

Opera's 'Influencers':

How megastar opera singers use social media to reinvigorate opera in the twenty-first century

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The Laidlaw Undergraduate Research and Leadership Scholarship program offers undergraduate students funding to pursue independent and interdisciplinary research over two summers. A portion of the grant is earmarked for international travel. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this international experience was not possible. Instead, the world came to me in a new way with online learning, leading me to my final research topic: exploring how star opera singers use social media to build relationships with their fans, even from a distance.

Abstract

The use of technology in opera has been ubiquitous since opera premiered on public and private stages in the seventeenth century. Centuries later, opera has been challenged to prove its relevancy, accessibility, and appeal to broad audiences in today's world by employing new technologies. In the following paper, I will explore how the use of social media by megastar opera singers has intersected with the operatic art form. I will begin with historic case studies from the late 19th and 20th centuries, assessing how the careers of Sibyl Sanderson (1864-1903), Maria Callas (1923-1977), and Luciano Pavarotti (1935-2007) benefited from extensive media coverage. Then, I will explore how the use of social media by megastar opera singers is a continuation of these historic trends, offering opera fans new, intimate glimpses into the lives of opera singers. I conclude that this has ultimately redefined the relationship between opera singers and audiences by emphasizing attainability and closeness in the world of opera and has the potential to make opera more accessible in the twenty-first century.

The processes of operatic production have been inextricably linked to technology ever since opera premiered on public and private stages in the early seventeenth century. In these early opera performances, technology was used to create spectacle. Flying machines, live water features, and other innovations were used to immerse an audience into an imagined operatic world and to build the connections between singers and spectators.¹ Quickly, technology became as equally important to opera as music and singing, and a synonymy developed between operatic technology and operatic spectacle.² Since these historic productions, opera has attempted to move beyond the idea that it is superficially pompous or an “‘eye-candy’ for the decadent”.³ These efforts have focused on increasing the accessibility of opera and have introduced new avenues for technological innovation, such as live streaming, global broadcasts, and the distribution of opera content on social media. In the following paper, I will explore how the use of social media by megastar opera singers has intersected with the operatic art form. I will begin with historic case studies from the late 19th and 20th centuries, assessing how the careers of Sibyl Sanderson (1864-1903), Maria Callas (1923-1977), and Luciano Pavarotti (1935-2007) benefited from extensive media coverage. I then explore how the use of social media by megastar opera singers is a continuation of these historic trends, offering opera fans new, intimate glimpses into the lives of opera singers. I conclude that this has ultimately redefined the relationship between opera singers and audiences by emphasizing attainability, relevancy, and closeness in the world of opera. I also suggest that the use of social media by megastar opera singers presents an opportunity to make opera more accessible in the twenty-first century. Social media diversifies the channels through which opera can be consumed and increases the availability of opera content. Finally, I contend that opera stars

¹ Nicholas Ridout, “Opera and the Technologies of Theatrical Production,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Opera Studies*, ed. by Nicholas Till (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 159.

² *Ibid.*, 160.

³ *Ibid.*

use their social media channels to share glimpses of their personal lives in an effort to demystify the operatic art form and to engage new audiences.

A relevant historic intersection between opera and technology is the rise of opera singer portrait photography in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.⁴ In “Photographic Diva: Massenet’s Relationship with the Soprano Sibyl Sanderson” from *Technology and the Diva*, Karen Henson argues that the American soprano Sibyl Sanderson (1864-1903) became a distinguished opera star largely because of the widespread circulation of her portrait photographs.⁵ Throughout the later 19th century, card sized images of Sanderson were distributed to opera fans in large quantities.⁶ These images appeared in the illustrated press, in weekly “celebrity” series subscriptions, in books, and by the 1900s, in newspapers.⁷ These small photographs could be copied using the “carte de visite” methodology (developed by A.A.E. Disdéri in the 1850s) and circulated with great efficiency. This led to a proliferation of Sanderson’s image, especially across France, creating a sense of closeness and intimacy with the singer and generated increased interest in Sanderson’s performances.⁸ The extensive circulation of Sanderson’s portraits was not an obscurity. Her career aligned with a trend towards the distribution of celebrity photographs, a tendency that first peaked in the 1850-60s and then again in the 1880-90s.⁹ In the 1850-60s, celebrity photographs became popularized by weekly subscriptions that were collected for albums and consisted of photographs and biographies of famous individuals.¹⁰ The second peak aligned with the increased use of

⁴ Karen Henson, “Photographic Diva: Massenet’s Relationship with the Soprano Sibyl Sanderson,” in *Technology and the Diva: Sopranos, Opera, and Media from Romanticism to the Digital Age*, ed. by Karen Henson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 57.

