SMALL-SCALE OPERA: HISTORY AND CONTINUING RELEVANCE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

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This paper explores the history and recent rise in popularity of small-scale opera. Small-scale opera, originally referred to as chamber opera, and recently referred to as “Micro-opera”, “NANOWorks”, et cetera, has gained popularity in the past forty years due to artistic and financial reasons. The genre reflects the need for companies to find financially viable ways to continue to produce and perform classical music in a poor economic climate. The short length and relatively simple plots of the works in this genre also reflect the shift in media consumption on a broad level in the United States. While the genre is growing in popularity today, it has ties to historical practices, including some of the first documented operas written in the Baroque period.

This paper provides a historical account of iterations of small-scale opera and culminates in interviews with professionals working in the field today. Through my research, I conclude that the genre is likely to succeed in the 21st century. This is due to the financial viability small-scale opera affords to both those producing and attending these works. Small-scale opera provides composers with a flexible medium in which they can explore writing sung drama that is substantially more likely to be produced than full-length works.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I. HISTORY OF SMALL-SCALE OPERA</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II. MODERN DAY SMALL-SCALE OPERA</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scale and Terminology</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Viability</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection of Trends in Media Consumption</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience Appeal and Demographics</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artistic Appeal</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat to Full-Scale Opera?</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

Small-scale opera, or opera that is characterized by having reduced duration, limited forces, uncomplicated plots and/or unspecified performance space, has grown in popularity in the second half of the twentieth century. The genre has existed since the birth of opera itself, circa 1600 C.E., and possesses a rich and varied history that continues today because of its flexible and pragmatic nature. This paper will chronologically and geographically explore historical examples of small-scale sung drama, focusing on the characteristics of temporal, spatial and formal scale. This exploration will culminate in commentary by individuals working in the field of small-scale opera today, again focusing on the specific issues mentioned above. Through this investigation of the creative flexibility and financial viability of small-scale opera, I will show that the genre provides audiences with a uniquely intimate and affordable form of sung drama and artists (composers, directors and musicians) a medium in which they are able to explore and ply their craft.
CHAPTER I. HISTORY OF SMALL-SCALE OPERA

The appeal of small-scale opera as an alternative to full or grand opera is evident in its rich and varied history. For the purposes of this thesis, small-scale opera is opera that incorporates one or more of the following characteristics: reduced duration, limited forces, uncomplicated plots, and unspecified venue. The performance of the many historical variations of small-scale opera from roughly 1600 C.E. to today is a testament to the value of the genre as a practical alternative to full-length opera. Small-scale opera, because of its flexible nature, has offered a particularly accessible form of musical drama throughout history. This chapter is devoted to a chronological sampling of the various forms of small-scale operas that have been written since 1600 C.E. Although small-scale opera first emerged in Italy, it quickly spread throughout Europe and evolved to reflect the cultures that adopted the genre. This chapter will explore the beginnings of small-scale opera in Italy and then trace its history chronologically and geographically.

The origin of small-scale opera can be traced to that of opera itself. The first prevalent iteration of small-scale opera is a product of a musical entertainment popular in the fifteenth and sixteenth century, the *intermedio*. While *intermedio* would later refer to small-scale opera inserted between the acts of a play or opera to provide dramatic relief, earlier forms of the genre were practically nonexistent. An *intermedio* in the fifteenth and sixteenth century lasted from one to twenty minutes and varied in form, from a simple madrigal to a complex concertato. The subject matter, dependent on the context in which they were performed, could be either sacred or secular. *Intermedi* were inserted between acts of spoken or musical drama and even served to punctuate non-performance activities such as tournaments or feasts.¹ Examples of this type of

abbreviated sung drama are *Chi mi conoscera* by Alessandro Stradello (1671) and *Lamento della ninfa*, by Claudio Monetverdi (1638).²

*Intermedi* would continue to exist as a genre into seventeenth century Italy, coexisting with, rather than evolving into, full-length opera. The function of *intermedi* in the early seventeenth century begins to vary, however, as the relationship between the main and auxiliary entertainments shift. While some early seventeenth century *intermedi* served to enhance the main entertainment by maintaining similar themes or moods, such as lament or virtue, others expanded the plot by introducing additional elements or characters to the plot of the main work. The popularity of the *intermedio* ensured that small-scale opera continued into the eighteenth century, where it enjoyed success in several forms throughout Europe.

The use of small-scale opera as auxiliary entertainment is one of several functions it would serve in the eighteenth century. The tradition of the *intermedio* persevered, but because of the demands of a changing audience, it evolved in form and content. It is during this time that the term *intermedio* became synonymous with *intermezzo*, the latter becoming universal by the mid-seventeenth century. These two terms, however, are not the only ones used by composers throughout Italy. As stated by Troy,

> Besides “intermezzo” and its numerous variant spellings, these pieces appear under a variety of designations, including “divertimenti musicali,” “scherzo musicale,” “contrascena,” and “farsa in musica.” Moreover, the form “intermedio,” more common to the seventeenth century, is by no means unusual in libretti printed after 1700. Often used interchangeably with “intermezzo,” it may be found in the libretto of a Venetian opera performed as late as 1746.³

*Intermezzi* served, as *intermedi* did, to augment the entertainment of an evening in an auxiliary capacity. During the first half of the eighteenth century, however, *intermezzi* were

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² Sternfeld, *The Birth of Opera*, 33
almost entirely comic in nature. The intermezzo also differs from its ancestors in that it was
composed with a specific and somewhat standard form. Each section of the work typically
contained one or two arias in da capo form, separated by recitative secco, with a final duet in the
final section.⁴

