



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### Decolonizing the Cultural Heritage of Opera

Lajosi, K.

**DOI**

[10.5117/9789048567638/AHM.2024.015](https://doi.org/10.5117/9789048567638/AHM.2024.015)

**Publication date**

2024

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

AHM Conference 2024: 'Heritage, Memory and Material Culture'

**License**

CC BY-NC

[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Lajosi, K. (2024). Decolonizing the Cultural Heritage of Opera. In I. Saloul, S. Berrebi, N. Munawar, & M. Panico (Eds.), *AHM Conference 2024: 'Heritage, Memory and Material Culture'* (Vol. 3, pp. 93-96). Amsterdam University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.5117/9789048567638/AHM.2024.015>

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

# Decolonizing the Cultural Heritage of Opera

Krisztina Lajosi<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Amsterdam, Faculty of Humanities, Amsterdam, the Netherlands  
\*Corresponding author. Email: [k.k.lajosi@uva.nl](mailto:k.k.lajosi@uva.nl)

## ABSTRACT

Opera, often considered a Eurocentric elitist art, is being reinvented around the globe. Its cross-cultural appeal has been explored by numerous artists, art collectives, activists, and established opera houses. Opera is being hybridized, indigenized, and revitalized, resulting in a new aesthetic and social energy that empowers local communities whose voice was either suppressed or erased by colonial hegemonic practices. The greatest challenges facing contemporary opera are its sustainability and inclusivity. As a traditionally expensive art surviving thanks to its affluent public and state subsidies, opera was naturally associated with social prestige and cultural capital, and deeply intertwined with coloniality. Decolonization in opera means both an artistic method and an epistemic change with social relevance. This paper gives an overview of decolonial operatic practices that seek to liberate the cultural heritage of opera and to reinvent this art, to make it available for marginalized communities and to engage young audiences that were not typically attracted to this genre. Examples from the Global North and the Global South illustrate the demands of artists and activists who are rethinking the potential of opera and its social relevance in the twenty-first century. Opera as a multi-layered cultural heritage matters. The challenge for artists, heritage professionals, and scholars of opera is to create a new decolonial epistemic system within which this genre can continue to thrive.

**Keywords:** Opera, Decolonial, Cultural heritage, Intangible heritage.

Opera is usually not associated with the democratization of art, the promotion of social change and engagement, or diversity, let alone decolonialization. On the contrary, it gained a reputation as a conservative, Eurocentric art perpetuating colonial imaginaries and catering to the taste of the wealthy elite, thus reproducing both its own repertoire and the demographic of its audiences. The classical repertoire worldwide includes a few dozen works by a handful of European composers, mainly from the long 19th century. On the one hand, opera is a finite corpus keeping alive an impressive infrastructure of imposing buildings and expensive productions. However, there is another kind of opera culture, one that produces well-received contemporary works attracting a younger and less affluent public open to musical and dramatic experimentation, also outside of Europe.

Therefore, the image of a rigid and exclusionary art does not always match the practice. There are successful contemporary artist collectives – like the *World Opera Lab* led by [Miranda Lakerveld](#), or *Airport Society* under the direction of [Krystian Lada](#) – which have expanded both the content and the form of opera, making it more diverse and inclusive with respect to global voices and using the aesthetic potential of the genre to promote social change. The core idea of the EU-funded project [TRACTION](#) was to make opera more inclusive and accessible for marginalized groups, inviting them to co-create opera enhanced and supported by digital technology. This project refers to opera as a “signature cultural contribution to European history” and “a cornerstone of European cultural heritage (...) expressing both authority and revolution” (TRACTION 2024). But how European is opera in the

21st century? The Zambian-Norwegian artist Anawana Haloba has challenged the concept of opera as a European art in *Negotiating the Subtle Encounters: An Experimental Opera*. The non-gendered characters in this work transverse geographies, cultures, and societies, drawing attention to environmental racism, the rise of Western nationalism, and the plight of migrants. Haloba found opera the most suitable genre to deconstruct racial prejudice and cultural stereotypes, and to stage decolonialism in a dramatic form (Haloba 2021). The innovative composer Luigi Nono banned the classification of “opera” for his one-act “stage action” titled *Intolleranza 1960*, a piece criticizing capitalism that revolves around the plight of migrants. Nono invited his public to take action instead of being mere passive spectators of “opera”, a concept that could not convey his dynamic future-oriented message. Despite predictions about opera’s death, the genre is still alive and artistically and socially relevant. As Mladen Dolar remarked, “the more opera is dead, the more it flourishes (Dolar 2002, 2-3). Contemporary artists do embrace the name and the potential of the genre, and their creative efforts demonstrate that opera is more dynamic and diverse than its “zombielike” reputation would suggest. In her book *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement* Naomi André has described how opera can be used to reclaim the voices of Black peoples. Stories of repression are re-enacted and unveiled through the transformative power of opera, which can serve as a fertile site for contestation, activism, and social change (André 2018). Renson Madarang, a tenor of Hawaiian origin, described himself as “having a decolonial identity” within a “colonized art”; but he also sees great potential for the indigenization of opera because of its combination of dance, singing, and narrative similar to Hawaiian arts (Madarang 2020).

