

Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution: University of Glasgow
Unit of Assessment: 29 – English Language and Literature
Title of case study: Transforming opera for the 21st century
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)

University of Glasgow researcher Zoë Strachan has helped Scottish Opera to expand and diversify its audience through the creation of two new operas, *Sublimation* and *The Lady from the Sea*. *Submission* was commissioned as part of Scottish Opera's innovative *Five:15* programme, designed as a platform for the development of new operas by new artists with the aim of attracting new audiences to the art form. *Five:15* brought together five pairs of well-known writers and composers who were 'new to opera' to create five 15-minute 'shorts', to be performed at venues across Scotland. By encouraging younger people to engage with opera, the project was intended to address funder and public perceptions that its audiences come from a narrow and ageing demographic. *Sublimation* (2010) played to sold-out venues around Scotland and was chosen by Cape Town Opera in South Africa to open its new programme in November 2010, being performed to a total of 3,437 people. *The Lady from the Sea* had its premier at the Edinburgh International Festival in 2012 before touring to Glasgow, reaching a combined audience of over 1,800. Both productions attracted critical acclaim in broadsheet and music press.

2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)

Zoë Strachan (Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Glasgow from 2003) has published three critically acclaimed novels: *Ever Fallen in Love* (Sandstone, 2011), *Spin Cycle* (Picador, 2004) and *Negative Space* (Picador, 2002). In 2003 *The Independent on Sunday* listed her in its top twenty novelists under 30 and in 2011 the *Scottish Review of Books* selected her as one of its new generation of five young Scottish authors. Strachan's short stories and essays have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies. She contributes journalism to various newspapers and magazines and her work has been broadcast on BBC Radio 4 and Radio 3. She has received a Hawthornden Fellowship and two writer's bursaries from the Scottish Arts Council, and was appointed UNESCO City of Literature writer-in-residence at the National Museum of Scotland. In 2008 she was awarded a Hermann Kesten Stipendium and spent time in Glasgow's twin city Nuremberg, engaged in dialogue with international writers and journalists with the aim of promoting cultural exchange between the cities; this also involved giving public presentations and writing two articles for the *Nürnberger Zeitung*. In 2009 she received a Robert Louis Stevenson Fellowship which took her to France where she wrote a play about dementia, *Old Girls*, the libretto for *Sublimation*, and part of *Ever Fallen in Love*. In 2011 she was granted a British Council Visiting Fellowship at the University of Iowa, where she also held an appointment as Fellow with the International Writing Program.

In recent years Strachan has become increasingly interested in interdisciplinary projects and different forms of writing, collaborating for example on the exhibition and publication *I throw my prayers into the sky* (2010, Internationales Künstlerhaus Villa Concordia, Germany) with visual artists Laura Murray and David Sherry and writer Louise Welsh. Recent works for theatre are *Panic Patterns* (2010, with Louise Welsh, Citizens' Theatre and BBC Radio Scotland) and *Old Girls* (which opened the 2009/10 season of *A Play, a Pie and a Pint* at Oran Mor in Glasgow and guested at a rehearsed reading with the original cast at the Huntly Hairst festival). In 2008 she was invited to join Scottish Opera's *Five:15* project, which paired Scottish authors with composers to create short works that would attract a new and younger audience to opera. Strachan was already known to Scottish Opera because of her profile as a novelist, and was approached by composer Nick Fells (Music, University of Glasgow) because of his interest in the themes and style of her first novel, *Negative Space*. After preliminary discussions Strachan and Fells presented the proposal for *Sublimation* to Alex Reedijk from Scottish Opera and Michael McCarthy from Music Theatre Wales at a series of commissioning meetings.

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The key theme that links the novels *Spin Cycle* and *Ever Fallen in Love* with the libretti for *Sublimation* and *The Lady from the Sea* is that of memory. In *Spin Cycle*, one character struggles with recurring memories of the murder of her cousin. Chapters from her point of view feature flashbacks and also ‘flashes’ of the murdered woman’s life. *Ever Fallen in Love* is split between two narrative timelines, and explores the ways in which the past affects the present and the protagonist recreates memories and retells stories in order to fix his own identity. The operas allow Strachan to develop the theme of memory in a different form. In *Sublimation*, the cyclical musical structure is driven by the core narrative of a character suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, which again involves flashbacks. Ellida, the central character of *The Lady from the Sea*, is revisited by the memory and then the actuality of a past lover, raising vital questions about her own identity. Strachan is currently conducting further research into the notion of memory as a form of narrative.

