

# **Anthropologists in the Opera: Professional Engagements and Private Inclinations in Musical Life**

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## **Abstract**

The paper contemplates the relationship between opera and anthropology. Focus is on opera as a pertinent object of anthropological investigation. It will highlight some theoretical, epistemological and conceptual orientations by which anthropologists can explore and experience operatic worlds. On one hand opera is an “exotic” topic for anthropologists, while on the other anthropology is still perceived as a very unusual approach to opera. Opera’s urban glamour, whether it be represented through the splendour of court spectacle, the pomp of national myths and sentimental melodramas, the political party, or the bourgeois festive occasion, seemed hundreds of miles away from anthropologists’ traditional activities or priorities. For four hundred years, opera’s aim was to fascinate and create phantasms, focusing principally on the culture of Europe, while anthropology’s task was rather different: the deconstruction of such fascinations by focusing mainly on non-European cultures. In the last decades this traditional antagonism has been overcome. The paper will thus introduce the work of anthropologists and ethnographers whose personal and professional affinity for opera has been explicated in their academic and biographical account. Anthropological accounts on opera (made by Claude Lévi-Strauss, Michel Leiris, William O. Beeman, Denis Laborde, Paul Atkinson, etc.) convince us that social anthropologists do not need to travel to distant places, primeval forests or islands to find relics of social rituals and experience the “exotic”. They merely need to go to the opera, where our own weird rites are performed in both their highest and their most trivial form. As a field site, the Slovenian opera habitus (the Ljubljana and Maribor Opera Houses) will be particularly emphasized. Professional or private ethnographical inquiries of opera mostly deal with diversity and mutuality in local social venue and musical life. The paper will therefore show that the contexts of diversity (such as different places of opera determined by different social venues, music scenes, urban structures, (trans)national ideologies, collective memories and cultural traditions as elements of mutuality) do not only reveal the specificity of the role opera plays in diverse spaces but can also explain the epistemological and conceptual diversity of anthropological interest for opera research.

## **Anthropologists in Operatic Settings**

We probably would not be the first in posing the question of what opera has to do with the anthropological program and perhaps it is no coincidence that opera still figures somewhere between embarrassment and disdain among anthropologists. In Western social taxonomies opera mostly enjoys the status of both music and art. However, there is a marked absence of anthropological treatment of opera whether as music, art, theatrical setting, spectacle, performance, ritual, or simply, as cultural form and social phenomenon. Even though the worlds of opera have provided a series metaphors, analogies, situations, characters, or simply mirrors of a particular culture for anthropological understanding of everyday life in a particular society, in anthropology we find a kind of a collective failure to address the

accomplishment of opera in ethnographic and other settings. The noticeable lack of anthropological research of opera reflects, to paraphrase Paul Atkinson (2004: 94), a recurrent imbalance in the anthropological examination of culture. Despite the fact that the twentieth-century socio-cultural anthropology is saturated by probably the single most central concept in the discipline and by its remarkable surge of interest in culture, the treatment of 'culture' has been, considering Western urban cultural forms, doubly asymmetrical.

The first asymmetry is, of course, related to anthropology's traditional focus on non-Western cultures and societies. When we look how classical Western anthropology perceived art or music, it will be, I think, easier also to understand why opera is a quite new, unusual and "exotic" topic for anthropology, and further, why anthropology is still perceived as very strange, unusual and "exotic" approach to opera worlds. Although art and music are to be found in every culture, small-scale as well as complex, anthropological studies of art and music have not been often at the centre of theoretical developments within the discipline, although they frequently illustrated its changing intellectual fashions. The development of the anthropology of music (Merriam 1964; Suppan 1984; Lortat-Jacob & Roving Olsen 2004: 7-26; Nettl 2004: 333-52) and the anthropology of art (Morphy 1994; Layton 1991), which met in the past opposing observations and arguments, from disapproval to approval, can be seen in this direction. As a result, from this point on, the perception of cultural phenomena and practices in different societies all over the world became an important epistemological issue: how to read them, what kind of role they have in their own societies as specific practices, how what we know about them can change our conception of what constitutes art, music or theatrical practice. As Morphy says, the fact that the word "primitive" was applied to the arts of non-Western societies for so long tells us something about the European concept of art and the role it has played in the positioning of "other cultures" in European thought (Morphy 1994: 648).

Let me now move to the second asymmetry which will, hopefully, help to explain why anthropologists were reticent to study opera. While all anthropologists would insist, if I paraphrase Atkinson again (2004: 94), on an analytic relativism to the point of suspending common-sense values and assumptions concerning "high" culture or elitist art, and the self-evident importance of different cultural forms, in practice the discipline has displayed a collective inverse snobbery. Popular culture has received recently much more extensive attention than so-called serious or high culture. Popular music receives more anthropological attention than "classical" music. Films and musicals are more studied than opera or the "straight" theatre. I think that this anthropological snobbery is a reflection of a wider anthropological culture that treats the bourgeoisie and high-class groups of society as negative reference-points rather than subjects for empathetic research. This is probably the most reasonable explanation why social or cultural anthropologists did not go to the opera very often. Opera's urban glamour, whether it be represented through the splendour of court post-Renaissance and pre-revolutionary spectacle, the pomp of Romanticist national myths and sentimental melodramas, the modern political party and venue, or the

bourgeois festive occasion, seemed hundreds of miles away from their traditional activities or priorities and well removed from their view of life or vantage point. For four hundred years, opera's aim was to fascinate and create phantasms, focusing principally on the culture of Europe, while anthropology's task was rather different: the deconstruction of such fascinations by focusing mainly on the non-European cultures. However, if during this long period the anthropologists perceived opera as something outside their domain, this dogmatic contradiction between the culture of opera and the culture of anthropologists has been, hopefully, overcome during the last three decades. In the last decades, we face the increasing prominence granted to the notion of "performance" in socio-cultural anthropology (Hughes-Freeland 1998; Royce 1977, 2004; Buckland 1999; Wulff 1998, 2000). Most of these performance studies are written on the conceptual background of Goffmanesque, Turnerian and Schechnerian analyses.

It was stereotypically proclaimed that social or cultural anthropologists did not go to the opera very often in the past. If this prejudice towards anthropologists was maybe true, then we can say that this antagonism between anthropology and opera has been noticeably overcome during the last three decades. As a result of this change and progress, we can today clearly explicate certain efforts in the opera sphere made by anthropologists and ethnographers. It seems that the French structuralist Lévi-Strauss was one of the first anthropologists who paved the road, implicitly if not entirely explicitly, for the relationship between anthropology and opera. If his "non-European" structural reading of Wagner's *Ring* showed how opera can be almost a mathematically structured musical system, rather like myth, another French anthropologist and writer, Michel Leiris revealed opera's more passionate, social and ceremonial sides. Further, the work and writing of William O. Beeman proves that an anthropologist can even have a dual career, being both an academic and a professional opera singer. Two further researchers, French musical anthropologist Denis Laborde and British social anthropologist Paul Atkinson, reveal the backstage life of the modern opera company by meticulously investigating how an opera is produced today, or what kind of musical, theatrical, cultural and economic lines cross in this complex process. Additionally, this paper argues that not only can opera be a relevant object of anthropological work, and that anthropology can offer a pertinent approach to opera, but also that anthropologists can manage very well in the opera. Opera and an anthropologist should no longer be an odd couple. In the following sections of the paper I will try therefore to introduce some operatic engagements and itineraries of anthropologists and ethnographers mentioned above.

True understanding and detailed documenting of the social processes of cultural production requires ethnographic fieldwork. Practicing fieldwork is not the only adequate tool to deal scientifically with arts, music and cultural worlds of course, and can be usually combined with other qualitative as well as quantitative methods, but it is still the best possible way for anthropologists, sociologists and ethnographers to approach social realities in their most various representations and transformations. If contemporary anthropology of culture wants to deal seriously with the social worlds and their realities in which cultural artefacts are enacted and produced, then they need, according to Paul Atkinson, field-based

research that documents the ordinary as well as extraordinary social activities that go into the making of culture. The theatre, the painter's studio, the concert hall or the opera house are in principle no different from any other setting of work. However, the anthropologist is still a very rare specialist in any major cultural setting, especially in organizations devoted to the production of "high" culture. To this very fact Atkinson adds: "*Despite the high profile of opera companies in recent years, and despite the prominence of opera performers among the 'superstars' of global culture, there has been very little work on the everyday life and work of opera companies and their members.*" (2004: 97). The reasons for the relatively small number of detailed ethnographic studies of operatic settings are probably multilayered, and some of them, I believe, related also to the very constitution of traditional anthropological paradigm which has been predominantly oriented to the investigation of so-called rural cultures, while urban phenomena were perceived among anthropologists as part of their "domestic" settings. Opera has been always perceived as elitist cultural form, supported whether by state, aristocracy, nobility or some other kind of governing instance and as such it challenged some anthropologists' hesitation or even neglect. This was because opera was in the past always negotiated in terms of enchanting world belonging to high society or well established social class, and never as product of certain labour and real social practice which could be observed. When we start thinking of opera as serious work and social practice and not only as a phenomenon of mundane ecstasy, or of highly "sacred" mission in society, then it can become also treated as a pertinent object of an ethnographic investigation.

Let us now have a quick look into some examples of ethnographic or semi-ethnographic practice in the field of opera. All semi-ethnographic or ethnographically based experiences roughly sketched in the following chapters tell that ethnographic inquiries of opera are mostly about diversity and mutuality in local social venue and musical life. Through ethnographies of opera it is shown that the contexts of diversity (such as different places of opera determined by different social venues, music scenes, urban structures, (trans)national ideologies, collective memories and cultural traditions as elements of mutuality) do not only reveal the specificity of role opera plays in diverse spaces but can also explain the epistemological and conceptual diversity of anthropological interest for opera research. These ethnographies of opera reveal that there is no single operatic setting but many of them that need to be explored: for example, Lévi-Strauss's structural reading of opera is more about his metaphorical "composing" of an anthropological grand opera, materialized in the four-volume study of *Mythologiques* which reminds us to Wagner's tetralogy of *The Ring*; Michel Leiris's ethnographical value in the field is more related to his diary-like documenting of his private operatic itineraries, attendances and trips to different opera houses and locations all over the world; William O. Beeman's ethnographic approach is mostly from on-stage perspective in terms of how singers and performers in general should deal with principles and demands that take place in the opera houses today; both Denis Laborde and Paul Atkinson reveal the great complexity of different social processes which define an opera company and make its production possible; my ethnographic focus is on how social representations of opera are produced or

reproduced and at the same time imagined by different social agents and actors involved within a particular national operatic habitus: for instance, my ethnographic work has had to compete in the field sites of both Slovenian opera houses with the dominant Slovenian musicological canon.

Each of these otherwise differently oriented doings reveals different aspects of operatic phenomenon as well: for instance, Lévi-Strauss's contribution can lead us to the understanding of opera as myth and metaphor, Leris's to opera as ritual and spectacle, Beeman's to opera as singing and artistry, Laborde's to opera as social process, Atkinson's to opera as performance of complex cultural machinery of a particular kind, etc. Yet, what all contributions seem to have in common is that they demystify, in different ways, the image of opera as the phantasmagorical phenomenon, as the mundane excess or even as the monstrous. Indeed, opera as performing art as well as music-theatre is able to offer phantasms, fictions, enchanting performance sites, spectacles, in which people create and experience imagined worlds, but behind this picture we find a real social organization embraced by reality, which makes opera's modalities of experience accessible for ethnographic enquiry. It is true that the opera house produce the contexts where music emerges as a vital force, but it is also true, that different operatic settings produce some other effects beside purely musical, artistic or aesthetical ones that are socially and culturally conditioned.