⁵ Ibid, 56.

⁶ Ibid, 57-59.

⁷ Ibid, 57.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

photography in the press.¹¹ Today, Sanderson is often referred to as a ‘media star’ because of the degree to which her image was distributed, especially when compared to her contemporaries.¹² In part, this may be a result of Sanderson’s body type which coincided with 19th century ideals and was frequently accentuated in these photographs.¹³ Her full chest and small waist aligned with the so-called “S-curve” proportions. This term was originally used to describe classical and Renaissance sculpture and became fashionable again in the late 19th century.¹⁴ The case of Sibyl Sanderson highlights that technology has been interwoven in all aspects of opera throughout its history. Photography was a driving force in Sanderson’s ascent to opera stardom and reveals that technology plays a significant role in shaping the opera experience.¹⁵

Photographs of opera singers, like Sanderson’s, were circulated to create a sense of closeness with an otherwise unattainable star. Historically speaking, opera divas were enigmatic. Until the beginning of the 20th century, opera stars upheld strict secrecy around their private lives and fans were left to fantasize about the lives of their favourite stars.¹⁶ Sibyl Sanderson’s media attention also aligned with broader trends in society of the day, as individuals expressed interest in consuming celebrity content.¹⁷

Like Sibyl Sanderson, the Italian tenor Luciano Pavarotti (1935-2007) was well acquainted with the media. Pavarotti has been credited with bringing opera to the masses with his charming charisma, powerful voice, and later in his career, his segue into popular music and culture. The

¹¹ Henson, “Photographic Diva”, 57.

¹² Ibid, 56.

¹³ Ibid, 57.

¹⁴ Ibid, 59.

¹⁵ Ibid, 56.

¹⁶ Irina Kotkina, “Self-Representation in the Web World of Opera: What Do the Blogs and Social Network Accounts of Famous Russian Opera Singers Tell Us About,” *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 25, no. 1 (2017), 90.

¹⁷ Henson, “Photographic Diva,” 57.

popularization of Pavarotti and opera during his lifetime, however, would not have been possible without astute media coverage. In 1977, Pavarotti was featured in the initial Metropolitan Opera's "Live from the Met" broadcast. Pavarotti performed a signature role of his, Rodolfo from Puccini's *La bohème*. The performance was broadcast live across public television channels in the United States and was the first production of its kind to be hosted by the Metropolitan Opera. Since its debut, the "Live from the Met" series has evolved and today the company has several similar initiatives. The Metropolitan Opera's "Live in HD" series has played in movie theatres around the world since 2006 and a series of "Nightly Met Opera Streams" have been made available in 2020 for streaming on personal devices. Pavarotti's appearance in the inaugural "Live from the Met" production speaks to earlier movements to increase the accessibility of opera by employing new technologies. Since then, these digital initiatives have created new channels for opera engagement. At the same time, they have created a frenzy around megastar opera singers and have made it more difficult to access their performances live. This is not unlike the fandoms that develop for popular culture celebrities. Throughout his career, Pavarotti increasingly intersected with popular culture and popularized famous operatic works, such as Puccini's "Nessun dorma". In 1990, Pavarotti's recording of "Nessun dorma" from *Turandot* was chosen to be the football World Cup theme song. This recording was used as the musical background track in television coverages of the event, introducing new audiences to Pavarotti and opera more broadly. Pavarotti's recording for the football World Cup resembles the ways in which megastar opera singers use social media today, to publicize their work and to bring opera to wider audiences.

