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Actualizing Unwritten Operatic Conventions: Oral Transmission and the Work-Concept

Jessie Miller
Butler University

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Applicant: Jessie Miller
(Name as it is to appear on diploma)

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Read, approved, and signed by:

Thesis adviser(s): [signature] 5-6-24
Dr. Nick Johnson, Associate Professor of Musicology
Date

Date

Reader(s): [signature] 5/8/24
Dr. Sophie Benn, Assistant Professor of Musicology
Date

Date

Certified by: [signature] 5/6/24
Director, Honors Program
Date

Actualizing Unwritten Operatic Conventions: Oral Transmission and the Work-Concept

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Jessie Miller

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A modern orchestral musician raised on a diet of traditional symphonic works generally experiences a musical career which is at all times practiced in close relation to written documents. In theory, the only information one needs to perform a Beethoven symphony correctly is the score itself; any questions one has should find their answers in the music itself. When this is not true, and one must follow sources outside of the score to produce a successful performance, it is considered an anomaly in the system of strict documentation and reproduction. When that orchestral musician leaves the world of the symphony for the world of opera, they may be surprised by how loosely a performance relates to the score, and how much lies outside of the written document. This was certainly my experience; when I passed the boundary from symphonic playing to operatic, I found myself immersed in a world that held a rich, highly cooperative culture, and yet was also locked in seemingly inescapable, unsolvable conflict—and none of it lived on the page.

It soon became clear that much of what defines opera and makes it a distinct cultural entity is not to be found in the score, but instead is kept alive through interpersonal interactions, pedagogy, and performance. I found there was a historical mythology associated with every operatic work I performed: tall tales of the eccentric genius who wrote it and infamous stories of past performances. Most of these have no place in music history textbooks, but instead are spread and preserved by word of mouth, passed as anecdote during rehearsals and lessons. I was awed by my conductors' encyclopedic knowledge of traditional performance practices, and wondered at what textbook these must have been learned from. I soon came to suspect that the maestro's innate understanding of the quirks and personality of each opera likely does not rise

primarily from any central empirical document, but from absorbing the live actualization of the piece through countless rehearsals and performances.

I found the maintenance of this tradition to be an inherently cooperative process: for these cultural elements of opera to be retained, conductors, directors, and pedagogues must choose to repeatedly and faithfully share their exhaustive knowledge, and musicians and students must continue to listen and remember, and choose to share it themselves when the time comes.[1] This cooperative facet of opera does come at a price: when so much that is essential to operatic performance cannot be ascertained through written sources, there arise a great deal of disagreements, both practical and existential. The scholarly and critical literature on opera contains a large body of interpretational disagreement and controversy, to the extent that one may be convinced that it is impossible to produce an opera in satisfactory harmony with the score, composer's intent, and historical traditions. I contend that the twentieth and twenty-first century controversy around the actualization of unwritten operatic conventions is a result of the temporal interactions of oral transmission and the work-concept.

For the purpose of this paper, I am grouping all such elements which are communicated primarily through speech and performance, rather than writing, under the umbrella of "operatic convention". Generally, these are elements of operatic culture or performance which at one point rose to popularity organically, and are now considered on equal footing with what is mandated in the score itself, though there is (usually) no central governing document regulating it. Notably, these conventions usually revolve

[1] Because I am discussing a performance art, this sharing of information encompasses both verbal communication and engagement in performance.

around issues of tradition, style, and ethos; this makes them inseparably tied to Western opera's distinct cultural and artistic identity.

Convention manifests in many areas of performance: One example is the issue of cuts, which are the mindful exemption of written work, may it be a few measures, an aria, or an entire scene.[2] Convention also concerns the particular singing practices expected of those performing a certain opera; when one performs a Handel aria, convention dictates that it must be distinct from a Verdi aria through highly specific qualities of tone and ornamentation, but neither score will carry explicit indication of this being the case. The plots of operas can be quite opaque in moral and rhetorical intent, particularly in the case of centuries-old works that are viewed by a modern audience. At the time that a work was written, its meaning was likely quite clear, as librettists generally work with commonly understood social norms and dynamics. This being the case, opera scores do not carry explanations of plot ramifications or character motivations, or prescribe what the audience's moral takeaway should be. Therefore, the ethos of the story must be understood through how performers actualize their characters in performance, and the correct way to do this must be communicated to them by informed pedagogues who have successfully completed the task themselves.[3]

Above, I am speaking of the score as the composer and librettist wrote it. Now, annotated scores exist which serve to clue the reader in on many of these traditional particularities. However, these written annotations are not how these cultural elements are

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[2] Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart et al., *Il Dissoluto Punito, Ossia, Il Don Giovanni (KV 527): Dramma Giocoso in Zwei Akten* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2005).