Sublimation

Sublimation was the result of a collaboration between Strachan and Fells in 2009-10. Scottish Opera began its *Five:15* project in 2007, with a view to creating excellent new opera within Scotland, by involving a new generation of composers and writers new to the medium. *Sublimation* was commissioned after a highly competitive pitching process. Having discussed a number of narrative scenarios with Fells, Strachan became interested in working with the Dryope myth as told by Ovid and Robert Graves, since it offered the kind of themes needed within an unspecified visual (historical and geographical) context that would therefore be open to interpretation. Fells agreed, and they began to shape the narrative in terms of dramatic and musical progression. Collaboration continued with some editing of the material as Fells’s score took shape. They then worked with the director, Matthew Richardson, attending rehearsals and finally the performances themselves. Kally Lloyd-Jones, Artistic Director of Company Chordelia, choreographed and performed in the production. The entire process (from first contact to last-minute musical adjustments for the South African performances) lasted from 10 December 2008 until 27 November 2010.

The Lady from the Sea

Strachan was approached directly by the Director of Scottish Opera, Alex Reedijk, to work with Craig Armstrong with a view to a collaboration using the Ibsen text. This was due to the success of *Sublimation* as a piece, but also to Reedijk’s perception of the strength of the working process between Strachan and Fells. Armstrong had previously collaborated with author Ian Rankin on *Five:15* and was keen to select a new librettist who would be able to work with his vision for *The Lady from the Sea*. Reedijk was also aware that much of Strachan’s previous work featured female characters and dealt with themes of sexuality and feminism. After discussing themes, atmosphere and staging, Strachan researched Ibsen, and in particular his relationship with Munch (whose art clearly influenced Ibsen’s visual language) as well as his proto-feminism. The writing process took considerably longer than *Sublimation* as the opera is full-length, and the team were subsequently involved in every aspect of the production, including casting, identifying and interviewing video artists, and working particularly closely with the director and designer. Strachan conducted substantial research into the libretto form, attending numerous performances of traditional and contemporary opera, music theatre and experimental theatre in the UK, Germany and the US. The entire process lasted from 8 June 2010 to 9 September 2012.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- Zoë Strachan, *Spin Cycle* (Picador, 2004) (novel). [AVAILABLE FROM HEI]
- Zoë Strachan, Louise Welsh, David Sherry and Laura Murray, *I throw my prayers into the sky* (2008) (exhibition and book). [AVAILABLE FROM HEI]
- Zoë Strachan (librettist) and Nick Fells (composer), *Sublimation* (2010) (short opera produced by Scottish Opera). [AVAILABLE FROM HEI]
- Zoë Strachan, *Ever Fallen in Love* (Sandstone, 2011) (novel). [REF2]
- Zoë Strachan, (librettist) and Craig Armstrong (composer), *The Lady from the Sea* (2012) (full-length opera produced by Scottish Opera). [REF2]

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

Opera has a reputation in the UK for being ‘high-brow’ and intimidating to new audiences, especially the young. Attracting a younger demographic is essential to the future of the genre as

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well as being a significant factor in boosting audience numbers in the short term. New works are notoriously difficult to commission and stage, with ticket sales often failing to recoup the costs involved.

Scottish Opera designed the *Five:15* project (2008-10) to address both challenges: to reach out to new audiences; and to teach a new generation of artists the skills needed to create opera, thus securing its future in Scotland and beyond. The project invited well-known Scottish composers and writers who were new to opera to write 15-minute 'shorts'. It was thought that this taster format, coupled with the fact that the operas were in English, would provide an accessible introduction to the art form for younger people. This unconventional approach was complemented by the choice of venue, with Scottish Opera convincing venues that do not usually stage opera – such as theatres and universities – to add the shows to their programmes.

Strachan's storytelling expertise and her experiments with narrative form made her an ideal participant in the project, and the recurring themes of identity and gender politics in her novels were of particular interest to the composer and production company in selecting her as librettist.

