

# Conference Report

## Symposium on South African Opera and Globalisation (1994–2022)

Abraham Marthinus Spies, University of Pretoria<sup>1</sup>

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The *South African Opera and Globalisation (1994–2022)* symposium was held from 12 to 13 May 2022. The event was organized by Lena van der Hoven, professor of Music Theatre at the Institute of Musicology at the University of Bern, and hosted by the Young Scholars' Program of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences and Humanities. The symposium attracted papers presented by scholars and experts from around the globe, including South Africa, Nigeria, United Kingdom, and Canada. Discourse on the South African opera scene is sparse, making this symposium of great importance to the ongoing development of literature in this field. Opportunity was not only given to well established academics, but young researchers were strongly encouraged to take part.

The first day consisted of a panel discussion with the South African choreographer Jessica Nupen. This was a hybrid presentation taking place face-to-face and online. During this session, Nupen presented her recent Dance-Rap-Opera *The Nose* (2021), based on a short story by Nikolai Gogol. The opera was due to premiere in March 2020, but because of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic it was postponed to October 2021. The opera was further hindered as the collaborating artists from South Africa could not travel to Germany due to global restrictions on travel. As a result, the opera evolved from being a live performance to a hybrid installation, with pre-recorded dance and singing performances accompanied by a live music ensemble.

The second day took place online and was divided into four different panels: 1) Opera productions in and outside of South Africa, 2) Mapping the working situation of South African opera singers, 3) The South African opera voice in discourse, and 4) Developments of the South African opera landscape. The first panel started with *Opera in Afrikaans, Again, or, Re-making a Genre in South Africa: The Cases of Poskantoor (2014) and Die Vertrek (2019)* presented by Melissa Gerber. In her paper, Gerber discussed the emergence of a new Afrikaans opera aesthetic during the last decade. She presented an analysis of the reception and critical evaluations of the two operas cited. Due to the historical use of the art-form as propaganda to legitimize an authoritarian regime, Gerber questioned the relevance of Afrikaans opera in the post-apartheid era and whether it can meaningfully engage with the current societal and political issues.

The second presentation during this panel, *Emerging from the Forest: Cape Town Opera's Pandemic Hänsel and Gretel*, took the form of an interview between Andrew Holden and the South African born director Alessandro Talevi now residing in Turin, Italy. Talevi expounded on his use of contemporary South African themes including poverty, child abuse and environmental degradation, in the design and staging of the opera. Furthermore, he discussed the social implications of giving canonical operas a South African inspired aesthetic and the place of South Africa's artists and productions in the global

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<sup>1</sup> Author's email address: [u11357895@tuks.co.za](mailto:u11357895@tuks.co.za).

operatic market. The final paper in this panel was *Introducing Bhekizizwe: Models and Approaches for Creating New Opera in South Africa and Beyond* presented by Robert Fokkens. With *Bhekizizwe* the creators sought to explore a narrative and characters that are seldom seen on European operatic stages. Fokkens further highlighted that the creation of the opera was an exploration of the expressive and dramatic potential of opera, even when performed on a very small scale. The final structure of the opera was driven by creative, financial, and theatrical considerations resulting in a monodrama for solo baritone and five instruments, with the singer portraying several different characters throughout the work. This opera was presented as a model that can be adapted by future South African opera-makers in and beyond South Africa.



Fig. 1. Conference Poster South African Opera and Globalisation (1994–2022).