[3] The longer a work is retained in the canon, the rift between historical and contemporary artistic values grows ever wider. Hence, the likelihood increases that the work will be misinterpreted or performed in a historically inconsistent style. Accordingly, so increases the responsibility of the performer and pedagogue to maintain the unwritten conventions in order to communicate lost meaning, which must be done through the act of performance.

primarily communicated. Rather, they have the ineffable and inherently active quality of that which must be understood through live enactment and transmission. Similarly, though treatises and guides can be found on the appropriate vocal styles by composer and time period, these must act as supplement to a performer having heard the style performed before, and the use of such a text in isolation cannot hope to produce a traditionally congruent and satisfactory result. The same is true of the expression of a character in the historically correct manner; study of previous renditions is necessary despite the existence of texts explaining the bygone cultural norms that give a tale its significance. Even in the case of that which is sometimes included in the score by the composer or editor (mostly optional cuts), several significant elements pertaining to those conventions cannot be conveyed through this medium. Factors such as the ethos of why that tradition exists, the implications of its existence on the atmosphere of the work as a whole, and the cultural circumstances which led that element to exist in that opera at that time, cannot be adequately described or comprehended through brief score notes. In such cases and many more, the ramifications of an operatic convention cannot be truly conveyed through writing alone, no matter how extensive, and must be understood in the context of live performance.

Jan Vansina's *Oral Tradition as History*

When the written word is not present or adequate to pass on traditions, a group must practice oral transmission. Jan Vansina offers a compendium of all of the processes of retention and change that information experiences when communicated through systems of oral transmission.[4] William V. Harris described his work as "the most useful

[4] Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

single item in the growing literature on this subject."[5] While a work garnering this praise could still fall into obsolescence in the decades intervening, the text has been used consistently in the scholarship on oral traditions since its publication, through to the present day.[6] Though in the preface of this work, Vansina distinguishes it as one with a primary focus on pre-colonial African societies, he also states that the book: "should not be limited to any particular period or place, and all human thought and memory operates in the same way everywhere and at all times". Hence, though my application of his work does not align with Vansina's practical examples, it does not fall outside of his philosophical purposes for the text. Similarly, my use of the text does not demand my constructing an argument that opera is functionally an entirely orally-based society, which is fortunate, as that is neither possible nor my intent. I merely aim to demonstrate that the operatic conventions which lay mostly or entirely outside the score are the elements of the tradition which are most closely influenced by and influential of the Western musical culture, and that despite the well-documented paper trail of these conventions, the processes of oral transmission are very much alive in them.

Vansina himself accounts for cultures that have had written record incorporated, yet maintain oral transmission alongside:

> In their turn written records may serve as a fountainhead for oral tradition. Thus a mixed period of transmission comes into existence, and can last for a long period…Historians should be aware of this…and trace whether a tradition has been recorded several times, rather than be content with the last recording.[7]

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[5] William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 80.
[6] See Raewyn Connell, *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Science* (London: Routledge, 2007); John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of History*, 7th ed. (London: Routledge, 2021); Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022).
[7] Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, 31.

I contest that, in the case of opera, the "mixed period of transmission" is not one that was arrived at and will be eventually passed on from, but the original and eternal state of being. From its origins several centuries ago, opera has been a tradition simultaneously written down and distributed orally, with written document giving rise to oral performance, and oral performance giving rise to written document.

Indeed, though written records have always been at our disposal, there is cause to think this reality may be in part to blame with our struggles for authenticity. Vansina observes that when a message receives widespread oral communication, the frequency with which it is told has a tendency to produce a sort of standardization; retellings of the message that are outliers in some capacity can be more easily identified as such when there are many others telling the same story.[8] This is prevalent enough that he is able to generalize, "...after accounts have been told for about a generation, the variations tend to stabilize, and details only change gradually after that point."[9] Applying this principle to Western opera, it is precisely because of written documentation that erroneous or outlier performances do not always pass through this informational sieve. It is true that unsuccessful performances are generally discussed and drawn from less, but if the written documentation survives, we cannot permanently be rid of that unsatisfactory retelling in the sense that purely oral cultures can be.[10]

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[8] Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, 31: "multiple flow does not necessarily imply multiple distortion only, rather perhaps the reverse."
[9] Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, 17.
[10] The issue of memory is another notable discrepancy between true oral transmission and the system which I observe in Western opera. In purely oral cultures, lapses in memory are to blame for a great deal of distortions, which the presence of writing in opera largely (though not entirely) precludes. However, to my estimation, the permanency of erroneous retellings may produce approximately the same outcome as the unreliability of memory. One should also note that slips in memory do come into play in every situation where operatic traditions are communicated orally (lessons, rehearsals, socially, etc.). The effect of memory on transmission is also relevant to documents such as concert reviews, and in such cases as discussed later where concert reviews could not be made, so remembrances by audience members can be even less depended upon.

