

Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution: Oxford Brookes University
Unit of Assessment: 35 - Music, Drama, Dance and Performing Arts
Title of case study: The reception and politicisation of Puccini's operas
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Dr Alexandra Wilson's research on the reception of Puccini's operas was disseminated to a large non-specialist, international audience, principally via numerous opera house programme essays, but also via radio broadcasts, pre-performance talks, a podcast and a book for general readers. Accessible yet authoritative, her research on the historical contexts of Puccini's operas has transformed the way in which they are written about for a general audience, challenging outdated stereotypes. Her work has deepened audience understanding, particularly of Puccini's lesser-known works, encouraging audiences to explore other unfamiliar repertory. It has helped both operatic newcomers and seasoned audience members to engage more effectively with the art-form as a whole and influenced the way in which opera is written about in the media.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>The underpinning research is the first comprehensive study of the Italian reception of Puccini's operas during his lifetime. Through her detailed analysis of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historical documents, Dr Alexandra Wilson has overturned the view of Puccini as an apolitical composer of limited historical significance, demonstrating that the Puccini reception offers a vital key to understanding a crisis of national identity that gripped Italy between the 1880s and the 1920s. Penetrating the conflicts that surrounded Puccini's works not only informs us about how public reputations were constructed, sustained and challenged, but reveals much about the aspirations of a nation. Debates about music became closely bound up with discussions about the state and future of the Italian nation and Puccini – as the leading exponent of the Italian art form most closely linked with the national image – inevitably became embroiled in political, social and aesthetic controversy. Critics of all political persuasions shared similar anxieties that Italy was entering a period of political and musical decadence. Where they diverged was in their response to such problems and in the contradictory solutions that they proposed. Puccini's music was simultaneously held up as a symbol of cultural strength and derided as a manifestation of artistic and societal decline. Cultural historians have recently demonstrated that the arts are central to nation-building processes, and that artists have a key role to play in the creation of myths of kinship. Wilson has demonstrated Puccini to be a profoundly important political figure, through his politicisation at the hands of supporters and detractors alike, an area which has to date been neglected by scholarship. Furthermore, by revealing Puccini's prominent place in pan-European aesthetic debates of his day, Wilson makes a nuanced case for a reconsideration of Puccini's cultural significance, challenging modernist-inspired academic disdain for the composer on the one hand and popular hagiography on the other.</p> <p>The Puccini reception documents include newspaper, magazine and journal reviews, books, correspondence and iconographical sources. Much of the research was based on Italian-language primary sources, which are available only in Italian research libraries and inaccessible to the general public or to an Anglophone readership.</p> <p>The research, all single-authored, was carried out by Wilson between the commencement of her doctoral studies in February 1998 and the publication of the article 'Defining Italianness' in 2008. She began work on this project as a PhD student at Royal Holloway, University of London (1998-2002), developed it as a Junior Research Fellow (Worcester College, Oxford, 2001-04; St Hilda's College, Oxford, 2004-05) and completed it as a Lecturer (2005-07) and Senior Lecturer (2007-11) at Oxford Brookes University, where she is now a Reader. The outputs from this project written and published during Wilson's time at Brookes were a monograph, <i>The Puccini Problem: Opera, Nationalism, and Modernity</i> (Item 1 below), which concentrated upon the operas from <i>La bohème</i> to <i>Turandot</i>, and an article on the reception of the earlier <i>Manon Lescaut</i> published in <i>The Opera Quarterly</i> (Item 2). The monograph appeared to enthusiastic reviews from scholars across several disciplines and has become both the definitive study of Puccini reception and a model for richly-textured studies of composers within their historical contexts.</p>
3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

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1. Peer-reviewed monograph: Alexandra Wilson, *The Puccini Problem: Opera, Nationalism, and Modernity* (Cambridge University Press, 2007; paperback edition 2009). ISBN: 0521856884 (paperback 0521106370)

Submitted to RAE2008, Oxford Brookes University, UoA35-Music, RA2, AM Wilson, Output 3.

2. Peer-reviewed journal article: 'Defining Italianness: The Opera that made Puccini', *The Opera Quarterly*, 24/1-2 (2008), 82-92. doi: 10.1093/oq/kbn058

Submitted to REF2014, Oxford Brookes University, UoA35-Music, Drama, Dance and Performing Arts, REF2, AM Wilson, Output identifier 7879.