### **Claude Lévi-Strauss and His “Composing” of an Anthropological “Grand Opera”**

In the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, art and music, especially opera, play a manifold, compelling role. The leading proponent of structuralism, which took him from linguistics to structural reading of art, music and architecture as systems of signs, he analyzed, in his fundamental four-volume work *Mythologiques*, the complex multitude and diversity of Amerindian myths through “deep-structured” logical and linguistic rules. But the most interesting thing is that he literally “composed” this comprehensive scientific work in the manner of a musical work. Through this, a theoretical “overture” leads him to a vast set of chapters organized in musical terms, as narrative variations, fugues, arias, recitatives, cantatas, toccatas, sonatas, harmonies and scherzos. At the end of the four-volume symphonic edifice, a reprise and coda crown the argument. Like almost every thinker in the contemporary French pantheon, Lévi-Strauss has been influenced by Wagnerian music. He does not repudiate the analogies often proposed between his own “tetralogy” of *mythologiques* and that of the *Ring*, and tried to establish the relationship between myth and music as two principal enactments of consciousness. The mechanism of European fantasy in the opera is, according to him, greatly enhanced by music as “a machine to suppress time”, just like myths among American Indian tribes (1964: 24). Due to this, he described the relationship between mythology and music, on which he insisted so much, in the initial section of *The Raw and the Cooked [Le cru et le cuit]* (1964) and also in the final section of *The Naked Men [L'Homme nu]* (1971), as logical, due to similarity and contiguity, and not as arbitrary. Lévi-Strauss in the

*Mythologiques* showed that myth, which has articulate language as its vehicle, remains bound to language, while only instrumental music, defined as a system of sounds, breaks completely free. Vocal music and opera as the most extravagant art of singing are more comparable in this respect to myth. Namely, opera also has articulate language as its vehicle. From this point of view, opera and myth can intersect, while the affinity between myth and music disappears in the case of pure instrumental music, which is outside language (Lévi-Strauss 1990: 670-671). Let us see some parallels between mythical schema and opera score, if put into the Lévi-Straussian perspective.

Mythical Schema	Opera Score
myth contains “the universalities of human mind”	music as a model for “what is the most universal and human at the same time”
myths represent a coherent and organized system of meanings	orchestral score is a coherent and organized system of sounds and staves
myths function as a kind of machine for the suspension of time	opera (in its musical formation) points to a supra-temporal structure which is able to suspend or suppress time
myths are auto-referential: they can be translated only into themselves	opera score is auto-referential: it can be translated only into itself

**Scheme 1: Structural Mutuality within Cultural Diversity**

Obviously, Lévi-Strauss was the man of music, as it seems that he constantly prefers musical element in the opera work over other constitutive elements. He approaches opera as he would be an inheritor of the dominant 18<sup>th</sup> century operatic tradition known under the slogan *prima la musica e poi le parole*. In the Lévi-Straussian perspective, both opera, as essential representation of Western music, and myth are able to suspend or suppress time. They both have the power to represent a kind of temporal snare. This means that both phenomena play, in a social context, a supra-temporal structure, which is able to stop time or to ensnare it. When Lévi-Strauss compared orchestral scores of Wagner’s *Ring* and myth schemes of Amerindians, he assumed that if we try to understand myth, we have to read it as “*we would read an orchestral score, not stave after stave, but understanding that we should apprehend the whole page and understand that something which was written on the first stave at the top of the page acquires meaning only if one considers that it is part and parcel of what is written below on the second stave, the third stave, and so on. [...] And it is only by treating the myth as if it were an orchestral score, written stave after stave, that we can understand it as a totality, that we can extract the meaning out of it.*” (Lévi-Strauss 2001: 40, also see 1955b: 428-44). So Lévi-Strauss implicitly signaled that both systems, European music and non-European myth, traditionally perceived as totally different and alien to each

other, actually exploit otherwise-different cultural machinery – opera by musical instruments and voice, myth by mythic schemata and patterns – to attain similar social effects in parallel (Lévi-Strauss 1964). According to him, music, like opera, can be read contextually, that means through the synchronic perspective. When Lévi-Strauss creates a kind of comparative view on the function and structure of myth schemes in Amerindians and musical scores of Wagner’s operas he actually builds the symbolic bridge where the cultural diversity meets structural mutuality.

For Lévi-Strauss, both music and myth are basic human universalities. But what kind of element connects these two phenomena that were once, according to him, united but had been drawn apart, each going in a different direction? Lévi-Strauss’ answer is that language is the correct point of departure, as both music on the one hand and mythology on the other stem from languages “*but grow apart in different directions, that music emphasizes the sound aspect already embedded in language, while mythology emphasizes the sense aspect, the meaning aspect, which is also embedded in language*” (2001: 46-47).

According to the structuralist dichotomy between nature and culture, he argued that if music reminds the man of his physiological rootedness, mythology makes him aware of his roots in society (Lévi-Strauss 1983: 28). If we try to paraphrase this logic, then opera could be seen as an eminent cultural extension of nature. Even more, music is able not only to unify both, nature and culture, but can transgress this dichotomy. To simplify the argument, let us restrict ourselves to opera. We can say that opera operates according to two grids. One is physiological – that is, natural: its existence arises from the fact that opera exploits organic rhythms through a singing voice which gives constitutive relevance to the phenomenon. The other grid is cultural: it consists of a set of musical notes and sounds, of which the number, hierarchy and style vary from one opera to another, from one composer to another, from one national tradition to another, in the last instance, from one culture to another.

By inserting opera as an eminent representation of European musical tradition into the structural distinction *natura vs cultura*, opera can be seen as an irreducible cultural mirror of Western human nature and life which is maybe not entirely compatible to the nature and life of “primitive” thought but are not as alien and distant from each other as classical colonial anthropology would have it. When comparing eminent European musical phenomenon and non-European mythical phenomenon, Lévi-Strauss actually established a specific reading which I would call “civilisational reading”. It seems Lévi-Strauss wanted to tell us that European music, with its eminent representation – opera – had the same value or similar position in the mind and life of a contemporary European that myth had in “wild thought”. Why is that? Maybe here is one of his implicit answers: “*With the death of myth, music becomes mythical in the same way as works of art, with the death of religion, are no longer merely beautiful but become sacred.*” (Lévi-Strauss 1990: 653)

It is obvious that we cannot reflect opera appropriately without adopting a symbolically external point of view. As Claude Lévi-Strauss showed, European cultural phenomena cannot be considered only from inside, that is from the viewpoint of Western culture. If we read opera from a “non-European”

perspective, as he did, then we see that opera is not only *a part of society*, as many Western academic traditions debated previously, but it actually *constitutes society*. In other words, it constitutes, using Lévi-Straussian dichotomy, the very nature of European culture. Metaphorically and symbolically, opera literally *performs the constitution of society* (Kotnik 2004: 334). When I speak here of society, I think of course of European society, as only this society can be strictly described as *operatic society*, where opera is an “autochthonous” phenomenon. Opera that took over the traditional function of mythology was not just any kind of music or just any kind of art, but a type of cultural machinery that appeared in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century within the literary and musical circle of the Florentine *camerata*, continued in the early seventeenth century with Monteverdi, and later with Lully, Handel and Gluck; music which reached its full development with Mozart in the eighteenth century, and with Verdi, Wagner and Puccini in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As Slovenian sociologist Rastko Močnik provocatively pointed out, opera may be a phantasmagoric way that European societies tried to retrieve the problem which all societies usually try to resolve with incest taboo, namely the problem of the relationship between nature and culture. The societies which “failed” to separate nature and culture, entertain opera (Močnik 1992: 22). An interesting coincidence which may prove this thesis is that Lévi-Strauss’ classical scientific book *Tristes Tropiques* (1955a) needed to be transformed into an opera (Steiner 1996: 50-1).

Thus opera might be the only mythology that still remains at the disposal of the contemporaries of the “civilized thought”. Opera was and remains, paraphrasing Lévi-Strauss, a mythical dimension of European society and probably the most eminent mythology of Europeans that has survived till today. Lévi-Strauss’ ambition to compose his major scientific project as a musical work has, of course, the roots in his personal history. His admiration of Richard Wagner, almost as god, and as “the” criterion of music not only powerfully influenced Lévi-Strauss’ recognition of opera in general but reminds of something what anthropologists describe as ancestor worship. Moreover, among contemporary Wagnerites and followers of his ideas, the “worship” of Wagner is marked by almost confessional manners. It is reasonable to speak of Wagnerism in terms of a cult which provided an attachment, sometimes fanatical, to Wagner’s ideals and mythicized figure. Lévi-Strauss remained so much indebted to Wagner’s aesthetical and theoretical conception of music that was ready, for instance, in his *The Raw and the Cooked*, to qualify him as “*père irrécusable de l’analyse structurale des mythes*” (Lévi-Strauss 1964: 23).

French social anthropologist Jean Jamin wrote that Lévi-Strauss was always particularly fond of music (Jamin 1999: 34). In the interviews with Didier Éribon, Lévi-Strauss confessed that he “en écoute tout le temps” (Lévi-Strauss & Éribon 1988: 246). According to Jamin, he acted in music like melomane transforming himself into a kind of musicologist, as this can be seen in the “Finale” of *The Naked Man* where he proposes a structural analysis of Maurice Ravel’s *Boléro* (Lévi-Strauss 1990: 660-667). In his work *Tristes Tropiques* he comes back to his passion for music revealing his personal inclination to conducting and musical composition. His phantasm being a composer or conductor was no doubt an



important stimulant for his reflection of music, and particularly, for “composing” his megalomaniacal work *Mythologiques*:

I have always dreamed since childhood about being a composer or, at least, an orchestra leader. I tried very hard when I was a child to compose the music for an opera for which I had written the libretto and painted the sets, but I was utterly unable to do so because there is something lacking in my brain. [...] ... if I wasn't able to compose with sounds, perhaps I would be able to do it with meanings. (Lévi-Strauss, 2001: 47)

When approaching, structurally, to Wagner's operas, Lévi-Strauss acted, I would say, like musician, or musicologist and less as anthropologist. When he entered the opera, he manifested very little or even no interest in the social organization of performance. As some French authors note, he was entirely concentrated on music and to what was coming from the orchestra pit. His rigorous concentration only to orchestral or musical part of performance tells about his personality. He has been described as sensitive, dignified and reserved, someone who has always privileged rigorousness in his professional life, and to maintain a certain distance from events, people and facts. He showed certain aspects of his work to his life and personality in his own testimonies (Charbonnier [1961]1969; Lévi-Strauss [1975, 1979] 1983; Lévi-Strauss and Éribon [1981] 1991). Those close to him all agree on his distinctive sensibility, which leads him sometimes to prefer the company of nature, rocks, plants, and animals, to that of people, myths, or opera. Undoubtedly, this is, to Bernard Saladin d'Anglure, the key to his aesthetic sensitivity, whether in relation to painting, poetry, music, more precisely opera, or simply a beautiful ethnographic object (Lévi-Strauss 1993). This sensual refinement for different things seems to be part of his family heritage. His great grandfather was, for instance, both a composer and a conductor. Two of his uncles were painters, as was his father who was also passionately interested in both music and literature. This aesthetic sense can be found in most of Lévi-Strauss's books; it is expressed in the choice of titles, in the choice of images (on the covers of the French editions of *Mythologiques*) and the organization of the contents (e.g. the musical arrangement of *Mythologiques* beginning with *The Raw and the Cooked*, which is devoted to music, and concluding with the 'finale' of *The Naked Man*). We can add to his youthful fascination a close reading of Freud (Saladin d'Anglure 1996: 333), regular attendance at the *Opéra* in Paris, and his admiration of Richard Wagner's vision of music, and opera.

Even though we could read, in the last instance, his structural analysis of music, or, more precisely, Wagnerian opera, like a version of Western reincarnation of mythical mind of the contemporaries, it is difficult not to recognize that his vision of music within the structural analysis of myths has some deficiencies as well. One among them is that he construed the relationship between European music and non-European myths predominantly on the basis of his phantasm on “that God, Richard Wagner”. In praising Wagner he was consistent and very persistent.

