

Institution: Oxford Brookes University		
Unit of Assessment: 33: Music, Drama, Dance, Performing Arts, Film and Screen Studies		
Title of case study: A Democratic Art Form: Changing the Conversation about Opera		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2000–2019		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Alexandra Wilson	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Professor of Music and Cultural History	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: [text removed for publication]
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 1 August 2013–2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Wilson's research on opera's hidden history as popular entertainment is changing perceptions of the art form both nationally and internationally, overturning negative stereotypes that serve as a barrier to accessibility. Opera receives a largely negative press today, routinely being characterised as elitist, irrelevant and even un-British. Wilson's findings, disseminated to a wide general public via talks, study days, journalism, programme essays, a BBC Radio 3 documentary, and an ac-trade book, have challenged these norms, enhancing the experience of existing audiences and making the art form more accessible to new ones. Wilson's work has also been instrumental in bringing about change within the opera industry. Company managers, journalists, and singers have used it to respond to pressing challenges the industry faces today, from the Covid crisis to Brexit, as well as to find new and relevant ways of presenting opera to audiences in the twenty-first century.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>Wilson is internationally recognised as one of the world's leading authorities in the field of opera reception studies. Her publications over the last two decades (all sole-authored) have enhanced public understanding of the connections between operas and the pressing social, political, and aesthetic debates of their time. More recently her research has begun to focus on the question of why opera is perceived as elitist today, by scrutinising the trope's roots. She uses historical evidence to show that the chasm between opera and popular culture is not as deep as some like to contend and has revealed a rich history of opera as popular entertainment. This has challenged established modes of thought, calling into question long-standing and deeply ingrained assumptions about how we categorise different forms of culture. She is generating new ways of thinking that are expanding the audience reach for opera. This work has fallen into three developmental phases:</p> <p>Phase 1. A body of publications on the reception of Puccini's operas during his lifetime. This culminated in <i>The Puccini Problem: Opera, Nationalism, and Modernity</i> (output 4), which is now the definitive text in its field. This book demonstrated how Puccini reception became bound up with debates about Italianness, race, gender, and aesthetic identity at a vital moment of national self-definition. Wilson is regularly consulted by arts organisations to write or comment on the relevance of Puccini's operas to present-day socio-cultural challenges.</p> <p>Phase 2. A body of publications on opera in 1920s Britain (outputs 1, 2, 3). Central to this work is Wilson's monograph <i>Opera in the Jazz Age: Cultural Politics in 1920s Britain</i>, which examines opera's place in the 1920s 'battle of the brows' and provides a vital resource for anyone interested in British identities and taste formation. The book is the first to consider this important debate about cultural categorisation (which still has ramifications for how we talk about the arts today) from a</p>		

musical perspective. Wilson concludes that opera sat closer to the middlebrow than the highbrow, thanks to its mixed audience, close relationship with celebrity, and connections with new technologies and the mass media.

Phase 3. An emerging body of publications on opera and the elitism stereotype. Wilson first started to explore this issue in output 5, continuing in output 1. Further work is in progress: her next book, supported by a Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship, will trace the development of the opera/elitism stereotype from 1920 to 2020.

3. References to the research

1. Peer-reviewed monograph: Alexandra Wilson, *Opera in the Jazz Age: Cultural Politics in 1920s Britain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019). ISBN: 9780190912666
2. Book chapter: Alexandra Wilson, 'Gender', in *The Oxford Handbook of Opera*, ed. Helen Greenwald (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). ISBN: 9780195335538
3. Book chapter: Alexandra Wilson, 'Galli-Curci Comes to Town: The Prima Donna's Presence in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *The Arts of the Prima Donna in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. Rachel Cowgill and Hilary Poriss (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). ISBN: 9780195365870
4. Peer-reviewed monograph: Alexandra Wilson, *The Puccini Problem: Opera, Nationalism, and Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007; paperback 2009 ISBN: 9780521106375). ISBN: 9780521856881
5. Peer-reviewed journal article: Alexandra Wilson, 'Killing Time: Contemporary Representations of Opera in British Culture', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 19/3 (2007), 249-270. DOI: 10.1017/S0954586707002364

Evidence of quality:

- Output 1 was supported by a British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship awarded to Wilson for the year 2014-15. Title: 'Opera, Popular Culture and Cultural Categorisation in 1920s Britain'. Value: GBP104,113.
- Output 4 was awarded the American Musicological Society's Lewis Lockwood Award (2008) for an exceptional work of scholarship by an early-career academic.
- All outputs were published by OUP or CUP and entered for the RAE/REF.

