

Hybrid Programming in Opera Houses:

Digital Management Models during the 2020 and 2021 Quarantines

Dr. Felicitas Casillo, PhD.

Communication Faculty, Universidad Austral, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5243-0673>

FCasillo@Austral.edu.ar

Sol Leguizamón

Communication Faculty, Universidad Austral, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

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Abstract

The great opera houses are institutions linked to strong traditions in relation to genres, a canon of works and conditions of enunciation. Throughout the 20th century, these institutions have appeared in the media discourse through references in reviews or in recorded broadcasts. Today, technology has impacted not only the recording and transmission, but also the performance of the works themselves, and digital mediation has expanded the physical limits of these institutions. In 2020 and 2021, with the partial or total suspension of programs in most of the major theaters, changes have accelerated in the link between the classical genres housed in these institutions and forms of mass dissemination such as live experiences. Based on the semiotic analysis of the interface, this paper aims to distinguish and describe the digital content management models that the websites of five major theaters have implemented: the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires, the Metropolitan Opera House in New York, the Opéra National de Paris, the Teatro alla Scala in Milan and the Staatsoper in Vienna.

Keywords: digitalization, culture, arts management, opera, theater.

1. The challenges of cultural management in contexts of social disaster

In 2020 and 2021, in the context of prolonged quarantines due to the Covid-19 Pandemic, the field of culture contracted significantly. Despite the growth of trends such as the Creative Economy or Culture for Development¹, which had been consolidated over the last decades, its leisure status pushed culture far down the list of essentials. Small cultural actors may have been the most affected, while larger institutions had to hasten the design of strategies to remain in contact with their audiences.

Social distancing measures related to confinement affected especially the cultural and creative industries, impacting their entire value chain, and weakening even further the situation of culture professionals, notably workers of micro, small and medium size businesses, as well as artists and freelancers, many of whom work informally” (UNESCO, 2021).

In this sense, the great opera houses accelerated a process of mediatization that had begun during the 20th century. With theaters partially or completely closed, the various institutions turned to the possibilities of new technologies to design hybrid programming that included face-to-face performances and online transmissions. The use of this expression, “hybrid programming”, was generalized during the pandemic to refer to that programming of cultural and educational institutions that included online transmission (Bellas Melagosa, 2021, p. 96; American Alliance of Museums, 2021; Seattle Cultural Accessibility Consortium, 2021).

Opera houses are institutions that were born during the 18th century, in the spirit of the Enlightenment, and reached their splendor during the 19th century in Europe and somewhat later in America. During the 19th and 20th centuries, their appearance in the press was referential through reviews that had a direct impact on the evaluation of the works. Also during the 20th century, opera houses and the media launched products such as specialized television, radio channels or programs, which broadcasted recordings of concerts, opera and ballet.

Since its origin, the stage has always been a site of technological innovation: the support systems of sets, cranes for *deus ex machina*, naval battles that required amazing hydraulic systems, among many other examples. The last decades have been no exception in the history

¹ In 2019, at the United Nations’ 74th General Assembly, UNESCO declared 2021 as the “International Year of Creative Economy for Sustainable Development”. According to UNESCO, the Creative Economy is one of the fastest growing sectors and contributes 3% of global GDP.

of the performing arts. New technologies have facilitated novel forms of recording and broadcasting, and this has meant that classical arts, usually associated with high culture, have reached mass audiences (Heyer, 2008; Roll and Horst, 2017; Trubnikova and Tsagareyshvili, 2021; Ouazzani et al., 2022). For example, in December 2006, the Metropolitan Opera House (Met) in New York City inaugurated the use of live stream methods with Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. Back then, the work was broadcasted live to other theaters in the United States, and a couple of years later, the Met began “live cinema”: broadcasting live opera in selected cinemas around the world. This became known as “digital broadcast cinema” (Heyer, 2008).

Technological advances in recording, editing and audio and image design, such as HD microphones and cameras or the possibility of filming with drones, influence in narrative, visual and sound aspects of the works: special effects, images or holograms projected on stage; lighting that allows for more comfortable filming; the screens that project subtitles in large theaters; or the fact that the gestures of musicians, singers and dancers, the make-up, costumes and set designs must withstand the detail of the close-up. This went far beyond mere “filmed theater” (Heyer, 2008). Although this is not the issue that this work seeks to understand, the transmission of Opera through different media undoubtedly influenced the reach of new audiences, but it also influenced the work itself, its narration and staging.