## Michel Leiris' Diary-Like Observations of Opera

Let us now move from the “musicologised” vision of opera as music, or more narrowly, as score, characteristic for Lévi-Strauss, to a quite different aspect of opera phenomenon, e.g. its social and ritual dimension. French anthropologists and ethnologists “discovered” opera, as an interesting object of investigation, somewhere between 1960s and 1980s. If Lévi-Strauss was the first who approached this form of music from a very specific anthropological angle, with an emphasis on Wagner’s mythicized opera as eminent representation of Western music and culture, this anthropological attempt to the phenomenon did not remain alone in the field so far. Another outstanding writer, ethnographer and anthropologist, Michel Leiris, turned his mind to one of his major loves, opera, as well. As an untrained lover of music, he discerned fascinating patterns of cultural movement in opera and reveals his personal predilection in this great genre. However, his vision of opera was almost in diametrical opposition to what Lévi-Strauss appreciated in the opera. Roughly, for Leiris it was a social context that counts in the opera, including the production of spectacular reality, the rituality of ecstatic event, and the experience of audience.

Leiris began his writing career as a poet associated with the Surrealist movement, but he later made major contributions as an art critic and anthropologist, as well as through his great autobiographical confession, *L'Âge d'Homme (Manhood)*. His intellectual legacy places him at important points of intersection within French cultural history. He actively participated in some of the most striking intellectual and artistic movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: surrealism in the twenties, ethnography in the thirties and existentialism in the forties. His multi-volume autobiography *La Règle du jeu* stands as a model form of self-enquiry in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In *Operratiques (Operarratics)*, written in the form of private reviews, short reflections and diary-like notations, he turns his philosophical concerns about all aspects of opera, its form, its meaning, its performance, its ceremonialism, its rituality, its aesthetics, and its social history.

It seems that opera represents a highly negotiated ritual that always, from its very beginnings till now, matters in a society. It is therefore, perhaps, not surprising that Michel Leiris became redundantly interested in the ritual and spectacle aspect of opera. Social anthropologist Jean Jamin who edited *Operratics* introduces some revealing details about how this Leiris operatic work was composed:

Along with his travel and field notebooks, and the *Diary* that he kept intermittently from 1922 through 1989, *Operratics* is one of the major manuscripts that remained unpublished at the death of Michel Leiris, who left it in my care for possible future publication. Neither a treatise, nor an essay, nor a chronicle, nor even a little encyclopedia – in spite of the impression created by the titles he gave to each of the fragments that make up this work (“Operas on Film,” “Opera and Folklore,” “Opera and Bullfighting,” “Transvestites,” “The Marvellous in Wagner and Verdi,” “Verism,” etc.) – *Operratics* is first foremost a work of personal

observations and memories of the opera, which fascinated him from a very early age, as he explained in *L'Age d'homme*. [...] ... we could say that Michel Leiris was not the *child of the libraries* ... but rather a *child of the opera*, indeed a *child of the spectacle*, so dominant is the visual aspect of what he both retains from and expects of opera, as he was most likely more attracted by the performance itself than by the music. (Jamin in Leiris 2001: 11-12).

It can be argued that Leiris' interest in the opera is quite different from Lévi-Strauss' inclination to opera. Michel Leiris began to note his views, impressions and memories of the opera in January of 1959. At more or less the same time he began writing *Fibrilles*, the third volume of *La Règle du jeu* where he speaks more clearly of opera not only as an allegory of his presence in the world ("life like an opera"), but also as the organizing principle of this long chapter, *The Proud, the proud* ..., which does not lack certain Verist elements, with the episode of his unsuccessful suicide attempt which, putting Leiris in the position of becoming his own Franco Alfano, condemns him to finish his book after declaring that he himself had wished to "end it all". Jamin indicates that it could be possible to see here a sort of Leiris' identification with Puccini, composing *Turandot* and already seriously ill with the condition that was to end in death. According to Jamin, *Fibrilles* as well as *Operratics*, whose longest fragment is dedicated exactly to *Turandot*, were written at a time when he himself intended to make amends regarding the barb with which he had struck Puccini's memory, describing him as "that other piece of trash". *Operratics*, which can be considered as the technical and, in a way, "harmonic" – in the musical sense – side of *Fibrilles*, has nevertheless remained unfinished. The fragments that compose it, each one embellished with a title and dedicated to a particular theme, have remained in the form of note cards, whose organization and classification represented the raw material of Leiris' books (Jamin in Leiris 2001: 12-13). Even the title of the book, e.g. *Operratics* has its specific meaning: it is constructed from a juxtaposition of two terms – *opera* and *erratic* – which, penetrating one another, constitute a play on words, forming what could be called a "portmanteau words". The title chosen by Michel Leiris places this work under the sign of what he considered to be one of his "*aficiones*", with his outbursts and silences, his manias and digressions, and his interrogations too. In the beginning of this *Operratics* Leiris described himself as a "*mere opera lover (neither a musician not a man of the theater) publishing his views on opera*" coming "*from an outsider, a member of the 'good public'*" (Leiris 2001: 17). For him, opera is any theatrical work whose basic medium is song, including musicals and lyric drama (*ibid.*, 20). However, he adds that the definition of opera as theater sung is not sufficient, as certain great ritual events – with protagonists in costume, mimed actions, music and choruses – are nearly operas (*ibid.*, 21-22). In other words, opera is not only about music but spectacular event as well. This is why the travestism, rooted in sexuality, in the opera appears as charming masquerade and not as unacceptable perversion or moral transgression. These kinds of transformations are, according to him, the essence of theatre (*ibid.*, 40). Given opera's "festive" character, more pronounced than in other forms of theatrical entertainment and other arts in general, one

would expect, Leiris writes, eroticism to play a greater role on the stage, but remained more a special element on the part of the audience:

In the nineteenth century – which can be considered opera’s “great century”, when opera was truly a festive occasion since men attended in evening dress and women in low-cut gowns – it was not necessary to present eroticism on the stage, since it was physically present in the hall ... (Leiris 2001: 51)

Wagner’s desire to create a theatre for the people, in which the old Germanic myths could come to life, came true in its most bizarre form. The Bayreuth festival in Wagner’s temple *Festspielhaus* is like a closed and almost sterile social structure:

Wishing – according to Bayreuth custom – to exclude bravos since they are the very opposite of religious contemplation; in fact, wishing to suppress any public intervention and – reducing it to passivity – hinder any real communication between the artists and it (communication, by definition, cannot be unilateral), does this not come down to stripping the theatrical event of its “ritual party” aspect: this noisily demonstrated communion. (Leiris 2001: 184)

It is an annual ceremony difficult to access for wider publics, a ritual frequented by the consecrated. Its social exclusivity can be best explicated in the ritual of waiting, even many years, for the tickets. Italian verism, which can be taken as a kind of response to dominant Wagnerian ideology, turned to everyday life and social problems of ordinary people, for instance, with Mascagni’s peasant opera *Cavalleria rusticana* and Puccini’s social opera *La Bohème*. Leiris’ inclination to verism, particularly to Puccini, is well explicated on different pages of the *Operratics* where he also described his trip to Torre del Lago in Tuscany to visit Puccini’s villa.

Leiris’ tendency to relate opera with its social aspects is well established through relating opera with different manifestation of opera’s sociability, such as celebration, bullfighting, gastronomy, superstar system, folklore, operatic pilgrimages and occasions. As Jean Jamin pointed out, Michel Leiris tended to consider opera as spectacle:

From a sociological point of view, opera is the spectacle for which the public is still most likely to get dressed up. (Leiris 2001: 185)

Even more, Leiris does not forget to mention certain technical elements, such as the importance of lustre in the theatre, which accelerates the spectacularity of interior. Before, the candles were in function to conjure up the spectacular scenery of light which pushed the audience to feel like being on the stage. Such supposedly accidental elements were integrated into life of audience and not merely embellished it, like a

superfluous ornament. Meaningfully, older opera halls illustrate a desirable fusion of theatre and audience's life. Theater houses stand, Leiris states, on what was once a place for spectacles. In brief, older halls were not only in function of seeing the performance on the stage; they fit as well for a celebration and festivities.

Both Claude Lévi-Strauss and Michel Leiris were not only great opera lovers and experts, but also introduced operatic, musical and theatrical motifs into their works: the former attached importance to Wagner, and the latter to Puccini, Verdi and Leoncavallo. Their approach, however, differed totally, as evidenced especially by a text—replica which Lévi-Strauss wrote after the posthumous publication of Leiris' *Operratiques* – a collection of extracts and fragments about the opera. The author of *Structural Anthropology* remained sensitive to purely musical questions: the essential role of the score (Mâche 1999: 154-168), while Leiris focused on the libretto (Louis-René des Forêts recalled: “*The striking feature of our conversations, which I confirmed while reading a collection of his posthumous notes entitled Operratiques, was the fact that he was interested less in music as such, and more in the spectacle and, primarily, in the contents of the libretto. Here he was unbeatable, capable of recounting in detail the plot of every opera, even if it was immensely convoluted and improbable, as is frequently the case with Verdi*”) and, first and foremost, on the spectacle itself. This fundamental controversy about the character of opera was presented also by Jean Jamin, another anthropologist, ethnologist and a friend of Michel Leiris. If Lévi-Strauss was interested particularly in the orchestral score, structure of music and, naturally, Wagnerian *Musikdrama*, then Leiris' passion and conception of opera was different. He was indifferent to musical and structural problems in opera as he was passionately concerned with the spectacle, the libretto, the opera-goers, the auditorium, the rite. For him, opera is *une espèce de cérémonie d'aller à l'opéra* (Jamin 1999: 34-7). Jean Jamin, in his article “Sous-entendu. Leiris, Lévi-Strauss et l'opéra” (Reticence: Leiris, Lévi-Strauss and the Opera), established that the attitude towards opera of both anthropologists was very different.

<i>Lévi-Strauss</i>	<i>Leiris</i>
score	libretto
music	plot
work	ceremony, ritual
orchestra pit	stage, scene
mythical & romantic opera	verist & historical opera
Wagner	Puccini, Verdi
structure	spectacle
mathematical nature of opera	passionate nature of opera
not interested in audience	interested in audience
personal event	collective event
“expert” attitude	“dilettante” attitude

**Scheme 2: Two conceptions of opera: Lévi-Strauss and Leiris**

The scheme presents two entirely different conceptions of opera made by two French anthropologists. Even though they shared mutually some anthropological principles in approaching social phenomena their operatic ethnographies and biographies were marked by significant conceptual diversity. If Lévi-Strauss always made clear his conscious taste for music, Leiris was far more interested in social occasion and ceremonialism of opera (Jamin 1999: 36-37): the former was interested in how opera was composed, structured and played, while the latter how opera was staged, performed and perceived. Roughly speaking, whereas Lévi-Strauss preferred the notion of opera as musical work, Leiris rather understood it as social or ritual work, approaching opera from the point of view of an enthusiast who is insightful and not at all musically “doctrinaire”. This difference is also evident in their attendance habit. Lévi-Strauss attended opera, but listened with closed eyes in order to be transported to a magical world miles away from *choses terrestres*, earthly things; actually he vowed not to visit the *Opéra* anymore. Before this vow he regularly attended the performances at this grandest and for centuries the most important and exclusive French temple of music, and probably the France’s most prestigious stage of political drama and national aspiration too. On the other hand, Leiris regularly attended opera with his wife to her dying day in 1988. While there, he enjoyed observing spectators, ceremonial gestures, and the order of ritual in general. For him the operatic experience is also a social occasion and not just a musical structure (Jamin 1999: 41). To speculate, if Lévi-Strauss would have fit better into the ascetic atmosphere of Wagner’s temple *Festspielhaus* in Bayreuth, Leiris would have probably enjoyed the 17<sup>th</sup> century Venetian opera houses known all over Europe for their lavish public status – accessible to all citizens and tourists –, grandiose performances, virtuosic singers and particularly by noisy and spoiled audiences. If Lévi-Strauss’ remarks on opera were exclusively reserved for Wagner or were based mostly on his musical experiences from the secluded *Opéra Garnier*, Leiris built his ideas about opera on the basis of numerous trips to different operatic destinations all over Europe. Due to this, Leiris’ operatic itineraries and engagements show his intention to bring different operatic experiences deriving from different locations, events and operas to one common ground which is his love for this genre.