4. Details of the impact

Wilson's research has established an extensive public reach internationally, being disseminated and achieving its impact via the following activities and publications:

- Programme essays for the Royal Opera House [henceforth ROH] (x 15 over the period under consideration); Opera North (x 5); English National Opera (x 2); Glyndebourne; Scottish Opera; Welsh National Opera; English Touring Opera; Teatro Regio Turin at the Edinburgh Festival; Wiener Staatsoper; Wexford Festival Opera; Bilbao Opera
- Public talks at: ROH (x 4); Opera Holland Park (x 2); Oxford Lieder Festival (x 2); Opera Prelude; Royal Northern College of Music; Cardiff University.
- Articles for: *BBC Music Magazine* (circulation 27,394; readership 234,000), *History Today* (50,000 readers), *Opera*, *The Guardian* (circulation 111,155), *The Sunday Times* (659,699)
- A Radio 3 Sunday Feature, written and presented by Wilson: 'A Flapper's Guide to the Opera' (part of the BBC's 2017 opera season in association with the V&A and the ROH, first broadcast 22/10/17, available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b099vsvw>). Chosen as a pick of the week in *The Times / Radio Times*, attracted c.117,000 listeners and downloaded 1,700 times by 03/09/20 (Source J).
- A podcast about her 1920s research (<https://notesonnotespodcast.com/2019/05/03/6-an-interview-with-alexandra-wilson/>)
- A Glyndebourne podcast on *Madama Butterfly* <https://www.glyndebourne.com/festival/podcast-madama-butterfly/> 5,760 listeners by April 2020 (Source H)
- Interview during ROH live broadcast of *Madama Butterfly* broadcast to 1,030 cinemas globally

on 30/03/17

- Interviews for BBC Radio 4, including 'Britain in Ten Operas', broadcast 25/11/20 (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m000pp80>) and an interview about opera and accessibility on 'PM' in 2017, in which Chris Mason called Wilson 'a real ambassador for opera'.
- The annual OBERTO study days Wilson co-organises at Oxford Brookes (<https://obertobrookes.com/events-past/> – 7 events 2013-19; c.50 delegates at each). Wilson also organised a study day on popular opera in Britain at Senate House, London (28/11/15), open to the public and further disseminated via a podcast (<https://obertobrookes.com/2015/12/07/popular-opera-in-britain-study-day-by-dr-alexandra-wilson/>).
- A reconstruction of a 1920s celebrity concert at Oxford Brookes (08/09/15)
- Research-related engagement with opera enthusiasts on Twitter (@amwilson_opera 4,760 followers at the time of writing)
- An ac-trade book, *Opera in the Jazz Age*, which has reached non-specialist readers. Daniel Snowman wrote in *Opera* magazine 'Wilson is one of those rare musicologists capable of seeing opera in its widest historical context...[An] impressively researched and highly entertaining book' (Source K).

John Snelson, former Head of Interpretation and Publishing at the ROH, argues that Wilson's work has been 'prescient in demonstrating that the ideals of the academy can work in partnership with the public in appreciating art' (Source A). Numerous opera companies in the UK and Europe have commissioned Wilson to write essays and give talks that contextualise operas in fresh and accessible ways. The reach of these has been extensive. For example, the ROH alone sold 145,000 programmes containing Wilson's work (equating—at GBP8 per programme—to sales for the company worth GBP1,160,000), many of which will have reached multiple readers. The programmes have been dubbed 'the best and most interesting of any opera house or company', 'essential reading', and 'a model of readable scholarship', thanks to the contributions of esteemed experts such as Wilson (Source A). Opera North has used Wilson's work (18,300 programmes sold) to make operas more relevant to modern audiences: her essays have 'encouraged fresh ways of thinking' about familiar operas and cut through 'traditional assumptions' and 'popular prejudices' (Source B).

The music industry and academia often exhibit distaste for 'crowd-pleasing' operas, a factor that new and potential audience members find off-putting. Wilson's work has dispelled longstanding snobbery surrounding Puccini's works. For the ROH, Wilson's authoritative essays have enriched audiences' understanding of the significance of these often-maligned operas, their cultural contexts and their ongoing influence. Snelson calls Wilson 'a rare leading voice in tackling the fault line of popularity and perceived cultural value' and says her work has challenged long-standing received wisdom about high and low culture that has 'disproportionately dictated aesthetic values for much of the 20th century in opera' (Source A). It has, in effect, given audiences a licence to enjoy these works 'guilt-free'.