The comic intermezzo grew in popularity during this time for two significant reasons. The
first of these was accessible plot lines and identifiable stock characters. While opere serie relied
on tragic or historic plots populated by historical or mythological figures (or anthropomorphized
emotions), intermezzi featured familiar characters closely related to, if not taken directly from the
commedia dell’arte tradition. Initially, the stock characters of the intermezzo, such as the “---old
woman and her young male prey or a beautiful girl pursued by an older man”⁵ were often
servants or relatives of the characters in the opera seria they accompanied. Very quickly,
however, the relationship between the two sets of characters became less important, and the
independent intermezzo came into being. The most prominent intermezzi in the eighteenth
century were composed with the intention that they could be paired with a variety of opere serie,
and as such were preferred by traveling troupes.⁶

The second major reason for the prosperity of this iteration of small-scale opera is the
functional aspect of the genre. Intermezzi during this time served as a cost-effective (limited cast,
props, sets) distraction from the changing of sets of the main entertainment. Lengthy set changes
were filled with comic scenes that possessed independent plots, or on occasion would be used as
a deliberate indicator of time passage in the main action. In this case the intermezzo characters

Music Online. Oxford University Press, accessed February 1, 2015,
⁵ Troy, The Comic Intermezzo, 38
⁶ Troy, The Comic Intermezzo, 67
would remark on the necessity of a song so that the characters in the main drama would be afforded enough time to carry out whatever action was announced in the previous act.  

It is important to note that *intermezzi* were not the only comic form of opera popular during the eighteenth century. As the *intermezzo* enjoyed spreading popularity throughout Italy (roughly 1705-1730) *opera buffa*, also referred to as “*dramma giocoso*”, “*dramma comico*”, “*divertimento giocoso*” and “*commedia per musica*”, was growing in popularity at an equal rate. *Opere buffe* would become a source of dramatic and musical content for the *intermezzi* written in the middle eighteenth century. *Intermezzi* differ from *opere buffe* only in duration and purpose; it was not uncommon for *intermezzi* to be reduced derivative of full-length comic opera, retooled to be inserted between the acts of a play and altered to cater to the number of singers available.

While both genres continued to be popular into the middle of the eighteenth century, it is during this time that the *intermezzo* began to decline in popularity, while *opera buffa* persevered well into the nineteenth century. While scholars acknowledge the relationship between *opera buffa* and its small-scale counterpart, there is some debate among historians about whether *opera buffa* was the cause of the demise of the *intermezzo*. Some scholars have argued that the shift to full-length comic musical entertainment indicated an inferiority in the *intermezzi* as not satisfying the wants of the audience, while others feel that though it was the popularity of the comic *intermezzo* that led to that of the *opera buffa*.

Although nineteenth century scholars believed that *opera buffa* supplanted the *intermezzo*, later scholars discounted this theory.

As early as 1923, Andrea della Corte decisively refuted these notions by pointing out that independent, full-length comic operas were produced in abundance.

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7 Troy, *The Comic Intermezzo*, 63  
8 Troy and Piero, “Intermezzo”  
9 Troy, *The Comic Intermezzo*, 7  
10 Troy, *The Comic Intermezzo*, 133
during the seventeenth century, long before comic intermezzi reached their maturity and that in the period of its mature form the intermezzo in no way presents a preliminary, inferior, or gestational aspect.\textsuperscript{11}

*Intermedi* and *intermezzi* were not the only forms of small-scale musical drama being performed during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the *New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, Michael Talbot describes the *serenata* as, “A dramatic cantata, normally celebratory or eulogistic, for two or more singers with orchestra”, with “the singers representing characters who communicate directly, without external narration.”\textsuperscript{12} *Serenate* were most often performed in a private court setting, although they were also popular in academic settings. The brevity of the genre made it popular for social events, much like the *intermedio* in its employment in court functions.

…in Venice the custom arose of performing a serenata instead of a full-length opera in public theatres on the last night of Carnival in order to leave more time for banqueting and visiting the gaming-house.\textsuperscript{13}

Contemporary terminology regarding these works, like that of *intermezzi*, is far from universal. In addition to the designation *cantata*, poets labeled their works with a number of specific identifiers, among them “applause per musica”, “epitalamio musicale”, “festa teatrale”, “azione teatrale”, “composizione per musica”, “festa di camera”, “poemetto musicale”, and intreccio scenico-musicale,” depending on the situation for which the piece was written.\textsuperscript{14}

Although *serenate* are not considered true opera by strict definition, they share enough core characteristics with small-scale opera (as defined in the introduction) to be discussed here.

The most prominent difference between *serenate* and true opera is a general absence of distinct

\textsuperscript{11} Troy, *The Comic Intermezzo*, 134
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid
plot and a subsequent minimization of staged drama. The *serenata*, unlike the *intermezzo*, has no specific form and can vary greatly in duration. Reduced movement and the use of printed scores by the singers during performance are no surprise, however, when considering the circumstances in which *serenate* were performed. While occasions such as visits from foreign dignitaries and weddings could be prepared for well in advance, *serenate* eulogizing military victories or births would require swift action.\(^\text{15}\) Such events would not only require expedited work by the poet, composer and musicians, but also those involved in the technical production of the piece. As the pieces were included in somewhat ceremonial festivities, they were not performed in traditional theatres. This required architects to creatively design and build so-called “theatres for a day” that would suit the needs of the occasion.\(^\text{16}\) The need for adequate performance space is an enduring catalyst for small-scale opera that was reflected in performances in Poland in 1735. Witkowska writes,

> What August III did not have in Warsaw at the time was a decent theatre: the king had liquidated the theatre houses built previously by this father, August the Strong, and the new Opernhaus was not to be completed until 1748. In such circumstances, the Italian *serenata* became the most suitable genre for courtly celebrations, functioning as a substitute for the *dramma per musica*.\(^\text{17}\)

Performance in a non-traditional space and minimized drama aside, *serenate* featured many of the same characteristics as contemporary opera. The singers in these productions were typically costumed and placed on stage with scenic backdrops identically to their operatic contemporaries. In addition, stage machinery was also employed, providing an additional layer of spectacle, despite the lack of motion of the singers on stage.\(^\text{18}\)