Mellēna-Bartkeviča (2018) considers that there are three main modalities of how media can amplify an opera production: media integrated into the stage reality, like onstage video projections, visual and audio effects or background screens, media used as opera distribution channels, and media as a communication tool: official videos, teasers, backstage insights, interviews, etc. In addition to these kinds of changes related to the works, the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) brought about changes related to institutions and industry. From being considered temples of fine arts supported by states, theaters started to receive profitability requirements and adopted mixed forms of Cultural Management (Casillo, 2020). In this sense, communication became an active element in the promotion of the seasons and expanded the “sacred” realm of the stage².

The aim of the present analysis was to describe the digital strategy that, during the years 2020 and 2021, in the context of the Covid-19 Pandemic, five of the world’s major opera houses carried out on their own websites. These theaters were: the *Teatro Colón* in Buenos Aires, the Metropolitan Opera House in New York, the *Opéra National* in Paris, the *Teatro alla Scala* in Milan and the *Staatsoper* in Vienna. The research questions of this work were: (1) What actions did the five great opera houses take in relation to programming during the pandemic? (2) How did each opera house design its own digital interface?

The five great opera houses were chosen for their radical importance in the history of Opera. At the same time, on the one hand, these institutions also belong to various traditions and countries. On the other hand, these opera houses also implemented innovative digital strategies during the pandemic. Unfortunately, there are many other notable theaters that, due to the limits of the research, were left out of the analysis.

Faced with the impossibility of offering in-person performances due to the risk of disease, these institutions faced the challenge of creating a digital or hybrid program while at the same time respecting their own tradition, which is also a strong reception pact with a specialized and demanding audience. The latter implies maintaining certain parameters regarding the nature of long-established genres and an established canon.

The subject of study, although currently presenting certain specific characteristics due to the context of global emergency, is related to nuclear debates in the art world; it involves, for example, the struggle described by Adorno and Horkheimer (1998) within the Frankfurt

² As an example, since 2016, the Teatro Colón launched innovative promotional campaigns that included a series of audiovisual spots under the hashtag #VamosAlColón, aimed at young audiences.

School, between the culture industry and the artistic nature of works. Or the problem described by Walter Benjamin (2015) about the technological reproducibility of works and the consequent loss of the artistic aura. In this sense, the descriptions and conclusions of the present research would not only serve the field of management but also aim to contribute to the reflection on the hermeneutic nature of a work of art (Gadamer, 1997) and the possibility of establishing changes and innovations without breaking the communication with the tradition of artistic forms. In relation to this, Auslander considers that the technology that makes *Live* possible makes the work of art summon us in different ways:

I will suggest that different digital representations make different claims on us. [...] I am suggesting that some real-time operations of digital technology make a claim upon us to engage with them as live events and others do not [...]. It is crucially important to note that it is up to the audience whether or not to respect the claim and respond to it (Auslander, 2012, p. 7).

From the Gadamerian point of view, which Auslander shares, this demand that the work of art makes on us is part of the very symbolic nature of the work itself, so it is worth asking about the impact that digital or hybrid design will have on the future of these genres and whether that design will succeed in engaging the audience.

2. Analysis and description of digital management models

The methodology used to describe the digital management models was the semiotic analysis of web pages, based on the laws of interfaces described by Carlos Scolari (2018). “Digital management” means management provided by digital tools (Noam, 2019). The analysis required the design of a matrix with categories to observe the web pages of the chosen institutions. The exploratory methodological design was based on the hermeneutic analysis perspective of Eco (1990). This perspective takes up the tradition of textual interpretation and tries to interpret the creative text from the understanding of the emission instance, the textual elements and the reception instance, and how these three elements appear in the text. The researcher starts from the characteristics evident in the image (*intentio operis*), and then carries out documentary work on the broadcast and its context (*intentio auctoris*). Finally, the analyst, as receiver of the image, describes the reception experience itself (*intentio lectoris*). This interpretation process is not linear, but circular.

