

# RE-IMAGINING OPERA IN AUSTRALIA

To broaden its audience and justify its public funding, Opera Australia must change with the changing demography of the nation and relinquish its elitist nature, says **Lyndon Terracini**

**W**hen an artist understands how to weave the text and the music together to communicate every individual moment within a musical and dramatic context to the audience, it is a wonderful and often awe-inspiring experience. In fact there is nothing more moving or thrilling than total music theatre.

As the largest performing arts organisation in the country, Opera Australia is a leader in the cultural life of Australia; it not only delivers the operatic art form to the widest possible audience but also contextualises what the operatic form means to contemporary Australians. However, the current volatile cultural environment and artistic inertia have diminished the importance of the making of art, particularly opera, and its connection with the broader community.

Peter Brook, one of the greatest stage directors of his generation, in his extraordinary book in 1973, *The Empty Space*, said, 'Everything in opera must change.' But while the rest of the world has changed dramatically, very little in opera has changed since the nineteenth century; in many ways, the form has become captive to its own traditions and is peculiarly unaware of the changes that have taken place around it.

## Elitist exclusivism

Opera companies and orchestras worldwide are closing at an alarming rate for a number of reasons (including the global financial crisis), but the lack of change in the fundamental structure of opera companies is an extremely important contributing factor. We live in a very different time and the expectations of the past can be

assumed no longer. We can blithely ignore this, and many practising artists in classical music are already doing so, or we can change.

There is a small but passionate group of people who believe only their opinions regarding the role of 'their' opera company are of importance. 'All of Sydney is talking about it,' one of them said to me recently, about a particular production that, while artistically successful, sold only slightly more than 4,000 tickets. When I pointed out that there were many more than 4,000 people living in Sydney, the response was, 'Well, all of my friends have seen it.' And that is the fundamental problem: everyone at my 'club' has seen it and bugger those who aren't members of my club.

This sense of patrician entitlement is not only at odds with the Australian way of life but also with contemporary Australia.

It is simply not acceptable in a democratic society for an arts organisation receiving \$20 million per year in funding from government to play only to a few members of an elitist club. In fact, any arts organisation receiving public funds is obliged to justify that funding by including all members of society. Of course, a large audience does not necessarily equate with

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quality, or vice versa for that matter, but it is unacceptable from a purely equitable standpoint.

We at Opera Australia do our utmost to play to as many people as possible (about 500,000 people in 2012). Fewer than 70 of our 1,600 employees are employed in administration; and 337 of the 354 performances planned across Australia in 2012 will be on the main stages in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. Our programming is popular without being populist so that opera can once again be regarded as a popular art form in the context of a new Australia. After all, it is a very different Australia we are living in compared to a few decades ago.

### Changing demography

After World War II, European migrants brought to Australia their cultural history. They had, if not a regular connection to it, an understanding of opera, ballet, chamber music, and the symphonic repertoire. More recent migrants do not have that same cultural or artistic heritage, but they bring with them very different artistic languages in music, theatre, dance and indeed food.

The dramatically changed ethnic demography of Australia's east coast cities is not reflected in our audiences. The faces on our stages and in our orchestra pits do not represent accurately the faces on our streets. In fact, the narrow ethnicity of the audiences in our theatres is alarming.

The successful production of *La bohème*, which played to 45,000 people in Melbourne and Sydney, had an African-American soprano and a Korean tenor singing the leading roles; we also had more audience members from those ethnic communities than usual. But within our major performing arts organisations, we are in real danger of creating an elitist arts community and an audience that does not represent contemporary Australia.

As the 2011 Pulitzer Prize winning playwright, Bruce Norris, rightly said: 'The people who go to the theatre are just like me; white, middle class, educated, small L liberals, progressive.' This, plus 'older and conservative' viewers, is our audience too. While there is nothing wrong with this, it is unacceptable to presume that we should *only* play to that audience. Norris sees a society

divided by race and income: comfortable white suburbs and economically depressed black suburbs (the western suburbs in Sydney) on one side and the northern and eastern suburbs on the other. Ignoring these changes will see our audiences decline dramatically.

Our food culture has voraciously embraced the changing demography; some of the most innovative eating in the world can be found in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. It's a hybrid of extraordinary eating experiences. So why haven't the creative artists in music and theatre replicated the success of our creative culinary colleagues—why are we so protective of our meat and three veg that we refuse to consider the extraordinary tastes of Asia. (To be fair, a number of small to medium performing arts organisations are creating work that is much more representative of contemporary Australia.)

