

Call for Papers:
The “African Operatic Voice”¹ – Opera and Music Theatre in Africa and the African Diaspora

Venue: University of Bern

Date: 7.-10.9.2023

Deadline: 1st October 2022

Opera is a global genre that defines itself through continuous reinvention and transformation in new cultural settings. This conference positions itself in the framework of the latest scholarship on opera studies which shifts its sole focus from Europe to transnational and interdisciplinary research on opera and music theatre. As international scholarship emerges to explore the transcultural medium of opera production in Africa and its diaspora, with its socio-political and aesthetic specifics, a pan-African perspective has yet to be explored (Euba 1989; Olorunyomi & Duro-Lapido 2008; André et al. 2012; Nii-Dorthei 2015; Mhlambi 2016; André 2018; Roos 2018; Pistorius 2019; Matzke et al. 2020). This four-day conference aims at highlighting the diversity of opera and music theatre across a variety of African and African diasporic contexts and identifies some of the paradigm shifts that have been, and are currently, taking place. Building on our edition on opera and music theatre in Africa and its diaspora in the Boydell and Brewer series *African Theatre Volume 19* (Matzke et al. 2020), in which we started to explore where opera and music theatre is performed and how the genre is understood, this conference intends to investigate these questions in more depth. For this event we outline three pillars of opera studies, namely aesthetics in general, specific social functions of opera and music theatre in societies and institutional structures. These three pillars will be explored through interdisciplinary presentations in a conference in which practitioners, such as composers, singers and directors will be integrated. For this emerging research field such in-depth interdisciplinary and pan-African discussions are essential.

As the notion of “African opera” is most often defined by either traditional African composition techniques, or by a libretto in an indigenous African language, or by a story focusing on an African theme (van der Hoven & Maasdorp 2020), the **first pillar** of this conference will focus on the **aesthetics of opera and music theatre in Africa and its diaspora**. In this section the conference will shed light on libretti of opera compositions in Africa and its diaspora for the first time. Often African opera libretti are either completely written in English or use both English plus an indigenous language. Questions that arise pertain to the following: What compositional and semantic challenges lie in writing a libretto in more than one language? How does one deal with details that get lost in translation for the audience? Apart from the libretti, this section will furthermore revisit the frequently asked questions on aesthetics ‘What does opera mean in African and African diasporic contexts?’ and ‘How do scholars and practitioners approach and utilize these terms?’ (van der Hoven et. al. 2020). These discussions aim to develop a broader understanding of different opera compositional techniques in Africa and create a necessary differentiation on if and how they are reflecting national, pan-African and/or global techniques. What are the different ways in which the genre of opera and traditional African musical genres potentially merge with each other and how does this impact on genre transformation and the porousness of genre boundaries? Other questions that arise in this instance are whether the genre contains practices and legacies of the colonial, the postcolonial and the decolonial? To round this part off, this section also needs to address the role of dance in African opera and music theatre compositions.

The **second main pillar** of the conference will discuss the **different roles which opera and music theatre can have** in comparison to other arts **in society and state** through an interdisciplinary approach. We are interested in learning how these functions differ in different African countries and why. One of the major historical roles opera and music theatre fulfilled since the 19th century is nation-building and the constructions of a national identity. In Africa nation-building was addressed not only aesthetically by creating an “African operatic voice” but through four different

¹ See Bode Omojola (2020) and Kofi Agawu (2001) for the expression.

characteristics, such as performances for commemoration days, portraits of political icons, renegotiations of historical figures or events and, last but not least, the retelling and re-performing of African myths and rituals (André 2012, Omojola 2020, Kasule 2020, van der Hoven 2022). Opera and music theatre in Africa therefore created performative archives of memory too, as theatre studies scholar Yvette Hutchison described it for South African theatre performances (Hutchison 2013). In an interdisciplinary approach the concept of nation-building in opera and music theatre needs to be further critically discussed to determine its usefulness at a time in which the idea of nation constructions is obsolete.

While theatre has a long history of “political theatre” (Lehmann 2002) and Applied Theatre (Warstat et. al. 2017) the political and social function of music theatre and opera has been more complicated. Still, we would like to discuss the different ways, in which music theatre and opera engage(d) with issues of social change in Africa from Applied Theatre to social critique, as we witness a trend of new social critique and realism with topics such as political protest, current social issues such as migration, xenophobia or gender violence in South Africa. The conference wants to explore the reasons for topical (re-)configurations, which might incline a new function of opera and music theatre in society. We also put up to critically debate if and how new opera and music theatre productions reflect notions of protest (Muyanga 2020) and Black empowerment (André 2018) and concepts of decolonisation. Thereby this pillar shifts the focus to specific opera and music theatre compositions in Africa and its diaspora of the late 20th and early 21th century and their different performance practices.

The **third pillar** for the event will focus on **institutional structures of African opera landscapes**, which so far have received hardly any scholarly attention other than some pioneering work in South African mini-dissertations (see Kunju 2013; Olivier 2014; van der Hoven 2022). In the current situation as a matter of course the short and medium impact of the Covid pandemic on African opera production needs to be addressed and reflected on in particular as it might destabilise and change current institutional structures. A focus on institutional structures includes a wide range of topics such as who are the decision-makers in the opera industry, what role does funding, politics and race play, can a Black empowerment be witnessed (André 2018), what choices of performance locations and audience development are made. With an increasing globalization, mobility and digitalization, it needs to be asked ‘Is opera production in Africa shaped for and by a local or a global opera market?’ (van der Hoven & Maasdorp 2020). Highlighting institutional structures of opera production in Africa shall critique current praxis of opera historiography, which focuses on the Global North, and provoke change. Opera historiographies of different African countries need to be situated in historical musicology and not only in departments of ethnomusicology, theatre studies and African studies as well to start reflecting on approaches of postcolonialism or decolonization.

Special invitations will be extended to papers dedicated to the following aspects:

- What does Opera Mean in African and African Diasporic Contexts?
- Colonial, Postcolonial and Decolonial Practices of Opera and Music Theatre
- Challenges of Libretti
- Genre Transformation
- Institutional Structures and Black Empowerment
- Female Creators
- Performing for a Local or Global Market? Performing Venues and Audiences
- Short and Medium Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic
- Opera Historiography in Africa
- Nation Building and the Construction of National Identities
- Aesthetics of Commemoration
- Performative Archives of Memory: History, Politics, Myths and Rituals
- Applied Theatre, Theatre of Social Critique and Protest
- Dance in Opera and Music Theatre
- International Collaborations

Please **send abstracts** (max. 300 words) for a 10-minute in-put presentation or 20-minute lecture or panel discussion within the thematic framework of the conference, **as well as a short vita** (max. 100 words) in English including contact details **by 1st October 2022** by email to Prof. Dr. Lena van der Hoven (lena.vanderhoven@unibe.ch). Contributions from the humanities and social sciences (music, media, theatre and cultural studies, sociology, literature) are equally welcome. Young academics are strongly encouraged to apply. The selected speakers will be notified by 1st November 2022 and the conference programme will be published online www.musik.unibe.ch/aov . The conference will take place preferably in person but will provide a hybrid option if needed.