

Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution: University of Aberdeen
Unit of Assessment: UoA 35 – Music, Drama, Dance and Performing Arts
Title of case study: 74 Degrees North – Reassessing Opera in the Twenty-first Century.
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>This case study details the impact of collaboration between three colleagues at the University of Aberdeen - Mealor, Stollery (Music) and Davidson (History of Art) and how the resulting work has contributed to a reassessment of opera in the twenty-first century in the context of the work of Scottish composers such as Thea Musgrave, Peter Maxwell Davies, Judith Weir and Sally Beamish. In 2010 the team created the opera <i>74 Degrees North</i>, commissioned by Scottish Opera for its FIVE:15 series of new operas.</p> <p>The impact of the work can be evidenced in the following ways:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Securing of excellent reviews in national press; Near capacity audiences over eleven performances at three national venues; Plans with Scottish Opera to create a new longer version of the work for future performance nationally and internationally; Further collaboration between composers in Music department to create new work with the capacity to achieve impact; sound festival 2012's commitment to a weekend of new approaches to opera composition; Development of a substantive and continuing relationship between Scottish Opera and University of Aberdeen.
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p><i>74 Degrees North</i> was composed during the period from May 2009 to May 2010 by Professor Peter Davidson (Chair in Renaissance Studies), Professor Paul Mealor (Chair in Composition) and Professor Pete Stollery (Chair in Composition and Electroacoustic Music).</p> <p>The writing team was committed to a collaboration between three elements: text; instrumental/vocal music; and electroacoustic music and sound design. The text was a concise development of the central ideas presented in Davidson's monograph <i>The Idea of North</i>. This text, conceived within the research environment <i>The North</i>, one of University of Aberdeen's four interdisciplinary research themes, demonstrated intensive research across many cultures, languages and disciplines to produce a new and positive definition of the "north", as well as making a contribution to the contemporary movement of "writing about place".</p> <p>The opera is set at 74 degrees north, at the burial place of the first men to die on Sir John Franklin's catastrophic arctic expedition of the 1840s, the <i>locus classicus</i> of arctic disaster caused by arrogance rather than adaptation to northern realities. Its underlying concern is with relations to the climate and ecosystem of the north; its implicit form is derived from the Noh play trope of 'a visit to a celebrated grave'.</p> <p>Research undertaken was entirely collaborative. Davidson produced a synopsis to which Stollery composed a short electroacoustic sketch, which influenced Mealor's initial work on the score. Stollery and Mealor subsequently worked together on the design of the rest of the score, subverting the expected paradigms of electroacoustic = negative, instrumental = positive. Neither of the two elements is subservient to the other throughout the work.</p> <p>Mealor's score develops his fascination with chamber orchestral colours and the notion of waves brought about through harmonic and rhythmic construction. The electroacoustic element is a constant of the dramatic and musical narrative, not standing for the negative and supernatural elements alone, but evoking and reflecting all aspects of the arctic setting of the opera. The</p>

Impact case study (REF3b)

intention is to surround the audience and stage with loudspeakers to create an immersive environment for both the icy soundscapes and for the supernatural events in the second half of the opera.

Mealor's operatic vocal writing here differs greatly from his choral music. Extreme registers, large interval leaps with much use of falsetto by baritone are not only responses to this dramatic text, but also demonstrate an engagement with contemporary British opera exemplified by recent works by Turnage, MacMillan and Weir.

Stollery has continued the research theme of collaboration with instrumental/vocal colleagues by providing the electroacoustic sound score for **Palmer's** new choral and orchestral work *Caedmon* which was also premiered in the 2012 **sound** festival.

3. References to the research

A score of *74 Degrees North* has been submitted under REF2, along with a DVD of one of the performances. The opera was performed in Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Glasgow:

15–16 May 2010	Elphinstone Hall, University of Aberdeen (3 performances)
20–22 May 2010	Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh (4 performances)
25–27 May 2010	Òran Mór, Glasgow (4 performances)

A DVD video of the opera has been submitted in support of its inclusion in REF2; it can be viewed also at:

<http://www.abdn.ac.uk/music/uploads/files/REF/seventyfour.m4v>

4. Details of the impact

74 Degrees North had an impact on the cultural practitioners who brought it to life for the commissioning institution, Scottish Opera (see supporting statements from Jeremy Huw Williams, Alex Reedijk and Michael McCarthy). Through performances in three big Scottish cities it had a wider impact on the general public, as reflected in the excellent reviews in the national press (see press pack). The scope of the impact can be measured by the near capacity audiences over the eleven performances (see audience figures provided by Scottish Opera).

The impact of the work can be seen in its role in a broader reassessment of opera as a genre which took place at the **sound** festival in 2012, which had an overarching theme of New Opera. This included the commissioning of four brand new operas as well as a keynote presentation from Alex Reedijk, General Director of Scottish Opera, and an academic symposium on the future of opera. This was a direct result of the impact of *74 Degrees North*, and the fact that **sound** is capitalising on a renewed and re-assessed interest in opera in the region is testament to this.

The relationship between the University of Aberdeen and Scottish Opera is gathering strength and as a result, the University has become a venue for performances of opera as part of its national touring programme (for example, *Carmen* in 2010; *Pirates* in 2013, with accompanying *A little bit of Pirates* performed in the Music Department), with future performances planned. Scottish Opera also provides in-kind support for the University's Student Opera Group, through advice on direction, provision of costumes, sets and support for the musical director.

Scottish Opera, in partnership with the University of Aberdeen, has been instrumental in trying to ensure the longer-term sustainability of new opera. The partnership of equals in the creation of *74 Degrees North* has encouraged the promotion of similar collaborative ventures between librettists and composers. For example, Scottish Opera, in partnership with the University of Aberdeen, has been successful in acquiring funding from Leverhulme Trust (2013) for a Young Composer and Librettist Scholarship Scheme. This is a unique programme, developed to nurture 12 young

Impact case study (REF3b)

composers and librettists over three years. Starting in 2013, each year, for three years, this initiative will offer four students a nine-month scholarship, which will culminate in annual public performances of two new short operas, created by the scholars, showcased at the **sound** festival, NE Scotland's annual celebration of new music.

The impact of this work is sustainable over a longer term: such was its success that the creative team and Scottish Opera are working on a plan for further performances of a new extended version in the future. The Festival of Choral Music at St Andrew's University has requested that any future production be staged there, and there are discussions taking place over potential performances in Toronto.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

The following practitioners have provided testimonials detailing impact of the research:

1. Professional Baritone; performer in the eleven Scottish Opera performances of the work and part of the team working towards future performances of a new version.
2. General Director of Scottish Opera; commissioner of the original work and part of the team working towards future performances of a new version.
3. Joint Artistic Director of Music Theatre Wales; director of the eleven Scottish Opera performances of the work.
4. A press book for *74 Degrees North* is available at: http://www.abdn.ac.uk/music/uploads/files/REF/seventyfour_pressbook.pdf
5. Audience figures provided by Scottish Opera are available at: http://www.abdn.ac.uk/music/uploads/files/REF/seventyfour_audiencefigs.pdf m