\(^{15}\) Talbot, “Serenata”  
\(^{16}\) Ibid  
\(^{17}\) Alina Źórawska-Witkowska, “Giovanni Alberto Ristori and his Serenate at the Polish Court of Augustus III, 1735-1746,” (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2007), 143.  
\(^{18}\) Talbot, “Serenata”
Another type of small-scale opera, the farsa, became popular in Venice in the early 1790’s. Farse were operas in one act, typically billed with ballet, with an evening consisting of two farse and two ballets.\(^{19}\) The farsa embodied nearly all of the characteristics that define small-scale opera: limited duration, reduced forces, and simplified plot lines. In his biography on Rossini, Richard Osborne notes of the composer,

As he later recalled, conditions in shrewdly administered theatres such as the San Moisè were ideal for an apprentice composer. The cast usually consisted of six singers: a soprano and a tenor as the romantic leads, a seconda donna, and either a trio of comic basses or a pair of basses and a tenor. There was no chorus. Working to a strictly limited budget, with minimal scenery and limited rehearsal time, the company would stage two or three new one-act operas per season. The designation of these operas was farsa, a term which has little to do with the English word ‘farce’. Some of them are funny but not all.\(^{20}\)

Of the theaters in Venice producing farse, the most productive was the Teatro S Moisè, “with 106 of the 191 productions documented through printed librettos.”\(^{21}\) According to The New Grove Dictionary of Opera, farse, like serenate, were not composed in any specific form. This lack of form is due to the vast body of work that farsa texts were drawn from. Although some farsa texts were originally composed, the majority of text comes from adapted novels, French and Italian musical and non-musical entertainments and drammi giocosi per musica texts.\(^{22}\) This is not true of Gioachinno Rossini’s farse, however, which followed a strict form that informed his later and more prolific works.

The shape of these 85-minute pieces is that of an arch. A multi-movement introduzione and a finale (both essentially tripartite) are the two plinths; a long central ensemble is the keystone. It is a structure Rossini would eventually use as the basis for the first act of such two-act pieces as L’italiana in Algeri and Il barbiere di Siviglia.\(^{23}\)

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\(^{21}\) Ibid

\(^{22}\) Ibid

\(^{23}\) Osborne, Rossini, 174.
Small-scale opera is not unique to Italy from 1600-1900 C.E, however, and evolved to suit the needs of the cultures and communities in which it was performed. In all instances, these small-scale genres contain the characteristics of reduced forces, shortened duration, and simplified plotlines. Spain, with its own rich musical culture, embraced early operatic traditions and adapted them for popular appeal. Of the entertainments of the Spanish court after Charles III’s ascent to the throne, Stein and Leza write,

The first opera for the archduke was performed in August 1708, probably the “operetta pastorale” or “scherzo pastorale” *L’Imeneo*, staged in connection with the wedding of the archduke to Elisabeth Christine of Brunswick-Lüneberg. Antonio Caldara’s *Il piú be nome*, a one-act “componimento da camera” setting a text by Pietro Pariati, has also been associated with 1708 wedding celebration, though the title-page of the score states that it commemorated instead the name-day of “queen” Elisabeth Christine.\(^{24}\)

While these small-scale works are in the Italian style, Spain later developed the tradition of the zarzuela, a type of theatre that included spoken dialogue and song.\(^{25}\) This in turn gave way to a new, minimized form of the genre, the género chico. The small-scale work was usually composed in one act and relied on extended sequences of spoken dialogue rather than sung music. Musically, the genre relied on commonly accepted (though not native) song and dance traditions such as the mazurka and schottische.

The género chico’s success was unparalleled, however, and the demand for it so great that in the 1890s no fewer than 11 theatres in Madrid were entirely given over to it and more than 1500 examples were produced.\(^{26}\)

Spain is not the only country to have its own unique forms of small-scale sung entertainment. The tradition of small-scale vocal works intertwined with dialogue, similar to the

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\(^{26}\) Ibid
intermezzo when accompanying a play, also existed in France in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The New Grove Dictionary of Opera defines vaudeville as “a French poem or song of satirical or epigrammatic character common in the 17th and 18th centuries.” Barnes writes that “Mersenne defined… as the simplest sort of air, using all sorts of verses set syllabically and sung without fixed metre,” and “primarily to mean topical songs in which political and court events were satirized.” While these singular pieces alone do not constitute small-scale opera, multiple songs joined together with spoken dialogue formed a new genre called “comédie en vaudeville”.

…comédies en vaudeville or operas-comiques en vaudeville: the term vaudeville did not refer to what we described in 3 as a strophic finale structure, but to any song in popular circulation, performed one syllable to a note, frequently with satirical or political content. As the French habitually invented new, topical texts to existing vaudeville tunes, they soon constructed musical comedies in which the vaudevilles were sung like recitatives in dialogue scenes.

The “comédie en vaudeville” only remained popular into the mid-nineteenth century, however, as the length of the genre increased and a greater portion of the show consisted of newly composed material. Opera comique became the preferred new genre, though it differed from comédie en vaudeville only in that the subject matter was not limited to comedy, and the music was all originally composed. It is important to note, however, that in its early years opera comique was required by law to be performed with reduced forces and in smaller venues. Recitative was also forbidden in works of this genre.