### **William O. Beeman’s Ethnographic Account From the “Native” Point of View**

Let us now move from the Lévi-Straussian and Leirisian auditorium view on opera to the stage, for many people the most sacred space, where – as Gurnemanz in Act I of Wagner’s *Parsifal* sings – “time becomes space”, where the magic of the craft takes its central place, and where the operatic artism and artistry becomes embodied in flesh, blood, tears, laugh and sweat. Opera is of course a very complex system of different crafts and artistry. However, it seems that throughout its entire history one craft dominated in the field, e.g. the craft of singers. Still, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century singing seems to be the lifeblood of opera, while other elements, such as orchestra, acting, staging, setting, décor, costumes, etc., seem to be important but supplementary.

William Orman Beeman is an American professional opera singer and an associate professor of anthropology at The University of Minnesota, where he is chair of the Department of Anthropology. For many years he was professor of anthropology, theatre, speech, dance, and East Asian studies at Brown University. However, not just an ordinary cultural anthropologist, he is doing something that other anthropologists usually don't: he also sings in opera. From 1996-1999 Beeman sang under contract with *Oper Chemnitz* in the German city of Chemnitz. He also wrote the book *The Third Line: The Opera Performer as Interpreter* (1993) with renowned opera stage director Daniel Helfgot. Their treatise actually provides guidance in dealing with singers' training, vocal teachers, coaches, conductors, and directors, and offers suggestions on how best to approach auditions, recitals, and competitions.

In the book *The Third Line* with Daniel Helfgot, he proposes that performers study the opera score's "third line" – movement, focus, facial expression and vocal inflections that can be naturally derived from the interaction of text and music – to transform the score into reality on the stage. The authors say: "*The book shows singers systematically how to go analyzing the opera score for dramatic and interpretative opportunities often ignored in the opera world ... material on auditions, career management ...*" Every opera performer is, according to Beeman and Helfgot, inescapably an actor as well as a vocalist. In order to survive as marketable artists in an increasingly competitive environment, opera singers must be able to perform with greater dramatic depth or comedic skill than was ever expected in the past. Yet many performers have difficulty in attaining the twin goals of vocal excellence and credible acting. Most training, whether institutional or private, emphasizes vocal technique to a degree that crowds out the other dimensions of performance. As William O. Beeman and Daniel Helfgot argue in *The Third Line*, opera performers must take charge of their own professional education. Stressing opera interpretation, not simply opera singing, they propose that performers study a "third line" of an opera score. Traditional techniques teach the conventional two lines of the musical score: the text and the music. The third line consists of interpretative dimensions that naturally derive from the interaction of the text and music, including movement on the stage, focus, facial expression, and vocal inflection. It is based on knowledge of the historical, literary, and cultural contexts of opera characters as well as the understanding of musical styles and performance practices.

When Beeman lived and worked full time at Chemnitz Opera, he also used the German stage for research. As a matter of fact, it's hardly to imagine better and more "native", literally onstage, access to an operatic ethnography than his as singer. Yet his research as an academic often focused on the performing, allowing him the opportunity to be on both stages at once. The performances are part of his research endeavour. "*At some point I wanted to be able to talk about performances and performing from the standpoint of the inside ... not just be an observer but to find out what it's like to perform*"<sup>1</sup>, said

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<sup>1</sup> These quotations are from the Kristen Lans' article "Anthropologist Beeman took to German stage for research" published here [http://www.brown.edu/Administration/George\\_Street\\_Journal/v22/v22n20/opera.html](http://www.brown.edu/Administration/George_Street_Journal/v22/v22n20/opera.html).

Beeman, who used one of the methods available to anthropologists, participant observation, to conduct his research. In his book, he reveals the “backstage life” of singers: the demanding work schedule in European and American opera houses. As he shows, even getting on to the stage is today very demanding: singers have to sell all their belongings and hit the road for every possible audition around the world in order to get hired as an opera singer. When his rich, resonant bass voice caught the attention of those holding auditions for the theatre company in Chemnitz, Beeman took a leave from teaching to accept a position there: *“I often think my schedule here is pretty demanding, but I work harder in the theater than I do here, just in terms of sheer time commitment. It’s serious work ... you have to live and breathe the theater.”* He describes his operatic life in Chemnitz opera house as a hard working experience. Practice was from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. every day, followed by another rehearsal or a performance from 6 to 10 p.m. Unlike opera companies in Germany which produce two or three shows a year and stage performances at the weekends, the Chemnitz Opera would produce more than two dozen shows, requiring Beeman to know as many different parts. He performed up to 20 nights a month in a variety of shows. With such a schedule, one of a singer’s biggest worries is illness. Each cast member has his or her own routines for keeping vocal chords in shape. One Russian singer with whom Beeman worked would drink a glass of warm beer an hour before each performance. Beeman would not drink even a single beer within a day of performing because, he said, alcohol would dry out his vocal chords: *“Singing is very much like athletics, it’s extraordinarily physical. ... It’s not just learning the notes and the words. Learning to sing a part in an opera is like learning an Olympic routine as an ice skater. It requires a great deal of experience to negotiate a performance from beginning to end.”* In addition to experience, a singer must have a passion for performing. Those factors coupled with a little good timing allowed Beeman to make a double career; being an academic and succeeding at the unusual task of becoming a professional opera singer, mid-life. If he were a tenor it would be almost impossible for that to happen, but basses are inevitably older characters, like the fathers and grandfathers, in the opera. In addition to being cast in older roles, there is another benefit that bass singers have, said Beeman: While tenors and sopranos have typically finished performing by their mid-50s, basses who take care of themselves can probably sing to the end of their lives. When Beeman wasn’t on stage in Germany, he assumed the role of anthropologist, interviewing those who worked in the theatre while they lunched in the canteen. Chemnitz employs some 500 people in its theatre organization. That includes everyone who works in the organization’s three houses: opera house, playhouse and puppet theatre. The theatres are public entities and funded through taxes, which allows the cheapest theatre ticket to cost about the same as a U.S. movie ticket, said Beeman.

His research, as well as his experience of performing, explores such subjects as how the opera house is organized, how the business and inner workings of opera function, what it means to be an artist, how to start character research, how to interpret arias for the opera stage and the concert stage, how to pursue a career in opera, how singers can deal with “traffic cop” opera directors, how to get at the



emotion underlying the words, how to access the character, acting and staging clues hidden in the music, or how to access the singer's, and the character's, motivation, in a practical, bar-by-bar method, using the music itself as a guide, and last but not least, how to look good on the stage and come across well to the audience.

In the ethnographic epiphany for singers, *The Third Line*, Beeman with Helfgot addresses, from an onstage perspective, different facets of the profession, including the idea that as the profession of opera has changed so has the expectations of the modern opera performer. Both Beeman and Helfgot write about those huge expectations, why they exist, and how performers are expected to rise to the challenge. Today's singers should not be only vocalists, they claim, but thoroughly prepared, complete performers. This ethnographically informed guide for opera singers leads us to two conclusions important not only for singers but for broader public as well. The first is that for the opera singer, art does not begin when the curtain goes up and ends when it goes down but far beyond. This study well illustrates that being an opera singer does not mean to be a definite product of adoration. On the contrary, the opera singer is historically and socially constructed figure as he or she embodies inherited techniques, skills, traditions, trends, etc. And the second conclusion is that singing is not an activity kept in a magical bubble of the enchanting or sacred world. It is far from that. It is a serious career full of rigorous training, painstaking work and tedious rehearsal, what will be more explicitly addressed in the next chapter.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the persona of the singer is a key aspect of opera's culture. We are, according to social anthropologist Paul Atkinson, accustomed to the larger-than-life global opera "stars" who partake of modern celebrity culture. Those superstar singer's lives are enacted on multiple occasions. But Atkinson's ethnography of singers' narratives reveals far more realistic performance of singers' lives and voices than just sensational stories about operatic divas. Both Beeman's as well as Atkinson's ethnographic accounts convince us that the everyday work of the opera company is not about glamour. Atkinson in his operatic ethnography of singers' lives carried out among singers working within the Welsh National Opera says that there is nothing glamorous about the life and work of the normal opera singer. But Atkinson stresses that the singer in opera always has a dual identity: she or he is performing a character in the opera, and is simultaneously performing her or his own identity *as* singer. Singers frequently construct their biographical accounts in terms of the cultural capital of family and immediate social context in order to account for their abilities. Singing and having a voice are presented almost as a happenstance, rather than something that was explicitly an ambition (Atkinson 2006a: 164, 168).

Atkinson also notices that when singers produce and perform narratives of self and career, they talk about their voice in characteristic ways. They also talk about singing as something that has been a feature of their lives from an early stage. The voice and singing therefore make themselves felt, almost irrespective or independently to the volition of the singer herself or himself. It is not that the ability to sing is, continues Atkinson, portrayed as a personal capacity or competence. Rather, "the voice" exists as

an independent agent. The voice exists, and is something that has to be found and used. In this recurrent type of biographical narrative, becoming a singer is not so much the realization of a personal ambition as the alignment of the singer's personal identity with that of the voice. The narratives are developed as if the singer and the voice were two different identities or agencies that have developed more or less independently. Due to this, the voice can almost have a life of its own, independently of the perceptions and intentions of the singer. Biographies of some iconized singers, for instance Maria Callas's is probably the most notorious one in that sense, support this Atkinson's ethnographic observation. The voice or the type of voice reveals the singer's true identity in a way that does not depend on the will of the performer. Atkinson therefore says: "*The voice determines what the singer will sing, rather than the singer's determination what the voice will produce*" (Atkinson 2006a: 179-180). However, the voice is not only a gift or an idiom of talent but rather the object of reflexive work and training. Atkinson's ethnography reveals that singers talk about their voice as an object of technical development. It may be thought of and spoken of as an "instrument". Many singers in my ethnography carried out at the Ljubljana and Maribor Opera similarly described their singing organ in terms of "the most fragile instrument" or "the only instrument that is not visible to its musician". Singers usually do not produce accounts of voice as something what is the end product of their training. Rather, the voice is described as an object which is a dynamic, very alive thing, and something what is changing all the time. The Slovenian soprano Ana Pucar Jerič described in the interview her feelings of voice like this:

Everyday the voice can be different. It is changing all the time in relation to singer's everyday feelings and spirits. It is a very alive thing. This is why the constant training of the voice is of crucial importance for us, singers, in order to control our fragile organ as much as possible and keep it in a good shape. The voice is never trained enough. Always you find something to correct in it.

The voice, therefore, can be "worked on". It is an object of rigorous and very personal training rather than a personal attribute. Singers' accounts of their voices are also couched in terms of physical fitness and even athleticism. When describing singing, William Beeman too, as we could see in the previous pages, made a very clear reference to a sporting activity. This is why Atkinson explains that the emphasis on technique and working on the voice brings together the embodiment of singing as an intensely physical activity and the instrumental sense of the voice as something to be worked on. However, Atkinson admits that operatic singing can be indeed "ecstatic" in various ways. Various singers he has talked to have described singing not only in technical terms, but also in terms of a unique "high" or of an "orgasmic" feeling. Singing therefore offers the ecstatic moments in opera for singers too (Atkinson 2006a: 193). But he also admits that he tried to avoid the hysterical portrayals of operas, divas, and the like, so that he could instead convey the everyday work that goes into the opera. He says: "*My interest is, therefore, the antithesis of one stressing the hysterical, the excessive, or the monstrous*" (Atkinson 2006a:

190). Singers in the Atkinson's ethnography express themselves in terms of a reflexive and self-conscious management of the voice. Such accounts capture the tension between the voice as a gift or a talent, and the voice as an object of cultivation. Of course, idioms of talent are among the key narrative topics of singers' autobiographical accounts too. The themes of chance and luck are interlinked with accounts of hard work and thankless tasks. Small or undesirable roles, chorus work, and contracts as a cover provide the counterpoint to the unforeseen and the fortuitous (Atkinson 2006a: 180-183). In brief, both glamorous appearances on stage as well as off-stage painstaking training and some less glamorous activities in their everyday life constitute the repertoire of singers' self-production through which opera singers constitute their professional identities.

