

**Impact case study (REF3b)**

<b>Institution:</b> University of Oxford
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 35 Music, Drama, Dance and Performing Arts
<b>Title of case study:</b> Oxford Opera: Bringing ancient and modern opera to non-academic audiences of all ages
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>The University of Oxford is a leading centre for research in opera and music theatre, where the work of musicologists and practitioners intersects to mutual benefit, and outputs have attracted the wide attention of new audiences well beyond the academic community. Oxford Opera encompasses a broad historical range, but shares a set of common aims and objectives: exploring new and historical modes of performance and realisation; challenging received operatic conventions and performance traditions in a scholarly and creative manner; and disseminating research results to new listeners through professional collaborations. Young people, the general public, and other professional practitioners have all been beneficiaries.</p>
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>There are several key academics in the Faculty of Music at the University of Oxford involved in opera focused research. Known collectively as Oxford Opera they are: Professor Robert Saxton, University Lecturer since 1999; Dr Martyn Harry, University Lecturer since 2009; Professor Jonathan Cross, Professor of Musicology since 2003; Professor Michael Burden, Professor of Opera Studies since 1989; Dr Suzanne Aspden, University Lecturer since 2005; and Dr Jonathan Williams, Director of College Music, St Hilda's since 2006.</p> <p>Oxford Opera participates in interrelated strands of research activity: the commissioning, composition, and performance of original works, exploring innovative ways to engage audiences through new modes of realisation; and the rediscovery and revival of historically neglected (especially eighteenth-century) works.</p> <p>Saxton and Harry have both composed new works. Saxton's music has been widely recorded, published, and critically reviewed. His second opera, <i>The Wandering Jew</i> <sup>[Section 3:1]</sup>, follows the outstanding international success of his first, <i>Caritas</i> (premiered in 1991, now the subject of a 2012 Ashgate monograph). <i>The Wandering Jew</i> had a prolonged genesis over more than ten years as Saxton researched and developed the scenario and libretto from a broad range of sources and then rethought aspects of his compositional technique (via associated works) in order to meet the new challenge of composing an opera specifically for radio. The research process is traceable in the sketches for <i>The Wandering Jew</i>, which – along with the full score copy – have been acquired by the British Library, and are now accessible to scholars and the general public. Harry's research resulted in his composition of a chamber opera for children, <i>My Mother Told Me Not to Stare</i> <sup>[2]</sup>, a collaboration with leading Australian children's author Finegan Kruckemeyer and pioneering UK-based drama groups Theatre Hullabaloo and Action Transport Theatre. The principal research challenge was in arriving at an operatic language suitable for a young audience; plot and music were developed during an extensive series of workshops and school events.</p> <p>Oxford researchers also play a prominent role in researching twentieth-century and contemporary opera. Cross's research engages broadly with historical, aesthetic, dramatic and analytical issues in contemporary stage works, including a monograph on Birtwistle's landmark opera <i>The Mask of Orpheus</i> <sup>[3]</sup>. As a member of the research group <i>Dramaturgie musicale contemporaine en Europe</i> (lead institution Université Paris VIII, funded by l'Agence nationale de la recherche), he has contributed to Europe-wide research into the creation and practice of twentieth- and twenty-first century opera, and in particular to the major project (2010–13) on the theatre of Luciano Berio. This is complemented by Burden's research interest in English opera and music theatre, the outcome of which has been explored on the stage with New Chamber Opera (NCO, which he co-founded), including works by Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Maxwell Davies and Birtwistle. His edition of Walton's one-act opera <i>The Bear</i> <sup>[4]</sup> resulted in a new public staging. Burden's principal area of research is in the English stage of the 18th century, which has led to such publications as his RMA monograph on Regina Mingotti's years at London's King's Theatre. He coordinates two databases on music on the London stage pre- and post-1800. Through his role as director of NCO, he is able to explore in practice on the stage the results of this research.</p> <p>Aspden, too, is an internationally recognised scholar of eighteenth-century opera as well as co-editor of the leading peer-reviewed <i>Cambridge Opera Journal</i>. Her research covers a range of</p>

issues surrounding performance and identity in opera, word and music interrelationships in vocal music, and particularly the career of Handel in England. Her long-standing research into Handel on the London stage culminated in the publication of the monograph *The Rival Sirens* <sup>[5]</sup>.