Lydia Goehr's *Imaginary Museum*

If the processes of oral transmission are so present in opera, as I have argued, why is the written score still the paragon of wisdom, and why is the ideal performance one that replicates in as much exactness as possible the exact vision of the composer? Lydia Goehr investigates this paradigm describing it in her words as the "work-concept."[11] This term defines the idea within Western art music that every written piece of music is an entity unto itself, which under ideal circumstances is as absolute and immutable as a great painting hanging in a gallery. However, due to the reality of music as a performance art, the onus of faithful reproduction is therefore on every performer who chooses to undertake the task; the work-concept is the musician's solemn oath and responsibility.

The work-concept did not simply spring into being, and its development over time has great relevance to this discussion of controversy within performance practice. According to Goehr, until 1800, the work-concept did not exercise a regulative force over musical activity in Western society. This means that, while individuals may have thought of pieces of music as singular works of art, this idea was not the primary determining factor of how music functioned in culture. Instead, music was governed by the extra-musical factors which surrounded it. In the seventeenth century and before, music was primarily viewed as a tool for achieving moral, religious, political, or social ends. It was due to the concerted efforts of composers and the convenient shifts in values brought about by Romanticism that brought about the idea of "music for music's sake". Around 1800, cultural behavior around music became primarily governed by the work-concept, meaning that music's primary function was to be art, and art demanded attention and

[11] Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), esp. 1-4.

respect.[12] As cultural change must occur by increments, the year 1800 was not a total revolution, and the work-concept increased in influence throughout the nineteenth century.[13] While the work-concept originally freed composers from direct servitude to utilitarian performance, as music as an idea gained credence in itself over this century, some composers wished to free themselves totally from the issue of performance. In the early 20th century, Schoenberg wrote in reference to his intentionally unperformable works, "'I hold the view that a work doesn't have to live, i.e., to be performed at all costs…if it means losing parts of it that may even be ugly or fault but which it was born with.'"[14] By the time this landmark figure lived, music did not have to ever be sonically realized in order to exist as a work of music.

An important detail comes with the question of *what* music gained this status. Romantic values centered around the infinite and ineffable, the liberation from the mundane, and the absolute truth, and instrumental music delivered just this. However, opera incorporating text and therefore by necessity being concerned with extra-musical factors, was not considered alongside instrumental music to have these qualities. Therefore, as the following discussion will demonstrate, the work-concept did not begin regulating the practice of opera at the same time or with the same strictness as it did instrumental music. Hilary Poriss asserts that authenticity to the composer's work did not come into vogue in operatic performance until the 1950s.[15] Erich Leinsdorf makes a central point of his conviction that to honor composers aptly is to perform their operas in

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[12] Goehr, *Imaginary Museum*, 101-107.
[13] Goehr, *Imaginary Museum*, 152-163.
[14] Goehr, *Imaginary Museum*, 229.
[15] Hilary Poriss, *Changing the Score: Arias, Prima Donnas, and the Authority of Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 4; here, Poriss makes a note that this newfound faithfulness was to the "established conceptions of what constitutes a composer's work (whether or not those conceptions are fully accurate)." This remark is consistent with later discussion, which examines why these popular conceptions of accuracy may not (and likely do not) equate to historical truth.

their complete form, with no cuts or modifications.[16] In the title of his book, he uses the word "radical" to describe this approach. If performing operas in full was radical in 1981 at the publication of this book, when performing symphonies in complete allegiance to the score had been common practice for almost two centuries, this serves as testament to the delay in the work-concept taking up a regulative function in opera. And, even though opera has gained much more perceived immutability than it once had (for example, modern performance practice is decisively rid of the phenomenon of "trunk arias"),[17] likely thanks to the likes of Leinsdorf, it is true that opera will always be largely extra-musically concerned. Though works of opera are without a doubt considered works of art, within each piece's ecosystem the music always serves the greater purpose of the plot, and therefore an opera may experience alterations unimaginable to incur upon a symphony in the interest of the extra-musical purposes of the work.