### **Denis Laborde's and Paul Atkinson's Ethnographies on Making an Opera**

The production of an opera from the first idea to the final presentation in front of the audience is a complex cultural machinery performing a very live organism, which has been explored by Denis Laborde, an ethnologist, musical anthropologist, musician and researcher at the *Centre national de la recherche scientifique* and collaborator at the *École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS)* in Paris, as well as by Paul Atkinson, a social anthropologist at the Cardiff School of Social Sciences, Wales, and the author or (co)editor of several essential volumes on principles in practicing qualitative research and ethnography has explored the social and institutional framework of opera performance through his fieldwork with the internationally known Welsh National Opera company.

Laborde studied at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique, Paris, and as a conductor dedicated himself to contemporary music. He then studied anthropology at *EHESS*, working on musical ethnology in Western cultures. Today, his work is mostly dedicated to an anthropology of music practised in Western societies, by exploring *les lieux de musique*, festivals and contemporary musical creativity. For our study he is interesting because he conducted an ethnographic research of Steve Reich's opera *Three Tales*. Between 1997 and 2002 he worked with Modern Ensemble from Frankfurt as participant observer, exploring the background, or rather, the "backstage" of the production of the last Reich's opera.

The operatic work *Three Tales* created by the American minimalist composer Steve Reich and video director Beryl Korot was presented by *Frankfurt Modern Ensemble* the first time on the 11<sup>th</sup> May 2002 in Vienna, within the framework of *Wiener Festwochen*. Later, this piece of art under the direction of Modern Ensemble, made a great tour all over Europe, from Amsterdam, Lisbon, Baden-Baden, London, Turin, Paris to Berlin. While the *Steve Reich Ensemble* run by the *Steve Reich Foundation* made a tour with this opera across United States and Australia. Denis Laborde decided to join this project as a member of technical team of Modern Ensemble in 1997, when the extract of the first act was presented in Paris within the framework of *Festival d'Automne*. This is how he became mobilized in this collective project concerning the creation of a particular piece of art, which saw the light 2002 in Vienna. However,

Laborde didn't take his part in this project as a regular ethnographer. Well equipped with formal musical and ethnological formation his role certainly went beyond the usual practice of ethnography in music and art. This is how he himself describes his triply informed ethnographic experience:

Even though my attitude here is the attitude of an ethnologist, this attitude is nevertheless triply informed. On the one hand, this attitude consists of the viewpoint of a member of the technical team of *Modern Ensemble*, since I participate in elaboration of this work "from the inside". On the other hand, it is also the viewpoint of a CNRS ethnographer, since my purpose is to produce, on the basis of the observed facts, a discourse with the desired scientific label. Finally, it is also the viewpoint of a musician, since I participated as an orchestra conductor in similar productions in the past. Because the ethnologist I have become cannot completely prevail over the orchestra conductor I was, educated in the Paris *Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique* and working myself in the first part of my life as a conductor of contemporary creations. (Laborde 2006: 122)

While doing the fieldwork of how an opera is produced today he found himself in permanent tension between two social positions on the terrain, namely between the observer and the observed. He was faced on the ground, he explicates, by certain methodological difficulties concerning the enormous quantity of actions: the problem is that so much is happening at the same time while one is trying to observe the different processes of creating an opera. Because of this Laborde proposes a *plaidoyer* for a dynamic, contextual and anti-intellectual approach to action which enables one to explore more concretely how Western societies produce music (Laborde 2001: 275-304; 2006: 121). Laborde's ethnography shows that the production of an opera is not only about performing a musical work (a product), but also a social work (a process). He stresses the processual nature of producing opera as music and art.<sup>2</sup>

Paul Atkinson's research based, as he stresses in his book *Everyday Arias: An Operatic Ethnography* from 2006, on the value of the ethnographic participant observation in various settings of the opera's day-to-day work of the company, with particular emphasis on the processes of rehearsal and performance of specific operas, took place over several years and was a mixture of full-time and part-time research (2006a: 25). Somewhere in the preface, he states that his commitment to work with the opera company stemmed from two streams of interest. On the one hand, there was his long-standing interest in opera itself as he became, in Cardiff, a serious operagoer on a regular basis. On the other hand, he had, as he says, an intellectual interest in performance more generally.

When doing his fieldwork, he utilized a dramaturgical framework to analyze the embodied craft of opera performance. Based on his ethnographic work with the Welsh National Opera, his main intention was to reveal how, through tedious repetition and rehearsal, opera embodies gesture to stylistically

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<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Maruška Svašek (2007) too defines art as social process and proposes a processual relativist approach to art production.

convey meaning in a performance that is both a visual and musical (Atkinson 2004: 100). As he says, he builds his approach to opera performance from the symbolic interactionist tradition. Due to this, Atkinson in his operatic ethnography refers much to the Goffmanesque framework. However, his analysis reverses, as he says himself, the Goffmanesque analysis. Rather than using the theatre to make sense of everyday life, Atkinson uses the sociology of everyday life to make sense of the work of music-theatre (Atkinson 2006a: 51-52). That means that he understands opera performance as the complex relations between music, words, intentions, motives, emotions, embodied gestures, and “*bodies which are couched to move and interact in the physical space of the stage*” (Atkinson 2006b: 95). Accordingly, the opera performer acts on the stage like a symbolic-interactionist interpreter, producing meaningful symbols, gestures, emotions, actions and reactions. His ethnography of an opera company thus explores the relationship between the everyday life of music-theatre (the collective) and the performer (the individual). Certainly, the singers are the most representative protagonists of the embodiment of performance. As he has emphasized in his research, the accomplishment of opera is profoundly physical work, as performing opera is eminently embodied activity. Even operatic singing is not just like a singing of windswept lark on a bright day, but it demands a highly developed, physically supported voice (Atkinson 2006b: 104-105).

Laborde’s as well as Atkinson’s ethnographic accounts indicate that the production of an opera is a complex cultural machinery of both an individual physical labour as well as a collective practice. The work that people do in an opera company is a key site for understanding both material and cultural reproduction of opera world. The transformations which singers, musicians, conductors, répétiteurs, producers and other profiles produce through work within an opera company can be read, as Atkinson explicitly shows, as distinct cultural markers. For instance, the singer, the répétiteur and the producer not only transform musical score through work, but the singer, the répétiteur and the producer are transformed through the work they do as well. Both ethnographies, Laborde’s and Atkinson’s, speak in favour of dynamic and interactionist interpretation of opera performance where different monads, like the concrete work embodied by individuals and the social dramaturgy performed by the collective, are interactionally produced and imagined. Studying these elements of an opera company lead them to the conclusion that opera is a collective experience on all levels. Both namely stress the great complexity of different social processes which define an opera company and make its production possible.

The best way to see how an opera is produced and enacted is therefore to enter the theatre, including the rehearsal studios, the onstage, the backstage as well as the auditorium, in order to follow the collective process of the realization of an opera. And this is exactly what Atkinson and Laborde did. They were observing the routine work of the rehearsal studio and the theatre and how “operatic tribes” in the opera company negotiate a social reality with each other, performers with répétiteurs and producers, producers with conductors, producers with opera company’s managers, etc., in order to create extraordinary performances through the everyday work.

Atkinson and Laborde show that making of an opera is – whether within a residential or touring opera company – a shared, collective undertaking in which the ordinary world of theatrical work intersects with the constructed world of the artwork or the dramatic performance. The performance is not created *ex nihilo*. It is produced, enacted and strongly linked at different levels of where performances are made, that is at the level of training, workshop, rehearsal process, practical management, and, in the last instance, the opera company itself. It is brought into being, into a physical and symbolic space, that is already partly constituted by the shared cultural codes and conventions of the performance community. The performance community embraces a variety of professional and lay interpreters and performers. The performance community includes the singers, the producer/director, the designer, the technical staff, the critics, the audience, and others directly or indirectly engaged with producing, witnessing, and evaluating the performed event. There are systems of signification and connotation that are shared among them. Furthermore, there is interpretative work by specialists that frames the performance and suggests interpretative contexts for practitioners and audiences. Program notes, published reviews, booklets of notes, CDs, DVDs and so on are themselves elements in the codes of cultural significance.

So these two operatic ethnographies show that if we are to understand how opera is enacted and reproduced, we need to take account of the practical dramaturgy of everyday rehearsal and performance. Each new production of the opera reproduces codes and conventions of opera itself and, consequently, recreates the canon. It recreates the reproduction that constitutes the styles, genres, characters, situations, emotions, and performance careers of operas. Through such practically oriented ethnographic investigation of how the opera's cultural machinery produces and reproduces the collective management and enactment of performance we can get a clearer view into the everyday accomplishment of opera as staged work. Atkinson in his operatic ethnography describes how he was following in 2000 rehearsals of the Welsh National Opera's production of *The Queen of Spades*, or *Pique Dame*, one of the Tchaikovsky's best-known operas, in their entirety, and attending several performances in Cardiff and elsewhere. Through this sustained fieldwork in the Welsh National Opera studios he was able to follow how such work is achieved, how characters, motives, and actions are negotiated in the collective work of the rehearsal studio, how producers, répétiteurs, performers, and others negotiate the processes of rehearsal and their outcomes, how an opera is made and remade, and how performances are replicated in revivals and by understudies. He saw that what the entire team of producers does is *cultural production*, and that such everyday work depends upon networks of negotiated performance. This is why he describes in details how singers and producers with names and surnames involved in this production worked together to create plausible actions and plausible characters within the framework of the overall production. He found out that building characters is culturally negotiated. The repertoire of gestures is culturally negotiated. Acting and singing is culturally negotiated. Emotions on the stage are culturally negotiated. The entire machinery of making an opera as production and performance is culturally

negotiated. By this he tends to say that it is socio-historically determined and not just the result of an imaginative exercise or a matter of purely intellectual reflection.

Opera is frequently represented in terms of excess, transgression, mundane ecstasy or glamorous world. But this is not, Atkinson's and Laborde's accounts show, the everyday reality that underpins the enactment of operatic machinery. The moments of musical and theatrical transcendence are the results of and are generated by the long periods of preparation and repetition. The extraordinary thus becomes routinized. The extraordinariness of operatic magic is therefore grounded in the careful preparation of rehearsal, and in the thoroughly embodied work of learning and performing. The socially organized routines of rehearsal and repetition make possible performances that transcend the mundane experience of their original enactment. Atkinson's and Laborde's studies show how the opera production follows a trajectory from the ordinary and the profane through to the sacred spaces and times of the first-night performance. It moves from a world of ordinary appearances to the world of transformed appearances. The performance that transcends the mundane, that is recognizably special to those who are competent to interpret performances, is grounded in numerous ordinary activities. The routine and repetitious work of the opera rehearsal studio, and the repeated performances in the theatre, are entirely characteristic of the everyday work through which skill and excellence are produced. But scandals, excess, hysteria, gossip and other similar operatic exhibitions are part of the eccentric operatic folklore and reality too. And anthropologists are well equipped with analytical tools in order to approach such aspects of operatic phenomenon in an analytical way. Both Atkinson's and Laborde's ethnographic accounts are exemplary case studies showing how ethnographers and anthropologists can focus on such eccentricities pertinently – particularly on the ways how they are socially and culturally constructed – not that they produce them. Both Laborde and Atkinson, whose approach to opera is from the off-stage perspective, stress the great complexity of different social processes which define an opera company and make its production possible.

At the opera, the extraordinary is repeatedly achieved through ordinary actions. The repetitious round of practice and rehearsal, and the embodied work of performance, are prerequisites to the collective achievement of the remarkable. Events and performances that transcend the mundane must nevertheless be understood in terms of the everyday work that makes them possible (Atkinson 2006a: 187-199). Atkinson throughout his operatic ethnography mindfully provides detailed, empirical accounts of how opera as cultural phenomenon is produced and enacted within a particular opera company, and how the complex social circumstances of performative acts and the collective social activities are negotiated in order to translate works into events. Laborde and Atkinson build the cultural analysis of how an opera is produced on the basis of their ethnographic work within two specific European companies, Frankfurt Modern Ensemble and Welsh National Opera. But many conclusions they make are so general that can be transferable to other European companies too, or can help in understanding how an opera is made and enacted within an opera company at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **Author's Ethnographic Commitments to Opera: When Anthropological Work Meets Musicological Canon**

In 2001 and 2002 I undertook extensive fieldwork<sup>3</sup> into the Slovenian operatic sphere, including both Slovenian opera houses, in Ljubljana and Maribor, and invited into the ethnography also particular informants from other cultural, academic or administrative institutions related to the topic, such as the biggest Slovenian cultural centre Cankarjev dom, the Slovenian Philharmonic, the Slovenian National Radio and Television, Ministry of culture, Academy of Music, and some experts from Slovenian musicology. Namely, all these institutions are in a one way or another involved into the production of opera's world in this country. If some of them are not entirely directly involved into the production of operatic art, each of them contribute its specific part to the production of something what I call the national operatic habitus<sup>4</sup>.

