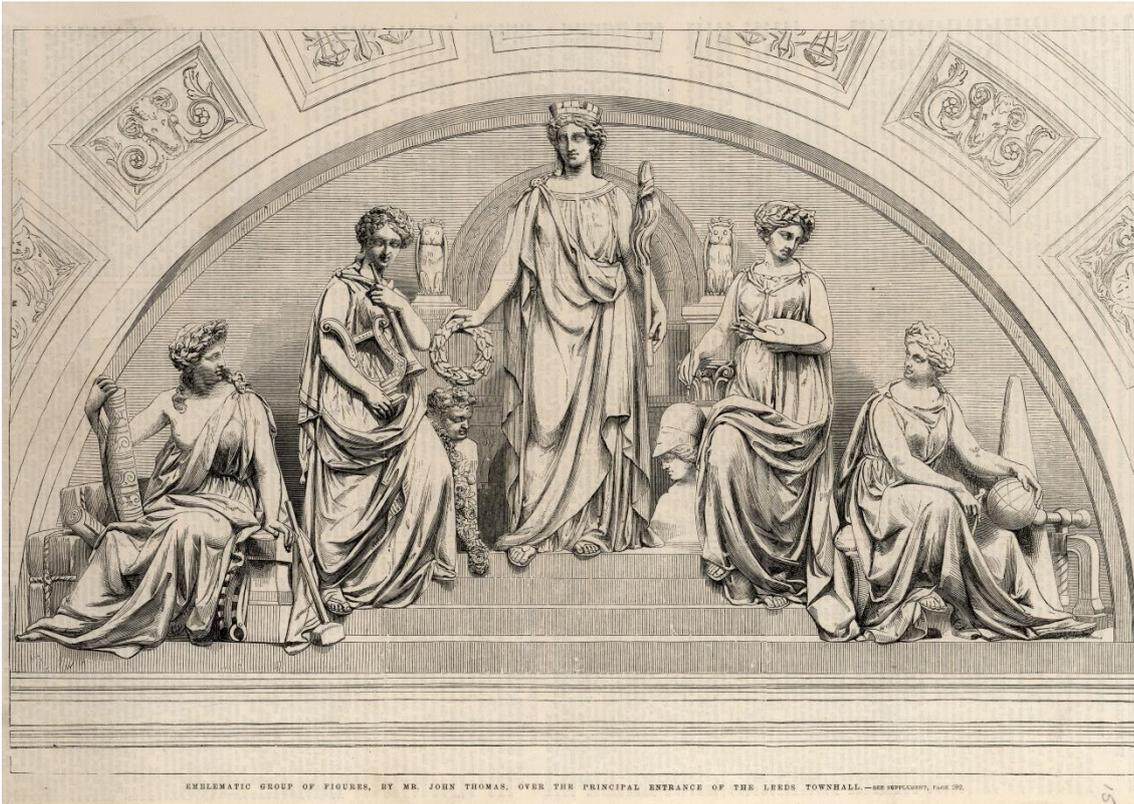


Figure 4: Tableau above entrance, Leeds Town Hall. Image, with permission, from the collections of Leeds Library and Information Service.

These figures are representative of Leeds (central) holding a wreath and spinning distaff; Industry (far left); Poetry and Music (left) with a lyre and pipe (Pan-like behind her is a faun); Fine Arts, to the right of ‘Leeds’ leaning against a Corinthian capital with a bust of the goddess Minerva (or Athena) at her side; and Science with her instruments on the far right. Behind them is a seat of justice with owls (belonging to Athena but also the symbol of Leeds). Children with fleeces bestride the doorway. The staff of Mercury (or Hermes, to give the Greek equivalent) features in each panel, ‘symbolic of Order, Peace and Prosperity’.⁸⁴⁵

The overlapping ideologies that occurred in the process of the secularisation of Christian ideals in the ‘municipal’ events of the Town Hall (outlined in the previous subsection) also run in parallel to overlapping elements of Wagner’s artistic polemic. The nature of *Kunstreligion* elements in his work fluctuates; there are overt Christian reference points in *Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin* and finally *Parsifal* (after which, Nietzsche accused Wagner of having fallen ‘helpless and broken on his knees before the Christian cross’⁸⁴⁶) but they are generally references to myth and tradition rather than scripture. *The Ring* is without these, so it could be

⁸⁴⁵ Leeds City Council, ‘Statues and Inscriptions’, *Discovering Leeds, LTH* (2003) <http://www.leodis.org/discovery/discovery.asp?page=200335_519878567&topic=200335_316509426&subsection=2003611_38707912&subsubsection=2003611_737011135> [accessed 28 November 2015] (para. 7 of 12).

⁸⁴⁶ Nietzsche, *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*, p.74.

placed into a different category of *Kunstreligion*: the replacement of religion with art as a transcendent and renewing experience.⁸⁴⁷ Similarly the town hall replaced the cathedral as a venue, as has been outlined.

While, broadly speaking, the town hall secularised its music-making, in Leeds the influence of the church is clear. Filling the back wall behind the stage and choir seats of the Victoria Hall is a large concert organ, built during the time of the construction of Leeds Town Hall itself. Much was made of the requirement for such an instrument at the time, in order to ensure the suitability of the venue as a space for music-making, with the organ available as an instrument for accompaniment, solo performance and as an ‘orchestral substitute’.⁸⁴⁸ The fashion for organ-building in town halls, which became an essential requirement, was set by the legacy of the church festival, whereby the organ had been ‘so crucial a feature of the [Birmingham] festival’s sacred performances, which had previously been held in a church’.⁸⁴⁹ But while the great organ of Leeds Town Hall was part of the plan for musical and moral ‘improvement’ for the masses it is visually removed from the auspices of the church, without a cross in sight. Instead it is ornately decorated with a wreath, a golden lyre surrounded by winged horses, wooden fauns with pipes and, at its highest point, winged, gilded goddesses draped in Grecian gowns recalling the Romanticised model of antiquity, perhaps even the *Kunstreligion* ideal of all of society being immersed in musical elevation. At the same time the owl of Leeds and the white rose of Yorkshire remind us of the grand but grounded reality of our location.

In actuality, municipal improvement of all kinds in Leeds was often led by church members, including Nonconformists with a concern for religious freedom and social action as much as political power.⁸⁵⁰ Quite opposed in one way to Wagner’s ideals, the benevolence of municipal government extended out of the bounds of the church and of Christianity, with Town Hall organist and musical educator William Spark programming and performing a concert in

⁸⁴⁷ In her doctoral thesis, *The Idea of Kunstreligion in German Musical Aesthetics of the Early Nineteenth Century*, Elizabeth Kramer asserts that ‘contemporary writers thought of the relationship between music and spirituality in three primary ways: music as giving voice to spiritual ideas; musical experience and spiritual experience as similar; and music as perceived as its own particular type of spirituality’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2005). Glenn Stanley includes art ‘replacing religion as an outlet of devotion or contemplation’ in his definition of *Kunstreligion* (*The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, notes pp.309-12 (p.309)).

⁸⁴⁸ Milestone, *A New Impetus to the Love of Music*, p.166. In fact it was Birmingham Town hall, opened some twenty-four years earlier, in 1834, that was, according to Milestone, the first English town hall with an organ, and as such was the defining model for Leeds and other, later town halls such as Manchester (ibid., p.85).

⁸⁴⁹ Ibid., p.246.