Although a current backlash against canonical operas by 'dead white men' is making life harder for opera companies, who must programme operas by popular composers such as Puccini in order to survive financially, Wilson has shown them to be works of 'urgent contemporary relevance' (Source B), by drawing parallels with present-day debates about nationalism, corruption, race, and sexual violence. Wilson's work has deepened and enriched audiences' appreciation of specific works and of operatic culture in general: as audience member Chris Brown notes, it 'changes our understanding of both past and present' and 'challenges us to change our understanding of the genre and not to give up the attempt to widen its appeal' (Source C).

The ubiquitous opera/elitism trope not only deters new audiences from exploring opera but also hampers the efforts of everyone involved in performing and promoting the art form. Wilson uses historical evidence to challenge damaging stereotypes, demonstrating that in the fairly recent past people of all social backgrounds used to enjoy opera as part of a broad entertainment culture. Michael Volpe, Founder and former General Director of Opera Holland Park, now Executive Director at Iford Arts, says that Wilson has overturned established modes of thought about opera and its audience: 'The idea that the average Joe can enjoy opera in a day-to-day way—that opera can be a populist art form—is often dismissed as a fantasy. But Alexandra's book and radio

programme show that it isn't'. He adds, 'In future when I'm asked "can opera be a more popular art form?" I shall direct the enquirer to her work' (Source D).

Audience member Kerry Bunkhall (Source E) was told in her formative years by her community, including teachers, that opera was elitist. Wilson's Radio 3 documentary and NotesOnNotes podcast enabled her to dismiss negative stereotypes that were hampering her own enjoyment and provided a user-friendly tool with which to share her passion with others. Both Bunkhall and Brown (Source C) see Wilson's work on 1920s operatic culture and the middlebrow as providing a model for how opera might be presented in less 'luxurious' ways in the future. A talk Wilson gave for the educational charity 'Opera Prelude' at the Cadogan Hall (25/09/18) not only enhanced attendees' understanding of Puccini's operas but led to their perceiving the composer as 'more human' (Source F). This event also provided a young singer with a fairly paid performance opportunity.

Wilson's research has also helped opera singers to navigate a now often-hostile cultural environment in the UK. Adriana Festeu (Senior Lecturer at Leeds College of Music and Programme Tutor, Royal Academy of Music), notes that Wilson's work in changing 'the way in which opera is perceived as an art form' is 'crucial in the development of the next generation of performers'. It has inspired young singers from deprived backgrounds to work actively towards bringing operatic experiences to their hometowns and fight the elitism stereotype that is still propagated in the media. Wilson's work also encourages them to explore new repertoires and has shown them how to "sell" their art form' to audiences in a fresh, informed way. Festeu writes that Wilson's work on historical singers has even changed her own identity as a singer: 'Being aware of opera's historical legacy makes me feel that what I do is meaningful and part of a tradition' (all Source F).

The elitism stereotype is largely a media construct, but Wilson's work is changing the way journalists write about opera. Her 'lively Twitter account' has become a point of reference for music critics (Sources G, H, I). Alexandra Coghlan, who writes for *The Telegraph*, *The Independent*, *New Statesman*, *The Spectator*, *Gramophone* and *Opera*, says: 'Wilson's contributions on social media have definitely changed how I have approached opera as a music journalist. Her particular research focus on high/low culture and our changing attitude toward opera in the UK has shaped how I approach questions of elitism or snobbery surrounding opera. I hadn't previously realised how modern a phenomenon such divisions were, and thanks to her work on the 1920s and opera's social context then, I have a much more lively sense of comparison and context for today's environment' (Source H). Critic Richard Bratby states that opera's non-elite history 'is not yet widely grasped by colleagues in my field; and your work has helped bring it into the centre of the discussion' (Source I). Wilson's research has 'successfully shifted perceptions on taste and popularity in the wider classical music world', and broadened the range of repertoires about which editors are willing to commission articles and books (Source I). Wilson's work on opera's connections with film and celebrity have altered the way in which industry figures (Sources B and H) and audience members (Source C) view opera's cultural status.