Categories were designed to analyze the audiovisual pieces that were disseminated through the websites of five opera houses: the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires, the Metropolitan Opera House in New York, the Opéra National de Paris, the Teatro alla Scala in Milan and the Staatsoper in Vienna. The observation categories that were used aim to describe a “grammar of interaction” that regulates the exchanges between the institution and the audience at the interface (Scolari, 2018, p. 39). In this case, the institutions’ websites functioned as an interface, a “space of interaction” between the institution, the artists, the work and the audience.

The observation categories of the analysis matrix were: a ‘complex enunciator’³, understood as the institution itself; the ‘audiovisual quotation’, i.e. the audiovisual content embedded in the page, whether live or recorded; the ‘genre’ of the work transmitted and possible ‘alterations in the genre’; the ‘duration of the work’; the ‘temporal or time availability’, i.e. how many days it can be viewed after its release; the ‘relationship between the virtual space and the space of

³ The notion of the enunciator is used in this work as “effective producer of discourse”, according to one of the definitions included by Charadeau and Maingueneau (2005, p. 215). In a creative work, the enunciator is complex, because it includes the institution, the actors, musicians, among others. The concept of enunciator should not be confused with that of the author, because the latter refers more to the narrative aspect of the work and not so much to the performance.

the work'; the 'filming style'; the existence of 'interpellation to the audience'; the 'interaction of the audience with the work'; the 'polyphony', i.e. the existence of other enunciators, such as patrons and sponsors; the 'fragmentation' of the audiovisual text; and, finally, the possible 'reception situation'.

Enunciator					
Audiovisual quotation: embedded content.					
	Theater 1	Theater 2	Theater 3	Theater 4	Theater 5
Genre / alterations					
Duration					
Time availability					
Relation virtual space / space of the work					
Filming style					
Interpellation to the audience					
Audience interaction					
Polyphony					
Fragmentation					
Reception situation					

Fig. 1: *The reception situation of these virtual contents includes certain actions that the viewer performs on the screen but also includes reception at home. The enunciator is the institution itself, while the audiovisual quotation is the artistic piece itself (source: own elaboration).*

From the analysis carried out, three models of digital management that the five institutions specified during the years 2020 and 2021 were described. According to Maiorani (2020), there are three phases related to live performance transformation in opera houses. The first involves the broadcasting of live content in cinemas and theaters; the second, the broadcasting of live performance recordings in cinemas; and the third, "Live at home", where the live experience takes place in the audience's home and through social media exchanges. The three models of digital management described in this paper belong to this last phase.

3. Digital management models in opera houses

Although there were three models of digital management, some common features can be found in all five institutions. Although these common features refer to context elements and were not included in the analysis matrix, it seems appropriate to at least mention them.

The first of these is that most of the content was free of charge; even those theaters that charged for content, such as the Metropolitan Opera House and the Opéra National de Paris, also broadcasted recordings free of charge, permanently or temporarily. The Teatro Colón shared complete works on YouTube that remained available thereafter. In the cases of the Met, the Staatsoper and the Opéra National de Paris, most of the free content was only available for 24 hours. In addition to mimicking the non-replicable experience of going to the theater from a scheduled season, this second modality seems to take into account a strategy of commercial care of the content.

Although it was not the focus of this analysis, another common feature was the importance given to social networks. All five institutions have profiles on the most popular platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. There, they share their seasons, programs, artist interviews, even live performances from the auditorium. The Metropolitan Opera House, the Staatsoper and the Opéra National de Paris also have mobile apps where content can be viewed on demand.

HD audiovisual recording technology is prominent in all three models of digital management, directing the audience's gaze to details, gestures or actors on stage. As mentioned in the first part of this article, for the last two decades or so, institutions have been investing in this type

of technology. Therefore, in the context of the social isolation of 2020 and 2021, large theaters already had valuable material to transmit. Beyond the model adopted by each theater, the possibility of using HD cameras for recording or live transmission implies a narrative consequence in the work itself. This function of the camera is similar to the use of small binoculars, classic in this type of theater, with which the audience observed details of the stage and also observed what was happening in the auditorium. This metaphor will be returned to later in the conclusion.



Fig. 2: During the classic 2021 Inaugural Gala of the Opéra National de Paris, broadcasted by live streaming, the cameras were able to capture the detail of the chinstraps on the faces of the dancers of the Ballet Défilé, a strange note that altered the usual aesthetics (source: screenshot).