⁸⁵⁰ *Music in the British Provinces, 1690-1914*, pp.295-96. Milestone asserts that ‘the repeal of the Corporation and Test Acts (1828-29) made it possible for Nonconformists, many of whom were already significant members of their local community, to take part in government, and the Reform Act (1832) enfranchised even more of the new industrial elite’. Milestone also points to ‘the widespread acceptance of Methodism’ that encouraged the idea of ‘progress through improvement’.

1883 specifically for the Leeds Jewish community whose numbers had swelled in accordance with and feeding Leeds' rapid industrial growth, and in response to persecution elsewhere in Europe.⁸⁵¹ Thus this specific model of local, civic pride proves to be more inclusive than the ideology of nationalism, in social and musical terms.

On one level parallels can be drawn between Wagner's ideology and the aims of those nineteenth-century council reformers for Leeds Town Hall. In 'Art and Revolution', Wagner calls for the social function of art: 'our object will [...] be, to discover the meaning of Art as a factor in the life of the State and to make ourselves acquainted with it as a social product'.⁸⁵² However, in the detail of Wagner's polemic, the differences are pronounced. Both Wagner and the Leeds reformers were committed to the positioning of music and the arts at the centre of community and society, an idea fashioned from a historical view of classical antiquity, where such music and events held a role of religious and moral significance. Both were overtly concerned with the power and ability of the arts (specifically music) as an experience that could lift ordinary people from the circumstances of their everyday lives and affect some manner of change *en masse*. In both cases the nature of this transcendent experience was imposed from a position of higher power. In Leeds (and more generally in industrialised nineteenth-century England) reformers sought to bring about improving behavioural and social change from a position of political power. Wagner had manoeuvred himself into a position of cultural power from which he aimed to effect ideological change in his audience. Both were driven by imperatives of morality and power albeit in very different circumstances. Whereas the impetus of the Leeds reformers was ultimately social and moral control over the masses, Wagner aimed for a radical restructuring, a 'new order' for society, based on his own propagated moral ideology.

Wagner, on one hand, and the Leeds reformers, on the other, were both concerned that financial obstacles should be removed. Leeds Town Hall's opening music festival of 1858 had the unusual addition of a 'People's Festival Concert' at prices affordable to all, consequently attended by 4000 people.⁸⁵³ In subsequent years, council concerts led by organist William Spark endeavoured to broaden and elevate musical tastes of the townsfolk through affordable concerts, and Milestone asserts that 'through Spark's ingenuity and vast musical knowledge, the Leeds public were able to hear brand new repertoire in their Town Hall, often for free'.⁸⁵⁴ Various Leeds Town Hall 'Penny Concerts' of high musical quality and prestige are detailed by

⁸⁵¹ Milestone, 'A New Impetus to the Love of Music', pp.190, 147.

⁸⁵² *Richard Wagner's Prose*, Vol.1, p.31.

⁸⁵³ Milestone, 'A New Impetus to the Love of Music', pp.178-79.

⁸⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.190-91.

Milestone where ‘a portion of the hall was reserved purely for the working classes who gained entry for a penny each’.⁸⁵⁵

If the attitude of the council in Leeds was ‘improvement’ through increased access to concerts and musical events, in the context of the completed Ring cycle, Wagner could be accused of the very opposite in the restricting of access to those already truly devoted. In his great ideal Wagner made extraordinary demands of his audience, requiring a ‘pilgrimage’ to Bayreuth and condemning those who wanted to enjoy the experience in their local opera house for making an extraordinary event into an ordinary part of life⁸⁵⁶ (although, as we have seen, Wagner was not adverse to taking overtures and orchestral extractions out to concerts in various accessible locations for his own marketing purposes). But despite the ideological requirements of substantial effort on the part of the audience (an arduous journey, the very duration of his works) which had to go beyond the bounds of any ordinary entertainment or leisure pursuit, Wagner would have preferred there to be no financial cost incurred for tickets to Bayreuth.⁸⁵⁷ Here we see quite differing purposes: in Leeds musical provision aimed to be widely socially improving in the first instance, eventually leading to an appreciation of ‘art for art’s sake’;⁸⁵⁸ in Bayreuth those who were already devoted, and making an effort towards enlightenment, might be further enlightened as a reward for their sustained endeavours. This salvation was to be earned by personal devotion, rather than effected by the evangelism of those in power.

As we have seen earlier in the chapter, Opera North did not make this history explicit, but the echoes of industrial and social reform are present in today’s experience of Leeds Town Hall, and of course more broadly in cultural life in the region. In assessing the priorities of the nineteenth-century reformers with regard to regional cultural achievements and social access to them, it is almost surprising that Wagner’s Ring cycle, or at least a substantial part thereof, was not attempted at this venue well over a hundred years earlier. Opera North’s *Ring* therefore serves also to fulfil the historical lineage of the aims of this venue, and the potential of the hall, aesthetically, as well as socially and as a key marker in the history of musical and cultural civic pride in the city.

⁸⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.196.

⁸⁵⁶ *Inside the Ring*, p.51.

⁸⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.53. Vazonyi quotes Wagner from ‘An den Heraus Amerikanischen Revue’ (June 1874), *Sämtliche Schriften und Dichtungen*, ‘My intention was to offer the public free performances, solely supported by individual contributions. But in Germany I did not find those thousand generous patriots.’

⁸⁵⁸ Chairman of the LTH Committee John Botterill wrote a letter published in the local newspaper: ‘The committee thinks that these cheap concerts tend to improve and elevate the people; and, by giving them a taste for music, are preparing them for becoming, ultimately, supporters of first-class concerts’ (*Leeds Mercury*, 22 October 1867). Milestone asserts that this view was ‘more idealistic than factual’ (*A New Impetus to the Love of Music*, p.198).

4.7 Conclusion

Over the course of this chapter I have aimed to examine the historical and current cultural backdrop to an experience of a Ring cycle, a work that we are told is ‘the biggest piece of Western art music that there is’.⁸⁵⁹ Moreover, this has been an investigation into the historical and geographical place and effectivity of Opera North’s Ring opera productions in Leeds between 2011 and 2014, and their reception.

This study uncovered certain themes surrounding Wagner and *The Ring* that abound in the public and academic spheres, often perceived as barriers to reception for the uninitiated. Monumentality and difficulty are the most prominent issues, while in the background we find a proliferation of variable literature, acrimonious writing, and perceptions of moral compromise. Confusion is also evident in perceptions of the ‘rules’ by which we might receive the works, and judge productions of all or parts of *The Ring*, since historically, arrangements and extractions from the cycle date back to the composer himself; this has created a disorientated sense of *Werktreue* (fidelity to the composer’s wishes) as Wagner himself was inconsistent in word and deed, arranging portions of his own work for financial gain, but extolling the wholeness of the *Gesamtkuntswerk*.⁸⁶⁰

In an effort to increase accessibility, Opera North did not particularly acknowledge or engage directly with the perceived obstacles to reception that I have mentioned here, but made this musical ‘megalith’ as inviting to a first-time audience as possible. However, those with a greater experience or deeper engagement were not excluded. As Head of Music Martin Pickard assured me, in reference to the work’s weighty philosophical content, ‘it’s all in there for those who want to access it’.⁸⁶¹ Opera North’s preparation of its audience addressed the emotional issues at hand, described by Pickard as the ‘fear of the threshold into Wagner’. This preparation was also informed by the musical or intellectual needs outlined by Dahlhaus, to ‘be able to distinguish the musical motives [...] and to keep track of [...] their relationships and functions’.⁸⁶² Indeed this concerted effort by the company could be conceptualised as part of a long line of attempts to make *The Ring* accessible for new audiences, many of which I have outlined.

