

# Where Can We Find Opera? A Methodology to Centre a Listening Revolution

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Numerous recent calls to decolonise opera include the theme of this special issue as well as the collective behind this new opera journal. While the last decade-plus has seen a willingness and a desire to expand opera, the core repertoire has remained static. Can genuine transformation take place within such a heavily institutionalized genre? And, if we were to imagine such institutional change, where might we strategically focus our energies in order to begin to hear the results today? As always, rather than looking to the institutions themselves, I look to practitioners—singer and performance artist Juliana Snapper and artist Massimo Bartolini—for potential strategies. Snapper and Bartolini show us how we can refocus our concern away from the glacial pace of change within operatic institutions and toward what we pay attention to, an activity each and every person can actively participate in: listening beyond the artificial limits of any given definition of opera.

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In *Opera Listens to You* (2011),<sup>3</sup> opera singer, performance artist and composer Juliana Snapper asks—and literally performs—an existential question for opera: does it have the capacity to hear its audience?

Just like your selfish lover, your narcissist BFF, your entire myopic family, Opera has exploited your sympathetic nature, wailing at you for hours at a time about her stories, her needs, her feelings without once asking how YOU were! But now—drawing on psycho-acoustical and neurophysiological research, applied therapeutic strategies, and the listening-based music technologies of composer Pauline Oliveros, Juliana Snapper has engineered for Opera a set of ears. Opera is ready to listen! Using this “listening vocality,” Snapper and a small ensemble will receive, unpack and render the expressive statements of willing individuals in operatic form: recitative-aria-chorus. There is no problem solving, advice or com-

1 Nina Eidsheim and Juliana Snapper, “Addressing Deep Code Problems. Listening to Opera through the World’s Liveness,” in *Situated Listening: Attending to the Unheard*, ed. Stephanie Loveless (London: Routledge, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003348528>.

2 Ironically, it might be because major opera institutions have had a difficult time understanding Snapper’s work that, in presenting at venues such as art spaces and festivals, she has been able to develop a unique critical opera practice.

3 *Opera Listens to You* was commissioned and presented on July 22, 2011 as part of the Machine Project’s residency at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN. A Los Angeles’ artist-run performance and installation space, the Machine Project space closed in 2018. Accessed July 15, 2025. <https://walkerart.org/press-releases/2011/machine-projects-open-field-residency-feature>

miseration. The goal is neither revelation nor redemption, but simply that each audience member that takes part feels deeply and thoroughly heard.<sup>4</sup>

As her combined score and invitation shows, Snapper has assembled an operatic listening device made up of herself and her ensemble. Instead of demanding that audiences pay attention to and admire a performance, this group of people performs attentive listening. Directing this listening to the audience, the ensemble's performance is the question: what do audience members—and indeed one particular audience member—see, hear, dream, know? Moreover, the underlying question Snapper asks is: could we use the form of opera to change opera itself right now, even if the institution of opera may not yet be ready?

In what follows, I will first describe an opera conceived and performed by Juliana Snapper and an ensemble assembled, under her direction, for the specific piece. Second, I will describe the application of a listening-to-opera methodology I derive from Snapper's piece. While both pieces were rich visually and sonically, I have decided to not include any images or sound examples to illustrate my textual engagements and descriptions. When engaging music and sound, I keep in mind the premise that the sound (or image) is created in and therefore by the listener, according to their socially and historically situated meaning making acculturation. Therefore, I want to avoid making any claims about what I describe beyond the recognition that my descriptions are based on what I am able to derive, based on my own socially and historically situated meaning making acculturation.

### ***Opera Listens to You* (2011)**

Snapper sets up a formal structure for *Opera Listens to You*: an audience member is invited to share a story. The performers' task is to listen to this story. After the story has been told, the ensemble sings it back to the audience member. The audience member's story and the ensemble's affirmation of their listening become the central elements of the opera.

The piece begins as one audience member—a young woman—is softly surrounded by Snapper and the chorus.<sup>5</sup> Forming a loose circle around her, they surround her with a protective yet permeable partition made of parachute material; the mesh is thin, but still provides privacy. In the video documentation, the soloist's and ensemble members' intense listening is palpable, in large part through the growing steadiness and depth of the audience member's voice as she shares her story. We hear a story of hardship and doubt.

The piece's unfolding is scaffolded by a traditional operatic form. First, the audience member's story provides the exposition, in the form of a *recitativo*. Then, the soloist and ensemble reflect on the material through an aria and chorus, mirroring the traditional formal structure of *recitativo*, *aria*, smaller ensembles (such as duos, trios, quartets), and chorus. As the story is retold through different bodies, voices and musical structures, it gains meaning and weight. And, from her response, it would seem that the distillation helps the audience member to *relate to* her own story instead of just being inside it, feeling trapped, as she had described. In the end, it seems that she feels deeply heard. She weeps as her story is sung back to her.