3.1. Referential management model

This type of digital management of the work of art is based on a referential relationship with the scenario. By means of recorded or even live content, an attempt is made to *reinstate* the stage in the interface of the website. That is to say, the digital language *reflects* the performance that takes place on a physical site, the stage. The performance is traditional in the sense that it is not designed for a virtual context. The work that is broadcasted belongs to the official programs launched each season by the Operas. If there are adaptations or innovations, these occur in the work and are not given by the digital management, which, like the glass of a window, tend to disappear in order to be effective. The digital support of the web functions metaphorically as a window into the interior of the theater.

Communication is still focused on the physical institution of the building, which is so relevant in this type of organization. The aim of the communication is dissemination and it is almost entirely focused on the work itself and not on the audience's experience. The work is standing still, in the sense that it has already been executed or, in the case of Live, the website is limited to transmitting the work and the audience has no possibility of feedback. The technological transmission has an impact on the work: turning the volume up and down, using subtitles, changing screen sizes, translating, pausing, fast-forwarding, reversing, and so on.

The content is available via streaming, through YouTube or hosted on the medium itself, and can be free or freemium, i.e. some content is free and some is paid. As mentioned before, the material can be available permanently or for a period of time. In the latter case, access to the

work is usually given within 24 hours for free, or, when the content is rented, it can be viewed for a few weeks.

Of the theaters analyzed, the Staatsoper's⁴ website operated on the basis of this model of digital management. The institution presents itself as the enunciator of the work. During the quarantine, recorded canonical works from the institution's archive were transmitted. The website functioned as the center of the digital strategy. There, the work appears as an audiovisual quotation, as embedded content, whether recorded video or live video. Although from May 2021 when the Opera House reopened, live streaming of works began to be transmitted, these are very similar to the transmission of recorded works. In other words, the only difference between live streaming and recording was the spectator's knowledge of the event, whereas in both cases, the transmission seems to be a by-product of what is happening in the auditorium.

Another striking category in the case of the Staatsoper was the relationship of the virtual space to the space of the work. The visual communication on the site appears to be symbolically neutral. The design is sober, stripped down, with a white background and classic black typography. The communication could be described as transparent, a kind of "writing degree zero" (Barthes, 1989) of design that tries not to overlap with the symbolic value of the work. This reinforces the metaphorical conception of the website as a window. With regards to the filming of the works, it did not present any novelty compared to the content recorded before 2020.

The referential management is not characterized by questioning the audience. In the works broadcast by the Staatsoper, there were no presenters or explanations of the work beforehand. Only a brief synopsis of the plot can be read, similar to the small booklets offered by the ushers in the theater to read before or during intermissions. The interface was also not designed for the audience to actively interact with the screen. As mentioned above, user intervention was limited to changing the screen size, pausing, fast-forwarding and setting subtitles.

Polyphony in enunciation was almost non-existent: donors, friends and supporters are named, but they are not active enunciators. On the other hand, advertising does fragment the audiovisual piece. Before the work begins, television-style advertisements are included in the format of a series of spots.

All content of the Staatsoper is free of charge. This static and "clean" model of total openness, altruistic, with a hybrid programming, i.e. projected in theaters and live digital, seems possible on the basis of strong state management and donations.

WIENER
STAATSOOPER



Deutsch English **KONTAKT**

LIVE KALENDER



⁴ The Vienna State Opera is publicly run and receives donations from general sponsors and donor friends.

Fig. 3: *In May 2021, the Staatsoper reopened and began broadcasting live with a hybrid programming referential model (source:screenshot).*

The case of the Teatro alla Scala⁵ was somewhat different. While the Staatsoper's management was referential, and therefore static, it was not passive. In contrast, in the case of Milan's famous opera house, the website seems largely secondary to the institution and is limited to selling tickets and displaying the schedule of the works in the auditorium. There is no streaming on the website. During the quarantine, broadcast recordings were available on Italy's public media group *Radiotelevisione Italiana* (RAI). While the Staatsoper has an app for mobile phones and tablets where content can also be viewed, the Teatro alla Scala has only an app for the theater museum. The institution has also made available occasional live broadcasts of rehearsals, via Facebook and YouTube. Its website could be described with the metaphor of a box office, i.e. its purpose is to display the season calendar and to be able to sell tickets.