Opera North’s series of Ring operas were bespoke productions, created for a specific audience, and for the stage of Leeds Town Hall (and touring concert halls of the north of

⁸⁵⁹ ON, *Richard Farnes Introduces Das Rheingold*.

⁸⁶⁰ While Wagner declared to Liszt in 1851 that a ‘separation of the materials’ of his (then imagined) Ring would destroy his artistic objective, Deathridge and Dahlhaus, in *The New Grove Wagner*, note his own extractions and concert arrangements (pp. 165-93), and Nicholas Vazsonyi, in ‘Selling the Ring’, describes these concert arrangements as a crucial part of the composer’s marketing strategy (p.61).

⁸⁶¹ Pickard, 11 June 2012.

⁸⁶² Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner’s Music Dramas*, p.82.

England). In recent years a great variety of bespoke Ring reductions have been created, as I have assessed. Opera North's *Ring* could be described as 'reduced' in terms of staging, although it is musically complete. This production without set, props or formal director, but with giant screens for images and text, was widely publicised as prioritising story-telling and emotional audience involvement. The act of creation for a specifically targeted audience means that the criteria by which the production is to be judged (or as Jauss termed it the audience's 'horizon of expectation'⁸⁶³) can be set by the producers themselves. If such criteria are shared successfully and producers and audience are ultimately in accord, the production will be judged positively. For a four-year Ring cycle Opera North was able to adjust and refine the communication of success criteria over time, and thus had the potential to create and match expectation increasingly.

Opera North's *Ring* was thus widely judged to be a success. Musically it was judged well by critics. The *Telegraph*'s Rupert Christiansen proclaimed of *Die Walküre* 'You'd be lucky to hear as good at Bayreuth',⁸⁶⁴ and *Seen and Heard International* reviewed *Götterdämmerung* with fervor, declaring that the production and the orchestra had proved Richard Farnes to be 'a great Wagner conductor'.⁸⁶⁵ Expectations were raised, via broadcasts and press communications, regarding musical primacy and scale, the impressive visual inclusion of the orchestra, and clarity of story-telling. These expectations were seen, by critics and audience, to be fulfilled. The company's targeted new audience members were familiarised by musical talks and workshops, but more prominently by a sense of community engendered by events and communications, and arguably, in Leeds, by the experience of venue and the undercurrent of history. In 2011, 'Sing ON: Wagner!' workshop participants, whilst engaging in musical learning, were afforded a practical experience of musical community with the company, in Leeds. The sense of local community over time, which can be described as 'civic pride', was evident in the home venue, Leeds Town Hall, with its democratic history of concert-going and its political ideology visible in its architecture, statues and inscriptions. The Town Hall was also aesthetically complementary to the work itself, being broadly contemporary with it, and drawing on common fashions for antiquity and ideals of a divine or transcendent experience of

⁸⁶³ Jauss, 'Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory', pp.12-13.

⁸⁶⁴ Rupert Christiansen, 'Die Walküre, Opera North, Leeds Town Hall, Review', *Telegraph*, 19 June 2012, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/opera/9342181/Die-Walkure-Opera-North-Leeds-Town-Hall-review.html>> [accessed 7 July 2015] (para. 5 of 8).

⁸⁶⁵ John Leeman, 'Opera North's Ring Concludes Apocalyptically with Triumphant *Götterdämmerung*', *S&HI*, 16 June 2014, <<http://seenandheard-international.com/2014/06/opera-norths-ring-concludes-apocalyptically-with-triumphant-gotterdammerung/>> [accessed 7 July 2015] (para. 14 of 16).

art and community. By 2014, and following mention by the company, some critical reviews even extended to the grandeur and suitability of the venue.⁸⁶⁶

Of all the elements discussed here, the most socially powerful access solution was perhaps encapsulated in the inclusion of *Götterdämmerung* into the Yorkshire Festival (celebrating the opening stages of the *Tour de France* in the region). This was the company's engagement with the locale and community, and the creation of a direct and tangible link between Opera North, the Ring cycle and a tradition (dating back to the nineteenth century) of northern civic pride.

For the more experienced Wagner audience members the company's setting of audience expectation also functioned to overcome certain sensibilities regarding *Werktreue*, since expectations of the production itself were communicated in preference to the original wishes of the composer for the work. While this subversion of the *Werktreue* ideal related largely to issues of staging, there were elements that also had musical components; particularly in the case of the on-stage orchestra. This expectation-setting and management by a company is of immense importance as to whether a production is deemed to be successful; communicating company priorities in production creates a benchmark against which audiences and critics can judge success in a far more immediate way than might be possible against the priorities of a nineteenth-century composer. The longitudinal approach of a four-year Ring cycle (with a full cycle in 2016) allowed for a developing narrative whereby Opera North could plant success criteria and rising expectations year on year, and go on to fulfil them.

In this specific concert staging, the undisputed musical success of Richard Farnes and the way in which success criteria could be mediated over a number of years, Opera North essentially reinvented the way its audience and critics conceptualise Wagner music dramas, as can be seen in the following review from *Seen and Heard International*, the sense of which is typical of critical reviews of these Ring opera productions:

One of the notable features of this Ring has been the success of the semi staging on the concert platform of Leeds Town Hall, the Victorian Gothic/neo-classic grandeur of which makes a good match for the monumentality of *The Ring*. Musically everything comes straight at you, the orchestra raked in such a way as to allow the elevated mighty brass section unimpeded sound lines into the auditorium. The singers, front of stage,

⁸⁶⁶ Ibid. (para. 4 of 16). Leeman notes 'the Victorian Gothic/neo-classic grandeur of which makes a good match for the monumentality of the Ring'. Richard Wilcocks noted 'the Victorian splendour of Leeds Town Hall (much more suitable than Leeds Grand Theatre)'. 'The Finale of Opera North's Ring is Brilliantly Successful', *Bachtrack*, 15 June 2014, <<https://bachtrack.com/review-g%C3%B6tterd%C3%A4mmerung-opera-north-leeds-june-2014>> [accessed 28 November 2015] (para. 1 of 6).

costumed and often dramatically lit, face the audience, acting their parts but without any props. A great deal of *The Ring* consists in dialogue between two people but here, instead of looking at each other they stand apart and engage you, the listener, as if you were their interlocutor. The result is a musical experience impossible in the opera house.⁸⁶⁷

By 2014, Opera North had, through the process of producing this sequence of music dramas, created a definitive Ring cycle for the concert halls of northern England on the company's own terms, judged by the criteria the company set, and with the company's priorities received and accepted by audiences and critics in preference to the ideology of *Werktreue* and the stated wishes of the composer. This occurred in advance of the event of a full cycle to be performed in 2016 in the concert halls of the north and in London, as this once 'provincial' Ring cycle, now becoming national, toured to the capital. In 1910, the *Nation* described Herr Denhof's Ring at last bringing 'Hope for Provincial Opera'. A century later another Ring cycle created and fulfilled its own hopes initially in a nineteenth-century provincial concert venue, now with a production of international standing.⁸⁶⁸

⁸⁶⁷ Leeman (para. 4 of 16).