### Artistic styles

The style of our performances is a complex conversation. We expect English or American acting styles on our stages, and when we see a Korean singer acting like a European or an American we complain about over or poor

Figure 1: *La bohème*



Courtesy of Opera Australia (2011). ©Branco Gaica

acting. For example, in our recent production of *La bohème*, the Korean lead actor responded emotionally (particularly at Mimi's death) the way a Korean man would. People from Anglo/European stock may not like that kind of acting style and emotional response, but that is the Asian style ... and Asian audiences connect strongly to it because it reflects the way they are conditioned to respond. So if we are serious about playing to ethnically diverse and wider audiences, we need to consider the performance styles we employ and the way we communicate artistically with a changing and very different audience. Asian artists should not be expected to perform like Europeans *and* communicate with their ethnic audience.

Of course an Asian artist will sometimes adopt a European performance style. I'm not suggesting totalitarianism, only that while we need to balance our performance styles to continue to satisfy our existing clients, we also need to get over this cultural cringe of desperately

trying to create an opera that Alban Berg may have written if he were still alive.

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### Brave programming

The premiere performance that gets rave reviews and very few ticket sales never plays again—primarily because it's too expensive and its European aesthetic appeals only to a small audience. Some people may call it 'brave programming,' but it's not—it's predictable and lacks courage, innovation and creativity. Brave programming invites criticism, while making a genuine connection to a real audience, who will become passionate supporters of the art form. For too long, we have alienated audiences and

Figure 2: *La bohème*



Courtesy of Opera Australia (2011). ©Branco Gaica

driven them away from new operatic experiences because the work itself has had little relevance to a potential audience ... and in some cases not wanted to find an audience at all. Too many new operas have been exercises in indulgence for academic composers, most of whom have no experience or understanding of the theatre or the operatic form.

Of course we must commission new work, but we should be a lot more rigorous in our selection processes. Composers shouldn't have to follow prescribed formulas, but we also need to create opportunities for a kaleidoscope of composers fluent in genuinely contemporary music and theatre.

We need to be informed by the culture of today in our own backyard and create new work that reflects the culture of our time and place.

Since 1973, when the Australia Council was founded, more than 160 operas (or Music-Theatre pieces) have been commissioned and presented. Not one of them has entered the

repertoire. Most have had only a handful of performances and disappeared forever because they didn't connect with the audience. So why don't audiences of any significant number want to see new operatic work?

We need to be informed by the culture of today in our own backyard and create new work that reflects the culture of our time and place. After all, that's what Mozart and Verdi did.

### Economics of art

Creating such new work is expensive and it has been virtually impossible to find an audience for this new repertoire. It may be that we need a national creative laboratory to enable contemporary operatic repertoire to be presented nationally by Opera Australia, in association with the regional opera companies in each state. Opera Conference could become a new initiative for the creation and development of new Australian Opera to tell our stories in a contemporary operatic context. The funds that Opera Conference uses to present standard repertoire could be used to create a new operatic repertoire with a clear purpose to connect to a substantial audience.

Figure 3: The Magic Flute



Courtesy of Opera Australia (2012). ©Branco Gaica

In the short term, it's vital to establish a new audience, communicate clearly and directly with them, and elicit from them emotional responses that intersect with those of traditional audiences—this will create a continuum between the different cultural and artistic responses. The ethnicity of our vibrant communities must be included in our major arts organisations—just like the profound and immensely popular migrant influence on our culinary repertoire.

The distinguished American music commentator and critic Alex Ross noted recently in the *New Yorker* magazine:

The question of where the money will come from is one that opera companies all over the world are anxiously pondering, whether they derive the better part of their funds from the state, as in Italy and elsewhere in Europe, or draw on private donors in the American style. What the art form needs in either case is a persuasive justification for the expenditure.

This 'justification' must come from a democratic support base that embraces the operatic form into the mainstream popular culture of our time.

### Patrons and repertoire

Opera Australia does not exist only to serve a small but vocal group of people. Patrons of Opera Australia are overwhelmingly generous financially and of spirit. Many of them, however, are not wealthy and often save for months to pay for tickets. It is our job to provide those ticket buyers with the best possible experience, otherwise we will lose our audience, and with them, employment opportunities for singers and musicians.