Wilson's monograph was a key item in her Department's RAE submission in 2008. Research in opera studies at Oxford Brookes University (where Wilson was the sole opera scholar at the time) was identified as 'World Leading' in this exercise. In 2008, Wilson's monograph was awarded the American Musicological Society's Lewis Lockwood Award for an exceptional work of musicological scholarship by an academic in the early stages of his or her career. It has been favourably reviewed by musicologists (e.g. Helen Greenwald, *Music & Letters* 90/1, February 2009, 129-131), historians (e.g. Axel Körner, *The Opera Quarterly* 24/1-2, Winter-Spring 2008, 126-132) and modern linguists (e.g. Laura Wittman, *Cambridge Opera Journal* 20/3, November 2008, 303-306). Greenwald wrote: 'It's a rare occasion when a scholar taps into the mother lode, but Alexandra Wilson has done just that....And she has done it exceptionally well', while Axel Körner wrote: 'There is no better time...for a historical reflection on what Alexandra Wilson describes in her excellent new book as "The Puccini Problem"'. The monograph has been widely cited in other books and articles, including Andrew Davis, *Il Trittico, Turandot, and Puccini's Late Style* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010); Marcia J. Citron, *When Opera Meets Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); and Citron, 'The Operatics of Detachment: *Tosca* in the James Bond Film *Quantum of Solace*', *19th-Century Music* 34/3 (spring 2011), 316-40.

The book was translated into Greek in 2008 for the Greek National Opera imprint with an initial print run of 2,000 copies. The publication was particularly welcomed because of 'the lack of musicological books in Greek' (cited in Source 1 below).

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Although an academic text, Wilson's monograph has reached a non-academic readership. It has been reviewed in publications for general readers, including *Opera* and *The Musical Times*, whose critic called it 'As accessible as Puccini's music itself...a book that can engage both scholars and the opera-going public' (Source 2). The *COJ* review also indicated its wide appeal: 'it is a compelling book not only for musicologists and music critics, but for anyone interested in the history and culture of modern Italy in its European context' (Source 3).

Wilson subsequently reworked research from the monograph in many high-profile non-academic contexts. In particular, Wilson has developed a sustained engagement with the audience of the Royal Opera House. The Commissioning Editor (ROH), has commissioned from Wilson a contextual essay drawing upon her research for the programme of each of the Puccini operas currently in the ROH's repertoire. Eight different Puccini operas have been performed during the census period, some with multiple revivals. Wilson's essays have appeared in all programmes for all Puccini productions during this period: no other contributor has written as regularly for the Puccini programmes.

The Commissioning Editor, Royal Opera House, (Source 4) writes that Wilson's essays are more authoritative than previous programme essays for this repertory and confront stereotypes about Puccini. He argues that her essays on the historical contexts for the operas help audiences to understand them and their production styles better, noting that Wilson's research makes her uniquely placed to provide such context. In particular, the Commissioning Editor notes the role Wilson has played in introducing audiences to less familiar Puccini operas. This in turn, he argues, has a knock-on effect, encouraging the public to explore other unfamiliar works. The Commissioning Editor argues that Wilson's essays both deepen audiences' engagement with the opera in question and encourage a heightened sense of participation in operatic culture more

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broadly. He writes: 'All this makes for a more involved audience who are able to get greater benefit from opera in performance: when they learn more, they enjoy and value the experience and the culture more'. The essays reach an audience of mixed age, income bracket and nationality and the Commissioning Editor explains that Wilson's essays speak equally effectively to new and long-standing opera-goers. He emphasises the engaging nature of Wilson's writing, explaining that readers value its clarity and the way it communicates in a 'direct and non-technical way', while stressing that the essays also appeal to experienced opera-goers who value its 'informed and thorough approach'. Finally, the Commissioning Editor observes that the essays influence the way in which journalists write in the mainstream press, thus disseminating Wilson's research to an even larger audience.