⁸⁶⁸ Christiansen, 'Die Walküre, Opera North, Leeds Town Hall, Review'.

5 Conclusion

From its origins as a branch of ENO, Opera North exists, uniquely, for the north of England and beyond, and thus distinctively fulfils an access agenda in the region: that productions of the highest quality might reach the broadest audience. It is noted in the 2015 Annual Review that Opera North is ‘the region’s leading cultural export’, and that it is ‘based in Leeds, rooted in the North, and international in outlook’.⁸⁶⁹ This thesis contributes to a growing discourse around the now established trajectory of instrumentalism in government-funded culture, by examining the specifics of how and why Opera North creates and presents its work according to an agenda for public access to opera and related arts.⁸⁷⁰

In relevance to the Arts Council, which mediates the funding of culture from HM Treasury, and cascades its own aims to the companies that it funds, one must also note the agendas of government under which an organisational structure such as Opera North is operating at any given time of creative productivity. These are, as Georgina Born described them, the ‘judgements of legitimacy fueling cultural policy and subsidy’,⁸⁷¹ which must be questioned, analysed and ultimately held to account. The instrumentalist approach to culture of ‘New Labour’, in office between 1997 and 2010, resonated strongly with the ambitions of a company growing in its educational and community-focussed aspirations, resulting in the creation of work such as *Swanhunter*, according to the expanding access agenda. The alignment of company and governmental objectives thus appeared to feed a cyclical (or spiralling) process of growth, whereby increasing support was offered for educational work, and artistic ambitions and output in the educational sphere consequently advanced. As well as the artistry of its creators, and the vision of its commissioners, *Swanhunter* was thus a product of its time and its government.

Expressly, this thesis has specific potential for knowledge transfer in addressing policy issues, as raised the ACE’s 2014 evidence review, *The Value of Arts and Culture to People and Society*. In this document, ACE researchers note ‘the rarity of evaluations that demonstrate the wider societal value of arts and culture activity’.⁸⁷² The evidence gap is particularly pronounced in terms of the ‘drivers of engagement and impact of arts and culture engagement’ in ‘children’s

⁸⁶⁹ ON, *Review 2015*, p.3.

⁸⁷⁰ Some select examples of different viewpoints within the discourse can be found in Hesmondhalgh et al., pp.93-97; Gilmore, *Raising Our Quality of Life*; a conference at the Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts in September 2016, *Rediscovering the Radical: Theatre and social change* <<http://rediscoveringtheradical.org.uk/about/>> [accessed 12 September 2016].

⁸⁷¹ Born, *Rationalizing Culture*, pp.10-11.

⁸⁷² ACE, *The Value of Arts and Culture to People and Society*, p.39.

arts participation and engagement'.⁸⁷³ While ACE researchers assert the need for 'statistical work', and privilege quantitative techniques and large sample sizes, it appears from the evidence gaps they point to, that ethnographic work in arts, culture, engagement and participation, such as mine at Opera North, with *Swanhunter* as a particular example of work with and for children, could go some way to addressing this knowledge void.

The impetus toward 'children's opera' or 'family opera' is largely a modern one, as recent press interest in the topic reveals.⁸⁷⁴ We might turn again to the agenda of government for instrumentalist culture, as evidenced in ACE's 2013 revised strategy and 2014 review, to ascertain where this interest might have originated.⁸⁷⁵ It is interesting to note that the involvement of young people with opera dates back almost as far as the origins of the form itself, with the earliest performance of Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* by 'young gentlewomen' at Josias Priest's boarding school in Chelsea, in 1687 or 1688, with, one might presume, their peers in attendance.⁸⁷⁶ The rather slow-moving English tradition of writing opera for children to perform continued, notably by Benjamin Britten with *Let's Make an Opera* in 1949, and *Noye's Fuddle* in 1958. While composers such as Britten may have helped to shape the cultural concept of children and opera, these examples do not present us with a consistent lineage of opera education or access. The modern-day access agenda arises because of the perception of obstacles, as elucidated by Alexandra Wilson in 'Killing Time', arising from around the turn of the twentieth century, and repeatedly propagated in various media, including other cultural forms. Indeed, recent press interest promotes this view. In 2014, *Huff Post UK's* 'Parentdish' asked 'How middle class do you have to BE to take your children to the opera?',⁸⁷⁷ with accusations of cultural 'one-upmanship' levelled toward such parents.⁸⁷⁸ Thus the modern-day media maintains and renews the charges of elitism in opera reception, acting as a cultural gatekeeper, dissuading entry, here on the basis of social class and also age.⁸⁷⁹ In multiple

⁸⁷³ Ibid., p.42.

⁸⁷⁴ Andrew Clements, 'The 10 Best: Operas for children', *Guardian*, 2 April 2015, <<http://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2015/apr/02/the-10-best-operas-for-children-family-operas>>; Chris Shipman, 'Debate: What do you think of opera for children?', *ROH*, 22 September 2014, <<http://www.roh.org.uk/news/debate-what-do-you-think-of-opera-for-children>>; Jenny Cornish, 'Take Your Toddler to the Opera. Really?', *Parentdish UK, Huffington Post*, 23 September 2014, <http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/09/23/take-your-toddler-to-the-opera-really_n_7322374.html>; Rupert Christiansen, 'Can Opera Save Our Children?', *Telegraph*, 21 June 2015 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/glyndebourne/11689604/Can-opera-save-our-children.html>; Christiansen, 'Will Children Ever Care About Opera?', *Telegraph*, 20 March 2014, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/opera/10711183/Will-children-ever-care-about-opera.html>> [all accessed 9 January 2016].

⁸⁷⁵ ACE, *Great Art and Culture for Everyone*; ACE, *The Value of Arts and Culture to People and Society*.

⁸⁷⁶ Bryan White, 'Letter from Aleppo: Dating the Chelsea School performance of "Dido and Aeneas"', *Early Music*, 37.3 (2009), 417-28.

⁸⁷⁷ Cornish (para. 4 of 15).

⁸⁷⁸ Ibid. (para. 7 of 15).

⁸⁷⁹ In 'Killing Time' Wilson notes, in more general terms that 'ignorance of opera [...] is the fertile ground in which assumptions can take root, fuelled by the profusion of stereotypes propagated by the

articles for the *Telegraph*, Christiansen repeatedly refers to operatic experience as alien to other cultural experiences in children's lives, and worries that no educational programmes are likely to engender a love of the art-form, because here opera is forced rather than discovered.⁸⁸⁰ My research, observing children attending Opera North's *Swanhunter* performances and workshops, detailed in Chapter 3, demonstrates that this need not be the case.