The tradition of opera including spoken text continued in the full-length form of the Singspiel in Germany and the ballad opera in Great Britain. While the ballad opera was most prominent in the 1730’s, a similar, shorter form of English opera existed decades before. Like

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29 Ibid
other forms of small-scale opera, the genre is not universally classified. Describing the variety of theaters and entertainments in London during the first part of the eighteenth century, Burden writes,

At those venues, an audience would have encountered a program of mostly spoken drama that remained the core of the repertory. But the bill, particularly after the increased theatrical competition that marked the mid-1710’s, contained a second item, typically a two-act piece often called (whatever genre it was) “the farce.” This item was characteristically always shorter, and was known after 1779 as the “afterpiece.” This second slot was the customary place for music: small all-sung operas, masques, pastorals, burlettas, and so on.30

Examples of these works include John Eccles’ *Europe’s Revels for the Peace* (1697) and Motteux’s *The Loves of Mars and Venus* (1685) (masques), *The Chimney Sweeper’s Opera* (1728), *The Quaker’s Opera* (1728), (ballad operas), *Midas* (1760) and *Judgment of Paris* (1768) (burlettas).31 It is logical that such mixed-bill programs, aside from providing “something for everyone,” would also provide a cost effective format for theater owners. When considering the exorbitant cost of rent, salaries, costumes, sets, props, and publicity, all of which must be paid prior to making any profit, the appeal of alternate business models becomes clear. In *The Gilded Stage*, Snowman writes,

One thing that marks out opera from other businesses is that its production costs have regularly run ahead of income. No farm, factory or finance house that routinely incurred large deficits would survive long. When sales of gentlemen’s wigs, ladies’ stays or shellac gramophone records went out of fashion, manufacturers stopped producing them. Yet the cost of producing opera has almost always exceeded the revenue provided by ticket sales. One way of getting round this was by putting on a ‘mixed bill’, only part of which consisted of opera.32

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The financial practicality of producing these types of shows, with reduced operatic elements applies to dissemination of opera into the second half of the nineteenth century. As opera became a symbol of prosperity in growing towns and cities across the globe, the necessity for scaled-down works continued. The construction of opera houses, if financially viable in smaller communities, was considered pinnacle. “…a reminder, perhaps, of the gentility they had left behind… everywhere, ‘opera’ was widely regard as an indication of wealth, social achievement, status.”33

As opera written during the nineteenth century grew in length and required increasingly larger forces to produce (due to improvements in instrument and stage technology), companies relied on small-scale opera, including reduced full-scale works and mixed-bills. Like small-scale opera up to this point in history, the use of reduced plot, limited characters, minimal costuming, and performance in a non-specific space were all employed to ensure the viability of traveling companies.

To our eyes and ears, the operatic entertainment on offer in mid-century Melbourne, Sydney, or San Francisco would often have seemed a curious hybrid, the ‘original’ work severely edited, cut and simplified for popular consumption, but with the addition of new dialogue and additional songs and dance routines… Not infrequently, operas would be cut to little more than half their original length so that the theatrical billboard might offer an operatic double-bill, or, more commonly, an opera preceded or followed by an equally ‘edited’ play or ballet. … Costumes and sets, too, tended to be multi-purpose standard issue: a painted mountain panorama might be unrolled for Sonnambula one night and William Tell the next, a castle or night sky made to serve both Lucia and Freischütz, while Lucia’s costume might be disguised with a coloured ribbon or two and adjusted to fit the company’s Gilda.34

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33 Snowman, The Gilded Stage, 140
34 Snowman, The Gilded Stage, 148
Of this practice, Snowman concludes, “Nevertheless, where there was ‘opera’, there was usually an audience.”35, a sentiment that remains true of small-scale opera into the 20th century.

The first half of the 20th century, wrought with war and economic depression, proved to be a difficult time for the arts, particularly for the performing arts such as opera. The massive scale of opera at the turn of the 20th century required substantial funding, which was not readily available in the private sector of the nations affected by the wars. During this period however, the Fascist regimes in Germany and Italy provided funding for arts endeavors as a means of nationalist propaganda, heavily censoring the types of works that could be performed. This was not the case in the United States and Great Britain, where government aid was significantly less in wartime in regard to the arts. An example of the types of support programs implemented by Allied countries were Great Britain’s Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts and Entertainments National Service Association, which after World War II would become the Arts Council, an organization that funds arts ventures in Great Britain to this day.36

Much like the reduced forms of opera found in the growing cities of the nineteenth century, many of the works written in the first half of the twentieth century shared a pragmatic scaling that suited the practical mentality of the period. Composers such as Benjamin Britten, Igor Stravinsky, and Maurice Ravel wrote shorter works in addition to full-length opera, with the one-act opera becoming a fashionable twenty-five minute (Stravinsky’s Mavra (1922)) to fifty minute long (Ravel’s L’Heure Espagnole (1904)) endeavor.37 Later, composers such as Jack Beeson, Harrison Birtwhistle and Maxwell Davies continued the tradition of writing for limited

36 Snowman, The Guilded Stage, 355
forces and reduced duration so that companies could more easily travel and produce these pieces.\textsuperscript{38}

The growing popularity of radio and television broadcast in the mid-twentieth century further contributed to the demand for opera on a smaller scale, at least temporally and formally. Composers such as Gian Carlo Menotti (\textit{Amahl and the Night Visitors} for NBC) and Malcom Arnold (\textit{The Open Window} for BBC) were commissioned in the 1950’s and 1960’s to write pieces specifically for television, further cementing the demand for small-scale sung works in mainstream media. This tradition persisted into the end of the twentieth century in England, including a group of six 50-minute operas commissioned for television in 1994-5 by Channel Four.\textsuperscript{39}

The popularity of small-scale opera has risen lately, particularly in New York City, where no less than thirty-one opera companies of all sizes and formats currently operate. The flexibility and viability of the genre benefits producers, directors, composers and musicians by providing a wieldy format for the creative process. It offers audiences a more accessible and intimate way to experience and enjoy sung drama. For these reasons, small-scale opera will likely persist well into the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, continuing to evolve to accommodate the ever-changing demands of audiences for sung drama.

\textsuperscript{38} Robert Adlington, “Music theatre since the 1960’s,” (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 235
\textsuperscript{39} Mervyn Cooke, “Opera and Film,” (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 285
CHAPTER II: MODERN DAY SMALL-SCALE OPERA

In order to understand the characteristics of small-scale opera that have led to its recent rise in popularity, I have conducted interviews with professionals currently working in the field. This chapter is divided into sections dealing with topics pertaining to the financial viability (for those both producing and attending these works) as well as those of creative and aesthetic concern. The sections in this chapter consist of excerpts from the interviews that were conducted pertaining to each respective topic.