Due to the work-concept, the score for an opera is not the only capacity in which it exists. If indeed every performance of the work is the work itself, then every performance creates a new source of the work from which every successive actualization flows. For every individual opera, there is not only the original document of the score and the immutable work of the original performance, but also the immutable work of every successive performance thereafter. If oral transmission works through the system of an inciting event being passed down through myriad voices over generations, then every time an opera is performed it creates a new "original", a new inciting event to be passed down, along with the pre-existing accounts of every performance that preceded it. This creates an expansive system of concentric renditions, each granted by the work-concept

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[16] Erich Leinsdorf, *The Composer's Advocate: A Radical Orthodoxy for Conductors* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).
[17] Poriss, *Changing the Score*, 3-4.

the credence of being itself constitutive of "the work"[18]. Therefore, the interaction of oral transmission and the work-concept create a system of transmission doubly complex, with fascinating ramifications on the continuance of operatic culture, which I will detail below.

Both oral transmission and the work-concept have important temporal elements. Processes of oral transmission by definition occur over stretches of time and across generations, and it is over these spans of time that informational distortions occur. Meanwhile, as we will see later, the work-concept is something that has developed over the course of centuries, becoming more and more rigid in the imaginations of musicians towards the modern day. Through the temporal actions of both oral transmission and the work-concept, we can understand both how the issues of transmitting unwritten operatic conventions have developed, and why they have come to a head in our modern era.

The medium of opera is particular to this discussion and set apart from other Western performance arts because its synthesis of factors and performance consideration lends it to systems of oral transmission a great deal more than any other singular Western art form. It encompasses instrumental and vocal music, movement, aesthetics, and extra-musical literary elements, all in the context of a centuries-long unbroken tradition. Therefore, opera holds both the greatest need for oral transmission (in order to be fully retained), and the greatest potential to suffer from the practical ramifications of oral transmission. For the purpose of this analysis, I will devote myself to the study of Mozart's 1787 opera *Don Giovanni*, a work perpetually present in musicological

[18] There will of course always be performances and productions of works that certain viewers take to be a dishonest representation of the score, and thus a critical opinion may discount it as a "true" rendition of the work. However, it demands a very extreme circumstance even in this case for a critic to proclaim that the piece performed was an altogether different one than stated. Furthermore, any one criticism is rarely universal, so at even a performance with a great deal of liberties taken, there will almost surely be an audience member who takes it to be an accurate rendition of the piece in question, and hence the addition is made to the imaginary museum.

literature, and a subject that seems to be never quite exhaustible. Though I am attempting to describe a theory universally applicable to the culture and dynamics of Western opera, this particular piece happens to exemplify and show in unusually stark relief all of the major phenomena which I set out to describe. In short, *Don Giovanni* is ideal for this discussion due to the position in the cultural paradigm of both the work itself and its composer, its popularity and age, the indeterminate nature of its moral and plot ethos, and its vague origins.

Don Giovanni and Mozart as Paradigmatic Figures

Goehr places a concerted focus on the issue of "paradigmatic works": of this, she observes, "we have tended, and still tend, to pick as our examples [of paradigmatic works] those works produced at the time when the work-concept acquired a centralized position in musical practice".[19] This is significant in a twofold manner: it both explains why certain works seem to be set apart as guiding lights in the canon, and illuminates how there came to be such a specific aesthetic and set of criteria to be met in order for a piece to achieve its place in the canon. Of *Don Giovanni*, its position here is hard to doubt: immortal author himself E.T.A. Hoffmann referred to the work as "this opera of all operas".[20] This status is important within this discussion to reassure ourselves that *Don Giovanni*'s treatment is not a result of flagrant disrespect, but truly an illustration of how opera is affected when oral transmission and the work-concept interact. In fact, as we will see later, it is exactly *Don Giovanni*'s place in the canon and ensuing popularity which are to blame for the wringer it has been put through in the past two centuries.

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[19] Goehr, *Imaginary Museum*, 96.
[20] Review in Dramaturgisches Wochenblatt, No. 14 (October 7, 1815); Hoffmann's precise words were "*die oper allen opern*".

With paradigmatic works come paradigmatic people. Goehr describes the overcorrection that took place at the dawn of the Romantic period, as composers made a desperate bid to move themselves and their music away from their little-respected place in arts and society:

> How could an artwork be viewed as an embodied expression of an artist as well as an independently existing work that, once created, had meaning without reference to its creator?…One way to counteract the belief in the *human* creation of a work was to attribute a God-like existence to the creator. [21]