We have seen how, during the last Labour term of office, Opera North was able to respond to a governmental agenda of 'Education, Education, Education'⁸⁸¹ by augmenting its educational efforts. We have seen how the company worked through its objectives, which echoed those of the Culture Secretary in 2008, who aimed to 'reclaim the word "excellence" from its historic, elitist undertones and [...] recognise that the very best art and culture is for everyone'.⁸⁸² In the current political age of 'austerity', Abigail Gilmore argues that there has been a move away from financial and social responsibility for culture toward a model of encouraging and increasing private investment.⁸⁸³ ACE's 2014 review lists 'Economy' as the first of its key themes listing where evidence might be found for the value of arts and culture.⁸⁸⁴ Gilmore details the way in which the findings presented in this document 'signal dominance of quantitative measures, and in particular ones which can assign monetary value to cultural experience'.⁸⁸⁵ It is notable that in terms of 'value-for-money', the educational outreach linked into the 2015 *Swanhunter* production had the capacity to reach more children, although at a far lower level of intensity, as compared with the 2009 programme, with more onus on the individual choices of families and the independent working of schools to ensure the work would be accessed. It is interesting to compare the government's drive to widen the reaches of educational provision of arts companies such as Opera North, whilst simultaneously limiting the school curriculum to focus on science, technology, engineering and mathematics, meaning less access to arts in a formal, educational setting (see the 2015 report by the Warwick Commission

mass media on a daily basis' (p.259). In 2014 the conference organised by her OBERTO group, *Beyond Black Tie and Bubbly*, brought together opera academics, writers and professionals, and sought to encourage the 'rescue' opera from such stereotypes.

⁸⁸⁰ Christiansen, 'Will Children Ever Care About Opera?'; 'Can Opera Save Our Children?'

⁸⁸¹ 'Ask me my three main priorities for government and I tell you: education, education and education.'

Tony Blair, 'Leader's Speech, Blackpool 1996', *British Political Speech* (1996)

<<http://www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=202>> [accessed 10 January 2016]

(para. 33 of 74). Dominic Gray explicitly linked Blair's drive for education to the developments in the working structure of Opera North in the mid- to late-90s (Gray, 9 June 2010).

⁸⁸² James Purnell, 'Foreword', in McMaster, p.4.

⁸⁸³ Gilmore, pp.4, 10.

⁸⁸⁴ ACE, *The Value of Arts and Culture to People and Society*, pp.15-23.

⁸⁸⁵ Gilmore, p.18. Gilmore then goes on to present an alternative, see pp.18-25. It is notable also that this quantitative and even financial bias is the very opposite of the proposal by McMaster of 2008, when he ushered the move 'From measurement to judgement' (McMaster, p.1) and when he attempted to establish 'a light touch and non-bureaucratic method to judge the quality of the arts in the future' (p.6).

on the Future of Cultural Value⁸⁸⁶). Despite the broadening focus of Opera North Education, an arts company is not a school, and a policy for public access via the Arts Council cannot replace the comprehensive reach of a policy for arts in schools via the Department of Education. However, a ‘work’ such as *Swanhunter*, as was commissioned and created in 2009, has the potential to go far further in its reach than an education programme or policy, should it enter the repertoire, or the canon. With a new Opera North production of *Swanhunter* with *The Wrong Crowd* in 2015, and two German production runs by Theatre Chemnitz between 2011 and 2013,⁸⁸⁷ and a growing interest in ‘family opera’ perhaps even as a developing genre,⁸⁸⁸ the outlook is, thus far, positive. The potential for this work (alongside specific outreach programmes) to fulfil the criteria that commissioner Rebecca Walsh spoke of in 2009 (to make opera work for people at any age, and to facilitate children’s engagement with the form) could eventually happen more widely than she might, at that time, have imagined, as the work has already achieved a greater longevity than the education project that led to its commission. I have argued that this commission was a product of a political moment in time and the alignment of company and government ambitions that had developed in synergy over the first decade or so of the twenty-first century. It thus stands to reason that in telling the story of the work’s creation and reception, these ambitions and this moment of artistic and political synergy should not be overlooked, since in this work and its potential to engage young people in opera there has been formed a specific cultural and educational legacy.⁸⁸⁹

⁸⁸⁶ The Warwick Commission, *Enriching Britain: Culture, creativity and growth* (Warwick: University of Warwick, 2015), p.45.

⁸⁸⁷ Edition Peters, ‘Jonathan Dove *Swanhunter*’, *Edition Peters* [n.d.]

<<http://www.jonathandove.com/works/stage-works/swanhunter/>> [accessed 24 January 2016].

⁸⁸⁸ To coincide with the 2015 production of *Swanhunter*, Andrew Clements listed ‘The 10 Best: Operas for children’ for the *Guardian*. Dove himself (often, but not exclusively, with Middleton) has developed quite a specialism over recent years in opera and vocal works aimed at children, families and communities, either incorporated as performers or as audience members. Such works include *Tobias and the Angel* (1999), *The Palace In The Sky* (2000), *The Hackney Chronicles* (2001), *On Spital Fields* (2005), *The Enchanted Pig* (2006), *Hear Our Voice* (2006), *The Adventures of Pinocchio* (2007), *Kwasi and Kwame* (2007), *Swanhunter* (2009) and *The Monster in the Maze* (2015). More broadly, RESEO, the European Network for Opera and Dance Education coordinates activity for professionals working in these areas, and recently produced a publication detailing forty-one operas that had been produced across Europe, suitable for young people: *Amaze Me: Operas for young audiences in Europe*, ed. by Penny Simpson (Brussels: RESEO, 2013). Doctoral work in the area is also growing. One recent submission is Leah Giselle Field’s analysis, *Creative Differences: Sendak’s and Knussen’s intended audiences of ‘Where the Wild Things Are’ and ‘Higglety Pigglety Pop!’* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of British Columbia, 2014). At the University of York, Omar Shahryar has received a WROCAH AHRC award for his doctoral work as a composer/researcher in children’s opera, and Helen Madden is similarly focussed on educational work, composing in music theatre.

⁸⁸⁹ This view considers *Swanhunter* as a specific and unique case study, initially produced immediately before a change of government that then altered the conditions under which the work was commissioned and created. It could thus be considered, in its timeline, as a culmination or end point of the synergy between company and policy. More broadly, this political period spanned thirteen years, during which time there has been a rich output of opera for young people, see the career of Jonathan Dove with works previously listed, and other works, including many British productions, in RESEO’s ‘best of’ catalogue, *Amaze Me*, ed. by Simpson.

There are, of course, other access agendas besides that of government, less comprehensive, less centralised and less legitimised. The reception of Wagner's music dramas, particularly his Ring tetralogy, has been perceived as problematic for an array of reasons explored in Chapter 4, and access solutions have been arrived at from a variety of sources, many involving reduction of different sorts. Opera North's series of Ring opera productions fits within this lineage, and yet stands apart as being musically complete, theatrically and dramatically sound, if not elaborate, and having a performance standard that has received such critical reviews as to be considered world-class.⁸⁹⁰ Indeed the home venue for the Opera North *Ring*, Leeds Town Hall has its own rich history of widening access of local people to 'high culture'. To quote Born, writing about IRCAM and the BBC, such institutions (to which I will add the public opera company) 'intervene influentially in the history of the fields they inhabit'.⁸⁹¹ Opera North has, with its Ring, intervened in the narrative of Ring cycle production and reception, locally, nationally and internationally. It has influenced perceptions and reality of who its audience is and what this audience is willing to receive. It has furthered the story of Leeds Town Hall as a culturally democratising piece of architecture and concert venue. It has challenged and changed expectations regarding the limitations inherent what was once termed 'provincial opera',⁸⁹² so that an opera company can be at once regional and world class. Fundamentally Opera North continues its influential intervention in the nature and meaning of culture in and of the north of England, at home and in export. Nowhere has this been more widely evident than in the Ring opera productions created for Leeds Town Hall.⁸⁹³