The Teatro Colón, the Metropolitan Opera House and the Opéra National de Paris have only partially adopted the referential model. In the case of the transmission of canonical works from its own archive, the Teatro Colón used the support of YouTube. In other cases, it streamed live via Instagram and Facebook, free of charge. The Met streamed some canonical works with the same strategy as the Staatsoper: archive content was made available for 24 hours on the website, using its own audiovisual support. The Opéra National de Paris also used its own audiovisual support on the website and like the Met, maintained a freemium model.

3.2. Experimental management model

This type of management model is based on the launching of totally virtual works and the inauguration of experimental situations of enunciation, which imply a break with the canon or with the genre. In this sense, the break with the genre occurs not only at the narrative level of the work, but also in the process of dissemination. In general, these expressions do not necessarily refer to the stage and on the contrary, *replace* it in the sense that they do not depend on the same conditions of enunciation. The communication focuses on the work and the hypothesis of a new audience.

Usually, the novel expression has already been performed (i.e. it is recorded). The interaction of the audience with the work is moderate: turning the volume up and down, changing the screen size, translating, pausing, fast-forwarding, reversing, etc. The content is available via streaming, through YouTube or its own medium, and is usually free of charge.

The Teatro Colón⁶ and the Opéra National de Paris⁷, although they have also broadcasted works according to the referential model, have set up an experimental type of management for 2020 and 2021.

On the website of the Teatro Colón, there is a section called #ColónDigital, an intertextuality to the universe of social networks. There, the institution broadcasted both canonical content

⁵ By law, the Teatro alla Scala has been an autonomous body since 1967. In the statute of the foundation, it is made clear that the State and the Region, the municipality of Milan and donors, both occasional and permanent, contribute to its support.

⁶ Since 2008, the Teatro Colón is, by law, an "Ente Autárquico", i.e. a public body of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires. It receives donations from large sponsors and small donors.

⁷ In public contracts, the Opéra National de Paris appears as a public establishment of an industrial and commercial nature. The institution maintains an efficient system of donors: main sponsors, official partners, major patrons, among others. The Paris Opera even provides communication services to its sponsors. On its website, it suggests that sponsorship can enrich the corporate vision of clients with "targeted communication services, tailor-made events, specific advantages for your staff are the result of a fruitful and constant dialogue with our teams, who are always at your disposal".

from its own archive and experimental or disruptive content. #ColónDigital includes some other sections. Some of the most innovative were #CasasDeÓpera, “a digital cycle based on short lyrical pieces, created and filmed entirely by artists of the Teatro Colón during the months of social isolation caused by the pandemic”; #MúsicosDesdeCasa, similar to the previous cycle, but performed by members of the theater’s orchestra, and #ColónParaChicos, with children’s content about the theater.



Fuggi, crudele, fuggi

CALENDARIO

Clases online
#ColónDigital
Estación
Visitanos
Vivir
El teatro
Instituto de Estudios Avanzados en Arte
Noticias
Revista
Donar



Don Giovanni es una ópera en dos actos de Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) con libreto de Lorenzo da Ponte, quien la basó en el mito de Don Juan, y principalmente en la obra del monje y dramaturgo español Tirso de Molina. *El bromista de Sevilla* (1630). Se representó por primera vez en Praga, en el Teatro Nacional, el 29 de octubre de 1787.

Fig. 4: #CasasDeÓpera is an experimental section that shares the space of the Teatro Colón’s website with the broadcasting of the official season. Singers and musicians made short videos, filmed in their own homes, referring to opera classics. Compared to the referential content broadcasted by the theater on YouTube, the views of this type of creations were markedly lower (source: screenshot).

The Opéra National de Paris inaugurated a section on its website called “L’Opéra Chez Soi”, the opera at home, where the user can view some content for free, “rent” works according to a referential model or watch experimental content under the title “3E scène”. Unlike the content shared by the Colón, which seems more spontaneous or amateurish, the groundbreaking content of the Opéra National de Paris is recorded with professional cameras, edited and produced by film directors.

