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How does the incorporation of South Asian cultural and musical traditions in *Orpheus* provide a creative response to decolonization?

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Abstract

This research explores the opera *Orpheus*, which is produced under the cooperation between two arts organizations - Opera North and South Asian Arts. Through its innovative recreation of Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*, *Orpheus* provided a creative response to decolonization from various perspectives. This research will examine its combined potential to reshape operatic identity and power dynamics. Emphasizing cultural identity and vocal prowess, the study investigates the collaborative potential of integrating South Asian and Western musical elements, and it also aims to offer a fresh perspective on *Orpheus* that both honours its origins and promotes an inclusive and empowered operatic common ground in a decolonizing way.

Introduction

In an ever-globalizing world, the intersections of diverse musical traditions present a rich tapestry of potential innovations and rediscoveries in the realm of the performing arts. While at the same time, under the Western-centralized power dynamic, there exist lots of misrepresentations and reinforcement of the traditional western colonized opera narratives, thus, focusing on creative cooperation challenging the misrepresentations and reinforcement could be essential to uncover the potential (re)discoveries in cultural industries. As a recent and prominent cross-cultural dialogue, *Orpheus* (a recreation of Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*), is a work that cooperated with two arts organizations, Opera North and South Asian Arts, which becomes a powerful and successful integration in response to decolonization. Therefore, in analyzing that how artists and people creatively made it, and examining both its creative producing process and the adversities it has faced, this research ventures into the heart of such cross-cultural encounters, probing the depths to which South Asian cultural and musical ethos can influence, challenge, and redefine the established paradigms of western opera and its colonial practices. As it delves deeper into the decolonization and possible cultural empowerment created by this cooperation, we aim to uncover how this operatic amalgamation can inspire a reimagining of identity with the South Asian Arts and artists, power relationship, and collaboration within the operatic universe.

Literature review

The literature review seeks to lay the foundation for understanding key concepts pivotal to our study, specifically focusing on the themes of power, identity, and decolonization

within the context of opera. From a decolonial perspective, since colonialism centralized power through domination, control, and the imposition of specific knowledge and values, decolonization is the process of reclaiming that power, challenging the dominant narratives. Focusing on power and identity is essential to understand and challenge the deep-seated legacies of colonialism in opera studies, and paving the way for a more equitable and inclusive future. Opera has historically been a powerful cultural emblem, intricately woven with narratives of dominance, submission, and identity. Originating as an endeavor to revive the theatrical practices of Ancient Greece, Western opera soon proliferated across Europe, the early 17th century saw the development of operatic styles and conventions in Italy, most notably by Claudio Monteverdi with his revolutionary work *L'Orfeo* in 1607. Adopting varied styles, from the impassioned Italian opera to the German "singspiel," operas in history resonate with their distinct cultural ethos (Kimbell, D., 1994; Parker, R., 2001). In addition, opera originated as a collaborative endeavor in Renaissance Italy, aiming to meld various arts and emulate the perceived comprehensive nature of Ancient Greek drama. This foundational goal ensured opera's inherent openness to diverse influences. As it spread across Europe, this adaptability still allowed opera to evolve, absorbing and keeping open to other influences.

However, most of the time, there are many operas that are still based on stereotyped plots, settings and characters. Opera which could be meticulously selected, reflects not just dramatic potential but also articulating messages about power relationships, otherness, and belonging. The global expansion of opera has led to diverse regional styles, each reflecting their unique cultural contexts and expressing power and identity in ways deeply informed by their specific socio-cultural milieu (Christian Utz and Frederick Lau, 2013). However, Western opera is also replete with colonial narratives, with many classic pieces set against the backdrop of colonized lands, echoing stereotypes and promoting exoticism (McClary, S., 1991). These portrayals often sustain and accentuate dominant colonial perspectives, perpetuating non-European characters in light of the prevailing colonial ideologies (Locke, R., 2009).

South Asian musical traditions, such as the "Sangeet Natak" of India, have ancient origins, offering a rich tapestry of narratives that exist outside Western opera's colonial purview (Grout, D.J., and Williams, H., 2003). Both Western and South Asian musical cultures have particular forms and genres that incorporate music into narrative storytelling, but they differ significantly in their cultural context, music theory, vocal techniques, and styles of presentation (Becker, J., 2015). Therefore, highly influenced by colonial plots by western opera, it stays potential and important for new forms of opera to combine different

narratives from various regional music operas.