The operetta *Skin Deep* provides us with an interesting if less successful access story. The lineage of the genre, traditionally shorter or 'lighter' than opera, was assumed by the creators, and absorbed via pervasive marketing campaign into the overarching agenda of Opera North to increase access to the operatic arts. Yet, in terms of the commissioning new work, the historical agenda of operetta in creation and the access drive of Opera North could be seen as a false equivalent. The lineage of operetta, Richard Traubner informs us, has always been commercially driven. Thus that commerciality with its 'big tunes', engaging characters, and

⁸⁹⁰ Graham Rickson, 'Siegfried, Opera North', *Arts Desk*, 15 June 2013, <www.theartsdesk.com/opera/siegfried-opera-north> [accessed 25 January 2016] (para.5 of 5); Michael Tanner, 'Opera: I am dreading the thought of Götterdämmerung if Opera North maintains the standard it has set with Siegfried', *Spectator*, 6 July 2013, <<http://www.spectator.co.uk/2013/07/opera-i-am-dreading-the-thought-of-gotterdammerung-if-opera-north-maintains-the-standard-it-has-set-with-siegfried/>> [accessed 25 January 2016] (para. 7 of 7); Leeman (paras 13 and 14 of 14); Christiansen, 'Die Walküre, Opera North, Leeds Town Hall, Review' (para. 5 of 8).

⁸⁹¹ Born, 'The Social and the Aesthetic', p.190.

⁸⁹² [Anon.], 'Hope for Provincial Opera'.

⁸⁹³ In 2016 *The Ring* toured in its entirety, with two cycles at LTH, and one each in Nottingham, Salford and Gateshead (venues as in previous years) with the addition of a cycle in the Southbank Centre, London between 28 June and 3 July 2016. According to a private correspondence from the company's marketing manager, Hazel Arthur, the London cycle sold out on the first day of general release in February 2015, around eighteen months in advance of the performance dates (shared with permission).

storylines structured within a specific dramaturgical frame, is a part of the genre and of audience expectation. *Skin Deep* fell into a gap between these commercially based expectations for ‘operetta’ and the deconstruction of a form that came from the influence of Kagel and the avant-garde.

The lineage of experience of the two creators was a contributory factor in their failure to create ‘operetta’ as the critics, the audience and the company understood it. To return to Bourdieu, when considering the failure of *Skin Deep* to engage an existing audience or induct a new one into ‘operetta’, we could view the process of creation as a less than ideal interaction between the individual creators David Sawer and Armando Iannucci, following their own agendas and trajectories, each according to his own ‘habitus’ or ‘socialized disposition’ and origin (as has been outlined in Chapter 3), with the ‘field’, which could be opera, ‘operetta’, or the company Opera North. In each of these possibilities the habitus of each creator occupied such a troubled position within the field and effectively compromised the ‘objective unity’ of the field.⁸⁹⁴ *Skin Deep* was consequently ignored in later discussions of commissioning and new works within the company, in a social attempt to mitigate the trauma of a disruption to the field and the failure of the overall agenda for increasing access for new and young audiences.

Were I to begin this study of Opera North now, knowing from the outset that it would be a study of the access agenda in action, I would probably be drawn towards far more obvious examples of the company’s work. The Education department, which traditionally catered for children in schools and for young people and families with on-site events at Opera North, has recently expanded to incorporate more community engagement into its schedule. The department, now promoted as ‘Education and Engagement’,⁸⁹⁵ incorporates partnerships and projects working with people who have been or are at risk of becoming homeless, artistic community residencies that have been established in geographical areas of educational need, and a group on site at Opera North that caters for young adults with autistic spectrum disorders. The extent of this ‘engagement’ work, which most explicitly fulfils the access agenda, was, however, not as advanced in 2008, at the outset of my studies, as it is now. This thesis has evolved from the study of an opera company adapting to its world, to a study of access through the breadth of the company’s activities, focusing on the drive to increase access through the central, everyday activity of producing opera. During the process of conducting the case studies I have outlined (and many others, researched but ultimately not included), the nature of the

⁸⁹⁴ Bourdieu uses the phrase ‘consensus in dissensus, which constitutes the objective unity of the [...] field’. Pierre Bourdieu, ‘Systems of Education and Systems of Thought’, in *Knowledge and Control*, ed. by M.F.D. Young (NY: Collier Macmillan, 1971), pp.189-207. (p.191). I argue that the consensus of what constitutes the field in this case was compromised by the work *Skin Deep*, whose properties were too incongruous to fit.

⁸⁹⁵ ON, ‘Education and Engagement’, *ON* [n.d.] <<http://www.operanorth.co.uk/education-and-engagement>> [accessed 26 January 2016].

company and its function as part of a larger ingrained historical and political narrative was revealed to me gradually, usually implicitly but occasionally explicitly. This thesis is a discovery that began with a focus on the Main Stage, the centre of company activity, viewing the complexities of *Skin Deep* and the reasons that it did not do the job it might have, and why it disappointed. My interest was then drawn outward, to what then seemed the periphery, the smaller departments to witness how *Swanhunter* succeeded in an educational agenda that was not, at the time, widely publicised. From my work with the Education and Projects departments a picture emerged of the entirety of the ‘spider’s web’, as Richard Farnes described the company. Having looked in from the edges I returned to the operatic centre stage to note the cultural achievement of a Wagnerian epic for the north.

Having analysed why *Skin Deep* disappointed the access agenda, how *Swanhunter* succeeded in its objective of education and engagement, and what the Ring dramas achieved for opera in and of the north, I must return to Georgina Born. These judgements of failure, success and achievement are essentially the ‘judgements of legitimacy’ that have the potential to inform policy and funding,⁸⁹⁶ and we must take account of who makes them, on what basis they are made and with what effect. In this thesis I have tried overall to avoid creating my own outright judgements of legitimacy, whilst acknowledging a growing cultural closeness to the company and a degree of ‘protective enthusiasm’, as McKechnie described it, for those within it, and for the work it does.⁸⁹⁷ I have aimed for a degree of critical objectivity whilst studying a company that has awoken all kinds of experiential subjectivities, artistic and social, as, one might hope, an opera company should.

To return to the plethora of activities currently in operation at Opera North that are designed from the outset to fulfil educational and community functions, future research has the potential to analyse the social, educational and access agenda more fully, as it is presented explicitly by the company. Ethnographic observation and analysis of Education and community work in opera and the arts is needed, where the Arts Council itself has acknowledged qualitative ‘evidence gaps’ in its reviewing of social engagement in the arts. Born also calls us, through interdisciplinary perspectives that might critique art within a broad-based understanding of its social production, that we might ‘intervene in those [cultural historical] processes to potentially creative effect’.⁸⁹⁸ In view of recent Arts Council publications, and the changes in tone of the UK government’s agenda for the arts during the time span of this thesis, there appears to be room and requirement for such intervention.

⁸⁹⁶ Born, *Rationalizing Culture*, p.10.

⁸⁹⁷ McKechnie, *Opera North*, p.4.

⁸⁹⁸ Born, ‘The Social and the Aesthetic’, p.199.

Appendix A

NB: I have attempted to retain some formatting of the original questionnaire, in order to give an indication of the type of document audience members would be presented with. This was originally a single sheet of A4 paper (two sides). However, margins have had to be altered to allow for binding, and I have also removed some of the lined spaces in this appendix, where respondents were originally invited to write their answers.