Snapper's *Opera Listens to You* can be distilled down to two principles: a container that allows participants to hear and share their own stories in ways they would otherwise not; and, a commitment to listening.

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<sup>4</sup> This text is excerpted from an unpublished performance program handed out at the *Opera Listens to You* performance. The artist shared with me the text from her personal archive.

<sup>5</sup> I was not present at the performance, but Snapper shared her personal documentation with me.

## Applying the *Opera Listens to You* Methodology to Massimo Bartolini's *Due qui/To Hear* (2024)

In July 2024 I travelled to Venice, Italy—the city many consider to be the cradle of opera. Coincidentally, I stayed at the Hotel La Fenice et des Artistes, the hotel that is associated with the venerable Italian-opera institution La Fenice and is situated just a narrow alleyway across from the opera house. Inaugurated in 1792, destroyed by fire and rebuilt twice, Teatro La Fenice has been lauded as “one of the greatest opera houses in both Italy and Europe” and due to the many “premiers of [opera] masterpieces, became part of the history of melodrama.”<sup>6</sup> However, the opera I experienced through the framework offered by Snapper's piece was not at La Fenice, but further east, in the Arsenal area, at the 2024 Venice Biennale's Italian Pavilion.

Walking into the Italian Pavilion, Massimo Bartolini's installation piece *Due Qui/To Hear*<sup>7</sup>, the commission for the year, filled the repurposed shipyard. I heard sounds—carpeting, deep, repeated, recorded, incidental—connecting the Italian exhibition's two enormous spaces and garden. The largest of the two rooms held a tall, scaffolded structure, so big that I could hide inside it. Together, this 12-metre-wide and nearly 50-metre-long maze of iron scaffolding—plus a forest of large wooden pipes, two huge music-box rolls, electronics, and a custom-built organ looping two short interlocking melodies—make up *Due qui*. In a clearing within the iron forest sat its *Conveyance*, composed of an elastic clay-mass wave encircled by a ring-like structure that forms a bench where visitors could rest and experience the altar-like energy of the clay performance. During the three days I spent with Bartolini's piece, the respirating organ lungs, the pumping clay, the vibrating drone that could be heard from the other room, and the cacophonous garden with its human and non-human sounds seem to flow together as a breathing whole. *Due Qui/To Hear* did not present itself as an opera—but in allowing the principles gleaned from Snapper's *Opera Listens to You* to guide my experience, I would soon learn that it makes possible a series of operatic scenes. In *Opera Listens to You*, Snapper and her ensemble set up a situation in which they could listen to the audience and reflect that listening back to an audience member. In my application of the *Opera Listens to You* principles, which I will share below, I situated myself as both the audience member who is listened to and an observer of that process. Rather than the sculptures and music within the installation emerging as static works that required interpretation, the elements that made up *Due Qui/To Hear* felt like a portal into stories that would have otherwise been forgotten, if not evoked by the piece.

During the days I spent visiting the Italian pavilion, and also in the weeks and months after returning home, memories jolted loose by the rich container of the artwork kept presenting themselves. One of the strongest was a memory of the reed organ, or harmonium, that sat in our family's living room when I was growing up, which we donated to a small Madagascan village sometime in the 1980s. My godmother had served as a mission nurse, and she had asked if we would be willing to donate the harmonium. The village had also asked for funds to replace the hanging shovel that they currently used to strike in lieu of a church bell. My parents had obliged both requests and, in turn, received photos of the bell and organ being transported on a cart to the village. This personal memory connected up with Kofi Agawu's note, from my reading years ago, that the Protestant Christian hymn was “the iconic marker of the kind of tonal thinking exported to Africa” (emphasis in original).<sup>8</sup>

6 “La Fenice & Malibran Theater: an History,” Teatro La Fenice, Fondazione Teatro La Fenice 1965, accessed July 17, 2024, <https://www.teatrolafenice.it/en/la-fenice-foundation/la-fenice-malibran-history/>.

7 Massimo Bartolini was invited to serve as the artist for the Italian Pavilion at the Biennale Arte 2024. For more information about this commission, see <https://www.duequi-tohear.it/project>. Accessed July 15, 2025.

I lived this opera long after I left Venice. In my mind's eye and ear, I could see memories and musings unfold as scenes on a stage.<sup>9</sup> In the first act, we see the little girl whose legs could barely reach the organ's pedals. The little girl and her family, singing hymns in their local church with its big organ. The phone call; the request. The heaving of the men carrying the organ from the little red house on Norway's coast to its journey across the ocean to the island of Madagascar. Here the story would cut back to older boats, on which missionaries arrived in the early nineteenth century<sup>10</sup> with bibles, psalm books, solfège books, and a keyboard. Maybe we would see the opera choir, staged and intercut musically as congregations in England collected funds to support the missionaries.