With numerous operas having been reinterpreted in various productions in the last twenty years, shedding light on issues of cultural representation and historical accuracy becomes an precious resistance to the western opera tradition. For instance, *Aida*, once criticized for its orientalist portrayal of Egyptians, has new performances that jumped out of the potential misrepresentations and exotification of the cultures it depicts, refocusing on the decolonization historical and cultural context (Chen, K., 2015). Some contemporary adaptations of these operas also try to emphasize cultural respect and authenticity in an innovative way, with directors and artists employing a more collaborative approach to include voices from the cultures being portrayed (Smith, A.O., 2022). *Otello* at the Royal Opera House and other operas of its kind have grappled with issues surrounding practices like “blackface”, striving for portrayals that respect the integrity of characters and their racial identities. *Nixon in China* from the Royal Scottish Opera, with its contemporaneous setting, navigates the delicate balance between Chinese and American cultural and political representations. Ai Weiwei's involvement in opera, particularly with the themes present in *Turandot*, underscores the critical examinations and revisions operas undergo in the modern age. As artists revisit these classics, there's been a burgeoning trend towards the decolonization of opera, jumping out from the practices in an innovative and cooperated way, where traditional western opera meets non-western music and narratives, challenging the supremacy of western operatic languages as a new language with more equality.

Decolonization, at its core, seeks to challenge and rectify the historical and structural imbalances of the previous form of western opera, questioning the conditions of opera's colonial past, new opera tries to position itself critically against the colonial past and searching for new operatic languages and also revolutionized the producing process in an innovative way. In the realm of the arts and opera industries, it not only means ensuring that collaborations and different cultures, what's more, it is needed to truly respect and uplift the contributions of all artists and cultures involved in the production in a both visible and equal way during the producing process, Especially those involving institutions from historically dominant cultures and under different power relationships, they should response in an innovative decolonization way, rather than perpetuating old hierarchies and structures dominated by the more powerful institution.

Analyzing the producing process of *Orpheus* in this research is an important creation to interpret its decolonization attempt, and it appears to embrace this spirit of being more equal and how it has made huge efforts to maintain a more equal collaboration. And the research

around it invites keen discussions on its resistance to the traditional opera forms, how it cooperated South Asian arts with the Western music form with its decolonizing initiatives during the creation process, in which ways it set a new common ground to challenge the imbalanced power relationship between South Asian Arts and Opera North, specifically, its potential to empower the South Asian community in Britain and foster a possible collective identity remains an intriguing and important focus (Patel, R., 2021).

Research Method

To analyze the decolonization and how the cooperation has been produced in an innovative way, this research conducted analysis from mainly two perspectives. One is the institutional analysis based on interviews from both the Opera North and South Asian Arts, the other is audience analysis based on a deep interview report from researcher Dawn Cameron, that she conducted numerous interviews with audiences who watched this opera in Britain. More data has been collected from videos and audios from social medias platforms such as Twitter and Instagram based on the discussions after watching the *Orpheus*, with one seminar named *After Orpheus* which is precious source as well. Mainly conducting semi-structured interviews, this research has interviewed Keranjeet Kaur Virdee, the Chief Executive and Artistic Director of South Asian Arts UK (SAA-UK), and Dominic Gray, Head of Projects at Opera North. Worth mentioning, this research has also interviewed one member in a special anti-racism group named ON anti-racism, which provides valuable insights into the cooperation process from an independent group perspective. Below provides the concrete table of all interviewees. Interviews with representatives from both Western opera institutions and South Asian Arts institutions would provide crucial insights into how this incorporation has been conducted and interpreted, shedding light on the collaborative process and the challenges this cooperation presents, this research delves deep into how these two institutions set the common ground from a cultural meaning that it created a new form of equal and decolonized cooperation. Worth noting that, this project has ethical approval from the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures at the University of Leeds, named as LTMUSC-146 – Telling Operatic Stories: Race, ethics, and authenticity