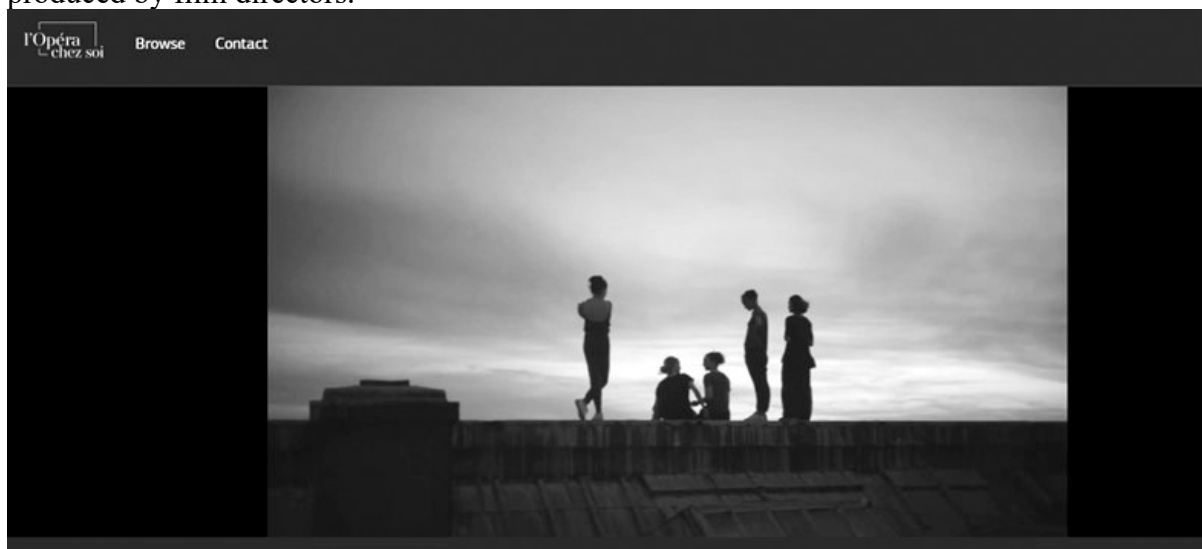


Fig. 5. Available in the section 'L'Opéra Chez Soi', "Laura" is a short film directed by Arnaud Uyttenhove that portrays the world of dance. The documentary tells the story of a young dancer at the Paris National Opera who questions her future and her vocation as a classical dancer (source: screenshot).

The enunciation of the experimental management model is different from that of the first model. While, in the referential model, the enunciation was led by the institution, in this second case, the allusion to the brand itself seems weaker and other enunciators appear, such as the artists themselves who star in the videos and the directors of the short films.

3.3. Innovative management model

This management model involves the design of an experience that breaks with the logic of affirmation (referential management model) or negation of the scenario (experimental management model) and, instead, *constructs* a virtual space and time. Communication focuses on an effort to *recreate* the scenario, not the same scenario of the institution, but another type of virtual performance conditions. Unlike the experimental model, the innovative model aims to captivate the traditional audience of the institution and involves an effort to monetize the broadcast of the work.

Of the cases analyzed, the Metropolitan Opera House⁸ was the institution that applied this type of model. Between July 2020 and May 2021, the Met organized the "Met Stars Live in Concert". In these concerts, Opera's greatest stars performed in a series of pay-per-view recitals in locations around the globe, each live via satellite and shot with multiple cameras. The Met's website announced:

While the Metropolitan Opera House remains dark because of the ongoing health crisis, Met Stars Live in Concert will allow audiences to experience extraordinary solo and duo performances by top singers - streamed live online - from such locations as a former abbey in Bavaria, a Norwegian castle, an outdoor terrace on a cliff overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, a church in Wales, and a historic mansion in Washington, D.C (<https://metstarslive.brightcove-services.com/>).

Furthermore, the Met linked this type of performance to previous strategies (i.e. to a digital tradition of the institution): "The series marries the intimacy of the Met's virtual *At-Home Gala* with the high production value of the company's Live in HD series of cinema transmissions". Tickets for each concert were affordable, costing US\$ 20, and the performances would remain available on demand for 14 days. Each concert lasted approximately 75 minutes.