This situation also influences repertoire choices. Singers often insist they want to sing *Poliuto* or some other little-known opera, and composers complain about not enough new work. But statistics show clearly that the audience for such repertoire is now limited to fewer than 5,000 people, and substantially less in some cases. So popular repertoire must 'subsidise' the unpopular repertoire.

The popular repertoire is of course regarded by this *claque* as inferior. Donizetti's *Poliuto* or Messiaen's *St Francois D'Assisi* would make for a wonderful presentation, but Opera Australia can't afford to do them. The global economic climate is extremely volatile, and we need to earn \$56 million next year through ticket sales alone just to maintain our current level of activity. That's \$56 million excluding fundraising, sponsorship, and government funding.

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### Funding

Whether we like it or not, we are in the entertainment business—if audiences are not interested in buying tickets to our productions, and benefactors don't sponsor the productions, we are out of business.

I could of course demand more government funding for the arts—and garner support for this speech from 'the club'—but we need to remember that everyone who pays tax in Australia is indirectly supporting us.

Privileged access to significant amounts of public funds for a small group of people was the catalyst for the French Revolution, and it's one of the reasons why the Middle East is undergoing such a dramatic political transformation.

The next 10 years could be the most provocative and volatile time in the history of arts funding in Australia. It is already happening in the United States and Europe and will accelerate over the next few years. The world has changed and we have to get used to it. All major arts organisations need to secure more income from new sources but particularly from sponsors and donors. The American system will become the norm, and we need to be nimble in adapting to this new arts world.

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### Successful changes

The AFL in particular has embraced the rapidly changing demographic of Australia. Its work in creating an audience from the grassroots of each community is exemplary and connecting new cultures to a strange new sport, particularly in western Sydney, is a phenomenal achievement. Even the incredibly conservative and patrician organisation like Cricket Australia has been forced to sell its product through 20/20 matches, which has become the income driver for the entire industry, now that the darling of the establishment, test cricket, has lost its haloed status.

For those of us who love cricket, these changes are not dissimilar to those in our arts world. Opera and classical music need to connect to a wider public in the same way as AFL has and examine what cricket has done with 20/20.

In fact, we have done it with *Handa Opera on Sydney Harbour: La Traviata*, which got a tremendous response from sponsors and the public nationally and internationally. However, we also need to look at 20/20 versions of opera performances to run in tandem with our test match opera.

Cultures change and audience tastes change because of those changes ... sometimes very quickly. If we as creative artists don't respond to the changes in society, the amount of opera presented will decline dramatically along with the standard of the work presented.

I find it peculiar that extremely successful productions of Shakespeare's plays can be cut, the text in famous speeches moved from the beginning to the end, and often include texts from other writers—yet there is only admiration from the audience and media for a wonderful theatrical experience! However, if a note of Mozart or Verdi is touched, there is a barrage of vitriol from 'the club.'

William Powers, in his thought-provoking book *Hamlet's Blackberry*, suggests new technology has changed the way our brains work, and our attention spans are getting shorter. Digital technology is now a vital tool in how we communicate the art we make to contemporary society.

Opera has become less relevant in Australian culture in the last few years. The challenge now is to engage with the notion of art as a popular cultural phenomenon in the same way that major art galleries have done: major state and national galleries are now audience driven. Interestingly, contemporary art has found an extremely large audience.

We also need to seriously examine why new work is substantially less popular than the standard repertoire. This is not the case with contemporary plays. Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, hardly a new play, is regularly presented by theatre companies throughout Australia. Even though critics may scorn and deride his work, David Williamson's plays are an important part every major Australian theatre company's repertoire ... audiences want to see them.

### Conclusion

Despite the enormous challenges we face, Opera Australia will play to more people in 2012 than ever before in its history. By re-imagining what an opera company is, and means, in the twenty-first century, we will democratise the operatic form for many thousands of people. And by engaging with a wide audience, we are placing the operatic art form firmly within the popular consciousness.

While excellence in everything we do remains our primary priority, our art will also have integrity. Just because a painting or a performance is popular does not mean it is inferior; in fact, the greatest works of art are enormously popular. We will present the most interesting repertoire, but we also we want as many people from the widest demographic to be part of this extraordinary experience. We will do our utmost to embrace a wide popular audience into our community, to play to as many people as we can and to see in our audiences, on our stages and in our orchestra pits, the faces of new and contemporary Australians, the faces of Aboriginal Australians, as well as our long-term traditional supporters. At Opera Australia we are committed to ensuring that great art embraces the faces that represent Australia in the twenty-first century.