Hence, the heresy of daring to make a change to a divinely inspired work of genius. And, Mozart's treatment in the Western musical culture is a textbook example of the wide-eyed rapture in which the work-concept dictates we hold figures of his ilk. To this point, David Littlejohn remarks that "it is always taken for granted that Mozart is one of the supreme geniuses of human history."[22] There need not be universal consensus on the content of such a remark for its existence in academic literature to speak volumes to Mozart's position in our cultural mythology. My use of the word mythology is intentional; upon examination of the treatment of a composer's life in the literature, there is often a departure from empiricism that causes discussions to take on an air of folk tales, and indeed these mythical depictions closely resemble Vansina's descriptions of oral traditions. In Goehr's meticulously researched and cited text, there are several references to Mozart's life—*wunderkind* feats and his opinions on the contemporary treatment of musicians—which carry no reference at all. In one such occasion, she directs the reader, "Recall Mozart's retrieving of the score of Allegri's Miserere contrary to papal decree."[23]

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[21] Goehr, *Imaginary Museum*, 162.
[22] David Littlejohn, *The Ultimate Art: Essays Around and About Opera* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 124.
[23] Goehr, *Imaginary Museum*, 183.

The presumption inherent in this statement is that the reader is familiar with the story in question, in the same way that two people brought up in the same culture would easily be able to recall the same beloved nursery rhyme (or, in the case of Vansina's work specifically, the same origin myth or story of a noble king). And, when there is no governing source on the tale to be consulted, if two people were asked to recall the details of the tale, there would no doubt be some amount of variation.

Though it may appear so, I do not take this manifestation of shaky historical account to be a misstep on Goehr's part, or a chance blind spot in Western culture's otherwise well-documented nature. In this situation, the work-concept is functioning exactly as it was designed to, and to do so, it must utilize oral transmission.[24] A person who once walked among mortals does not ascend to "God-like" status in the cultural consciousness if the narrative around their life is too centered on the mundane and factual. If, under the work-concept a composer's music was understood to "embody the infinite"[25], we had to understand the composer themself as someone who could touch the infinite. I can imagine little better ways to do this than by emancipating a person's life from cold hard facts and giving it over to the rarefied world of whispers and rumors, where it may expand in due proportion to the figure's place in antiquity.

Vansina, like Goehr, concerns himself with this phenomenon specifically. In the fourth chapter of *Oral Tradition as History*, he describes how cultural ideals have a

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[24] Goehr, *Imaginary Museum*, 206-209; Goehr argues that the work-concept was designed in the literal sense of the work, coming about at least partially through conscious effort on the part of composers dissatisfied with the state of their careers pre-regulative work concept. This is supported by the fact that composers working for the church and aristocracy consciously realized that their work had a primarily practical, rather than primarily artistic, function, and sought out a different system. There is also record of figures such as Beethoven reflecting on the new condition of the composer during the early 19th century, showing that, though the term had not been coined, composers were very aware of and participant in the societal shift that occurred during the nascency of the work-concept.

[25] Goehr, *Imaginary Museum*, 162.

tendency towards creeping into accounts over long periods of time, and that tales of cultural or founding heroes are the most extreme example of this. When evaluating the veracity of a story ostensibly true about a once-real figure, he remarks, "Suspicions should be aroused as soon as characters conform to ideal types."[26] With Mozart's life, that infamous film *Amadeus* is a prime example of such a dubious source.[27] The drama and fantasy made of the composer's life, while certainly not accurate to history, is picture-perfect to what both Vansina and Goehr know to happen to a figure of his cultural eminence. While a pink-wigged and irreverent Mozart isn't exactly "God-like", he is the exact image of the (work-concept exemplary) conception of the *wunderkind*, a personality so inexplicably imbued with talent earned at no apparent labor that it must be the recipient of a blessing from God, its works drawn directly from the heavens. *Amadeus* is not to be made a scapegoat in this discussion, but rather lends visibility and quotability to the truly orally transmitted tales of Mozart's life which are traded faithfully in lessons, rehearsals, and at performances of his works.

Age & Popularity

Don Giovanni was first performed in Prague in 1787, and musicologists have painstakingly traced the history of the work's performance during every decade through over two centuries of performance. The piece's constant, unceasing popularity since its inception results in a remarkably long and varied line of retellings, and according to Vansina, with more retellings comes more potential for distortion.[28] The particular time

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[26] Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, 106.
[27] *Amadeus*, directed by Miloš Forman (Orion Pictures, 1984), https://www.netflix.com/watch/247351?source=35.
[28] Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, 41: "...tales told many nights in the month may in fact change faster than tales which are told more infrequently."

the work premiered was also significant, for as it premiered before 1800, the work-concept was not exercising a regulative force while initial practices around its production were being determined. Because of this, soon after the work's premiere, it endured countless alterations that would now be viewed much more akin to mutilations.