These concerts had a peculiar structure; they began with a presentation at the Met's studios in New York where soprano Christine Goerke introduced the performance and spoke with Peter Gelb, the Met's manager. Then, the transmission continued live with the performance filmed in various theaters around the world. There, the concert of one or more singers and musicians took place. At the end of the broadcast, the transmission returned to the Met studios, and Goerke closed the show. Both the presenters and the artists addressed the audience directly in an emotional tone, consoling them or asking them to sing a well-known piece of music at home. The time of execution and reception of the work was simultaneous. With respect to the space of the work, there were several "spatial layers", physical and virtual: the audience's own home; the digital medium as virtual text; the Met's studios in New York; and the stage where the artists performed. The latter implies a difference with the referential model, in which the transmission focused solely on the stage space. Instead, in this case, the Met used another stage

⁸ The Metropolitan Opera Association, Inc. is a tax-exempt, non-profit organization that generates revenue from an effective donation system and from the performances it offers.

and not its own, but still considered it an experience of their own brand. In this type of institution, where the building is a crucial part of the artistic experience, these management decisions imply a radical change in the usual conditions of enunciation⁹.

The focus of the innovative management model is on one or several star artists, with allusions or tributes to the canon, although at times with a massive and spectacular style that can have repercussions in a certain rupture with the classical genres. Closer to a show than to an opera, the artists addressed the audience to thank them for their support and to console them for the difficult situation of isolation. In theater parlance, one could say that this management model “breaks the fourth wall”¹⁰. In relation to the more mass style, there is an adaptation of the genre: the concerts performed consisted of a series of famous arias from various operas along with popular or folk songs. In the presentation of September 2020, singer Joyce Didonato evocatively described this type of performance: “I have free reign here and we can create any world we want in this medium.”

CONCERTS HOW IT WORKS

The Metropolitan Opera

CART (0)



Fig. 6: In the final performance in May 2021, “Three Divas” featured sopranos Ailyn Pérez, Nadine Sierra, and mezzo Isabel Leonard on the stage of the Ópera Real de Versailles. The traditional Met audience was joined in this case by the Latino audience target: in the second part of the concert, the three singers performed popular pieces linked to their common Latino ancestry (source: screenshot).

Although the referential model also emitted live streams, in the innovative model, the lives imply a work designed entirely for virtuality. That is to say, the support is not a window, but the virtual space itself is transformed into a stage. The work is not standing still, but the instances of execution and reception are simultaneous. The receiver no longer participates in a

⁹ Something similar happened with the Teatro Colón between 2006 and 2010. At that time the theater closed its doors due to a thorough restoration of the building, and the City of Buenos Aires inaugurated amphitheaters in different neighborhoods where the artists of the Colón performed in front of the public. This generated a reconsideration of the institution itself, so identified with the building itself and with the hall, famous all over the world for its unique acoustics. Another spatial modification that had an impact on the consideration of the limits of the institution was the giant screen located in the Plaza Vaticano, next to the Teatro Colón, on which since 2013 performances that took place inside the theater have been projected.

¹⁰This is the name given to the scenic resource with which a performer interacts directly with the audience, interrupting the imaginary plane that separates the stage from the audience.

virtual experience, originally designed for a physical stage, but the work was designed specifically for a virtual enunciation.

During 2020, the Met also presented an unprecedented live At-Home Gala on April 25th. Hosted by General Manager Peter Gelb in New York and Music Director Yannick Nézet-Séguin in Montreal, the virtual event brought together more than 40 of opera's greatest artists to perform from their homes in 14 countries. During the presentation, Gelb said that "necessity is the mother of invention". Many of the singers and musicians connected via Skype, with varying qualities of internet connections. Unlike the Live Stars, where the picture and sound quality was astounding, this time the performance relied on home connections. Despite the disparate quality, the aim of the live At-Home Gala seemed to be more to maintain the unity of a community rather than the artistic outcome. Throughout the four-hour broadcast, the artists repeated "The voice must be heard", one of the Met's mottos, and underlined the social role of culture in a context of disaster.

On May 16th, 2021, the Met broadcasted the finale of the National Council Auditions via Kiswe, a platform for broadcasting large live events. On that occasion, the purpose of recreating the stage included ways of providing feedback to the performer, such as applause buttons on the interface. This feedback occurs in the virtual text of the work, i.e. it is mediatized, and does not impact on the real stage where the artist is performing. Audience reactions can be seen by organizers and the rest of the audience, but not by the artists *in situ*.



Fig. 7: During the National Council Auditions, the audience could provide feedback to the artists through certain tools enabled by the platform. The focus of this feedback was quantitative. That is, it counted the amount of "applause" according to geographic region (source: screenshot).