The interviewees include: Dr. Ruby Fulton, Co-Artistic Director of Rhymes with Opera, based in New York City. Rhymes with Opera produces and performs small-scale experimental opera, with a cast of three singers and an ensemble of six players. Neal Goren, Founding Artistic Director/Conductor of Gotham Chamber Opera, a company based in New York City specializing in innovative production of lesser-known chamber operas spanning from the Baroque to modern day. Dr. Jennifer Jolley, a co-founder of North American New Opera Workshop or NANOWorks, based in Cincinnati, Ohio. NANOWorks produces several concert length programs each season, consisting of 3-5 operas per program. The future goal of this company is to expand regionally, potentially touring with productions throughout the Midwest. Aaron Siegel, co-founder of Experiments in Opera, also based in New York City. Experiments in Opera produces original and curated works in a manner similar to that of NANOWorks, with events containing a program of multiple small-scale operas. Elisabeth Halliday, soprano and co-founder of Rhymes With Opera and liaison to the New York Opera Alliance. The New York Opera Alliance is an organization comprised of member companies whose goal is to propagate awareness and attendance of small-scale opera in New York City, in addition to serving as a resource exchange.

I. Scale and Terminology
In pursuing the question “What defines small-scale opera?” several questions have been raised about how to quantify such a protean genre. It is generally agreed upon that reduced duration and limited forces are necessary factors for a work to be considered “small-scale”, but exact parameters for either are far from universal. Works produced by the interviewees ranged from one to ninety minutes, with anywhere from four to forty performers (including instrumentalists.) Additionally, works produced by the interviewees were performed in a variety of venues both indoor and outdoor, ranging in capacity from roughly 50 to 700+ seats. To complicate further the matter of definitions, there is discrepancy about terminology and whether works of vastly varying sizes deserve specific designations.

**Joel Trisel:** What is your personal definition of small-scale opera and what do you call your own works? Do you have specific parameters?

**Elisabeth Halliday:** I think "small-scale" spans a huge range and can encompass everything that isn't Your City's Opera House (or houses, like NYC before we lost City Opera). We are small-scale at 9 performers, but Village Light Opera is also small-scale with 40 singers and a chamber orchestra. Neither of us can do French Grand Opera, is perhaps the designation I'm leaning towards. Horses are big and expensive.  

**Ruby Fulton:** We typically perform works that are between 10-45 minutes. We have some bigger pieces coming up but so far, we have done a lot more smaller works. Also, we perform all new music that has been composed specifically for our group, for our individual singers. I think duration is important. And instrumentation. We are currently working with a six-piece Rhymes With Opera Orchestra, which really feels like a chamber ensemble, or like a very tiny pit. Once I heard David Lang say that he considers every piece of music he has ever written, singers or no singers, text or no text, to be opera.

**Jennifer Jolley:** …I feel opera, loosely defined, could be any dramatic work… I'm finding different names for these short operas. I know that in the opera world there is debate as to “what is a chamber opera?” For my opera company, we try sticking with operas 30 minutes or less, with the instrumentation not being more than a quartet or quintet. (from the NANOWorks call for scores)..."Large instrumental forces are discouraged and piano is preferred.” We do program operas with larger instrumentations from time to time, but an instrumental sextet

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41 Ruby Fulton, Interview with the author. March 12, 2015.
is our limit. Our forces allow for up to a vocal sextet, not including a small chorus.42

Aaron Siegel: ...I think one of the great things about the word “opera” is that it can be used so easily, but its meaning is hard to pin down. When we look for works, composers or directors to work with, we are mostly looking for people who have an inquisitive and open sense of the word opera. People who are able to bring their own meaning to the word... Full-length operas - 90 minutes. If we are doing an evening of between 6 - 10 curated works, the average evening is around 2.5 hours. That works out to about 15 - 20 minutes per piece. That is what I'm finding is a typical length for the shorter pieces... Scale is a funny thing. Once you get into that medium length time space (30 - 45 minutes) it feels to me like it just wants to go to 90 minutes. Like there is a gravitational pull to have the work expand to a realistic and meaningful scale. It wasn't until the big houses starting being the source of the form that the scale needed to be so big.43

While the professionals interviewed for this paper disagree on a specified and definitive temporal reduction for works bearing the moniker of small-scale opera, such a reduction exists in the works his or her respective companies produce. The idea that the term “opera” encompasses any and all sung drama regardless of scale, whether temporal, spatial, or in terms of the forces involved in performing such a work, is questioned through these correspondences. The common thread in conducting this line of questioning would suggest that many contemporary composers and producers would agree that any form of sung drama can be regarded as “opera.”

II. Financial Viability

The question of whether small-scale opera is a more economically viable art form than full-scale opera would seem to have an obvious answer: yes. This does not address, however, whether the genre is economically viable to the extent of self-sustenance or profitability. While the genre does not require the large amount of capital necessary to produce full-scale opera, there remains a need for fundraising beyond box office revenue. Despite this need for external

42 Jennifer Jolley, Interview with the author. March 12, 2015.
43 Aaron Siegel, Interview with the author. March 15, 2015.
funding, repeatedly attained by the directors of these organizations, the genre still allows for an otherwise non-existent avenue for creative expression and output.

**Joel Trisel:** Would you say that small-scale opera is relatively viable in terms of being somewhat self-sustaining (especially as compared to full-scale opera?) Or does it suffer, in your experience, from the same need for outside funding?