Julian Rushton details the extreme alterations made to the text of *Don Giovanni* before the work-concept began regulating operatic performances.[29] In the years and decades following its premiere, *Don Giovanni* found great success in Germany as a *Singspiel*, a genre which was taking that country by storm at the time. This is curious, as Mozart wrote the work as a sung-through opera. Across myriad performances, Da Ponte's libretto was supplanted with other renditions of the tale, resulting in some regions knowing the characters by different names. The *Singspiel* versions, with their interrupting of music for spoken dialogue, could add entire scenes of action which at times greatly befuddled the plot. Even in cases where no glaring indiscretions were made, even within Mozart's lifetime there were seven different German translations made and performed of the originally Italian opera, which speaks of a great lack of standardization and must result in some diffusion of the composer's vision.[30] When the Paris Opera took up the work, by their traditional mandates ballet was added, as every opera performed in the theater was required to include ballet. As late as 1900, this great and highly reputable house performed the opera with five acts, ballets, no *scena ultima*, and entr'actes drawn from other works by Mozart.[31]

Though these changes are spoken of with a severe tone by myself and those that I reference, they were not done out of malice or intention to offend, or even knowledge of

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[29] Julian Rushton, *W.A. Mozart:* Don Giovanni (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 66-80.
[30] Rushton, *W.A. Mozart*, 68.
[31] Rushton, *W.A. Mozart*, 75.

offense. The changes that were made in each place and at each time were done so that the opera would fit most closely into that culture's artistic paradigm. Vansina is familiar with this phenomenon, stating that, "as all messages from tradition are uttered in the present, when they are recorded they are strongly influenced by the social present,"[32] and, "interests of performers are almost entirely conditioned by the interests of the community of which they are members."[33] In the absence of the regulative work-concept, the force that exercised the greatest power over these early performances was culture. Success was not yet defined by a performance's allegiance to the score, so productions had to seek out success by delivering an artistic product which their audience could most closely relate to. As these cultural changes are affected upon a tale, that altered message becomes an entity and tradition of its own within the culture which shaped it, taking on an identity distinct from its origins. This is what happened to *Don Giovanni* during its early life.

Interpreting a *Dramma Giocoso*

The influence of differing cultural values has had a major effect on the representation of moral and ethos over the history of *Don Giovanni*. Unlike the culturally influenced changes discussed above, this phenomenon can be very readily observed through to the modern day. As a *dramma giocoso*, the intended tone of this work has always been difficult to parse ideologically, and even more difficult to deliver satisfactorily in performance. This difficulty is exacerbated by opera's penchant for stark division between comedy and tragedy. *Don Giovanni* simultaneously holds heavy subject matter befitting a tragedy, and makes many quite transparent bids at comic relief.

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[32] Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, 94.
[33] Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, 108.

Littlejohn remarks that the titular character could be, and has been, interpreted as anything from an "endearing swashbuckler-sensualist" to "a total antihero, a creature of the most sinister evil…a cold, calculating rapist and murderer".[34] Every era of the opera's performance has made heavy use of a different technique to resolve this unbalance. In the eighteenth century, productions turned to "low farce" and obscenity to make Don Giovanni out as a "cad and swindler". During the nineteenth century, the pendulum swung towards the Romantic sensibilities towards grandeur and universal ideals.[35] Into the twentieth century, leftist political movements brought lower-class characters into a heroic spotlight.[36] Freudian psychology led productions to transform the Romantic supernatural elements into insidious forces of the unconscious, and the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s of course had its due effects.[37] Most recently, the twenty-first century movements around sexual assault awareness and combatance has created interpretations of *Don Giovanni* focused on the empowerment of the female leads, and exposure of the main character as an outright villain.

What stands out here is the fact that, though the work-concept increased in influence and historical efforts became considerably more dedicated over two centuries, how the moral of this work was communicated never ceased to be inextricably tied to the cultural vogue of the day. It seems to be evidence that Vansina's statement on the influence of social pressures, made in reference to totally oral societies, is just as relevant to Western opera.

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[34] Littlejohn, *The Ultimate Art*, 125.
[35] Rushton, *W.A. Mozart*, 68-73.
[36] Mozart's own exposure to the Enlightenment and initiation as a Mason in 1784 (prior *Don Giovanni*'s creation) lends credence to the idea that this was in fact an original intention of the narrative [Maynard Solomon, *Mozart: A Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995)].
[37] Littlejohn, *The Ultimate Art*, 126.