Götterdämmerung Audience Questionnaire

This questionnaire forms part of a research project for a PhD programme run between the University of Leeds and Opera North, investigating opera and audience response. I would be most grateful if you would complete the following short survey regarding involvement with and reaction to Opera North and *Götterdämmerung*. Any personal data you offer will be kept securely. Responses will be treated confidentially and reported anonymously in publications arising from the study. If you have further questions, or if you would like this statement in writing please contact me to obtain this (culcheth123@hotmail.com or at the address below). If you wish to withdraw your information at any time you may do so without penalty, also by contacting me. In this event, we will not use the data you have provided.

I would ask for a signature to confirm that you have read and understood the above information, and are willing to participate by completing this questionnaire

Many thanks for your help in giving your response.

Mrs Jenny Daniel, School of Music, University of Leeds, LS2 9JT
(culcheth123@hotmail.com)

I have read and understood the above information and offer my consent for my response to be used in this study.

SIGNATURE _____

Götterdämmerung

1. Please give the date and venue of the performance that you are attending.

Date: _____ **Venue:** _____

2. How far have you travelled in order to experience this performance?

3a) Have you attended other Opera North ‘Ring Cycle’ operas? **Yes** **No**

If so please give the work(s) and the venue(s).

b) Do you feel or anticipate that you are experiencing *Götterdämmerung* as part of a complete ‘Ring Cycle’ or as an individual production? Please give more details if you wish.

4a) Have you, prior to the performance, had any ‘misgivings’ regarding Wagner or attending his work? Please give details.

b) Do you feel these were addressed by Opera North, and if so how?

5. Have you experienced:

a) a pre-show talk specifically for Opera North’s *Götterdämmerung*?

Yes No

b) another event related to Opera North’s ‘Ring Cycle’ (at any time)?

Yes No (Please give details)

c) an online film or podcast by Opera North, or blog, introducing the ‘Ring’ productions?

Yes No (details)

d) How do you feel this experience has informed your reception of the opera(s)?

6a) Have you attended other **Wagner** productions? Yes No

b) Have you attended other ‘**Ring**’ operas elsewhere? Yes No

c) Please give details

7. Before your attendance tonight, were you familiar with

a) the **music**? Yes No

b) the **story**? Yes No

c) If so, how did you first become familiar with it?

8. Having seen this production of *Götterdämmerung*, do you feel that **prior** knowledge was **necessary** regarding

a) the **music** Yes No

b) the **story**? Yes No

c) Please give details of your feelings on this.

9. What effect do you think the venue (performance space, design, background, etc.) has on your experience of this production?

10. *Götterdämmerung* is advertised as part of the Yorkshire festival. Does this factor affect how you feel about the production or about Opera North?

11. What are your feelings on this ‘staged-concert’ production?

12. How did you hear about *Götterdämmerung*?

13. What were your main reasons for choosing *Götterdämmerung* tonight?

14. Use three words to describe tonight’s event?

15. What did you like most about *Götterdämmerung*?

16. What did you like least about *Götterdämmerung*?

17. Please rate your experience this evening with regard to the event?

Excellent Good Neither good nor bad Poor Very poor

Information about you

18a) Are you:

under 18 (please give age) _____ 18-25 26-35 36- 45
 46-55 56-65 66-75 76 or over

b) Are you: Male Female

c) What is your current occupation?

OR d) previous occupation if retired?

19. Are you associated with any Wagner-related organisation?

20a) Have you been to other Opera North productions? Yes No

If so, please give details: b) Are you:

Subscriber Friend Patron
 member of other scheme or association, eg. Ring Fellowship none of the above

21. Have you been to other events at this venue (not Opera North)? Yes No

If so, please give details

22. Would you participate in a telephone interview regarding *Götterdämmerung* ? This would take around 10 minutes. Yes No

My number is: _____ Please call between the hours of _____ and ask for _____

Alternatively you may like to answer some questions via email. Email address _____

Please return via the SAE (or to Jenny Daniel, School of Music, University of Leeds, LS2 9JT) . Many thanks for your help ☺.

Appendix B

Skin Deep - original numbers⁸⁹⁹

ACT ONE

No. 1 Overture

No. 2 Chorus (Clinic Staff)

‘Liposuction, skin abrasion’

No. 3 Solo (Donna) & Chorus (Clinic Staff)

‘The Needlemeier Clinic, putting right what nature got wrong’

No. 4 Dialogue, Duet (Robert / Donna) and Chorus (Clinic staff)

‘Yodelayeehoo’ / ‘Come on, Herr Doktor’s coming’

No. 5 Duet (Robert / Elsa)

‘Elsa, you nearly made me drop it’

No. 6a Solo (Needlemeier)

‘When a man’s kept awake at night’

No. 6b Duet (Needlemeier / Donna)

‘Is she here yet?’

No. 6c Operation conducted by Puppets

No. 7a Solo (Needlemeier)

‘I’ve removed fat from the lips’

No. 7b Duet (Needlemeier / Donna)

‘Is he here yet?’

No. 7c Solo (Needlemeier)

‘And all the time I’ve been sluicing’

No. 8 Mute Dance with Chorus (Clinic Staff)

‘Hush, the time is ready’

No. 9 Chorus (Clinic Staff) & Solo (Susannah Dangerfield)

‘Hi, this is Susannah Dangerfield’ / ‘Apply, smear, soothe’

⁸⁹⁹ Extracted from David Sawer, *Skin Deep: Operetta in three acts*, 3 vols (Vienna: Universal Edition, 2008)

No. 10 Interlude under Anaesthetic**No. 11 Duet (Robert / Elsa)**

‘Has it worked?’

ACT TWO**No.12a Chorus (Villagers)**

‘Sing praise! Sing praise! Sing praise!’

No.12b Ballet of Transplant Organs**No. 13a Chorus (Villagers)**

‘Sing of new noses, sweeter than roses’

No. 13b Chorus (Villagers)

‘Do you remember Su?’

No. 14 Solo (Elsa)

‘Look, look, my looks lie empty’

No. 15 Dialogue, Solo (Pollock) & Ensemble

‘Donna, how’s the vat?’/’Drink to the future, all of it mine’

No. 16 Creation of Elixir**No. 17 Solo (Robert)**

‘It’s a success, I am so blessed’

No. 18a Chorus (Clinic Staff)

‘Hush, Lania draws near’

No. 18b Dance of the Seven Bandages

Solo (Lania) & Chorus (Clinic Staff and Villagers)

No. 19a Chorus (Villagers and Clinic Staff) and duet (Donna / Lania -looks reversed)

‘Look, Hush, Quiet! Shush!’

No. 19b Ensemble

‘Sore, I am so sore’

No. 19c Solo (Elsa)

‘All gone’

ACT THREE

No. 20 Introduction (Susannah Dangerfield) & Duet (Elsa / Lania)

‘Ages have past’/’Donna? Donna? No, I’m Lania’

No. 21 Chorus

‘Butchers and bakers and Muslims and Quakers’

No. 22 Scene

‘All good things come to an end’

Needlemeier, Chorus (*looking like Donnas and Roberts*), **Donna**

No. 23 Solo (Robert)

‘Look at me, Elsa’

No. 24 Duet (Pollock / Susannah)

‘I am a who? In search of a what?’

No. 25 Scene

‘A world in motion takes Needlemeier’s potion!’