**Ruby Fulton:** I think small-scale opera still suffers from a need for outside funding, but it is more viable to attempt. For RWO, we have been gradually upping our budget each season…There is also the challenge of raising the production value and making more high-quality productions but balancing that with paying the artists more. It is tricky. I am a big believer in the idea that money does not necessarily equal success though. We are culturally indoctrinated to think that money equals success. Honestly though, it is only one way to measure things. There are so many other things that are so important. ⁴⁴

**Adam Siegel:** If you had asked me a couple of years ago, I would have said that small-scale opera is definitely more sustainable. Now, I think that it is probably more sustainable, but I am starting to have big questions about the nature of the form. If we want to continue to get modest funding from foundations, government agencies and individual donors, we have to keep producing work that people can connect to, that is of a high artistic quality and that is in higher profile venues. In this way, we are under the same kind of demand for growth and scalability that our capitalist economy is. I don't think this kind of trajectory is particularly sustainable But, on the other hand, I do have hope for the possibility that smart planning, strong community building and education programs can help to sustain an organizations mission and support a continued artistic practice. And certainly sustaining a budget of $100K per year is far more realistic than one that is $311 million. ⁴⁵

**Joel Trisel:** Some argue that even small-scale opera is not a sustainable venture, and that costs continue to increase with a demand for bigger and better productions. Do you find this to be true?

**Elisabeth Halliday:** That doesn't ring true for me. I think the issue was just that no one bothered to cultivate new audiences for a few generations and now all the opera patrons are dying and the younger generations don't care or can't afford the crazy costs. But if we start small and reevaluate spending, and audience engagement, I don't see why we couldn't grow. ⁴⁶

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⁴⁴ Ruby Fulton. Interview with the author. March 12, 2015.
⁴⁵ Adam Siegel. Interview with the author. March 15, 2015.
When asked about one of the most important aspects of working in the genre, Neal Goren described small-scale opera as economically viable (particularly when compared to grand opera), but acknowledged the expense involved in producing “high-quality” work.

**Neal Goren**: Finances. You can get away with lower production values in unknown repertoire more than you can in Tristan (though Gotham maintains high production values.) And lower orchestra costs. The problem remains that audiences are accustomed to a certain (high) level of production, be it from grand opera, Broadway, or rock concerts. But even a wildly elaborate Dido and Aeneas would be considerably less expensive to produce than a wildly elaborate Les Troyens. Or even a bare bones Troyens.\(^47\)

**Joel Trisel**: Because of?

**Neal Goren**: Personnel. Even in a modern production, the union does not allow us to put anyone on stage in their street clothes without paying them for “renting” them as costumes. That’s a petty example, but it all adds up. Costs can only be controlled so much, and one can only charge so much. The economics of chamber opera are totally foolhardy. Unless you don’t use union artists, in which case you get what you pay for.\(^48\)

Heidi Waleson further discussed the need for reduced personnel with Neal Goren in an article in *Opera News* in 2012.

…there are limits to growth. “I don’t want to get so big that quality suffers,” Goren says. “I’m at the helm, I oversee all artistic matters, and I can only do that for so many productions a year.” In addition to conducting the operas, he does all the casting of singers and covers and chooses the directors, who then choose their designers, though Goren does his own due diligence on the picks. He also coaches all the singers individually before the staging process begins, sometimes starting as early as a year in advance.\(^49\)

Similarly, the personnel of Rhymes with Opera reduce payroll and streamline the creative process by assuming multiple roles within the organization from administration to performance.

### III. Reflection of Trends in Media Consumption

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\(^47\) Neal Goren. Interview with the author. March 25, 2015.

\(^48\) Ibid

It is widely recognized that in an increasingly digitized world that humans are developing a diminished attention span, particularly when it comes to entertainment. This trend, a product of twenty-four hour television (and its advertising) format and perhaps more so by the advent of the internet age, could easily be cited as a contributing factor for the rise in small-scale opera.\(^5\) Audiences attending a single-bill program of a chamber opera lasting 45-90 minutes recognize a scenario akin to watching an hour-long television program or the length of a feature length film. Audiences attending a program of 60-90 minutes consisting of multiple 10-30 minute works recognize the experience of watching 30 minute television programs and their advertisements back-to-back or that of binge-watching videos on YouTube. It is likely that either of these experiences will feel familiar to audiences temporally if not dramatically.

**Joel Trisel:** Would you say that small-scale opera reflects a general trend in how we consume media (and our collective contemporary mindset)? Taking into consideration shorter attention spans and the desire for vaudeville-esque variety when several short operas are presented as an evening?

**Jennifer Jolley:** I do think our attention spans are shorter, and I don't think that's a bad thing. So yes, I do think this format reflects a general trend in media consumption. At the same time, we do have anthologies of short stories, so I see this as a different storytelling format with regard to operas. On a similar note, it's a fun challenge to write a story that has multiple parts, like a serial opera.\(^5\)1

**Aaron Siegel:** Yes, I do think you are right that how we watch and listen to opera is informed by our current media habits at large. It's funny though. No matter how much this happens though, most people won't go near opera singing, with vibrato and a trained voice, since it conjures all kinds of notions about stuffiness and elitism. I think one of the things we are doing at EiO is trying to figure out how to get people into the room who wouldn't normally be there. I do think that most people associate opera with a style of singing, as opposed to a more general connection between words, story, music and image. I kind of think that a lot of music videos approach the feeling of opera as I conceive of it. But can you imagine MTV or VH1 calling their shows 'opera request live?' But the point is...

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\(^5\)1 Jennifer Jolley. Interview with the author. March 12, 2015.
that opera is, can be, and should be a more inclusive form. And that is how we are positioning ourselves as a small-scale organization.\textsuperscript{52}

\textbf{Neal Goren:} Interesting question. I had a discussion about this with Nigel Redden, who heads the Lincoln Center Festival and Spoleto USA. He feels that audiences appreciate the extremes: either 60-90 minutes or 4-5 hours, but nothing in between. Are movies briefer than they were 20 years ago? I have no idea.\textsuperscript{53}

\textbf{Ruby Fulton:} We did a set of 12 1-minute “signature” pieces a couple years ago. We were not thinking so much about the media consumption climate, more about having all of these awesome composers who we wanted to work with and not enough time and space to program everybody. But yes, I think maybe part of the appeal of that set was related to our need for bite-sized information these days. Think about twitter, even. You have to get in and get out in a certain number of characters. No time for dilly-dallying around.\textsuperscript{54}

\textbf{Joel Trisel:} Do you feel like small-scale opera mirrors a general trend in media consumption? Being, as you said, more culturally relevant, more intimate and more easily digested because of the scale?