Contrasting Epilogues: The Prague and Vienna Premieres

Don Giovanni concludes with the titular character descending to Hell (the unclear significance of which is discussed below), followed by a rejoicing finale sung by all those who he had wronged.That is, if the celebration is allowed to go on. It is a common and widely accepted performance practice to cut out the epilogue where all of the other characters discover that Don Giovanni has died, and instead let the curtain fall on his dramatic death scene. This is not a compulsory decision; both versions of the opera, with and without the epilogue, have been performed by major opera companies in the twenty-first century. For example, the Zurich Opernhaus's 2001 production leaves the epilogue out,[38] while the Metropolitan Opera's 2016 staging keeps it in.[39] The nineteenth-century performance practice, however, was far less diverse. Rushton makes it clear that the preservation of the epilogue was a rare, and even controversial, act.[40] He describes various influences of Romanticism that produced this result: a literary taste for the supernatural (which encouraged the demon-laden dramatization of Don Giovanni's death, making the *scena ultima* too incongruent in tone), movement away from *opera buffa*, and Wagnerism, to name a few. These cultural values worked together to produce a *Don Giovanni* that was on a grander and more somber scale than was popular during the Enlightenment, and the omission of the epilogue was one step taken to achieve those aesthetic ends.[41]

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[38] Wolfgang Amadues Mozart, *Don Giovanni*, Zurich Opernhaus, directed by Jürgen Flimm, recorded February 10, 2001, https://youtu.be/aL2VdxseTvE.
[39] Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Don Giovanni*, Metropolitan Opera, directed by Michael Grandage, recorded October 22, 2016, Streaming video: Met Opera on Demand, https://ondemand-metopera-org.eu1.proxy.openathens.net/performance/detail/a8d4ea9a-0dba-5503-a44e-b9cedb60a04c.
[40] Rushton, *W.A. Mozart*, 75: "One critic vigorously attacked the Théâtre Lyrique for daring to include [the *scena ultima*]."
[41] Rushton, *W.A. Mozart*, 75.

It should be duly noted that this Romantic approach to *Don Giovanni* does not necessarily flout the work-concept, and it certainly does not betray a disrespect for the work or its author. As a critic wrote of a prominent production that included the epilogue, "The spirit of the masterpiece is not enough for them, they want also the letter…!"[42] The reference to the work as a masterpiece is a tell-tale sign that the work-concept was functioning in this critic's artistic environment. However, opera is not the "absolute instrumental music" of Goehr's description, and by definition serves extra-musical means. It seems that at this time, the "spirit" of the work, as the Romantics perceived it to be, was considered the most important element to preserve, rather than its every written element.

It took until nearly the twentieth century for the work-concept to begin regulating performances of *Don Giovanni* in the same way it had governed the performance of purely instrumental works for decades. Rushton isolates the hundredth anniversary of *Don Giovanni*'s premiere as the turning point over which interest in historically informed performances of the work was revived. However, interest in historical performance was not always the *scena ultima*'s salvation. By 1887, the history of *Don Giovanni* being performed consistently without its epilogue was nearly as long as the history of the opera itself. To eliminate the epilogue *was* to present a traditional performance.[43] As Vansina explains, oral tradition is "the transmission of [messages] by word of mouth over time until the disappearance of the message."[44] By the end of the nineteenth century, the message of *Don Giovanni*'s epilogue had almost disappeared. The oral performance of the opera had been absorbed and re-told by so many that the cultural understanding of the

[42] Rushton, *W.A. Mozart*, 75.
[43] Rushton, *W.A. Mozart*, 75.
[44] Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, 3.

work had almost entirely transformed, *even* in the presence of written documentation. Therefore, as the twentieth century dawned, a "traditional" or "historically informed" rendition of the opera could mean many different things where the epilogue was concerned, and as we have seen above, it still does to this day.

A century-long tradition is not the only justification for the epilogue's removal. There is a great deal of evidence that Mozart himself was the first to do it. The widespread belief is that, although the epilogue was performed at the Prague premiere of *Don Giovanni* in the fall of 1787, when Mozart conducted the Vienna premiere in the spring of 1788, it was his own decision to cut that final scene.[45] This belief gives rise to an idea of a "Prague version" and a "Vienna version", both satisfying the work-concept because both demonstrate an authentic artistic vision of the composer. The historical evidence to back this widespread belief, however, is not as resolute as tradition would have one assume.