The OBERTO events, which attract critics, singers, opera managers, directors and dramaturgs from around the world, as well as members of the public, have become an essential forum for addressing 'topical issues that are highly pertinent to the operatic profession' (Source F). So significant was the 2014 conference on elitism deemed to be that it was discussed in a book aimed at opera professionals, *The Business of Opera* (ed. Belina-Johnson and Scott, Ashgate, 2015). The OBERTO events also influence programming: Opera Holland Park has called them 'really useful in introducing opera professionals to unusual repertory' (Source D). Furthermore, the events have not only fostered networks between industry figures but put them directly in contact with their audience, which has helped to counter pockets of snobbery within the opera industry itself. The former Head of Interpretation at the ROH states that the 'OBERTO interactions have challenged directors and critics working within the echo chamber of the opera business to question their relationship to the wider audience upon whom they rely' (Source A). Wilson's historical work has shown companies how to market their product more effectively, by showing 'where the art form's enduring appeal lies and how that appeal can be rediscovered and reasserted' (A).

John Allison, editor of *Opera* magazine, argues that the 2017 event on musical migration helped the industry to address one of the biggest challenges of the present moment, Brexit, whose impact on opera he calls 'significant and potentially catastrophic' (Source G). Because many opera

professionals and journalists attended, papers presented at this event 'have been widely cited in ongoing conversations within the operatic community' (G). The study day was deemed so important that it was discussed in an *Opera* editorial and the magazine commissioned Wilson to write an extended article on the topic. The parallels Wilson has revealed between debates about cultural protectionism in the 1920s and those taking place today have helped artists, administrators and critics to navigate the challenges they face as Britain leaves the EU (G). Stuart Leeks of Opera North also notes the value Wilson's public engagement work on opera and nationalism brings to bear on contemporary debates about Brexit (Source B), while Festeu, originally from Romania, says Wilson's research has helped her as a singer to broach a cultural divide between different national traditions (Source F).

Both the ROH and Opera Holland Park (Sources A and D) note that Wilson's work has revealed that opera companies of the 1920s were dealing with challenges concerning audience engagement and a British antipathy towards opera that still seem very familiar today. The innovative solutions that were found in the 1920s are particularly valuable in 2021 and beyond, when the opera industry finds itself at a moment of unprecedented upheaval. In 2020 Covid-19 halted operatic activity and sent the global opera industry into a phase of deep self-reflection. Volpe (Source D) argues that the economic challenges resulting from the pandemic have made it clear that the current British model of presenting opera, which revolves around an expensive 'star system', is no longer viable and needs to be replaced by a sustainable model of 'popular opera'. He says that Wilson's work on opera in 1920s Britain has suddenly come into its own, because it demonstrates that 'a lean, economical, self-supporting sort of opera...thrived in this country in the past and could do so again'. He proposes that Wilson's work 'provides a blueprint that today's opera companies can use as they move forward into the post-Covid era' and urges anyone currently involved in the programming or promotion of opera to read Wilson's work. At times of crisis, the operatic landscape in the UK always transforms itself in order to survive: Wilson's findings have given the industry a toolkit with which to do so again. They form, Volpe argues, 'a crucial reference point for the entire business of British opera'.

In sum, Wilson's research has made multifaceted impacts upon opera goers and the opera industry, enriching audience experiences, breaking down barriers to accessibility, changing received thought, and giving opera professionals the tools with which to address a variety of challenges that the industry faces at a particularly difficult moment in its history. Its impact is 'felt beyond its immediate focus' (Source C) and as John Allison of *Opera* writes, on behalf of the opera industry as a whole: '[Wilson's] work matters very much to us all' (Source G).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- A. Letter from John Snelson, former Head of Publishing/Interpretation, Royal Opera House
- B. Letter from Stuart Leeks, Editor, Opera North
- C. Letter from Chris Brown, opera goer who discovered Wilson's work via Twitter
- D. Letter from Michael Volpe, former General Director and Founder of Opera Holland Park
- E. Letter from Kerry Bunkhall, audience member
- F. Letter from Adriana Festeu, Co-founder, 'Opera Prelude', Senior Lecturer at the Leeds College of Music and Programme Tutor at the Royal Academy of Music
- G. Letter from John Allison, Editor, *Opera* magazine
- H. Email from Alexandra Coghlan, freelance journalist and critic for *The Telegraph*, *The Independent*, *New Statesman*, *The Spectator*, *Gramophone* and *Opera*
- I. Letter from Richard Bratby, freelance writer and classical music critic, *Gramophone*, *The Spectator*, *Birmingham Post*
- J. Email providing listener figures from Ellie Mant, Producer, BBC Radio 3
- K. Review of *Opera in the Jazz Age*, Daniel Snowman, *Opera* magazine, March 2019, 363-4