\textbf{Elisabeth Halliday:} No. It's closer: shorter total lengths, more multi-media - but opera can never compete with the meme and the internet. So yes, it's more modern and more appropriate to our age, but I don't think we can ever "mirror" pop culture. We do that (opera sampler) - often our feature piece is only 30 minutes long, accompanied by one or two even shorter works. Sure, the Bang on a Can Marathon is a little Netflix-y in that way…I don't know of any casual opera marathons though.\textsuperscript{55}

These sentiments, though not identical, show that the temporal reduction in small-scale opera not only reflects a current trend in media consumption, it creates a versatile atmosphere in which producers can explore different formats of presentation. In a situation where multiple works are performed on a program, an additional layer of entertainment can be added by programming the works in such a way as to alter the pacing and overall arc of the event.

\textbf{IV. Audience Appeal and Demographics}

\textsuperscript{52} Aaron Siegel. Interview with the author. March 15, 2015.
\textsuperscript{53} Neal Goren. Interview with the author. March 25, 2015.
\textsuperscript{54} Ruby Fulton. Interview with the author. March 12, 2015
\textsuperscript{55} Elisabeth Halliday. Interview with the author. March 23, 2015.
While small-scale opera mirrors a temporal reduction in contemporary media, it offers a unique spatial experience that allows performers and audiences to connect in a meaningful way. The genre permits audiences to observe dramatic and musical nuance more clearly while still providing a sense of spectacle that is inherent to opera. Small-scale opera is not only accessible dramatically; with lower production costs, admission prices are also much less than those of full-scale productions. This allows an audience to attend new works while removing the monetary risk of investing in the attendance of unknown work. Because of this, the demographic makeup of audiences attending productions of small-scale opera has the potential to be more socio-economically diverse.

Ruby Fulton: I think that one of the appeals of small-scale opera is a chance to really connect with audience members in a very personal and meaningful way. Of course it is amazing to go to a huge production where you sit in awe of the hugeness of everything around you, and I think we all feel like that when we do something like go to the Met, or even elect to go out to see a movie on the big screen, instead of watching it at home on a laptop. But the potential for smaller-scale opera to connect with individual members is huge. We have cultivated a really interesting group of repeat audience members who I think are excited by the closeness of it. When we commissioned David Smooke, one of the things he mentioned about wanting to write for us was that we always have really cool audiences. They are pretty diverse normally, but I think there is a type of listener who craves that up-close experience. It’s hard to put a point on because it is the combination with an up-close experience with the hugeness of the opera voice and all of the history that goes along with the idea of opera. It’s like having your cake and eating it too. You get to have the big spectacle cake that goes along with the grandness of opera - also present in small-scale opera, I think - and then you get to eat it in an intimate environment where you are sitting 10 feet away from an opera singer. I think the affordability of both producing and experiencing small-scale opera makes it ideal for artists and audiences today, not to mention our shorter attention spans, which you have touched upon.56

Joel Trisel: What is the demographic make-up of your audience?

Aaron Siegel: We survey our audiences and last year over 50 percent of our audiences had never seen an opera before. The other 50 percent are heavily

56 Ruby Fulton. Interview with the author. March 12, 2015.
involved in the art scene in New York and Brooklyn. So, it is kind of different ends of the scale.\textsuperscript{57}

\textbf{Elisabeth Halliday}: 30-something working professionals, composers, artists or arts-minded, liberals.\textsuperscript{58}

\textbf{Joel Trisel}: You mentioned audience engagement...is it important to expand your target audience or continuing to advance the audience you have?

\textbf{Elisabeth Halliday}: More the latter - although we're experimenting with a matinee performance this May, which I assume means doing more targeted outreach to the matinee crowd (children, senior citizens). We've just recently switched successfully from one performance per opera to two, and we're now aiming for three so certainly we do need to sell more tickets. But the 20/30-something working professionals is definitely a good place to be, now we just need to find more of them.\textsuperscript{59}

\textbf{Joel Trisel}: What would you say are the characteristics of small-scale opera that make it successful (particularly as a draw for the audience)?

\textbf{Elisabeth Halliday}: Mostly I think I just wanted to stress the idea of accessibility. The feedback I get, again and again, is how amazing it is to be up close and personal. Younger people often don't have any exposure to opera and that tends to mean that they're blown away when they discover what opera singers can do...From an audience perspective, they get to be so close to the singers and instrumentalists in a way that only the very rich usually get to do. Front row seats at the Met offer the same type of intimacy but those are hundreds of dollars. RWO tickets are $20. Chamber operas are performed in close, intimate settings, allowing for an audience/performer intimacy rarely found in our genre.\textsuperscript{60}

\textbf{Neal Goren}: Intimate venues distill the power of opera... For an audience to have great singers at close proximity provides a real thrill, and the emotions of the music and libretto grab you in an intimate space and don’t let go.\textsuperscript{61}

\textbf{Ruby Fulton}: I think the affordability of both producing and experiencing small-scale opera makes it ideal for artists and audiences today, not to mention our shorter attention spans, which you have touched upon. I don’t really see it as a

\textsuperscript{57} Aaron Siegel. Interview with the author. March 15, 2015.
\textsuperscript{58} Elisabeth Halliday. Interview with the author. March 23, 2015.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid
\textsuperscript{61} Neal Goren. Interview with the author. March 25, 2015.
threat to traditional full-scale opera though. I think these things are different enough that they can both thrive.\textsuperscript{62}

V. Artistic Appeal

Audiences are not alone in enjoying the creative flexibility and affordability of small-scale opera. The genre allows composers to write new works of sung drama that are much more likely to be performed than full-scale opera because of the cost involved with presenting larger works. It also provides performers with a substantial amount of performance opportunities that would not exist otherwise. In a time when roughly 30,000 trained singers are competing for work, small-scale opera would appear to be a likely draw for singers looking to ply their craft and gain experience in the field.\textsuperscript{63} This is a key element of small-scale opera that will ensure its continuing success in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century.