A third opera singer that garnered significant media attention was Maria Callas (1923-1977). American soprano Maria Callas, who is remembered as one of the greatest opera singers of all time, was never at risk of unemployment as a result of her celebrity status. In the late 1950s,

while on her transcontinental American tour, Callas and her manager received numerous invitations for paid appearances. For example, in December 1958, a hotel in Miami offered Callas a sum of \$5000 in exchange for her posing at their venue.¹⁸ Callas received a similar offer in the same week from an establishment in Hollywood, speaking to her sought after status as a media icon.¹⁹ Like Sanderson, the widespread circulation of Callas's image supported her career, especially after her significant weight loss and the subsequent weakening of her voice. Additionally, Maria Callas was also known to have enjoyed unpretentious pastimes including cooking at home and shopping at local supermarket stores.²⁰ These simpler pleasures have been captured in photographs of the singer. In 1957, Callas posed for a photograph holding a stainless-steel canister in front of her kitchen stand mixer. Next to her are measuring cups, eggs, and a mixing bowl.²¹ She dons a dark apron that is tied behind her back and is wearing simple clothing. These domestic scenes invite a viewer into Callas's private life and were viewable next to her most glamorous images. The scene from the star opera singer's kitchen speaks to the 20th century trend that saw increased views into singers' private lives.²² Maria Callas's scenes from her home suggest the beginning of a new attainability in opera.

Across media channels today, the megastar soprano Anna Netrebko has been positioned as the direct heir to Maria Callas.²³ This has been achieved in both explicit and subtle ways. On social media, Netrebko is frequently pictured emulating Maria Callas's poses and costumes.²⁴ Like

¹⁸ George Jellinek, *Callas: Portrait of a Prima Donna* (Dover Publications, 1986), 250.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 250.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 178.

²¹ *Ibid*.

²² Kotkina, "Self-Representation in the Web World of Opera", 90.

²³ Clemens Risi, "Diva Poses by Anna Netrebko: On the Perception of the Extraordinary in the Twenty-First Century," in *Technology and the Diva: Sopranos, Opera, and Media from Romanticism to the Digital Age*, ed. by Karen Henson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 151.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 151.

Callas, Netrebko also shares intimate glimpses into her personal life. On her Facebook and Instagram profiles, she frequently shares images of her family travelling, cooking, and decorating their home.²⁵

In “Diva Poses by Anna Netrebko: On the Perception of the Extraordinary in the Twenty-First Century” from *Technology and the Diva*, Clemens Risi explores the ways in which opera stars are represented in digital media advertisements, including those that are circulated on social media channels. Risi focuses on the soprano Anna Netrebko, who has been hailed as a “singing supermodel”.²⁶ In his text, Risi argues that Netrebko’s rapid ascent to megastardom is related to the aggressive circulation of her image at the beginning of her career.²⁷ Several types of imagery exist of Netrebko, including a group of photographs that have been identified as the “Girl-next-door” variety.²⁸ In these photographs, Netrebko is fashioned as an attainable woman and might be pictured riding a bicycle or wearing clothing by fast fashion brands such as H&M, portraying a fashionable yet familiar woman. This content attracts Netrebko’s devoted fans, as well as a broader audience that is interested in her as a social media figure. These “Girl-next-door” images encourage audience members to relate themselves to Netrebko, resulting in feelings of closeness, attainability, and familiarity with the singer.²⁹ Alongside these images are glamorous photos of Netrebko that model her either as a traditional opera diva or are gender-specific, seductive

²⁵ Anna Netrebko (@anna_netrebko_yusi_tiago), Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/anna_netrebko_yusi_tiago/?hl=en; and Anna Netrebko (@annanetrebko), Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/annanetrebko/>.

²⁶ Risi, “Diva Poses by Anna Netrebko,” 150.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid, 152.

photographs.³⁰ Seeing the relaxed “Girl-next-door” variety on social media creates authenticity and propagates a new emphasis on accessibility that is transferred to the operatic medium.³¹

The connection that results between Anna Netrebko and her digital followers is unlike the historic relationship between an opera star and their fans. Social media encourages opera singers to share frequent updates to their followers, interrupting the historic norm for opera singers to uphold secrecy around their lives. More so than ever before, megastar opera singers have created a sense of closeness with their audiences through interactive, digital channels such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.³² These platforms are driven by symbiotic interactions, where fans have an opportunity to ask questions, receive personalized answers, and interact with singers in the form of ‘likes’, ‘comments’, and ‘shares’. In her article “Self-Representation in the Web World of Opera: What Do the Blogs and Social Network Accounts of Famous Russian Opera Singers Tell Us About?”, Irina Kotkina suggests that social media disrupts traditional hierarchies by giving increased power to followers.³³ This is because opera singers’ social media accounts can only gain traction if there is audience participation. This creates a new equality between opera singers and their fans, who all become “co-producers of the star’s online identity”.³⁴ By running personal social media accounts, megastar opera singers are making themselves more accessible to their fans and redrawing the boundaries between themselves and their followers. While some of these followers may never translate to box office sales, these fans are consuming opera in new ways, over social media platforms, streaming content and clips on their personal devices, and in opera singer appearances across popular culture.