The institutionally based "operatic geography" sketched above mainly defined my terrain of doing ethnography. So, from all these various levels of operatic domains which employ the institutional affinity to opera world in Slovenia I have gained a very colourful and multifariously insightful ethnography. Even though both opera houses were in the main focus of my empirical investigation simply because they represent the centre of Slovenian operatic habitus, they were not the only my terrain. My terrain was actually spread through the entire nationally codified operatic habitus. Due to this, my terrain was not limited to one particular institution or cultural organization but rather defined by specific locations which are physically or geographically dispersed. In other words, my terrain is socially constructed space of making a particular cultural activity within a particular national territory.

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<sup>3</sup> When pursuing my anthropologically informed research "at home" (Jackson 1987; Peirano 1998:105–128) and programming my fieldwork, I was essentially assisted by the texts of fundamental relevance in the field of methodology and epistemology of social anthropology, such as the studies of Sanjek (1990), James, Hockey & Dawson (1997), Ingold (1996, sections 1-9, 99-146, 147-198), Bernard (1988), Hammersley & Atkinson (1992) and Clifford & Marcus (1986). Otherwise, my anthropologically informed work on opera resulted in three books. The first book *Reprezentacije opere* [The Representations of Opera] published in 2003 brings an extensive ethnographic research of the recent structural, institutional, financial and other problems in the opera system in Slovenia, including the analysis of national cultural policy and representations of opera in Slovenian media. The second book from 2005 entitled *Antropologija opere* [The Anthropology of Opera] is a historic-anthropological and socio-anthropological study of academic discourses and intellectual traditions which dealt with opera. The third work, an essay written in French *Opéra dans l'arène du provincialisme et du nationalisme* [Opera in the Arena of Provincialism and Nationalism] and published in February 2006 by Parisian publisher *Éditions le Manuscrit*, introduces briefly Slovenian operatic culture to francophone readers

<sup>4</sup> Here I take the notion of the "habitus" in the Bourdieusque sense, as it seems that Bourdieu's use of this concept transcends the sterility of the opposition between subjectivism and objectivism. For more about his conceptualization of "habitus" see the following Bourdieu's works (1977, 1990, 1998).



As an institutionally diversified operatic habitus can be a very complex social system, the same goes for the access to it. There was no general access to the settings mentioned above. In practice, for each institution I needed to make many formal and informal “access negotiations”. However, both opera houses were the most important locations of doing fieldwork and the access to them was far from being the same. At the Maribor Opera I had a full access to experience the theatrical life and organization, including rehearsal studios for orchestra, the ballet rehearsal hall, the auditorium, the stage, numerous corridors and small rooms behind the scene, the gossip-room and, of course, the theatre’s most social space, the bar. It is funny that the majority of employees thought that I am a new ballet dancer in the house. One of my informants commented my presence in the theatre like this:

I can hardly believe that somebody is interested in our work in such non-sensationalistic way. Usually we have journalists around the house looking for rotten business. At the beginning I thought that you are a new ballet dancer here.

Doing fieldwork there was really inspirational. Still, visiting the performances there is, after more than six years, a very sociable occasion for me, particularly at the first-night after-parties. On the other side, my access to the Ljubljana Opera settings was entirely different and marked by certain obstacles, conflicts and scandalizing. The enthusiasm which has probably stimulated my initial interest in opera has, during my fieldwork, soon bumped into many forms of what we usually call reality. At the very beginning of my ethnographic experience I encountered some sceptical reactions coming from the circles of traditionally and nationally affirmative musicological elite as well as some representatives of Slovenian cultural policy. I had to face even more declining and disqualifying reaction when getting in touch with the managing team of the Ljubljana Opera House which banned me from carrying out fieldwork in the theatre, thus restricting my access to the field. The director explained me why my fieldwork was unnecessary approximately as follows:

You know, we already know everything about opera in Slovenia ... Everything is clear about how things work here. The repertoire is the way it is. The programme strategy is already well-elaborated, as well as the discussions on the significance of opera. The history of opera is well-known. All of these fields have been thoroughly examined by musicologists and music historians long ago, so you can’t discover anything new here.

At that moment I got the impression that the director would be more pleased to see in “his house”, rather than an anthropologist, a journalist who could report on the difficult job he had as a director of a house desperately needing a financial injection and thorough architectural renovation. The fact that I could not freely access to the opera house or the premises where I could encounter employees and thus

get more detailed information on life in this institution was certainly a handicap for my research. If, in the Maribor Opera House, I had a possibility to observe artists at work, I had to find other ways to gain access to informants in the Ljubljana Opera House, sometimes feeling like a real phantom of the opera. But such more or less banal episodes were at that time difficult to avoid, especially if taking into account that I was myself not very familiar with the world I was entering. Quite some years have passed since then and the managing team of the Ljubljana Opera House has changed (with other words, the ancient director was, overnight, replaced by a new, also politically appointed person), but I doubt that the conditions for conducting fieldwork in this institution would nowadays be any more convenient. My initiation into the Slovenian operatic habitus could be probably best described with the term *disenchantment*, by which I refer to the demystification of opera as an enchanting world. The ethnographic work has given me a picture of opera, an analytical view on how the opera world works, which in a way disenchant that world. My fieldwork made me free from many illusions that I have had about the opera world before.

The acquired ethnography has enabled me to analyse very different aspects and elements on the basis of which the operatic habitus in Slovenia is produced and enacted, such as the social position of opera, the presence of scientific and bureaucratic discourses within the habitus, the actors' understanding of the business of opera, the arts management of both opera companies, the institutional organisation of opera life and the organisation of work within the companies, the policy and visions of making the repertoire, the relationship between the companies' management and the employees, the formal and informal social hierarchies and networks, the employment policy, the retirement policy, the distribution of posts and roles, the level of co-operation between collectives and individuals, the working conditions, the funding and problems related to it, social implications of music review and media in the production of opera, and so on (Kotnik 2003). However, all these elements are far beyond the scope of this paper. Due to this, I will rather focus here only on one aspect of my ethnographic investigation which is the position of music-historical and musicological canon within the national operatic habitus.

From the very beginning of my ethnographic work two kinds of discourses have appeared as dominant in the Slovenian operatic habitus, the discourse of cultural bureaucracy<sup>5</sup> and the discourse of Slovenian musicology and music history. When doing my fieldwork at Ljubljana and Maribor Opera my anthropological approach to the opera was negotiated and even contested among certain influential actors with some questions such as "Why are you doing this kind of research?", "Don't you agree that only musicologists are experts for opera?", or "Do you think that you can discover something new what our musicologists and music historians haven't discovered yet?", etc. I found out very quickly that my ethnographic work actually competes with the hegemony of Slovenian music-historical and musicological

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<sup>5</sup> My quite conflicting ethnographic contact with the Slovenian transitional cultural bureaucracy is well described in my article "To Research Opera and Think State (An Open Letter to the Ministry of Culture)", *Monitor ISH*, 4(1-4): 367-377

canon that was internalized by many actors, from cultural bureaucrats, singers to the managers in the opera houses. While doing my fieldwork, I interviewed one Slovenian musicologist from University of Ljubljana who expressed surprise that I was doing “this kind” of research as he felt only musicologists should investigate opera. But one could ask who investigated opera before the 19<sup>th</sup> century when there was no musicology as a science of music. Due to the dominant position of musicological canon among the actors within both opera houses I wanted to conduct my fieldwork in cooperation with musicologists and music historians since they enjoy the reputation of “consecrated connoisseurs” of the operatic field in Slovenia. An eminent Slovenian academic musicologist, one of my informants, who has written some specialised articles on Slovenian opera, clearly disagreed with my ethnographic investigation because he considered it, as he said, to intervene into musicological professional domain. Furthermore, he explained to me that opera has been traditionally the matter of musicology and music history and that this situation should henceforth remain intact. It was not difficult to recognise his intention to perceive my research as a sort of colonising activity. His answer to my question how he can explain the situation that not one single research on opera art as social practice has been so far carried out in Slovenia was that musicologists and music historians were supposedly not interested in problems and gossips spreading among artists and directors of opera houses as well as journalists or music reviewers, but in the objective research of artistic creation on the stage. I asked him why he is then so reserved towards non-musicological research of the opera phenomenon if the research interests and competences regarding opera are so different and without common points. Not at all surprisingly, I was spared from hearing the answer. But it seems that such viewpoints and ways of thinking are not very rare in Slovenia. A similar suggestion was made, for example, in a quick conversation I had with an acquaintance, collaborator of the Academy of Music in Ljubljana.

I would certainly not want to do wrong to either musicology as such or all Slovenian musicologists. I believe some of them could hardly identify themselves with such points of view. But on the other hand, I have to point out that such mental particularisms are not at all rare, which reveals the structural or systematic character of the situation, i.e. a problem of constitution or domestication of this discipline as such in the Slovenian space which is not merely a problem of some individuals’ professional formation or orientation. Namely, each scientific discipline is a social construction and not a natural fact. Scientific disciplines are constructed and their constructed character depends on their position in the globally, and – even more – nationally conceived social space, on their appurtenance and attachment to their local milieu, on their position in the field of specialists or discipline (taking into account that every discipline has its own national traditions and particularities), on obligations to publish their results, on specific forms of

ensorship, and, last but not least, on distances they are capable to achieve in relation to different ideologies and essentialized categorisations.<sup>6</sup>

I started my research on opera in Slovenian opera scene as a fieldworker, but I quickly ascertained that the fieldwork would not be enough and that it would be obligatory to pass from the anthropology of terrain to archives, that means, returning to the historical sources which were until then totally unexploited, unexplored or completely overlooked. The passage from the terrain to the archives – as the terrain itself provided me with fundamental information which further led me to make this passage – initially signified the confrontation with the sources which were and still are considered by dominant Slovenian research traditions, particularly by musicology, music and art history, as the references *par excellence*, as “the” scientific literature, as the incontestable nationally recognized knowledge. This displacement of perspective changed the sources and the references; actually, it transformed “references” into objects of research. Due to this, I started examining the Slovenian dogmatic knowledge about opera and confronting it with the information I obtained from my ethnographic observations.

There are, of course, certain socio-historical reasons why the discourses of musicology and music history have been playing such an important role in understanding Slovenia’s operatic reality. Why the musicological academic canon embodied in such acts like writing national music histories is so resonant within both opera houses? I think this is because this musicological canon has been incorporated into the life of both opera houses at different levels. For instance, the musicological canon was entirely absorbed by cultural bureaucrats in creating the Slovenian national cultural program. Specialists from musicology and music history were often hired as advisers or external experts by the Ministry of Culture in order to frame and legitimate political guidelines and aspirations. Further, certain university professors of musicology and music history were intensely involved in different activities related to both opera houses, such as writing music review, holding a position as members of the board of companies’ directors, or preparing essays for opera programs. Such activities contextualize the operatic habitus into a series of interlocking canons – of musicological scholarship, of historical interpretation, or of social networks among the producers of culture and the cultural entrepreneurs. Due to this, there is a convergence of interest between the producers of opera (such as opera companies, directors, singers, or musicians) and the producers of knowledge (such as musicologists, music historians and other experts whose work frames opera’s reality in the country).

In Slovenia, musicologists and music historians have built their hegemonic position among people who produce or reproduce opera within both opera houses on different levels. They have produced in large different ideas of national history of opera strictly in relation to the affirmative national history. Although it is difficult to talk about the organized Slovenian opera culture before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the

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<sup>6</sup> For more about how musicology as science of music constructed and reflected its scientific canons see Bergeron & Bohlman 1992 and Kerman 2004(1986).