In the second act, perhaps the music would start out sombrely, as the harmonium was transported to the village, then intensify into a celebration as it was installed and used. Perhaps Indigenous music would gradually be overtaken by psalms in this scene? Would there be a letter aria in which a missionary writes back to send the photos and thank the kind family? And would there be a young child, a Mozart-like-figure sneaking into the church (with no walls and covered only by a roof), teaching herself to play at night? Perhaps the missionary's wife, who would normally play for Sunday service, would fall ill, with all despairing because there would be no keyboard music for the week's baptisms. The child shyly offering to play, and everyone so impressed that they forget to scold her for sneaking out during the night to play silently, without pedalling air into the harmonium.

Towards the ending, would the opera then cut back to the little Norwegian girl also singing the same psalm, and showing how many people would be saved because of the harmonium? Would the voices of the villagers slowly transform timbrally and tonally to match those of the missionaries and the organ? Would we see how the Norwegian harmonium would be reborn as an instrument with possibilities unimaginable to those who brought it to Madagascar? Or, would such clichés not be played out? Would instead the harmonium be deconstructed to serve music prior to missionaries and their psalms? Would the villagers find ways to play it without adhering to the sonic rules it was brought there to enforce?

Whether or not Bartolini consciously tapped into this complex timbral history, what I hear is a piece that was created to allow its audience to find their own stories, that created the possibility of an opera in my mind's ear.<sup>11</sup> For two additional months, version after version arose inside me. I imagine other visitors had similar experiences, whether they called them "operas" or not.

Opera is an old institution, and old institutions are slow to change. Just as the proverbial giant ship must turn slowly enough to accommodate its heft, opera may be in the midst of a turn that will eventually address its colonial history directly, even if I may not be able to detect any motion at the moment. The question is whether any of us, or even our children, will be able to experience it.

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8 Kofi Agawu, "Tonality as a Colonizing Force in Africa," in *Audible Empire*, ed. Ronald Radano and Tejumola Olaniyan (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 335.

9 In the context of opera, the harmonium is an instrument that is often used to enliven musical texture and timbre. It is also used to add sonic 'special effects' and create specific atmospheres. Ádám Sándor Fazakas offers a useful overview of operas that include the harmonium, with composers ranging from Giuseppe Verdi via Jules Massenet, Antonín Dvořák, Richard Strauss, Erich Wolfgang Korngold, and Paul Hindemith to Kurt Weill. For a complete list of works see Ádám Sándor Fazakas, "The Use of the Harmonium in Opera," *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai Musica*, June 10, 2024.

10 August Schmidhofer and Michel Domenichini-Ramiamanana, "Madagascar," Grove Music Online. 2001. Accessed July 1, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.44733>.

11 "To Everything That Moves," MASSIMODECARLO, MDC S.p.A., accessed July 17, 2024, <https://massimodecarlo.com/exhibitions/to-everything-that-moves>.

I, for one, am getting impatient. I want to hear opera that reflects who listeners are now, in their wondrous imaginations and in the generational struggles many have lived. If we want opera to both acknowledge its colonial imbrications and reflect its audience, then one viable and immediately available option is Snapper's framework, which—in turning to each single audience member rather than waiting for opera companies—rejects a reliance on leaders who are concerned about their Eurocentric legacy and their company's bottom line.

"Each joke is a tiny revolution," George Orwell famously observed about the power of everyday humour.<sup>12</sup> Snapper reminds us that each potential audience member has access to a similar power. Each opera an individual mounts in their mind, mediated by a framework—such as *Opera Listens to You*—that legitimises that experience as opera is a tiny revolution that, over time, can join with other small acts to add up to a seismic shift. We can refocus our concern away from the glacial pace of change within operatic institutions and toward how we choose to listen, an activity each and every person can actively participate in. If one audience member can hear twenty-plus operas in works like *Due qui/To Hear*, and if we can listen to that listening and acknowledge it, we already possess what we desire: a rich and complex world of opera today.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> George Orwell, "Funny but not Vulgar," *Leader*, July 28, 1945.

<sup>13</sup> Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 27–28.

## About the author

Nina Sun Eidsheim is an artist, vocalist, and writer who works in and through voice, race, words/concepts, listening, and materiality. Some of this work is done through the [UCLA Practice-based Experimental Epistemology Research \(PEER\) Lab](#), an experimental research Lab Nina founded and directs, dedicated to decolonializing data, methodology, and analysis, in and through multisensory creative practices. The author of *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice* and *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music*; and co-editor of *Oxford Handbook of Voice Studies*; Co-editor of the *Refiguring American Music*, she co-edits the *Refiguring American Music* book series for Duke University Press. Eidsheim is Professor of Musicology at the University of California, Los Angeles and CSWAC Chair of CSW | Streisand Center.