Interviewee Table

Interviewee	Affiliation
Keranjeet Kaur Virdee	Chief Executive and Artistic Director of South Asian Arts UK (SAA-UK)

Dominic Gray	Head of Projects at Opera North
Dawn Cameron	Researcher of Arts Council England (Audience Interviews)
Daoud Al-Janabi	Chair, ON Anti-Racism Group

Discussion

Orpheus, with its mythological roots tracing back to ancient Greece, tells a poignant story of love, loss, and the indomitable power of music. Adopting nearly 50% of the music from the traditional western opera Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*, *Orpheus* contains large reworkings by the South Asian artists. Historically speaking, *L'Orfeo*, is an early opera by Claudio Monteverdi, exemplifies Westernization through its adoption of the emerging operatic form, incorporating Italian language and musical traditions, thus aligning with the cultural trends of its time. However, discussions about its potential colonization pertain to how its appropriation and reinterpretation by subsequent generations can sometimes overshadow the original context, thereby reflecting a broader pattern of cultural dominance and subjugation in the history of art and opera. Therefore, Opera North's rendition offers a unique take on this classic narrative based on *L'Orfeo*, weaving in contemporary elements and decolonization nuances. This analysis aims to highlight and explore the main creative practices depicted in its production.

The endeavor to bring together South Asian musical traditions with Western opera, as exemplified in the reinterpretation of Orpheus by Opera North, opening a broader dialogue on cultural syncretism, decolonization, and the evolution of traditional art forms. A decolonial perspective, as mentioned before, is always highly connected with power relationship and cultural identity. Here it refers to how *Orpheus* balance the two power-imbalanced institutions and created a *common ground* during the cooperation process, one as the famous opera organization Opera North and the other as a small group South Asian Arts. Institutional power relationship as a basic cooperation condition, exists as an essential channel to uncover the cooperation process and off-stage decolonization practices. In addition, culturally speaking, with close regarding to cooperation between South Asian arts and the Western traditional opera forms, the cooperation has faced with double challenges, one is the Westernization of both the opera and the producing process, and the other is how to cooperate with South Asian culture in a decolonial but not simply an oriental and

integration way. Based on the interviews and data mentioned before and this important decolonization perspective, this research will analyse *Orpheus* from three main perspectives. One is the institutional perspective—the tension and power relationship between Opera North and South Asian Arts. The second perspective is audience analysis based on comments from main websites and social sciences platforms, combined with interview report with self-employed researcher, project manager and evaluator Dawn Cameron. Lastly, this paper will further analyze power dynamics and cultural identity based on decolonization perspective.

1. Institutional Analysis: Power Dynamics and Decolonization in the Collaboration of Opera in North and South Asian Arts

The collaboration between Opera North and South Asian Arts on *Orpheus* serves as a potent microcosm to examine institutional dynamics, particularly the nuances of power relationships and the broader ethos of decolonization in cooperation and artistic endeavors.

Opera North, as a larger institution with presumably more resources and broader audiences, holds a significant amount of structural power in this collaboration. Their capability to finance the project illustrates this dynamic, as Projects Director Dominic Gray in Opera North pointed out, it is Opera North who paid all the money for this opera *Orpheus*. However, while they have the financial might, their decision to "be careful to be equal" shared by Gray, signifies a conscious effort to balance imbalanced power and allow a genuine collaboration with the South Asian Arts. This important act could be seen as an essential practice to the principles of decolonization: recognizing historical imbalances in institutional power structures and actively trying to rectify them in the cooperation contexts. Also, worth mentioning, in this process, the ON anti-racism group contributed a lot in creating an equal space for the two different institutions, as Al-Janabi noted, "We not only talked with the director, but also pointed out that, at the very beginning, the cooperation should be designed in a new way, and the change should be top-down, rather than superficial attempt."

