

Opera and emotion: The cultural value of attendance for the highly engaged

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Abstract:

This paper examines the cultural value of opera through a study of its most devoted and long-standing audience members. Its key research objective is to develop our understanding of what opera-lovers love about opera. In doing so, we provide a case study of one way to research audience experience of the arts. We use a theoretically-grounded, interview-based method. Our analysis starts with a quantitative account of what people said, and moves to an in-depth, qualitative analysis of respondents’ emotional engagement with opera. We suggest that this paper will be of interest to performing arts organisations, to academic researchers of audience experience, and to those with responsibility for arts funding and cultural policy.

Keywords: opera, audience reception, cultural value, interviews, qualitative data, intrinsic benefits of the arts.

Introduction

Arts organisations and cultural scholars are increasingly interested in the ways in which audience members make sense of their experiences. The audience experience, including the value audience members place on that experience, is one of the most significant outputs of an arts organisation. However, this experience is extremely difficult to measure and assess, and has often been reported using box office data as proxy indices. Both academia and the

arts industries are currently engaged in the development and testing of research tools to explore the question of audiences and cultural value in more nuanced ways, in part as a means to engage with the increasing need for arts organisations to demonstrate their value to stakeholders and policy makers. The Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)'s Cultural Value Project, launched in 2013, aims 'to make a major contribution to how we think about the value of arts and culture to individuals and to society' (AHRC 2013). Bakshi (2013) has indicated that cultural value is a key area of importance for current research in the cultural sector, citing the then incipient Warwick Commission on Cultural Value (now published: Knell 2015), the AHRC Cultural Value Project, and the promotion of cultural value and wellbeing research by the European Commission (2007). Arts Council England has recently published an overview of evidence of the value of arts and culture (Mowlah et al. 2014). At the same time, academic researchers in the field of audience studies are interested in how to conceptualise, identify, and measure those aspects of their experience that audiences themselves value. This paper proposes a theoretically grounded research methodology that adds to current scholarly knowledge in the field of audience experience.

Opera Audiences

This study was originally conceived and conducted by 'Capturing London's Audiences', a research strand of Creativeworks London. As such, it has grown out of a particular nexus of intellectual interests, government policy, business concerns, research goals, personal expertise and academic interests. Creativeworks London is one of four Knowledge Exchange Hubs funded by the AHRC, running from 2012 to 2016. The purpose of the Hubs is to encourage, support and conduct collaborative research between universities and the creative sectors, with a view to benefitting small businesses in the cultural industries. Accordingly, the primary goal of the 'Capturing London's Audiences' strand has been to collaborate with small businesses in order to conduct research into London's audiences that will both benefit those businesses and be of academic importance. The strand is led by the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, which has a particular interest in opera and opera audiences, as a key activity of the school is the preparation of professional opera artists. Opera is one of the most aesthetically complex of art forms, often portrayed in the popular media as cultivating an 'élite' audience with high cultural capital and socioeconomic status. These perceptions make the question of the actual relationship opera has to its audiences of particular interest. Furthermore, the academic and practical expertise in opera represented by the Guildhall School, and by one of the authors (O'Neill), meant that the research team was well equipped to engage with audiences in this area. Thus, it was decided that a research project into opera audiences could act as a case study for building on existing research examining the value audiences ascribe to live performance. The current paper is part of a research project conducted by the authors as part of Creativeworks London, which includes the interviews discussed here and a series of surveys (O'Neill et al. 2013).

Benzecry (2009) gives a substantial ethnographic account of dedicated opera 'fans' in Buenos Aires; because Creativeworks London is specifically focused on the creative

industries in London, our work offers a much smaller-scale, but nevertheless complementary, study of opera fans in London. Similarly to Benzecry, we do not focus on the correspondence between socio-economic demographics and artistic taste. While Benzecry examines how taste is assembled, we explore respondents' emotional engagement with their operatic experiences. Where Benzecry asks audiences how they came to love this form, we ask them what they love about this form.

The London-based, highly engaged opera-goers we studied attend the opera very frequently, more than four times a year and sometimes as often as once a week (O'Neill et al. 2013), forming a core group within the opera-going public in Britain. According to audience segmentation categories used by Arts Council England, our respondents all fall into the category of 'Highly Engaged', but it would be difficult to place them in either of the two sub-categories of this group—'Traditional Culture Vultures' or 'Urban Arts Eclectic'—in the former case because they actively seek out new experiences, and in the latter because of their over-riding interest in opera (Arts Council England 2011). The high levels of engagement evinced by this group make them a useful case study for the cultural value of the arts; these audience members clearly feel that they receive substantial benefits from attending the opera, and we aimed to explore their own understanding of those benefits. The intrinsic, artistic value that these respondents ascribe to their experiences operates alongside any economic, social, health and wellbeing, or educative benefits they may gain from attending.