³⁰ Risi, “Diva Poses by Anna Netrebko,” 152.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Kotkina, “Self-Representation in the Web World of Opera,” 89.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid, 88.

It should be noted that several megastar opera singers hire media teams to manage their online presence. While Netrebko frequently posts her own content including images of her family travels and time at home, she has also benefited from hiring knowledgeable marketing personnel. At the beginning of her career, Netrebko's media team made sure to include her recordings in popular music charts, arranged for modelling engagements for both luxury and mass-consumption brands, and scheduled appearances for Netrebko in magazines, television commercials and shows.³⁵ In 2004, for example, Anna Netrebko appeared in *The Princess Diaries 2: Royal Engagement* alongside Anne Hathaway and Julie Andrews. In the film, she performs "Sempre Libera" from Verdi's *La Traviata* and is introduced as "opera's rising star". Netrebko's various appearances in popular culture, especially at the beginning of her career, diversified the channels through which opera could be consumed and increased Netrebko's own media coverage.

Social media also creates new channels for opera singers to share personal content. The late Dmitri Hvorostovsky, who was a megastar baritone, was known to have been very active online (with the help of a social account manager) and his Facebook page amassed nearly 200,000 followers.³⁶ Hvorostovsky built a rapport with his online followers; he suggested attainability by posting photos from his early career and built a sense of friendship among his followers when he shared informal photos from the gym or of his family.³⁷ In 2016, Hvorostovsky courageously shared on Facebook his experiences with fighting cancer and his chemotherapy treatment.³⁸ Fans were able to empathize with him and offer their support in his personal battle with cancer. The baritone's social media presence offered an unprecedented look into an opera star's complex life.

³⁵ Risi, "Diva Poses by Anna Netrebko," 151.

³⁶ Kotkina, "Self-Representation in the Web World of Opera," 98; and Dmitri Hvorostovsky (@Hvorostovsky), Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/Hvorostovsky/>.

³⁷ Kotkina, "Self-Representation in the Web World of Opera," 100.

³⁸ Ibid.

Seeing Hvorostovsky's posts created a feeling of proximity to the star. Also, his followers became invested in him as a person, rather than an unattainable celebrity.

The social media profiles discussed in this paper belong to some of the world's leading opera singers. In addition to being a medium for megastars, social media also creates new avenues of connectivity for emerging opera singers. Golda Schultz, for example, is a South African soprano who recently began singing at the Metropolitan Opera in a variety of roles, including Clara in Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, Sophie in Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*, and Nannetta in Verdi's *Falstaff*. Schultz uses her social media profiles in a variety of ways. Like megastars, she shares glimpses into her personal life and to promote her performances. Schultz also uses social media as a way to mentor young singers and has recently shared content to help other singers secure management and performance opportunities. With social media, emerging opera singers are given a platform to increase their exposure and to offer more diverse perspectives in the field. On her personal Twitter account, for instance, Schultz is an activist. She promotes social change campaigns, including #WeStandTogether in support of building stronger communities and also #SaveTheArts for artists affected during the coronavirus pandemic.³⁹ In comparison, Anna Netrebko predominantly uses her Twitter account to share travel photos and less frequently, performance updates.⁴⁰ Up and coming singers such as Golda Schultz use their social media platforms to advocate for other emerging singers, newness and attainability in opera.