Therefore, although being a smaller institution with a limited workforce of 3–4 people, South Asian Arts still plays a pivotal role in this collaboration. On an equal basis, it made huge efforts in creating an equal and culturally friendly environment before the cooperation, their expertise in reaching out to specific South Asian audiences, providing South Asian artists, and creating a welcoming atmosphere is indispensable and really important for the whole cooperation. In regarding with the contribution of the South Asian Arts, South Asian Arts Director Keranjeet Kaur Virdee mentioned, "We firstly set the common ground well,

which means that not only the final result should engage south Asian artists, but the basic cooperation basic line should be decolonized in an equal way, this effort could be really important in the whole cooperation and we are proud of these efforts.” The similar assertion that "without South Asian arts, this opera could not happen" by Gray underlines the contribution from South Asian Arts as well. This can be interpreted as symbolic capital and a way of producing a common ground within the cooperation process: while they might not hold the same amount of financial or structural power as the big institution Opera North, their cultural and artistic contributions are invaluable, further underscoring the essence that a decolonizing collaboration should employ.

Opera North’s financial contribution and South Asian Arts’ unique expertise demonstrate a tangible mutual dependency and cooperation. While on the surface, it might appear that Opera North holds more power due to financial reasons, the artistic endeavor's success hinges on the unique capabilities and contributions of South Asian arts. The collaboration between Opera North and South Asian Arts on *Orpheus* offers invaluable insights into the complexities of institutional collaborations in the opera sphere. Their partnership, while shaped by distinct power dynamics, showcases how conscious efforts towards equity and respect can lead to genuine decolonized collaborations. By recognizing and valuing the unique strengths of each institution, the partnership not only produces a successful artistic endeavor but also paves the way for future collaborations that champion the principles of decolonization. Such collaborations could be really valuable for further innovations of decolonization. As Dauod pointed out, “decolonization is a long-term process, one opera is great and wonderful, but so temporary.” It stays essential for the Opera North to bring more possible innovative cooperation in the future, and long commitment within institutions is highly necessary.

2. Audience Analysis on Authenticity and Re-education in the performance of *Orpheus*

The collaboration between Opera North and South Asian Arts inherently poses issues around authenticity for Indians. For diasporic communities, especially South Asians in Western settings, the portrayal of their traditions and culture becomes a beacon of identity. Dawn Cameron mentioned that one female audience member had nostalgic feelings upon watching the performance, which underlines the importance of this authenticity for the South Asian people in Britain. The mere fact that the collaboration evoked a "touch of home" for

her suggests that the portrayal of South Asian musical traditions in *Orpheus* resonated genuinely with the Indian audiences.

One challenge when Western platforms engage with non-Western cultures is the risk of exoticism, where the "other" culture, like Indian culture, is presented as intriguingly foreign without depth or nuance while leaving an only superficial listening memory. However, the emphasis on collaboration, as noted by Cameron, and the intricate weaving of cultural narratives suggest a move away from surface-level exoticism towards a more profound integration with the South Asian culture.

For many Western or white audience members, *Orpheus* might have been a first-time experience of South Asian musical traditions. As Cameron indicated, "the performance was not only entertaining but also educational, especially for former audiences." The opera serves as a cultural re-education, challenging Western stereotypes about South Asian music and culture that they have no possibilities to engage with opera performances. One audience member's reflection that the opera mirrors the "evolving global society" further highlights this educational journey, one where global audiences are learning to appreciate various musical traditions with less biases.

Historically, Western perspectives on operas have been stereotyped by colonial views. In *Orpheus*, there's a conscious effort to decolonize this colonial plot setting and according to South Asian Arts Director Keranjeet Kaur Virdee, that "The South Asian Arts not only comes to the common ground, while also cooperate and highlight the uniqueness of South Asian art in new set designs. For example, when designing the sets, South Asian artists would gave numerous ideas and South Asian elements into it. And most important, almost all South Asian artists are on the stage and provided their ideas on the sets and music forms." As one audience pointed out after watching the *Orpheus*, the decision about what parts would be South Asian music and what would be *Monteverdi* was dramaturgically driven in the sets. "There were lots of elements in the set which is really amiable for me, and there was also certain western voices they wanted to keep." By ensuring an equal footing for South Asian arts, the collaboration attempts to rectify historical power imbalances and serves as a medium of cultural re-education for Western audiences. South Asian Arts, with its expertise and intimate knowledge of its cultural roots, played a pivotal role in ensuring that the portrayal of Indian culture and musical traditions was both genuine and relatable. As a new Opera text from BBC points out, that "Opera must have more diverse character representation" (Hoskin, 2023), same in *Orpheus*, it not only provided a new experience for previous western

audiences, as for South Asian people living in Britain, this opera also serves as a totally new discourse for this community and their cultural identity for the first time.