As in the other models, in the innovative model, the technological transmission has repercussions on the work: turning the volume up and down, changing screen sizes, translating, pausing, fast forwarding, rewinding, etc. Although in the case of live broadcasting the intervention on narrative temporality is limited, the audience usually has the material to be seen again for at least ten days.

4. Conclusions

The context of the Covid-19 Pandemic accelerated and made evident some changes related to the link between art and technology in the great Opera houses. The new ways of communication seem to function like those small binoculars that were historically used in the theaters. With them, it was possible to appreciate some aspects and details of the work, but they also gave

access to some social issues that occurred in the auditorium. In other words, technology has a narrative impact on the work and also on the enunciative situation in which the work takes place.

In four of the five theaters analyzed, websites seem to have functioned as the central node of the digital management strategy. This seems natural in such strong institutions, and in a way it would replicate in virtuality the prominence that the buildings of these theaters usually have.

The digital management of the five institutions could be described according to three models. Each model has some advantages and challenges. The referential model is an expensive model, possible as long as there is state management or large donors. The benefit of this model is the care for the genres, the tradition of the works and the expectations of a demanding audience. During the Covid-19 Crisis, the use of the referential model meant the generous opening of content. Although the artistic advantages of this model are remarkable, it is possible to question whether it is sustainable in the future, in an artistic field that tries to generate new audiences willing to pay for an opera or ballet ticket.

The experimental management model is not expensive regarding the creation of short, disruptive content and does not involve a large investment. In the case of the Teatro Colón, the experimental content was filmed with mobile phones and broadcasted on YouTube. However, it is questionable how effectively such content creates new audiences and how the balance is managed in order to preserve the tradition itself. In theaters, an opera can be three or even five hours long, while experimental content lasts only minutes. This difference is just one example of the difference between works that belong to the canon and experimental content.

Finally, the innovative model is the only one that designed an exclusive performance for the virtual interface and at the same time enabled its monetization. In this model, the greatest strength of the interface was possibly the spatial design. On the website, there was a first level of exclusively virtual text, with advertising spots; then the live performance itself began, from the Met's transmission room, and only then did it move to the space of the work where the performance took place. The space of the work was not the Met, but the performance took place in distant, eye-catching locations. Finally, the transmission returned to the studios in New York, where the show closed. This complex spatial design deserves to be highlighted as not only a technological but also an artistic achievement.

One thing that all three models need to improve upon is the interaction with the audience. In the Met's live streams, audience interaction was moderate. The performers engaged the live audience, but there was no concrete possibility of feedback. The web interface also did not indicate the possibility of feedback via social media. This possibly means a downgrade for both artists and audience. In all genres of this type of theater, whether in opera or ballet, the audience's reactions have always been a key moment in the performance of the work: from the old-fashioned sending of flowers to the dressing rooms of a diva to the prolonged standing ovations in the auditorium. In the case of live streaming opera, the audience's place is still. This seems to require more planning if one also considers that, in contrast to live performances, the life of a streamed work is longer.

The enunciative situation of the innovation management model was the most planned. Both the physical space of the presentation and that of the performance appeared "doubled" in the interface, as virtual spaces. However, the virtual reference to the physical space of the reception was weaker. Considering that the reception instance is the one that lasts the longest, beyond the 75 minutes of the performance and up to at least ten days later, it seems necessary to design a virtual experience that can engage the audience.

This paper has described the virtual enunciation of five major opera houses. The digital enunciation of these theaters implied temporal and spatial changes, which have repercussions on the artistic performance and the interaction with the audience. The spatial and temporal design of the digital interface could be an opportunity to engage traditional and new audiences.

While these institutions have been involved in mass broadcasting for decades, the quarantines caused by the Covid-19 Crisis accelerated some changes. The impossibility of opening the theaters meant that hybrid programming was the only possible expression for months. Undoubtedly, the experience of the artists on stage and of the audience in the auditorium is not replaceable. A digital model that sought to replace that creative experience would be impoverishing. The challenge for such institutions seems to lie rather in the design of content that allows the audience to engage with the work. From a hermeneutic perspective, it should be stressed that the very nature of the artistic work requires a cooperative link of meaning between the artist, the work and the audience.

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