³⁹ Golda Schultz (@SchultzGolda), "This right here gets a big AMEN from my side of the church!!! Life is too short and this business is too tough for us not to be there cheering each other on! #westandtogether", Twitter, August 14, 2020, 11:28 am, <https://twitter.com/SchultzGolda/status/1294294888125800454>; and Golda Schultz (@SchultzGolda), "When you think things couldn't get worse for artists.... those supposed to help them maintain careers drop them further down the black hole.... #shameful", Twitter, August 13, 2020, 9:28 am, <https://twitter.com/SchultzGolda/status/1293902199693520897>

⁴⁰ Anna Netrebko (@AnnaNetrebko), Twitter, https://twitter.com/AnnaNetrebko?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor

Attainability and accessibility in opera were epitomized in April 2020 with the Metropolitan Opera's first ever "At-Home Gala". The company organized this digital alternative to its regular in-person programming after the coronavirus pandemic spread through New York City and the world, forcing the opera company to cancel a significant portion of its 2019-2020 season. The "At-Home Gala" event was streamed globally and made available for viewing online for one day after the content's live premiere on April 25, 2020. Due to social distancing measures that were in place at the time of the event, singers gave performances from their homes. They used personal devices, such as tablets, laptop computers, and smartphones, to record themselves. Many singers advertised or shared content from the "At-Home Gala" to their social media accounts, encouraging their followers to tune into the event. Viewers used the same types of devices (tablets, laptop computers, and smartphones) to access the content. In between performances, spectators were asked to donate to the Metropolitan Opera's "The Voice Must Be Heard" campaign to ease the financial burden of the pandemic. Forty-three opera singers were featured, including celebrity names such as Diana Damrau, Renée Fleming, Matthew Polenzani, and Jonas Kaufmann, to name a few.⁴¹ Many of the singers chose to perform repertory they are best known for. For instance, Fleming sang Desdemona's "Ave Maria" from Verdi's *Otello*. And, several singers wore casual clothing to align with the informal setting of their home; Kaufmann, broadcasting from his home in Munich, Germany, wore a sweater and jeans. In Kaufmann's case, there was a contrast between his casual attire and unequalled singing. He sang the famous tenor aria "Rachel, quand du Seigneur" from Halévy's *La Juive*. The repertoire, attire, and setting of the "At-Home Gala" were familiar and approachable, creating a relaxed and enjoyable environment. Although the quality of the sound was vastly different from a live performance, or even a professional recording, fans applauded the

⁴¹ "At-Home Gala," *Metropolitan Opera* online, April 25, 2020, <https://www.metopera.org/season/at-home-gala/>.

Metropolitan Opera's initiative to bring audiences and singers together. Those who reported on the event made note of the intimate glimpse into singers' homes, giving an unprecedented view into megastar opera singers' lives. The stars' proximity to the camera added an additional feeling of closeness and attainability. The Metropolitan Opera's "At-Home Gala" was the first of its kind in opera and exemplifies the use of social and mobile media by opera singers, as well as the growing importance of accessibility and diversified channels for opera consumption.

Technology has been intersecting with and changing opera from its beginning.⁴² In recent years, new technological innovations have been used to increase opera's relevancy and accessibility. Some of the successful efforts in this domain have included live streaming and broadcasting performances globally, as well as increasing the interactions between opera singers and fans through the use of social media. Megastar opera singers have created profiles on social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, to share performance updates, personal content, and to connect with fans. While many star singers entrust marketing and media teams to help curate their online image, several leading singers have also been known to respond to followers' comments themselves. These efforts by megastars have diversified the channels through which opera can be consumed, and have demystified the operatic art form by providing behind-the-scenes glimpses into opera singers' private lives. Meanwhile, emerging opera singers have been using their social media platforms for advocacy. Their profiles and activist agendas align with broader societal trends, suggesting the potential for growing relevancy in opera in the twenty-first century. Without these platforms, emerging singers would have minimized media attention, and consequently, fewer opportunities to advocate for these values. In all of the singers' social media profiles discussed in this paper, attainability appears to be a repeating trend.

⁴² Ridout, "Opera and the Technologies of Theatrical Production," 159.

Megastars, especially, have deviated from the historic norm by inviting their followers to engage with their personal lives. However, as a growing number of people subscribe to megastars' social media pages (often several hundreds of thousands of followers, or more) elements of their career will become more exclusive. Live performances and in-person interactions with megastar opera singers have been, and with increased media attention, will continue to be, inaccessible. It is now in the hands of opera houses to translate increased social media attention to box office revenues and to diversify their own channels for opera consumption. Whether these emerging singers become megastars themselves and follow the current trends of social media use and how in-person and digital avenues for opera consumption continue to develop to include fans' desires for attainability would be opportune directions for future studies in opera.

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