Jonathan Williams, as AHRC Cultural Engagement Fellow (since January 2013), directed the first complete performance in modern times of Rameau's 1754 opera *Anacréon*, given by professional Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment (OAE) in the Sheldonian Theatre in November 2012. The performance was the outcome of a decade's work by Williams reconstructing the score from diverse Parisian sources and studying French Baroque performance practices. His edition has been published in the complete Rameau Urtext edition <sup>[6]</sup>

### 3. References to the research

- [1] **Robert Saxton**, *The Wandering Jew* (Munich: Ricordi, 2010), a radio opera in 8 scenes, commissioned by the BBC, premiered/first broadcast on BBC Radio 3-9 July 2010. Commercial CD/MP3 recording of the work published by NMC Recordings Ltd (NMC D170) <http://www.nmcrec.co.uk/recording/wandering-jew-0>. \*With support from Arts Council England, BBC Radio 3, Peter Moores Foundation, and the OUP John Fell Fund.
- [2] **Martyn Harry**, *My Mother Told Me Not to Stare* (Theatre Hullabaloo, 2010), an opera for children (2008/10), premiered 19 February 2010. <http://mymothertoldmenottostare.wordpress.com/> \*With funding from the Foyle Foundation and Arts Council Wales.
- [3] **Jonathan Cross**, *Harrison Birtwistle: "The Mask of Orpheus"* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), Landmarks in Music Since 1950 <http://www.ashgate.com/isbn/9780754653837>  
\*Ashgate is a leading academic publisher. All books published within the Ashgate list are subject to peer review.
- [4] **Michael Burden**, *William Walton: The Bear* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), William Walton Edition <http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/product/9780193384439.do#.UIRFTbBvCho>  
\*Oxford University Press is a leading academic press. Peer reviewed.
- [5] **Suzanne Aspden**, *Rival Sirens: Performance and Identity on Handel's Operatic Stage*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) <http://www.cambridge.org/gb/academic/subjects/music/opera/rival-sirens-performance-and-identity-handels-operatic-stage>  
\*Cambridge University Press is a leading academic press. Peer reviewed.
- [6] **Jonathan Williams**, *Jean-Philippe Rameau: Anacréon: ballet héroïque en un acte* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2004), Urtext Edition, Opera Omnia Rameau (OOR IV.25) <https://www.baerenreiter.com/en/search/product/?artNo=BA8851>  
\*Bärenreiter is a leading international classical music publishing house in Germany. "Bärenreiter Urtext" performing editions are internationally renowned for their clearly formulated, scholarly critical and editorial criteria.

### 4. Details of the impact

Oxford Opera research has contributed to a significant broadening of the contemporary operatic audience. Public understanding and appreciation of the genre have been improved, and operatic works have thus been rendered accessible to those without formal musical education. Public engagement with opera has been enhanced through the recreation and promotion of historical performance modes, and new audiences have been engaged through specially designed target works for children and radio listeners. The interactive space created by NCO has equipped a number of young opera practitioners with the knowledge, skills and experience they require for a successful career in operatic performance and/or production.

#### Enhancing Public Understanding and Appreciation of Opera

Aspden's research on Handel has informed frequent TV and Radio features throughout the census period. A particular highlight was her regular contribution to the extensive media coverage of Handel's anniversary year in 2009, including a year-long Handel blog on the BBC website <sup>[Section 5: 1]</sup>, discussion of Handel on BBC Radio 3's *Opera on 3* and *Composer of the Week*, and on the BBC4 TV series *The Birth of British Music*, *Opera Italia*, and *Opera's Fallen Women*. The impact of Aspden's research, communicated to a wider public in this manner, is attested by her evident popularity with producers: she has been asked to return for further contributions to broadcasts and

documentaries (such as BBC4's *The Symphony*). An Oxford Music graduate working on Radio 3's *The Choir* observed, "Notably, several people there asked if I knew you [Aspden], and proceeded to describe you as the best they've ever had and 'not stuffy like most academics'."<sup>[1]</sup>