The next panel, focussing on the employment of South African opera singers, was presented by two young scholars namely Setsoane Jeannette Ntseki and Sakhiseni Joseph Yende. Ntseki presented the paper *Employment in the South African Opera Industry: In search of Constructive Models to Create Sustainable Job Opportunities for Opera Singers/Musicians* based on her master's dissertation. Ntseki examined the scarcity of local jobs for trained opera singers, and further explored the nature of employment provided by two opera companies in the Western Cape. She argued that many singers had to look outside the borders of South Africa to find employment within the opera sector, but that this was not a viable solution for everyone. In his paper *A Perspective of Young Opera Graduates on their Working Situation in South African Opera Industry*, Yende similarly investigated the unemployment of opera singers in the country, with emphasis on the personal perspectives of young opera graduates currently employed, as well as the perceived prospects of others who sought employment in the local market. Both papers presented during this panel illustrated that the lack of funding for opera has led to large scale closures of opera companies, which in turn leaves many opera performers and artists without any means of supporting themselves through employment within the sector they were trained for. Both studies inferred that the current funding structure for the arts needs restructuring.

The third panel debated the importance of the African Voice. Johann Buis presented *Midas Touch Voice Teacher: The Making of International Opera Superstars in Post-Apartheid South Africa*. This paper explored the exceptional accomplishments of the soprano and vocal pedagogue Virginia Davids. Most notable is her work with untutored singers, guiding her students' vocal technique, allowing them to ascend from the singing studio to the world's largest opera stages. Recent students of renown include Pretty Yende, Pumeza Matshikiza, and Masabane Cecilia Rangwanasha. Buis was followed by Joshua Tolulope David who read *More Than Voices: An Analysis of Vocal Models in Operatic Tradition in Africa*. David, a Nigerian national, is currently a doctoral student at the University of Toronto. In his paper he examined whether western operatic singing technique affects the authenticity of musical works in African languages, and whether there is a distinguishable 'authentic African voice' within this oeuvre. David argued that the voice should not be seen as an object of racialization or metaphorical vehicle for Africanization, but rather that the production of the voice is a nuanced interplay between the embodied and performative realization of a singer's personal narrative.

The final panel focussed on the development of the South African opera scene. Abraham Marthinus Spies opened this section with a reflection on collaborative engagements in his paper *The Gauteng Opera Scene 2012–2022: A Performer's Perspective*. His presentation showed that, in the absence of funding, the characteristics displayed by participants in the independent Gauteng opera scene include resilience, entrepreneurship, training, strong community involvement and collaboration with overseas companies on local productions. Lena van der Hoven in her paper *The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Pre-Existing Precarity of South Africa's Opera Scene*, highlighted the declining number of staged opera performances and dwindling audience numbers during the last two decades. This decline, however, predated the COVID-19 pandemic, with opera singers being necessitated to find employment outside of the arts to sustain a living in the years after the disbanding of the regional arts councils. In part, this is the reason why several opera companies were able to survive the economical aftermath of the pandemic, as many of these did not have any fulltime staff to support during this time. The long-term effects of the pandemic on the South African opera landscape remains to be seen. Donato Somma concluded this panel with *The Changing Appetites for Opera in Post-Apartheid South Africa*. Somma purported that although there is an increase in opera singers engaging themselves in entrepreneurial ventures, there remains a sparsity in funding, with government directing monetary resources into projects that service a broader segment of society. Most notable is the recent R 22,000,000.00 (€ 1,306,274.00) giant flag initiative.

During the question time after each paper, and the final open discussion, several questions were raised, resulting in a robust debate between presenters and fellow delegates. The first was the sparsity of documentation on opera performance after 1994, and the unwillingness of companies to share meaningful statistics. Validating information provided by opera companies is further exacerbated by the local media's lack of interest in the activities of independent opera scene. Secondly, a dialogue arose on the performance of opera in indigenous languages. It appeared that young performers had a predilection to perform European operatic repertoire over singing in their mother tongue. Why this bias exists and whether it is relevant to the operatic community at large will require further discourse. Lastly, in the analysis of new operas there is a disparity between creators and musicologists on conceptualizing what constitutes a work to be an opera, as there are blurred lines when it comes to classifying a composition as an opera, music theatre (Musiktheater), or musical theatre. Through further discussion it became clear that these issues are not specific to the opera landscape in South Africa but are relevant on a global scale. Endeavouring to answer these questions will no doubt result in valuable research that will enrich the literature on opera in South Africa.