

Exploring Gender-Based Violence and Femicide in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Music Theatre

University of Bern, Institute of Musicology

Conveners: Prof. Dr. Lena van der Hoven and Dr. Luis Velasco-Pufleau

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Since Catherine Clément's seminal work on the intertwining of opera plots and violence against women,¹ a growing number of musicologists have critically engaged with the representation of sexual violence against women in canonical operas and their stagings,² and questioned the persistence of rape culture in new productions.³ This scholarship has successfully examined rape as a 'violent performative of systemic, gendered power'⁴. Building on this scholarship, this two-day conference aims to broaden the perspective and specifically examine not only rape of women in opera, but also femicides and sexual violence against men and non-binary people, under the theme of gendered violence in music theatre in the 20th and 21st centuries. Particularly in light of the recent increased awareness of gender-based violence against women through phenomena such as the #MeToo movement and the COVID-19 pandemic, we want to explore if and how these events have influenced the commissioning of new music theatre productions on the themes of rape, femicide and gender-based violence, or the staging of opera and music theatre repertoire from the 20th century. In the 2022/2023 season, for example, three different productions of Béla Bartók's *Herzog Blaubarts Burg* were staged in Switzerland alone, at the Basel Theatre, the Lucerne Theatre and the Theater Orchester Biel Solothurn (TOBS). The opera thus fulfilled one of its most important social functions, namely to raise awareness of the highly topical issue of femicide in Switzerland. As the social geographer Christine Bigler has noted, "[p]rior to the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 30 percent of women worldwide had experienced physical and/or sexual violence"⁵. And in Switzerland, a woman dies every other week as a result of femicide. Assuming that the #MeToo movement and the COVID-19 pandemic have increased public awareness and sensitivity to the issue, the conference aims to explore whether there has been an increase in funding strategies for commissioning music theatre or staging music theatre productions on these themes. The conference will also discuss whether and how new compositions and new stagings of 20th century repertoire reflect current discourses on power and gender-based violence and refuse to re-stage problematic power relations.

In addition, the conference aims to broaden the previously exclusive perspective of the Global North to include discussions of productions from the Global South and their social significance. In recent years, several music theatre compositions have focused on other forms of gender-based violence, e.g. in *La*

¹ Clément, Catherine. 1988. *Opera, or The Undoing of Women*. Translated by Betsy Wing. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

² Cormier, E. Margaret. 2020. "Regarding rape: Representations of sexual violence on the twenty-first-century operatic stage." Montreal: McGill University. <https://escholarship.mcgill.ca/concern/theses/c247dz097>.

³ Cusick, Suzanne G., Monica A. Hershberger, Richard Will, Micaela Baranello, Bonnie Gordon, and Ellie M. Hisama. 2018. "Colloquy: Sexual Violence in Opera: Scholarship, Pedagogy, and Production as Resistance." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 71 (1): 213–53. <https://doi.org/10.1525/jams.2018.71.1.213>; Harper-Scott, J. P. E. 2009. "Britten's Opera about Rape." *Cambridge Opera Journal* 21 (1): 65–88. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586709990085>.

⁴ Cusick et al. 2018, p. 217.

⁵ Bigler, Christine. 2022. "Thematic section - Gender-based violence as a sustainability problem". Sozialpolitik.ch. Journal des Fachbereichs Soziologie, Sozialpolitik, Sozialarbeit, Universität Fribourg 1/2022: 1-17,1. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18753/2297-8224-188>

tierra de la miel (2013) which explores human trafficking, rape and femicide on the Mexico-US border⁶, or the chamber opera *Amagokra* which was performed in Cape Town (South Africa) in 2020, which highlighted the epidemic number of women raped and murdered in South Africa, or the chamber opera *The Gift*, which was planned in South Africa by the NGO Umculo just before the Covid-19 pandemic, on so-called corrective rape, or the chamber opera *Romeo's Passion*, which was performed in Johannesburg (South Africa) in 2018, focusing on gender-based violence against homosexual men. This is why the conference also aims to highlight gender-based violence against men, which is even less reported and receives little public attention. The conference approach stems from the Marie Skłodowska-Curie research project [ONTOMUSIC](#) led by Dr. Luis Velasco-Pufleau and Prof. Dr. Lena van der Hoven's Habilitation project on [South African opera productions after 1994](#), both conducted at the Institute of Musicology at the University of Bern.

The Call for Papers for the conference specifically invites papers on the following aspects:

- How have the #MeToo movement and the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the commissioning and staging of new music theatre productions on rape, femicide and gender-based violence?
- How do composers tackle the issues of rape, femicide and gender-based violence in terms of music aesthetics?
- How do composers and librettists narrate issues of rape, femicide and gender-based violence?
- Does the representation of rape, femicide and gender-based violence differ in comparison to theatre and film?
- How are canonical operas staged to address issues of rape, femicide and gender-based violence?
- Do contemporary musical theatre compositions about rape, femicide and gender-based violence have an activist moment?
- Do contemporary musical theatre compositions about rape, femicide and gender-based violence cross genre boundaries?
- How does opera studies deal with these issues in its historiography?
- Do opera and music theatre have a social function in societies, and have productions on rape, femicide and gender-based violence been part of applied theatre productions or social projects?
- Rape, femicide and gender-based violence are global phenomena: Can national aesthetic distinctions be made in narrative forms? How can these issues be dealt with sensitively in different cultures?

As a part of the symposium, the chamber operas *La tierra de la miel* (2013) by Mexican composer Hilda Paredes and *Romeo's Passion* (2018) by Umculo will be screened at the cinema of the Reitschule in Bern, followed by a public discussion between the conveners and the composers of the operas on 6 March.

The conference language is English. Please **send abstracts** (max. 300 words) for a 10-minute in-presentation or 20-minute presentation or panel discussion within the thematic framework of the conference, **as well as a short biography** (max. 100 words), including contact details, **by 15 July 2023** via email to the conference conveners (conference.musictheatre.musik@unibe.ch). Contributions from the humanities and social sciences (music, media, theatre and cultural studies, sociology, literature) as well as from theatre practice are equally welcome. Young scholars are strongly encouraged to apply and if there is no other possibility for travel funding, the organisers will try to support the travel costs of young scholars. If young academics need travel funding, please send a short note explaining why no other funding is available and how much funding is needed. Selected speakers will be notified by 15 August 2023 and the conference programme will be published online at <https://www.musik.unibe.ch/forschung/tagungen/> by the beginning of September 2023. The conference will take place in person, but a hybrid option will be available in exceptional cases.

⁶ Velasco-Pufleau, Luis, and Hilda Paredes. 2020. "On Music and Political Concerns: An Interview with Hilda Paredes." *Revista Vórtex* 8 (2): 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.33871/23179937.2020.8.2.16>.