The BBC Radio 3 programmes to which Cross regularly contributes achieve significant average listener reach of around 1.9m<sup>[ii]</sup>. He has contributed, for example, to *Opera on 3*, (Birtwistle's *The Minotaur* [31 May 2008] and Harvey's *Wagner Dream* [5 May 2012]) and Radio 3's flagship programme *Music Matters* (Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress* [10 March 2012]), on which Saxton also frequently appears. Cross's repeat invitations to discuss contemporary opera on Radio 3 and BBC4 Proms broadcasts (e.g., live from the 2009 performance of Birtwistle's *The Mask of Orpheus*), and at public events for orchestras and opera companies such as Glyndebourne and English National Opera, attest to his ability to communicate about "difficult" contemporary music to a non-specialist audience. The chief producer of the BBC Symphony Orchestra has written: "Professor Cross is exceptional & outstanding in his ability to communicate clearly & engagingly about challenging contemporary classical music to a general public. He is greatly valued by the BBC."<sup>[2]</sup> His online introduction to Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* for the Philharmonia Orchestra has so far received over 12,000 viewings<sup>[iii]</sup>. One YouTube viewer commented: "Thx for this. I'm a late starter in opera. The discussion gives me the courage to approach *OR* – indeed, to listen to Stravinsky." Cross gave a lecture on Stravinsky's Paris stage works as part of *The Rest is Noise* Festival, 2013, to an audience of over 200, and the SoundCloud recording of the event has already received over 600 "listens". One attendee (@aimi\_hayman) tweeted, "Yesterday's highlight was @jonathancross on Stravinsky, architecture, dance & fashion".

### **Bringing Opera to Life Through Historically Informed Performance**

With NCO, Burden has directed over thirty productions of works by, among others, Handel, Cimarosa, Mozart and Charpentier, springing directly from his research into the London stage. These productions have had a wide public reach (annual audiences of c. 2400)<sup>[iv]</sup>. With its own Baroque orchestra, The Band of Instruments, NCO has produced recordings of Charpentier's stage music and a collected edition of Rameau's cantatas for the ASV label. Appearances outside Oxford have included concerts and productions at the Tudeley and Southwark Festivals, London's South Bank and the National Gallery.

Williams's work brings the neglected stage music of Rameau to the attention of a wide audience, through well-received public performances in Oxford and London, and associated public events such as the interdisciplinary "Rameau in Oxford" study afternoon. His collaboration with the OAE is also proving to be of great developmental value to the professionals with whom he is working. The Chief Executive of the OAE writes, "These projects have already been ... of enormous benefit to the musicians of the OAE, who have been given the opportunity of developing their existing knowledge of the performance of eighteenth-century French Baroque music, and equipping them with the skills to perform with greater confidence and stylistic precision in the future."<sup>[3]</sup>

### **Creation of New Operatic Works for Target Audiences**

Harry's children's opera demonstrably reached well beyond the academic community, and has been particularly successful in breaking down barriers conventionally associated with contemporary art music<sup>[4]</sup>. "Opera is often perceived to be an elitist art-form [...] but if we fail to introduce young people to opera then there will be a whole generation who become excluded from a potentially rich art-form. This production [of Harry's *My Mother Told Me Not To Stare*] is making a feisty, concerned effort to create an operetta that speaks to young people's concerns yet engages the adults accompanying them" ( www.thepublicreviews.com)<sup>[v]</sup>. "[Harry's opera is] a brave attempt to make what is essentially high art accessible to its target audience of children over eight" (*Cumberland News*). The benefit in particular to the many children who experienced the opera and took part in linked school workshops has been transformative, and is documented in the feedback on blogs and websites. One child said: "I'm used to listening to rock music so this was something very different for me and it made an immediate impression on me."<sup>[vi]</sup> The opera's reach was extensive: a critically acclaimed 7-week national tour visited such venues as Darlington Arts Centre, Middlesbrough Town Hall, The Unicorn Theatre (London), Ammanford Theatre and the Nuffield Theatre Southampton, as well as schools and community centres. A second season (2012) toured from Huddersfield to Bath, Runcorn to Norwich. The total audience was 2931, with

## Impact case study (REF3b)

an additional c.800 attending workshops.

