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Frank Warschauer, “The Future of Opera on the Radio” (1929)

On June 8, 1921 – well before regular radio programs began airing in Germany – a performance of Giacomo Puccini’s *Madam Butterfly* was broadcast from the Berlin State Opera. It was the first opera aired on German radio. The regional broadcasting companies that were eventually established in 1923-24 devoted much of their programming to classical music, including opera. The strong focus on classical music was indicative of programmers’ view that radio should function as a source of culture and education for society as a whole. According to the State Broadcasting Company [*Reichs-Rundfunk-Gesellschaft*], the umbrella organization for regional broadcasters, 386 operas were broadcast over German radio during the 1930-31 season.

The Future of Opera on the Radio

The public will be involved in determining the future of opera. The composition of a given public is the result of social processes of stratification and technical development, which are decisive and irrefutable factors in breaking down traditional forms. The future of opera essentially depends on the fate of the technical means of its dissemination.

This simple observation, however, is oddly unfamiliar in considerations of opera today and tomorrow. It is rare that reference is made to these facts; at most general tendencies in this direction are known.

Already today opera is, as a purely musical form, an affair of the broad masses. At least it is presented on the radio in multiple repetitions to that dark, indefinite multitude of people. Whether the latter affirms or rejects it will one day become clear.

Radio is the most powerful disintegrator of the old opera public that had a mind set, or at least the preconditions for one, produced by definite educational and temperamental prerequisites. With radio, opera is broadcast across all such boundaries. It marks a definitive end to attempts to use the work to shape and consolidate a public, as was manifest most obviously and powerfully in the artistic will of Richard Wagner. Radio and with it the other technical means of musical dissemination are first of all energizing factors, and only after their function in this sense has been fulfilled will they proceed to assist in the initiation of new forces of group formation, a formative process that will henceforth act upon the total public of the world.

Consider that tomorrow opera in its entirety will be delivered to residential dwellings like gas and water. Far removed from all cheap triumphs, what glorious progress we have made; far removed from an infantile *à tout prix* optimism in regard to technology, it must nevertheless be said that with the realization of television, already at the point of technical utilization, a startling novelty in the history of culture will make its appearance: opera as an everyday event in one's own home. This is contrary to the whole idea of festival performances: opera with beer and house slippers. The opera of the solitary auditor, with which the famous Ludwig [King Ludwig II], ordering performances for himself alone in Munich, receives a remarkable retrospective confirmation.

What technical form will this take? Television divides the continual optical event into individual images and then decomposes the latter into tiny particles, which are extremely rapidly recomposed at the point of reception. A simultaneous film, so to speak, is made of the visible reality (without, of course, fixing it on celluloid), and this is broadcast through the air. On the receiving apparatus (now usually with a viewing field of eight to twelve inches circumference) one sees what is happening in the same instant at the broadcast point. This is perceived in individual images following in rapid succession, which for the present flutter rather considerably and are also otherwise not terribly clear.

“But this will never ...”—with such an expression the artistically literate Central European begins his reaction. For he is fond of saying that. Nor does he allow it to disconcert him that he is repeatedly proven wrong. “And what has that to do with opera ...? Do you really believe ...?”

I do not merely believe, I know it—without any further claims to divine omniscience. One small technical step farther and it will all proceed as follows: the receiver projects its image like a home cinema on a large surface suited to the purpose; there one beholds, just as in film, the events viewed from afar, for example those on an opera stage—and, indeed, with depth and in their natural colors (as the English inventor [John Logie] Baird has already achieved). Simultaneously one hears the acoustical events, as previously on a wireless telephone, so that one gains an overall impression scarcely diminished by technological deficiencies. The separation of the various sense impressions, as they have been previously available on the radio and phonograph records, will cease, and out of them the totality will be recomposed. [...]

Radio already has its own stage, if only for the purpose of broadcasting. Once television has been introduced, there will someday emerge a great broadcast theater whose performances will be designed like those of contemporary opera houses for the attending public, like those for the radio audience. It will be the future's most substantial and powerful opera stage.

Radio makes opera a reality for everyone. It will undermine the aristocratic prerequisites of the opera and thereby pose the question of its fate, a question that has so far received no better answer than the other problems of this age of denial and of the transcendence of existing relations.

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