Wilson's work has reached a very large number of readers. 71,674 programmes featuring her work were sold during the period 01/01/08 to 31/07/13 (many will have been read by multiple readers). The figures break down as follows (Source 5):

- *La bohème* programme (featuring Wilson's essay 'Making the Rounds'): 25,342 sold.
- *Tosca* (featuring Wilson's 'Praise and Hostility'): 20,620.
- *Madama Butterfly* (featuring Wilson's 'Heartfelt and Sincere'): 3,860.
- *La Fanciulla del West* (featuring Wilson's 'Fanciulla's Transatlantic Trials'): 3,599.
- *La rondine* (featuring Wilson's 'Puccini the Internationalist'): 4,219.
- *Gianni Schicchi* (featuring Wilson's 'Gianni Schicchi in Context'): approx. 2,600.
- *Il trittico* (featuring Wilson's 'Il trittico in Performance'): 4,315.
- *Turandot* (featuring Wilson's 'An Appropriate Ending?'): 7,119.

Wilson's research has had an international reach. One of the ROH essays was reprinted in the programme for the Pafos Aphrodite Festival, Cyprus (1,700 sold: Source 6). Wilson was also commissioned directly to write essays for other European opera houses. Greek National Opera (Source 1) specified precise sections of Wilson's monograph to be adapted for a general audience in an essay on *Turandot*. A commission on *La bohème* by the Gran Teatre del Liceu, Barcelona (Source 7) demonstrates that Wilson had been selected for her ability to engage non-specialist readers.

In 2008 Wilson's work featured prominently in BBC celebrations to mark Puccini's 150th anniversary (see Source 8). Wilson drew upon her research in order to confront widespread misconceptions about Puccini on 'Music Matters' and Radio 4's 'Puccini: Touched by the Little Finger of the Almighty', providing audiences with a nuanced understanding of the composer's cultural significance during his lifetime. She introduced audiences to unfamiliar Puccini operas and their staging in a Radio 3 interview about the ROH production of *La fanciulla del West* and a Proms pre-performance talk about *Il tabarro* at the RCM, subsequently broadcast on Radio 3.

Further activities included a contribution to a Glyndebourne *La bohème* podcast (2012), downloaded by 1,300+ listeners (Source 9) and a pre-performance talk at ENO on *Turandot* (2009), attended by 45 people (Source 10). Wilson reworked material from her monograph in a book aimed at students and a general audience, *Opera: A Beginner's Guide* (Oneworld, 2010), which is held in over 115 non-academic libraries worldwide (Source 11) and has been recorded as an audiobook.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

1. Corroborative statement author 1. Email sent to Wilson on 29 January 2008 from the Associate Dramaturge 2006-2009 commissioning an essay on *Turandot* for Greek National Opera, making direct reference to the chapters from *The Puccini Problem* that GNO felt would work well for a general audience
2. Review of *The Puccini Problem* in *The Musical Times* (Patricia Howard, 'Dons and Donne', *The Musical Times* 149/1903, Summer 2008) accessible on JSTOR.
3. Review of *The Puccini Problem* in *Cambridge Opera Journal* (Laura Wittman, *Cambridge Opera Journal* 20/3, November 2008, 303-306) (PDF attached)
4. Corroborative statement author 2. Email sent to Wilson on 11 September 2013 from

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- Commissioning Editor, the Royal Opera House, outlining reasons for using Wilson as a very regular contributor to the ROH programme books and the impact her essays have on ROH audiences.
5. Corroborative statement author 3. Email sent to Wilson on 30 July 2013 from Opera and Music Publications Officer, the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, providing sales figures for Royal Opera House programmes featuring Wilson's essays.
 6. Email sent to Stelios Manganis on 3 December 2012 from the Pafos Aphrodite Opera Festival giving sales figures for Wilson's essay. (Statement, and author details, available from Oxford Brookes University on request)
 7. Email sent to Wilson on 25 March 2011 from the Curator commissioning an essay on *La bohème* for the Liceu, Barcelona, which was published in both Spanish and Catalan. (Statement, and author details, available from Oxford Brookes University on request)
 8. URLs listing Wilson's BBC appearances: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00g2jlz>; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00fzc2y>; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00g3tfw>; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00cx88f>
 9. Corroborative statement author 4. Email sent to Stelios Manganis on 15 November 2012 by the freelance producer who made the podcast for Glyndebourne. The podcast had been downloaded 1,389 times at November 2012. It has not proved possible to obtain more up-to-date download figures from Glyndebourne.
 10. Corroborative statement author 5. Email sent to Stelios Manganis on 12 November 2012 by Baylis Administrator at ENO, giving attendance figure for Wilson's 2009 talk on *Turandot*.
 11. Word document itemising library holdings, drawn from Worldcat and individual library catalogues, at 31.07.13