Heritage studies provide an innovative perspective for understanding artistic transformations and the social relevance of opera. Among the major transformations affecting opera are 1) digital technologies, and 2) decolonial transformations to reinvigorate opera artistically and make it a more inclusive art. The focus in this paper will be on decolonial transformations in the cultural heritage of opera. One of the most successful transformations took place in South Africa, where opera artists and music critics joined together in the decolonization of the genre. In his book *Opera in Cape Town*, Wayne Muller examines how critics have developed an ideal combining Western opera with South African indigenous traditions, thus moving away from Eurocentric aesthetics by hybridizing the art.

Decolonization in the wider sense is a process addressing and undoing hegemonic power structures, investigating epistemic dominance and erasures in the sphere of culture. More specifically, I will use decoloniality both as an ethics and as an artistic research method for “delinking” (Mignolo 2007) the genre from an exclusively Western perspective and the Colonial Matrix of Power (Mignolo 2020, 613). One example of such delinking and the creation of pluriversality in opera (Mignolo 2018, xii) is the work of the aforementioned Anawana Haloba, contesting the notion of opera as a European cultural heritage. Miranda Lakerveld’s production of *The Ring of Our Time*, involving thirty artists from four continents, also decolonizes the idea of European opera. With its focus on the Euphrates region, Nigeria, Indonesia, and Mexico, the work both alludes to and decenters Wagner’s Ring cycle. The soprano Deantha Edmunds singing Handel’s Messiah in Inuttitut also performs an act of decolonization by introducing Inuit singing traditions suppressed by colonization into the mainstream of opera. Pluriversality was also evident in the *Messiah/Complex*, with musicians from every province and territory across Canada singing in Arabic, Dene, English, French, Inuktitut, Inuttitut and Southern Tutchone to make Handel’s music accessible to a variety of communities (Carter 2022).

In the 21st century opera is challenged to make the genre relevant for diverse audiences and to address ethical questions of decoloniality and sustainability. This mindset is mainly driven by artists, art collectives, activists, and only occasionally, by established opera houses. When mainstream opera houses include the voices of migrants – like Bernstein’s *Candide* by the Scottish Opera, or *Migrations*, a new work by the Welsh National Opera (Jackson 2022) – they are reflecting on current societal issues through a decolonial approach to opera. The performances of a forgotten opera by the Surinamese composer Johannes Nicolaas Helstone (1853-1927) by the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam (Concertgebouwworkest 2023), and of *How Anansi Freed the Stories of the World* by the Dutch National Opera (Salazar 2021), both represent valuable contributions to decolonial opera culture, but these remain exceptions to the rule. The decolonial perspective is mainly present in the new works

presented at the Opera Forward Festival (OFF). OFF presents opera as a dynamic heritage, and decolonialism is one of its guiding aesthetic principles.

According to the UNESCO, a strong cultural component is necessary for sustainable development, as supporting cultural heritage “helps build inclusive, innovative and resilient communities.” Does opera fulfill this role? One of the main purposes of safeguarding intangible heritage is “to raise awareness at the local, national and international levels of the importance of the intangible cultural heritage, and of ensuring mutual appreciation thereof” (UNESCO, 2022:5). Two kinds of operas are listed by the UNESCO as an intangible heritage of humanity: the Chinese traditional Kunqu opera listed in 2001 combines singing, lyrical recitation, martial arts and dancing, and is also about 600 years old, thus older than any Western opera. In 2023 Italian opera singing was also listed by the UNESCO among the intangible heritage of humanity because of its seminal role in shaping the lives of Italian communities (UNESCO 2023). However, Germany has the greatest number of opera houses in the world; and as in Italy, German opera has been important for its urban and regional culture. Seven to eight thousand operas are performed each year, as against only two thousand in Italy, allowing Germany to become a hub for artistic innovation and education where many international young opera singers can launch their careers. (Ross 2022).

South Africa also has a blooming opera culture. According to Jeremy Silver, the conductor and director of the opera school at the University of Cape Town, South Africa is one of the two or three countries that give the world its greatest opera talents (Bourdin 2023). Why then is opera not listed as an intangible heritage associated with South Africa or Germany? What is the impact of such heritage-ization on opera as a genre? Did the UNESCO’s association of opera with its place of origin, Italy, not simply reinforce opera’s Eurocentric image?

Opera was once considered a “white space” in South Africa, and was therefore expected to disappear when apartheid ended; instead, opera proved to be resilient and able to involve local non-white communities. It underwent “Africanisation” (Muller 2023) and came to terms with its new aesthetics (Pistorius 2023), and today Cape Town has one of the best opera schools in the world. In his book *Opera in Cape Town*, Muller shows how opera culture started as a colonial project that arrived with Europeans, but in the course of the 20th century grew into a localized genre fostering cohesion and artistic innovation: “There have been more than twenty South African operas performed in the country, and I think each of them in their own way represent a distinct way of reinterpreting opera within a (South) African context” (Muller 2023). One of the most celebrated examples of opera’s success in South Africa is the soprano Pretty Yende, who was invited to sing at the British coronation ceremony of Charles III.