\textbf{Joel Trisel}: So the genre afforded you the opportunity to compose opera, which you wouldn’t have considered approaching in a full scale setting?

\textbf{Jennifer Jolley}: Yes, mostly. There are very few opportunities for young composers to write a full-scale opera AND have it performed. I could probably write a full-scale opera, but I would need to have it both workshopped and performed. In the theater world, there are workshops and readings, but not so much with opera. And there really should be opportunities to workshop new works.

It is important to note that this experience is far from unique. Included in Chapter 1 is a quote from Osborne, in which he writes of Rossini, “As he later recalled, conditions in shrewdly administered theatres such as the San Moisè were ideal for an apprentice composer… Working to a strictly limited budget, with minimal scenery and limited rehearsal time, the company would

\textsuperscript{62} Ruby Fulton. Interview with the author. March 12, 2015.
\textsuperscript{63} Susan Mohini Kane. \textit{The 21\textsuperscript{st} Century Singer: Bridging the Gap Between University and the World}. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 4
stage two or three new one-act operas per season.”64 These conditions are nearly identical to those of Jennifer Jolley and the scale of her NANOWorks in Cincinnati, Ohio.

VI. Threat to Full-Scale Opera?

In recent years opera attendance in the United States has been decreasing at a substantial rate, with a reduction of attendance by approximately one-third from 2002 to 2008.65 This figure, along with the closing of several companies throughout the US in the past decade, raises the question of whether or not full-scale opera is an unsustainable art form in the 21st century. With the growing popularity of small-scale opera and the subsequent success of the companies producing these works, it is worth questioning whether this emerging model threatens to supplant that of 20th century opera.

Joel Trisel: Does small-scale opera pose a threat to traditional or grand opera?

Elisabeth Halliday: It does not! Traditional/Grand Opera is threatened whether we're around or not. We are, I feel, helping to "save" opera by bringing in the audiences who are already not going to traditional opera. We are more affordable, more culturally relevant, more intimate, and... shorter.66

Neal Goren: No threat whatsoever. It’s an entirely different genre. In NYC at least, there is enough audience for varying tastes and interests. Smaller companies can be more nimble than the grand opera houses, and are therefore better able to ride out economic fluctuations. But not [a] threat.67

Ruby Fulton: Yes, some big companies have been folding but there are also new things happening at Houston Grand Opera and Dallas, etc. I think big things everywhere are folding and I hope it will turn around. This might sound cynical, but I would guess that plenty of the small-scale companies are folding all the time too, we just aren’t reading about it in the news. There also has been such a big trend in the last ten years or so for young artists to start their own organizations - which I think is fantastic, and brought about by groups like Bang on a Can who taught us that this is possible - but I’m not sure that I see it as a replacement for the bigger institutions. More like an added flavor. Yes, co-existing is what I

imagine happening. But who knows? It definitely has been cool to see the smaller companies popping up. I know in New York City alone, there are something like 40 small-scale opera companies. I think the bigger institutions are thriving more in Europe, too. The government pays to sustain the arts more over there.68

Aaron Siegel: …I don't necessarily think that small scale opera is a threat to large scale opera. Opera at the scale Experiments in Opera is working just can't reach nearly as many people. The Met has a house of 3800. They reach more people in one night than we do in 2 years of productions! If big opera is in danger it is because of… the pressures of growth inherent in capitalist ideology. But, that being said, I think that small-scale opera can disrupt some of the modes of working that big opera has and in that way, I could see the work we are doing having an impact on how opera is produced and performed in the future.69

Small-scale companies in New York City are further strengthening their prominence by working together, rather than competing against one another. The New York Opera Alliance, a consortium of small-scale companies, was formed in 2013 in order to “increase awareness of participating organizations, share ideas and resources, and generate revenue for collaborative projects” in the city.70

Elisabeth Halliday: After City Opera closed there was a lot written about the death of opera, and a lack of opera in New York outside of the Met. We 31+ companies were all, like, what the hell? It became clear we weren't doing enough to be heard. So we decided to create this alliance to share knowledge, resources, help one another with outreach and development, and work to spread the message that opera - new opera, chamber opera, innovative opera, affordable opera - was alive and well in New York. Some groups are on the board just to feel like they are part of a community, but others of us cross-publicize, sometimes even joint-produce.71

By investigating the characteristics of small-scale opera that have led to its recent rise in popularity, I have shown, through interviewing professionals working in the field, that the genre

68 Ibid
69 Aaron Siegel. Interview with the author. March 15, 2015.
is likely to succeed in the 21st century. This is due to the financial viability small-scale opera affords both those producing and attending these works. Small-scale opera provides composers with a wieldy medium in which they can explore writing sung drama that is substantially more likely to be produced than full-length works. Additionally, in a market inundated by trained professionals, small-scale opera grants singers performance opportunities to ply their trade and gain experience in the field.
CONCLUSION

The above research shows that small-scale opera, or opera that is characterized by having reduced duration, limited forces, uncomplicated plots and/or unspecified performance space, has grown in popularity in the second half of the twentieth century and is likely to persist into the 21st century. The genre has existed since the birth of opera itself, circa 1600 C.E., and possesses a rich and varied history that continues today because of its flexible and pragmatic nature. This exploration of the genre culminated in commentary by individuals working in the field of small-scale opera today, again focusing on the specific issues mentioned above. These interviews showed that small-scale opera provides audiences with a uniquely intimate and affordable form of sung drama and artists (composers, directors and musicians) a medium in which they are able to explore and ply their craft. Further research on the topic could include an exploration of recent discourse pertaining to public opinion of the form, as well as investigating additional perspectives of those professionals in the field who contribute to the production of small-scale opera, such as dancers, designers, and conductors.
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