Slovenian musicologists and opera historians strive to prove the existence of particular performances on the Slovenian soil before the 18<sup>th</sup> and even the 17<sup>th</sup> century (see particularly Bedina 1997: 191-202; Kokole 1999: 115-129). For this purpose, they like to expose, for example, the *comedia italiana in musica* which was supposedly performed in Ljubljana in 1600 and which they consider as “opera”, Bonomi’s *tragedia per musica Il Tamerlano* performed in 1732 (Cvetko 1963: 15; Sivec 1976; Grdina 2002), *Belin*, supposedly the “first Slovenian opera” composed by Jakob Zupan in 1780 or 1782 which does not survive, or J. B. Novak’s incidental music of A. T. Linhart’s play which was given the name of *Figaro* (named after the Beaumarchais’s play) and was first performed in 1790 (Sivec 1981). Ciril Cvetko, an eminent Slovenian expert for opera and music, wrote:

The first opera in the Slovenian territory was created before the first Croatian and Serbian operas, and even before the first Russian opera. In 1732, a performance of the *tragedia per musica* “Il Tamerlano” written by maestro di Capella Giuseppe Clemente Bonomi, a bandmaster of the Carniolan vice-regent, the duke Francesco Antonio Sigifrid della Torre e Valassina, took place in the palace of the latter. It is not established as a fact whether the composer was or was not born in Carniola. But there exists a preserved dedication to the vice-regent in which Bonomi speaks about the duchy of Carniola where supposedly lived his ancestress. If he considered himself as a descendant of our region, then we can also consider his opera “Il Tamerlano” as our music-scenic work (Cvetko 1963: 15).

The question of opera in relation to the territory is actually the question of academic invention. Musicologist Dragotin Cvetko insisted in his re(tro)visional article “Slovenian Opera through Time” (1982: 5-12) that it is necessary to draw a distinction between “the opera reproduction on Slovenian soil” and “the production of Slovenian opera”. Since the tradition of the Slovenian opera is relatively poor, he used this distinction in order to prove that opera in Slovenia nevertheless has a long and rich tradition. Let me summarise this distinction with further sub-antinomies in a more illustrative way:

“the Slovenian opera”	“opera in Slovenia”
poor tradition of art form	long tradition of land/territory
“we” (Slovenian composers)	“they” (Italian & German troupes)
“native thing” in nation	“foreign thing” in nation
autochthonous opera	non-autochthonous opera

As this distinction is mostly based on the difference between “us” and “them”, “native” and “foreign”, autochthonous and non-autochthonous opera, the Slovenian musical scholars, faithfully devoted to the mythological aspects of national ideology, have been often caught in a strange contradiction and ambivalence: they wanted both long operatic tradition and its authentic Slovenian

cultural and ethnical character at the same time. For achieving this, opera's tradition needed to be invented by territory, if I use Hobsbawm's vocabulary (1993 [1983]: 1-14). Due to this, the musicological knowledge has been mostly in function of inventing or affirming, rather than reflecting or problematizing national tradition.

Another interesting phenomenon is a dedicative opera historiography. From the 1980s on, the central generator of music-historical and musicological activities were anniversaries of Slovenian opera houses and other political events and jubilees. At one such occasion, Primož Kuret, an eminent music historian, wrote in one of his texts, strangely, about the Slovenian territory as a proto-territory of opera's birth:

Reflecting on the Slovenian opera means considering the possibilities and impossibilities to which the Slovenian culture was exposed in general during different periods of its development ... Finally, reflecting on the Slovenian opera means considering the development of the Slovenian culture and musical consciousness ... Despite all the opportunities and difficulties, opera has proved itself to be a lively organism. We can also state that about the Slovenian territory – where opera has been present from its very beginnings, from its birth in Florence on. Even the cold war between the opera and the environment is a part of the everyday folklore. But something has to be acknowledged: opera with its distinctive role fulfilled all of its responsibilities and abilities in forming the Slovenian culture and musical awaking. Opera achieved this not as a provincial theatre but as a national theatre which was well aware of its obligation (Kuret 1992: 24).

The first musicological attempts had been made in 1920s and 1930s with Josip Mantuani (1860-1933), a musical historian, and Stanko Vurnik (1898-1932), an art historian, musical historiographer, and ethnographer. Both paved the road for the first fundamental scholarly works in the domain of music history produced in the late 1940s and 1950s. Among the works which pioneered in the field of music historiography are Vilko Ukmar's *Zgodovina glasbe [The History of Music]* in 1948, Dragotin Cvetko's *Odmevi glasbene klasike na Slovenskem [Echoes of Musical Classics in Slovenia]* in 1955, and his three-volume *Zgodovina glasbene umetnosti na Slovenskem [History of the Art of Music in Slovenia, I-III]* in 1958, 1959 and 1960 (Sivec 1994: 115-129). Systematic musicological research in Slovenia began in 1962, when the study of the history of music was shifted from the Academy of Music (which became part of Ljubljana University in 1975) to the department of musicology at Ljubljana University. Between 1960s and 1980s the research of opera was mostly oriented towards the historiographical investigation of opera. In this period the first Slovenian histories of opera were written (Klemenčič 1961; C. Cvetko 1963; D. Cvetko 1982; Sivec 1976, 1981). One of the central goals of this nationally inspired positivistic opera historiography was related to the project of a thorough revision of the Slovenian musical past. The primary intention was to place the "birth" of the early Slovenian operatic activities as far beyond the 19<sup>th</sup>

century as possible. Later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, socialist musical historiography tended to reduce the national opera culture to a prestigious cultural artefact of the two opera companies in the country, situated in Ljubljana and in Maribor. The Ljubljana Opera was built in 1892 and immediately became one of the symbolic and material points of unification and political emancipation of the Slovenian nation, while in Maribor the company was founded after the WWI, in 1919, within the framework of the Maribor's *Regional Theatre*.<sup>7</sup>

The period that followed the collapse of the socialist Yugoslavia and the independence of Slovenia in 1991 brought drastic changes in every social domain, from politics, economy, tourism, sport and culture. Opera became part of this new Europeanised political and cultural vocabulary of democracy (Kotnik 2005: 264-273, 2006a: 36-46). In the operatic sphere it brought a new program which adopted the slogan “opera as political and social engagement” and was a kind of a prolongation of some previous musicological attempts from the early 1980s, such as “the Slovenian opera within the European frame”. The entire social change of the 1990s was eminently marked by the “European turn”. In the transitional 1990s, both Slovenian Operas got trapped between the institutional and constitutional problems as well as the social demand: the latter wanted them to become in a way the entrance ticket which would allow the Slovenians to enter the association of the European cultural nations. Like many of the second or third rank opera companies, both houses had to face a multilayered crisis which was quite a typical phenomenon in all the post-socialist societies; the crisis covered the whole range of their activities – from the cultural policy, management and institutional organisation to the repertoire policy. In the early 1990s, the Ljubljana opera house had to face some deep cultural, political, managerial and especially financial problems which mostly manifested on the level of its program. The number of subscriptions and visitors decreased drastically because of the economically and artistically unreasonable degradation of the house's repertoire. Additionally, the birth of the new Slovenian state led to a revitalisation of the debate which began almost a century ago: the question about the constitutional status of the two opera houses which seemed to favour the Ljubljana opera house over the one in Maribor. Whereas the Ljubljana opera house inherited the prestigious status of an institution of national importance even from the pre-Yugoslav and Yugoslav times, the Maribor opera house has always been treated in the political and bureaucratic discourse of the cultural politics as merely a regional institution. Due to this difference, the Ljubljana opera house was automatically entitled to a bigger part of the state budget while the Maribor opera house had to rely to a greater extent on the limited financial support of the municipality of Maribor. As the state sources usually provide a much greater financial stability than the municipal ones, the administration of the Maribor opera house had to fight for several years to get the prestigious national status. In the course

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<sup>7</sup> As the more detailed history of both companies is beyond the scope of this paper, I, therefore, direct the reader to the following literature to read: Grdina 2002, Sivec 1981 (for Ljubljana Opera); Špendal 1982, 1986, 1995 (for Maribor Opera).

of the 1990s many new social representations of distinction were produced, contested and negotiated by Slovenian media, cultural bureaucracy and even by local academic public:

Ljubljana Opera	Maribor Opera
national position	regional status
“centre”	“periphery”
old socialist organisation	modern organisation
managerial and artistic collapse	foundational confusion
lower quality vs more money	higher quality vs less money
opera of traditionalism	opera of modernism

Symptomatically, the national musicological canon more or less avoided such problems and delicate issues related to both opera companies, as musicologists were convinced that such issues are not worthy of any serious scientific scrutiny. For them, such problems related to the national operatic everyday are just a matter of silly gleanings. Now with equal national status, it seems that the Maribor opera company is getting the better over the Ljubljana’s rival. The normal season of both companies extends from September to June. However, the structure of the programs of Ljubljana Opera (with the capacity of 700 seats) and Maribor Opera (with the capacity of 900 seats) is comparable: their repertoire mainly includes the works from the Romanticist era, exemplifying belcanto, verismo, the Viennese and Czech operetta, and some Slavic operatic reminiscences. The works from the pre-Romanticist era as well as the modernist 20<sup>th</sup> century period rarely appear on their programs.

As a matter of fact, opera in Slovenia has not had any significant academic attention and knowledge about it is therefore very modest and confined to traditional topics, approaches and disciplines. Roughly, despite its putative academic position, opera remains more or less under-communicated area of research. From the analytical review of the literature, ranging from the events from the “national” awakening” and the Pan-Slavic movements in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, all the way to the contemporary musicological, music-historical, or ethno-musicological writings, I expected to find out what had already been done in the field of national opera studies and quickly saw that the bulk of the literature about opera comes predominantly from two academically canonized disciplines: musicology on one hand and music history and music scholarship on the other. Opera still seems strange to these Slovenian academic traditions; and the Slovenian academic domestication of opera also remains strange. The biggest problem lies in the epistemological orientation, which mostly observes opera as a pure and phenomenised object of art and music while it completely excludes or ignores the examination of the social procedures that established knowledge about opera, and were created by individual researchers or intellectual traditions. This problem is particularly visible in provincial environments as the Slovenian, where academic traditions and practices are familiar with different ideological interventions and



omnipresent provincialism. The Slovenian “national operatic milieu”, including the privileged academic and cultural communities, has always been a matter of narrow, untouchable circles, and the experts writing about opera have never been considered as problematic or doubtful. I have, in the most meticulous detail, revealed that the domain of opera research in Slovenia is “*still completely dominated by the field of the traditionally oriented part of musicology and musical history which, without any kind of problematisation, inserted opera, their respective subject, into the different ideological (generic, romantic, evolutionist, positivistic, national(istic), progressist, developmentalist, authenticist and essentialist) constructions*” (Kotnik 2005: 380). Slovenian traditional opera studies, however, owe their conception of opera to a much broader understanding of certain notions and terms, such as history, nation, culture, or art.