The engagement of artists who were new to opera added a freshness of perspective and approach to these works, as well as offering a hook to attract a more diverse audience. *Five:15* enabled Scottish Opera to discover significant new talent, some of whom (Strachan included) were subsequently invited to create longer operas.

Sublimation

Strachan was invited to take part in the *Five:15* programme in its second year, teaming up with composer Nick Fells to create *Sublimation*. The piece was performed as one of the five mini-operas in Elphinstone Hall, Aberdeen, (15–16 May 2010), Oran Mor in Glasgow (17 and 25 May) and the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh (20–22 May), reaching combined audiences over its nine performances of 1,791 people and selling out completely for all its shows. The piece was well-received, with reviewers noting that '*In Strachan and Fells' Sublimation, a skilfully layered text overlays a personal crisis that is at once modern and timeless*', and media coverage reaching an estimated 311,000 people. The programme was supported by education outreach events;

Strachan took part in an opera study day coordinated by Scottish Opera and the Department of Adult and Continuing Education at the University of Glasgow. The event was open to the public, with approximately 20 workshop participants engaging in a facilitated discussion with Strachan, Fells and the novelist Bernard MacLaverly (also a librettist for *Five:15*) as part of the day-long session.

Sublimation was chosen from the five 2010 productions for a guest performance at Cape Town Opera, with performances in Rondebosch between 21-27 November 2010 to a total audience of 1,646. Cape Town Opera was inspired by the *Five:15* concept to develop its own successful *Five:20* project for nurturing new opera in South Africa.

The Lady from the Sea

Scottish Opera built upon the *Five:15* project by inviting a selection of the writers and composers who had worked on the project to collaborate on longer pieces, to be performed as part of the festivities to celebrate 50 years since the company's foundation. Strachan was invited to collaborate with Craig Armstrong (composer for Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet*, *Moulin Rouge* and *The Great Gatsby*) to create a full length opera based on the Ibsen play *The Lady from the Sea*. *The Lady from the Sea* was an innovative co-commission between Scottish Opera and the



Figure 1. Miranda Sinani and Lee Bisset in *Sublimation* (from <http://zoestrachan.com/libretti.html>)

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Edinburgh International Festival, and had its premier at the Edinburgh International Festival on 29 August 2012. The opera was performed on 29 August and 1 September at the King's Theatre in Edinburgh, and on 8 and 9 September 2012 in Glasgow's Theatre Royal. Total audiences were 1,813. It was a critical success, with reviewers in *The Times*, *The Scotsman* and *The Independent* praising Strachan's libretto particularly, and *The Herald* writing: 'If you don't know Ibsen, but get Austen, you'll love it, although Zoë Strachan's libretto is more explicit and emotionally direct than anything either of them wrote. As a concise, lucid and poetic text it is exemplary and the narrative she, [Craig] Armstrong, and choreographer Kally Lloyd-Jones have put together with director Harry Fehr could hardly be bettered.' The work won a 2012 *Herald* Angel Award for cultural excellence.

Both these works have been successful in reaching younger and non-traditional opera audiences. Pre-performance discussions and Q&A sessions were held in both Edinburgh and Glasgow, free of charge and open to all. *The Independent* noted in its review of *The Lady from the Sea* that Scottish Opera's Five:15 programme and full-length new operas have worked to great effect: 'This freshness and open-mindedness is paying off with an audience which, for the most part, has to pay full fare on the bus. *The Lady from the Sea* whets the appetite for what they will do next.'

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

- Director of Scottish Opera (contact details provided by HEI) (confirming Five:15 project and Strachan contribution)
- Scottish Opera Magazine (on Five:15 project and the collaboration between Zoë Strachan and Craig Armstrong) ([link](#))

(Evidencing the critical reception of the works)

- Musical Criticism (Five:15 review) ([link](#))
- The Scotsman (Five:15 review) ([link](#))
- Selection of Reviews from the Scottish Opera website ([link](#))
- The Arts Journal review ([link](#))
- The List interview ([link](#))
- The Scotsman review ([link](#))
- The Times review ([link](#))
- The Independent review ([link](#))
- EIF Festival Review ([link](#))