Under the work-concept, the autograph manuscript reigns supreme, and is generally turned to when trial is held over issues such as these. However, in the case of *Don Giovanni*, it appears the manuscripts cannot be trusted. In the 1974 Dover edition of the full orchestral and vocal score, the editors' commentary notes that, in the Vienna premiere, the opera ended in measure 602. This aligns with the productions which choose to omit the epilogue. However, the note goes on to say, "The Vienna libretto reads: ... 'at this very moment all the others come out, look, give a loud cry and run off, and the curtain falls'".[46] Meanwhile, other editions of the score disagree with this. The 2005

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[45] Klaus Donath, "MUSIC : A Trimmed 'Don Giovanni' Opens Tonight", interview by Chris Pasles, *LA Times*, February 21, 1990, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-02-21-ca-1244-story.html.
[46] Georg Schünemann and Kurt Soldan, Editor's Commentary to *Don Giovanni: Dramma Giocoso in Two Acts; Complete Orchestral and Vocal Score* (New York: Dover Publications, 1974), 463-469.

Bärenreiter piano reduction contains extensive notes on the alterations made in the fifteen Viennese performances of Don Giovanni which took place during Mozart's lifetime, all occurring between May and December of 1788. One such alteration is a cut which occurs in the midst of the epilogue: "In the autograph mm. 689-749 were subsequently crossed out (in connection with the 'Vienna version'); in its place, Mozart wrote a transition".[47] These two stories present a paradox, two mutually exclusive accounts both attributed to the original source score; a cut in the midst of the epilogue could not have been present if the epilogue itself was not present. Under the work-concept, an account of an original source incompatible with itself is inconceivable; however, under oral transmission, the warping of historical accounts over time until they are incompatible is very easily imagined.

There is more reason to forgive these historical discrepancies on account of oral transmission. Rushton attributes the lack of records on the early *Don Giovanni* performances to the fact that Emperor Joseph II did not permit the reviewing of theatrical productions.[48] In doing this, the Emperor imposed the dynamics of oral transmission upon his very literate society. If written descriptions, receptions, and criticisms were all forbidden by royal decree, much of the information that we depend on from first hand witnesses had to have literally been passed down and disseminated orally.

There is the mark of rumor still on professional discussions of this topic. Klaus Donath asserted in an interview that, "When Mozart conducted his last performances of 'Don Giovanni' in Vienna in 1788…he cut that scene...Later in 1791, after his death, they opened it again. But he himself conducted many performance [sic] in Vienna after the

[47] Mozart et al., *Don Giovanni*.
[48] Rushton, *W.A. Mozart*, 66.

premiere in Prague, and he cut it".[49] Meanwhile, contrary to this, Robert Lawrence shares: "There are few, if any, cuts in Don Giovanni...scarcely a phrase is deleted...and whenever this does happen, it is the responsibility of the director in charge rather than the dictate of any fixed tradition".[50] Donal Henahan asserts the exact opposite notion that Lawrence does, positing that "Don Giovanni...has been one of the most radically cut works in the repertory".[51] All of these people are scholars of their craft, drawing on different written historical sources that support their claims. However, if oral transmission played a part in the formation of those historical sources, and oral transmission continued to take place until the next historical source was made, and in every following intermittent time period, then it can safely be said that oral transmission is indeed active in our culture, and we are here presented with the result.

It is true that there was only one version of history that actually happened in Vienna in 1788, and if one chooses that version to perform, the regulative function of the work-concept mandates their tireless search for that one definitive artistic whole. However, what lives in the cultural consciousness, and therefore actually composes *Don Giovanni* in our imaginary museum, is a temporally impossible simultaneity. This coexistence of multiple pasts in one cultural history is only possible through the distortive influence of oral transmission.

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[49] Donath, "A Trimmed 'Don Giovanni'".
[50] Robert Lawrence, Preface to *Don Giovanni: Opera in Two Acts* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1961), v-x.
[51] Donal Henahan, "Music View; ABOUT THOSE CUTS IN OPERA." *New York Times*, January 25, 1981, https://www.nytimes.com/1981/01/25/arts/music-view-about-those-cuts-in-opera.html.

Conclusion

Vansina writes, "rumor is the process by which a collective historical consciousness is built." *Don Giovanni* has demonstrated how instrumental a role oral transmission can play in one of the seminal works of our musical tradition. While the content of the opera itself lies in print, our cultural understanding and treatment of the work has been inextricably shaped by what has taken place in the absence of the written word. Goehr, though coming from a different angle, asserts the same basic principle: that our cultural conception of music as works is not based around scores or performances, but the ineffable and transcendent communal understanding of a work as a precious, interesting, creative, singular thing. Therefore, if Vansina is correct that in order to have collective historical consciousness, we must have a shared oral history, then the work-concept cannot exist *without* oral transmission. Though this interaction creates practical issues with performance that at times reach towards the insurmountable, as I have described, the two theories are sides of the same philosophical coin, and the job of performance will always be the job of finding coexistence between the two.

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