*The Wandering Jew* was premiered on BBC Radio 3 on 9 July 2010 by the BBC Symphony Orchestra and BBC Singers, conducted by André de Ridder; a commercial recording of the opera was issued by NMC. It has brought opera to new audiences in spaces away from the conventional opera house, free of charge. “This project blew me away [...] Saxton's tonal (or modal) musical language ranges from the cinematic spectacular to rapt spirituality” (*The Times*, \*\*\*\*\* review, 11 June 2011)<sup>[viii]</sup>. Unlike the majority of opera broadcasts, which consist of recordings of staged works, *The Wandering Jew* was composed specifically for radio [text removed for publication]<sup>[viii]</sup> and the associated recording is available to purchase. The opera's premiere and CD release<sup>[vii]</sup> was covered extensively in the national press and supported by composer interviews on radio and via the NMC website, thus reaching well beyond academic audiences. Listeners tweeted: “Robert Saxton's *The Wandering Jew* @nmcrecordings is an accessible modern opera of great humanity” (@clivepaget); “Released on 13 June: Robert Saxton's overwhelming choral masterpiece: *Wandering Jew*, on NMC: a powerful listen...” (@vatdaddy).

### Career Training and Development for Young Practitioners

NCO has a particular commitment to the development of young singers, accompanists and arts administrators, through the NCO Studio, repetiteur scheme, and administrator internship<sup>[ix]</sup>. Each year the studio stages two student productions and a recital series of twenty-four concerts in which they take part, with repertoire choice and production style primarily led by the ongoing research of Faculty members. The repetiteur scholarship is designed for pianists wishing to further their skills as a repetiteur, accompanist or conductor, and involves assisting in rehearsals, performances and with the training of singers for NCO, and helping to organise and run practical musical activities. The administrative intern acts as assistant to the Company's director, dealing with the smooth running and marketing of the Company. The significance of the impact of these personal development opportunities on young practitioners is attested by individual testimonials: “The NCO Repetiteur Scholarship was, without doubt, the most important part of my university experience, and the defining factor in my pursuit of a career in professional opera [...] I owe my subsequent successes entirely to this early experience. As a result, I now feel firmly in a career for life”; “The Repetiteur Scholarship with NCO [...] has been the single biggest contributing factor in my professional and musical development to date”<sup>[5]</sup>.

### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

#### Testimonial evidence:

- [1] Email statement from an Oxford Music graduate
- [2] Email statement from Chief Producer of the BBC Symphony Orchestra
- [3] Email statement from Chief Executive of the OAE
- [4] Email statement from composer and freelance producer (formerly with BBC)
- [5] Email statement from NCO Repetiteur scholar

#### Other corroborative evidence:

- [i] A year of official BBC blogging on Handel by Aspden:  
[http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/composersoftheyear2009/suzanne\\_aspden/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/composersoftheyear2009/suzanne_aspden/)
- [ii] RAJAR quarterly radio listening figures: [http://www.rajar.co.uk/listening/quarterly\\_listening.php](http://www.rajar.co.uk/listening/quarterly_listening.php)
- [iii] Cross introduces Stravinsky, *Oedipus Rex*, for the Philharmonia Orchestra:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1kS1mj6N9rg> (c. 12,000 hits)
- [iv] NCO audience figures provided by Michael Burden
- [v] *My Mother Told Me Not to Stare* reviews <http://www.theatrehullabaloo.org.uk/shows-reviews.asp?showid=70>
- [vi] Feedback from child <http://www.theatrehullabaloo.org.uk/shows-reviews.asp?ShowID=70&ReviewID=21>
- [vii] *The Times*, \*\*\*\*\* Album Review (11 June 2011)  
<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/arts/music/albumreviews/article3054070.ece>
- [viii] [text removed for publication]
- [ix] Information on New Chamber Opera and scholarships programmes  
<http://www.newchamberopera.co.uk/about/>