Chorus, Needlemeier, Robert, Elsa, Donna, Lania, Pollock

No. 26 Finale

‘Drink, drink, let’s drink liquid Needlemeier’

Chorus, Needlemeier, Donna, Elsa, Lania, Susannah, Pollock

No. 27 Chorus (Lania like Donna)

‘Tinker, tailor, joker, jailer’

No. 28 Trio (Robert, Elsa, Lania)

‘Elsa looks ungainly, Robert looks unsightly’

THE END

Appendix C

Education work around the *Swanhunter* production, 2009:

Date	'Operations' Workshops	<i>Swanhunter</i> schools' matinee performance (2pm)	In-service Training	Public performance and <i>Idea of North</i> programming (Projects department)
2 Oct				<i>Insomnia</i> , HAR, 8pm
9 Oct				Light Night, HAR, 5-10pm
10 Oct				Light Night, HAR 1-8pm
15 Oct				Kevin Crossley-Holland, HAR, 8pm
30 Oct				<i>Winterreise</i> (A Winter's Journey), HAR, 7.45pm
31 Oct				<i>Atanarjuat, the Fast Runner</i> , HAR, 7pm
10 Nov	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rawdon Littlemoor Primary, LS19 • Raynville Primary, LS13 			
11 Nov	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • St Peter's C Of E Primary, LS9 • Armley Primary, LS12 			
12 Nov	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lidget Green Primary, Bradford, BD7 • Headfield Junior School, Dewsbury, WF12 			
13 Nov	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lidget Green Primary • Sacred Heart Catholic Primary School, LS29 			<i>Swanhunter</i> premiere, HAR, 7pm
14 Nov	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opera North, Linacre Studio Swanhunter FAMILY WORKSHOP			<i>Swanhunter</i> , HAR, 6pm
17 Nov		Leeds Matinee 1, HAR		Melvin Burgess, HAR, 6.30pm
18 Nov		Leeds Matinee 2, HAR		
21 Nov				<i>Swanhunter</i> , HAR, 6pm
22 Nov				<i>Swanhunter</i> , HAR, 3pm <i>Swanhunter</i> , HAR, 6.30pm

23 Nov			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thoresby INSET 4.30-6.00pm • Hexham INSET 4.00-5.30pm 	
24 Nov	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gonerby Hill Foot CE Primary, Grantham, NG31 • Falla Park Community Primary, Gateshead, NE10 			
25 Nov	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kirkby La Thorpe CE Primary, Sleaford, NG34 • Nevilles Cross Primary, Durham, DH1 		• Bridlington INSET	
26 Nov	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cranwell Primary, Lincolnshire, NG34 • St Michael's Esh Laude, Durham, DH7 			Susan Bickley and Iain Burnside, HAR, 7pm
27 Nov		Hexham Matinee		
28 Nov				Wildbirds and Peacedrums, HAR, 8pm
30 Nov	• Bay Primary, Bridlington, YO16			
1 Dec	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hipsburn First School, Northumberland, NE66 • Aldbrough Primary, Hull, HU11 			<i>Swanhunter</i> , Thoresby, 7pm
2 Dec	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spittal Community First School, Northumberland, TD15 • Wetwang Primary, YO25 	Thoresby Matinee		
3 Dec	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tweedmouth West First School, Northumberland, TD15 • Hornsea Community Primary, HU18 			
4 Dec	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rock Hall School, Northumberland, NE66 • Hornsea Community Primary 			
6 Dec				<i>Swanhunter</i> , Bridlington, 6.30pm
7 Dec		Bridlington Matinee		
10 Dec		Berwick Matinee		
11 Dec				<i>Swanhunter</i> , Berwick, 7pm
13 Dec				<i>Swanhunter</i> , Lowry, Salford Quays, 6pm

Other Education work during autumn 2009, not directly related to *Swanhunter*:

Streetwise Opera	Ongoing in conjunction with ON Projects department, delivering arts workshops to people who have experienced homelessness, at the Booth Centre, Manchester
Opus 1, 2 & 3	Out of school arts projects for 8 to 11-year-olds, run from the HAR during 2009-10
Little London Families	Outreach work for parents and younger children. Including ‘ Little Movers ’, a weekly workshop run at Little London Children’s Centre in November 2009 for children aged 0-4 and their parents. Parents also taken to <i>Swanhunter</i> as an introduction to the stage work of ON.
Play ON	Orchestral residencies at high schools in Kirklees and Leeds during 2009-10
Sing Up Bridlington	Residency involving three choirs from the town during 2009-10
Development events - various	For artists and teachers throughout the region
Work with young offenders	Wakefield, during 2009-10

Appendix D

Education work around the *Swanhunter* production, 2015:

Date	Education	Soundings programming (Projects department)	<i>Swanhunter</i>
19 Jan	Little Voices, HAR, weekly during term time, 10am & 11.15am		
24 Jan	Big Sing, HAR, 10am		
17 Feb		Kathryn Tickell and the Side, HAR 7.45pm	
18 Feb	Storytelling and music workshop, Compton Centre, Leeds, 2.30pm		
19 Feb	Arts and crafts workshop, Compton Centre, 2.30pm		
20 Feb	Singing workshop, Compton Centre, 2.30pm		
27 Feb		Ólafur Arnalds, HAR, 7.45pm	
6 Mar		<i>The White Ribbon</i> , HAR, 7pm	
12 Mar		Arve Henriksen, HAR, 7.45pm	
2-11 Apr			<i>Swanhunter</i> , ROH2 Linbury Studio Theatre, London, 2pm & 7pm
8 Apr	Indoor Camping Adventure, HAR, 5pm		
16 Apr			<i>Swanhunter</i> , HAR, 7pm
17 Apr			<i>Swanhunter</i> , HAR, 7pm
18 Apr	Interactive Preshow talk 12.15pm and 5.15pm (<i>The Wrong Crowd</i>)		<i>Swanhunter</i> , HAR, 2pm & 7pm

20 Apr			Swanhunter Schools' Performance, HAR, 11am
21 Apr			<i>Swanhunter</i> , Pool Lighthouse, 7pm
22 Apr			<i>Swanhunter</i> , Cambridge Junction, 7.30pm
24 Apr			<i>Swanhunter</i> , Doncaster Cast, 7.30pm
25 Apr			<i>Swanhunter</i> , The Lowry, Salford Quays, 7pm
26-27 Apr			<i>Swanhunter</i> , Alnwick Playhouse, 1.30 pm & 7pm
29-30 Apr			<i>Swanhunter</i> , Queen's Hall, 7pm & 11am
1-2 May			<i>Swanhunter</i> , Gulbenkian, Canterbury, 2pm & 7pm
3 May			<i>Swanhunter</i> , Harrogate Theatre, 7pm

There were also some *Swanhunter* activities in schools, but again thorough records have not been made available to me, as they were in 2009, although it is my understanding (deriving from a conversation with Jo Bedford) that less work was done in schools in 2015 than in 2009. It is also pertinent to mention that, as a joint production, there were talks done by The Wrong Crowd that did not involve ON Education, as is documented in this chart on 18 April in Leeds. The ON website also states: 'Pre/post show talks may be available at other venues, please check the venue's website or with their Box Office when making your booking.'

With the rapid expansion of the Education department since 2009, it is not possible retrospectively to document all the Education work going on during the preparations and production of *Swanhunter* 2015 that was not related to the show itself, in the way that I could for activities in 2009. I can comment that by this time the *Swanhunter* production, while central to the department's activities at that time, was one project among various ongoing activities, many of which would be quite unrelated to this.

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