Opera is also popularized in South Africa by initiatives such as Umculo (a Xhosa word meaning both art and reconciliation), founded by Shirley Apthorp, whose aim is to transform the country’s divided and diverse communities through opera and music. Among their productions is the prize-winning *Romeo’s Passion* that decolonized opera on multiple levels. This low-budget opera focusing on LGBTQ+ rights was co-created in workshops with young South Africans. The performance took place in a run-down building in Johannesburg with a set that was hardly more than a sofa, but the singing was world-class and the young audiences were deeply engaged and enthusiastic. According to one critic, “the place was alive with hope and excitement, and I had a distinct sense that I was glimpsing the future” (Ballantine 2018).

Another unlikely space for an opera is Mali, where *Bintou Were, a Sahel Opera* was premiered in 2007, with a story about a pregnant migrant woman, Bintou, who gives birth on the border between Africa and Europe, at Melilla. This opera had a budget of 2.5 million euros and was conceived and funded by Prince Claus of the Netherlands. It premiered symbolically on the 400th anniversary of Monteverdi’s *L’Orfeo*, the first classic European opera, and the royal family was present at its first open-air night performance on the banks of the Niger River (Diallo 2007). The opera involved famous singers from several countries in the Sahel, one of poorest regions in the world, and it was also performed a few times in Europe; but can it really be considered decolonial? Unlike the opera houses built in the colonies in the late 19th century to perform European operas, this initiative invites local communities

to create and present their own stories on the operatic stage. However, operas from the Sahel cannot travel easily to Europe. How decolonized are the opera infrastructures, the aesthetic and financial models of the Global North? One project by the acclaimed German dramatist and activist Christoph Schlingensiefel, *Opera Village in Burkina Faso*, resulted in building an opera house in one of the poorest countries in the world involving local people and material in order to contribute to awakening the cultural identity of the community. The theater was designed to promote encounters, exchanges, and communication among communities of different backgrounds. Schlingensiefel's idea was to endow the Wagnerian concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* with a new meaning: living together (Hegenbart 2022). Why is opera necessary for such a project? Are these initiatives of Schlingensiefel and Prince Claus not rather imposing a European art on African culture in the name of philanthropy? How can the cultural heritage of opera be made to serve communities worldwide in the present, and how can opera represent the fluidity and complexity of identities? How can an intangible cultural heritage be preserved without essentializing cultures and national or regional identities? It is clear from the examples cited above that opera matters as an intangible heritage not only for Europeans but for the world at large. The global and decolonial potential of opera is a new and exciting field deserving further exploration.

The *Opera as an Intangible Heritage* research group was created in April 2024 to bring social partners, artists, and collectives together with scholars of various disciplines in order to address these questions and to study historical and contemporary operas from a decolonial perspective.

## REFERENCES

- Bourdin, Julie. 2023. *The Guardian*. 5 November. Accessed 04 25, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/nov/05/a-singing-nation-south-african-opera-cape-town-lead-role-world-stage-operalia>.
- Pistorius, Mia. 2023. *Black Opera Research*. 26 November. Accessed April 25, 2024. <http://blackoperaresearch.net/wayne-muller-on-opera-in-cape-town-the-critics-voice/>.
- Mignolo, Walter D. 2007. "DELINKING: The rhetoric of modernity, the logic of coloniality and the grammar of de-coloniality." *Cultural Studies* 21 (2-3): 449-514.
- Mignolo, Walter D. 2020. "On decoloniality: second thoughts." *Postcolonial Studies* 23 (4): 612-618.
2024. *TRACTION*. 7 March. Accessed 04 30, 2024. <https://projects.research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/en/projects/success-stories/all/immigrants-and-prisoners-bringing-new-voices-european-opera>.
- Dolar, Mladen. 2002. "If music be the food of love." In *Opera's Second Death*, edited by Salvož Žižek and Mladen Dolar, 1-102. New York-London: Routledge.
- UNESCO. 2023. *The practice of opera singing in Italy*. Accessed April 30, 2024. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/the-practice-of-opera-singing-in-italy-01980>.
- UNESCO. 2022. [https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/2003\\_Convention\\_Basic\\_Texts-2022\\_version-EN\\_.pdf](https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/2003_Convention_Basic_Texts-2022_version-EN_.pdf).
- Mignolo, Walter D. 2018. "'Foreword. On Pluriversality and Multipolarity.'" In *Constructing the Pluriverse: The Geopolitics of Knowledge*, edited by Bernd Reiter, ix-xvi. New York: Duke University Press.
- Carter, Sue. 2022. *How Deantha Edmunds is Decolonizing Opera*. 2020 June. Accessed April 30, 2024. <https://www.inuitartfoundation.org/iaq-online/how-deantha-edmunds-is-decolonizing-opera>.
- Jackson, Claire. 2022. *How opera is giving a powerful voice to migrants*. 14 September . Accessed April 30, 2024. <https://www.bigissue.com/culture/music/how-opera-is-giving-a-powerful-voice-to-migrants/>.