For audiences, *Orpheus* is more than just a musical performance; it's a creative cultural dialogue that challenges, educates, and enlightens. As for South Asian groups, it commits a lot to authenticity. *Orpheus* not only uses 11 native languages in total, but also it uses improvisation that rooted in South Asian traditions and a number of special instruments from India traditional cultures, all made its role in challenging the traditional watching experiences for audiences based on a colonized western setting, it renews a precedent for how global art forms can evolve, respect diverse traditions, and champion the principles of decolonization.

3. Common Ground and Cultural Identity

Historically, Western opera has been criticized for its orientalist perspectives. By incorporating South Asian elements, Kaur mentioned that *Orpheus* not only challenges orientalist stereotypes but also repositions the opera within a decolonizing framework in an innovative way. As Kaur emphasized, "I imagine that when Monteverdi composed L'Orfeo, he would have met with diverse musicians who influenced him creatively. Now, through this collaboration, we have the opportunity to bring together a cast who are masters in their own right, who can break down boundaries and cross borders through music to touch our hearts and minds. Ultimately, they remind us that we are all humans with lots of shared similarities and particularities that deserve to be celebrated unapologetically." This could be really inspiring and touching, since operatic themes have historically been intertwined with power dynamics, sometimes explicitly while sometimes not that explicit. While merging musical traditions and cooperate new opera forms have its challenges within the deeply-rooted westernized opera production process. Amy Freston, the chorus of Opera North commented in the *After Orpheus* discussion seminars that, "There were those differences as well. It's been a learning curve, I would say, on both sides." Yet, the end goal was not just a mere musical encounter; she also mentioned, "there are so many other things you need to consider... we have produced something that conveys the essence of what we had not try before." Central to the renewed understanding of *Orpheus* is the essence of collaboration. However, collaboration brings layers of cultural considerations. As Opera North Artist Jasdeep Singh Degun reflected in the *After Orpheus* seminar, there are "cultural differences for sure that come with the musical traditions themselves... there are all these different

levels," such as the venue, whether it's "Opera North's turf, being in the Leeds Grand Theatre," or "at the Darbar festival in London." The journey of *Orpheus* from inception through rehearsals to its final production offers invaluable insights into these collaborative nuances. He also shared that while the initial ideas "work quite interestingly together," the process became "very complicated," underscoring the need for someone who could "navigate both areas." Thus, the common ground was important to be navigated and created to challenge the previous power relationship between Western opera and South Asian arts, and the practice of actually producing a common ground becomes particularly precious for the cooperation process and the decolonization of opera, as Kaur mentioned, "Even the subtlest emotional feelings stand important, the cooperation process is not only production, it is the very first steps of challenging the traditional opera production process and let the South Asian artists to be seen in the beginning."

The reinterpretation of *Orpheus* symbolizes more than just a cooperation of different cultures. It is more about achieving a goal that is "excellent, something transformative, and extraordinary," as mentioned by Professor Edward Venn in the *After Orpheus* seminar. It represents the possibility of creating an empowered and collaborative artistic platform and common ground that is both transformative and most importantly, recognizes the challenges and opportunities of cooperating disparate musical traditions in an innovative way to question the traditional power relationships and create new narratives for the South Asian people to search for their unique cultural identity.

Conclusion

A creative response to decolonization was offered by *Orpheus*, a daring opera that was adapted and rewritten alongside Monteverdi's masterwork. *Orpheus* is not only a poignant collaboration, but it also empowered the South Asian group as a collective identity musical form. Created by Opera North and South Asian Arts in an inclusive method to challenge the typical producing power dynamic, it served as the best of both musical worlds in a decolonial form. From three key viewpoints, including institutions, audiences, and cultural identity, this research aims thoroughly into the process of a decolonial partnership challenging the imbalanced power relationship within institutions and also historically rooted. *Orpheus* offers as an intriguing example for the music industries and the larger world, highlighting that decolonization is not just the end result but also, to a greater measure, the entire cooperative process.

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