<b>Dogmatic Perspectives</b>	<b>Reflexive Perspectives</b>
<b>history of opera</b> = chronologically closed structure of composers and musical persons	<b>history of opera</b> = a representation of different shared histories of musical, theatrical, cultural, political, economic, intellectual and academic ideas and practices
<b>nationality of opera</b> = founded on the biological explication of the constitution of nation	<b>nationality of opera</b> = founded on naturalist, nationalist and organicist ideologies
<b>opera as high culture</b> = a denomination which is considered as the real scientific finding	<b>opera as high culture</b> = a denomination which needs to be considered as an ideological construction
<b>operatic art</b> = a sacred thing and the property of musicologists, musical scholars and musicians	<b>operatic art</b> = a social phenomenon
<b>operatic work</b> = a musical work	<b>operatic work</b> = a social work of musical and other practices
<b>composer</b> = the producer of national character of opera and the bearer of the nation's esprit	<b>composer</b> = an artist of certain national territory, cultural milieu or musical place
<b>opera audience</b> = an undefined crowd outside any analysis and reflection	<b>opera audience</b> = a specifically imagined community which is a constituent part of opera system

**Scheme 3: Dogmatic and reflexive comprehension of some categories: history of opera, composer, etc.**

The dogmatic perspectives, through which Slovenian music historians, musicologists, and music scholars have perceived culture, art, music, are mostly about stories they tell others and themselves about their relation to the nation’s habitus. In common-sense uses, nationalism denotes primarily the devotion to one’s nation, and the belief in the higher values of one’s own nation *vis-à-vis* other nations. The definition of nationalism is far from being entirely new. Its core are the definitions suggested especially by Ernest Gellner [according to him, nationalism is “*a theory of political legitimacy, which requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones, and, in particular, that ethnic boundaries within a given*

*state should not separate the power holders from the rest*” (Gellner 1983[1987, 1998]: 1)], or Benedict Anderson [who defined nationalism, as “*cultural artefacts of a particular kind*” (Anderson 1991 [1983]: 4)]. But in our case, conventional nationalism embodying the constitutive elements of a nation is characterised by a specific cultural indigenism which promotes, on the one hand, an ideology of “autochthonous operatic tradition” which is usually argued by the idea of an ethnical indiginity of opera composer, and on the other hand, an ideology of the national authenticity of the opera works performed by Slovenian artists on the Slovenian stages. The authenticity is constructed whether by ethnical or aesthetic criterion. This ideological hologram underlies the entire Slovenian tradition of music and opera studies. In traditional accounts of Slovenian opera studies there is a strongly rooted belief, that the Slovenian opera culture is an “organic thing” deeply engraved or inscribed in the very nature of the Slovenian nation. This belief tells that opera should contribute to an “authentic” and “autochthonous” character of Slovenian music, culture and nation. In accordance with this thinking, opera history should be oriented exclusively towards the confirmation of the national identity. As a consequence, not just opera but all performing arts are predominantly pursued under the cover of its “autochthonous” and “authentic” national character.

With regard to the scheme presented above and to what has been already said, we need to outline some characteristics of the situation of opera studies in Slovenia which urged me to explore other disciplinary, particularly musicological and music-historical, traditions as well: 1) there is an absence of an elaborated field for recent and contemporary opera studies; 2) the research of opera is entirely dominated by traditional musicology and music history: the extremely marginalized position of opera studies within the traditional competent disciplines, the ignorance of foreign achievements in the field, the hegemony of one discourse which disables different or other views, the romanticism and sentimentalization of the opera phenomenon; 3) there is a need to understand the research teleology of traditional orientations in the field: the documentation of Slovenian operatic creativity, the defence of the genesis, the origins and the continuity of “autochthonous” operatic tradition; the production of national musical and operatic history – the production of the national character through music, “the Slovenianness of Slovenian opera”; the promotion of opera as part of national archive; the epistemic inability for understanding opera as real social practice and non-excessive activity; the nationally coloured academic imperative – “Slovenian researchers should explore the Slovenian cultural creativity”. In Slovenia, it has been immoral till recent times to imagine any interpretation of opera outside the provincial motives and affirmative discourses of national awarness and belonging.

When approaching to these dogmatic perspectives, I was, above all, encouraged by Le Goff’s and Nora’s three-volume account on doing history (1974), Stuart Hall’s concept of representation (1997: 13-74), Michel Foucault’s concept of discourse (1969, 1971) which helped me treating all these representations as specific discourses of particular practices. Those discourses and representations are never historically blank and neutral but convey meanings. One can say that ideology is inherent to any

human's eye and consequently that both columns of perspectives suggested above, dogmatic and reflexive ones – the last ones could be in a way labelled as “anthropological” as well – are, in Althusserian terms, representations of the imaginary relationship of their producers to their research objects (Althusser 1993 [1976]). Both claims are very true but the difference of crucial importance is related to how dogmatic, on the one hand, and reflexive perspectives on the other establish their relationship with ideology and epistemology. Epistemology, as the discourse about the nature and status of knowledge, is helpful in understanding what is the authority of a particular knowledge, how a particular theory and a particular practice are argued, how it is possible to say that someone knows something, how someone knows something, what are the implications for a particular knowledge of something of adopting one research procedure rather than another, etc. The questions of epistemological issues are both practical and theoretical: the practical level has to do with method, the theoretical or philosophical forms the basis of methodology, the discourse about method. For the dogmatic knowledge it is typical that tends towards the creation of unchangeable truths and principles. Dogmas are usually based on an authority, not on reflexive findings. For the reflexive knowledge on the other hand, it is characteristic that tends towards a systematic and relational reflection of social realities and phenomena. My position here is that all these perspectives, including my own, labelled here as the anthropological one, are not the real world *per se* but rather the representations of producer's attachment to a particular reality. Due to this, the dogmatic perspectives through which Slovenian music historians, musicologists, and music scholars have perceived culture, art, music, after all opera as well, are mostly about stories they tell others and themselves about their relation to the nation's habitus. As mentioned above, the view on opera is a matter of epistemology (see respectively Lecourt 1972; Bachelard & Lecourt 1974; James & Hockey & Dawson 1997; Audi 1998) and ideology (see Althusser 1993 [1976]; Geertz 1973; Canguilhem 1977), two constitutive elements of any theory as well as practice. Both tell a lot of someone's personal as well as academic commitments in scientific work and beyond as well. For myself I could say that two books, Philippe-Joseph Salazar's brilliantly argued semiotic study *Idéologies de l'opéra* (1980) and Ulrich Weisstein's anthology *The Essence of Opera* (1964) particularly inspired and encouraged me at the start of my own anthropologically oriented research of opera, and indirectly shaped some of my epistemological stances towards opera research in general.<sup>8</sup>

Among many systems of anthropological knowledge, the analysis of historical sources takes the most important part in understanding opera culture as distinctive social phenomenon as well as integral historical part of national identity. The central aim of my analysis was therefore to reflect how Slovenian traditional and still dominant academic accounts in the field of opera research defended by the mainstream flow of musicology, music history, cultural history, art history and related domains, have

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<sup>8</sup> But my work has been influenced by some other writings too, such as Adorno 1962; Lindenberger 1984; Rosselli 1984, 1992; Fulcher 1987; Martorella 1982.

dealt with the Slovenian operatic habitus. The results based on the discourse and textual analysis and enriched by the endeavours of historical and social anthropology, suggest that in Slovenia, opera is predominantly pursued under the cover of its “autochthonous” and “authentic” national character. The findings also suggest that the Slovenian operatic habitus is for these traditions conceived as totally “objective structure”, “natural category” or “self-evident fact”. But the problem is that their constructions of the Slovenian opera culture have been explicated as the very scientific findings rather than a nationally coloured ideological discourse of essentialism, autochthonism, authenticity, organicism, historicism and nationalism. In Slovenia the opera as social phenomenon is still more or less construed in a homogenous nationally affirmative perspective. For the dogmatic imagination it is difficult to see that cultural phenomena are neither “natural”, “organic”, nor “national” *an sich*; they can be considered as such only by naturalistic, organicistic and nationalistic ideologies of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

This entire regressive and retardatory situation in the field of opera studies actually inspired me to start working on opera as anthropologist. At the beginning I thought that I will be doing only an ethnographical investigation of social processes and problems – some of them quite delicate, with long tradition and very excessive manifestations in media as well – with which both Slovenian Opera Houses, in Ljubljana and Maribor, have been facing with for decades. But I immediately realized that I have to reorient my initial research interest because my initial research project evoked huge resistance, fear and sophisticated ignorance by certain dominant actors in the field, such as certain representatives of administration of opera houses, Ministry of Culture and even from the musicology, which reacted discouraging. Thus, I was forced to start investigating these parts of Slovenia’s operatic habitus as well. I was immediately aware that if I would like to understand how the operatic habitus in Slovenia functions then my investigation has to turn towards these monopolistic, privileged and power discourses in the field, namely the discourses from the field of musicology, national cultural policy and bureaucracy, and management of both opera companies.

In this investigation I found that even the most recent Slovenian academic writings about the opera seek to be accepted as the nation’s guardians, witnesses, providers and the propagators of its identity or of its unique and representative cultural image. The irony of this kind of “expertise” and “epistemology”, however, is that it is the experts themselves who want to fulfil the task, which they conceive as their mission for the “nation’s sake”. But far more serious problem is that such orientations are protected by an exceptional political power and even academic canon. For this reason, such views have been easily interiorised also by various mentalities into the state cultural administration, into the opera management, by opera journalists and critics, artists, and others (Kotnik 2003, 2005, 2006a, 2006b). My approach to opera was therefore strongly marked by this provincial situation in Slovenia where opera has been more a subject of continuing and complex ideological commodification than reflection.

## Final Thoughts

It is beyond the scope of this paper to show fully, firstly, that opera can be a relevant object of anthropological research, secondly, that anthropology can offer a pertinent approach to opera, and thirdly, that anthropologists can manage very well in the opera. It was stereotypically proclaimed that social or cultural anthropologists did not go to the opera very often in the past. The author, however, establishes many reasons and endeavours that suggest that opera and anthropology no longer need be alien and distant from each other. If the anthropologists perceived opera as something outside their domain, this traditional antagonism between the culture of opera and the culture of anthropologists has been noticeably overcome during the last three decades. As a result of this, the present article introduces the work of certain anthropologists whose personal and professional affinity for opera has been undoubtedly explicated in their academic and biographical account: Claude Lévi-Strauss, Michel Leiris, William O. Beeman, Denis Laborde, Paul Atkinson, etc. All accounts presented here indicate at least two important things: first, opera can be studied and represented ethnographically; second, operatic ethnographies are about the mutuality and diversity as opera embodies culture and cultural difference. If Lévi-Strauss' "non-European" structural reading of Wagner's *Ring* showed how opera can be almost a mathematically structured musical system, rather like non-European myth, Leiris revealed opera's more passionate, social and ceremonial sides. If Lévi-Strauss' structural reading of opera sounds exclusively Wagnerian, then for Leiris' we could say that his ethnographic comments sound very Puccinian. When Lévi-Strauss finds similarities and makes parallels between European music and non-European myth, he actually builds the structural mutuality within the cultural and symbolic diversity. Further, the work and writing of William O. Beeman proves that an anthropologist can even have a dual career, being both an academic and a professional opera singer. Beeman's professional biography illustrates that the work of anthropologist and that of opera singer is maybe difficult to compare. But it also proves that anthropologists can manage very well in the opera whether as singers or attendants. Two further researchers, French musical anthropologist Denis Laborde and English social anthropologist Paul Atkinson, reveal the backstage life of the modern opera machine by meticulously investigating how an opera is produced today, or what kind of musical, theatrical, cultural and economic lines cross in this complex process. Both show that the making of an opera within an opera company is mostly about how diversity meets mutuality. Opera as staged work is a collective practice where different ideas and profiles are constantly negotiated in order to find a mutual agreement about the production which will harmonize the performance of an opera with the performance of an opera company. Further, the author reveals his own personal and ethnographic commitments to opera in Slovenia, and what makes the anthropology of opera that he has established different from other, particularly dominant, Slovenian musicological and music-historical traditions. As shown, my ethnographic work has had to compete in the field sites of both Slovenian opera houses with the dominant

Slovenian music-historical and musicological canon. Unfortunately, it is the case showing that the diversity – here it is about the disciplinary and epistemological diversity – is not always productive but can evoke tensions and misunderstandings between different social actors or groups who don't understand each other or who don't see the diversity as enrichment in relationships and as opportunity for mutual collaboration. To summarize, all these semi-ethnographic or ethnographic accounts show, in entirely different ways, how the mutuality meets diversity and how the diversity can lead to or digress from the mutuality.

Today, opera is not only one of the liveliest and most polemical areas in musical scholarship and musicology, it has an increasingly high profile in other social sciences and in the humanities. Anthropology is capable of adding a significant contribution to this colorful operatic mosaic. Opera as a musical, compositional, stylistic or aesthetic structure is for someone not expert in music scholarship difficult to understand. But if we take into account opera's social dimension, anthropologists can certainly say something about its "social power" according to the principles, methods and procedures we use to understand social phenomena particularly, as one of the advantages of practising anthropology is, still, doing fieldwork and studying ethnography.

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