Methodologies and Theories in Arts Audience Research

In developing our research methodology, we examined existing qualitative research into audience experience. Radbourne, Glow and Johanson (2013) draw together several qualitative studies, many of which identify particular indices or categories of the audience experience, as we do in this paper. In most of the cases featured in Radbourne, Glow and Johanson, as in our own case, the categories are devised following interviews or focus groups with audience members, and represent key concerns apparent in audience members' own accounts of their experiences. These categories are then proposed as a framework with which to describe and analyse the audience experience.

Our study, like those in Radbourne et al., asks people to retrospectively reflect on their arts attendance, providing an account of remembered, rather than lived experience. We examine how people make sense of their memories of an arts event, as opposed to the sensations they undergo during the course of it. Reason notes that 'it is through conscious reflection that individuals make sense of and invest meaning in their experiences' (Reason 2010, 21). He argues that the experience of a performance is at least partly made real and coherent by the retrospective process of reflecting on it (ibid, 24). Kahneman and Riis (2005) propose that remembered experience is where meaning (as opposed to sensation) is constituted, so any exploration of the meaning audience members attach to an artwork must engage with their memory of it: '[e]valuation and memory are important on their own, because they play a significant role in decisions, and because people care deeply about the

narrative of their life' (Kahneman and Riis 2005, 289). Accordingly, the process of reflection (which can be facilitated by participating in audience research) is, in itself, an important part of the experience of arts attendance. Or, as Reason puts it, we should 'conceive reflective activity [...] as an experiential moment in its own right' (Reason, 2010, 32). Furthermore, the expressive operation of theatrical art forms, as explored by Carlson (2001), relies on and engages with an audience's memory. Audience members may recognize and remember not only textual and musical compositions and their component parts, but also the individual performers, the productions, and the performance space itself. In interpreting a performance, the audience draws on memories (both private and shared) of previous performances. Therefore, the very process of discussing opera with our interviewer could be said to form part of our respondents' opera-going history. For all these reasons, our research engages with remembered, rather than lived, experience, and our method involves asking people to reflect on their own history with opera.

Perhaps the most extensive example of sociological research asking about remembered experience of music is the work of Gabrielsson (2011). He documents 1,300 accounts of strong experiences with music ('SEM's), gathered from almost 1,000 people, and spanning the twentieth century (accounts cover the period from 1908 to 2004). It is clear from these accounts that Gabrielsson's respondents set great store by their strong experiences with music; that these experiences happen to people of all ages, demographic groups and musical backgrounds; that people store up the memories of the experiences even to the point of those memories being the dominant memories of a whole period of life (e.g. early childhood), or indeed of the whole of one's life. They seem to be experiences that form a crux of one's thinking about life and one's place in the world. They are described as elemental spiritual experiences.

We note that research into the behaviour, sensations and reactions of audiences during the performance itself is also a fruitful and informative endeavour (see, for example, McAdams et al. (2004), Egermann et al. (2013), and Reason et al. (2013)). However, for the purposes of this study we follow Gabrielsson, Radbourne et al., and others, and focus on remembered experience. Future research may synthesize the two approaches, and examine the nature of the relationship between the lived and remembered experiences: for example, how do audience members construct stories to explain their visceral reactions? How does the process of reflection modify initial responses? To what extent does the remembered experience of a performance correspond with the lived experience?

Having accepted that asking the audience about their remembered experience of a performance could yield insight into a performance's meaning and value, we then had to decide on a framework within which to conduct the discussion: what aspects of a performance's value should we investigate? Bakhshi (2013) notes that there are no standardised units of value for measuring arts output, and that different stakeholders have different value needs. He argues that, because value in culture is uncertain, an iterative approach is necessary to determine which metrics are appropriate. This study uses such an approach: we allowed the transcript material to guide us in deciding on 'themes' that we

then used to code and analyse that same material. Our themes were those subjects that recurred throughout the interviews and that seemed to be of most concern to our respondents.

In developing this theoretical framework for our interviews, we drew on the studies featured in Radbourne et al. (2013), Brown and Novak (2007), Bakshki and Throsby (2010), Reason (2004), McCarthy et al. (2004), and Carnwath and Brown (2014). The studies we examined develop indices or categories that can be used to measure qualitative responses. For example, in Chapter 1 of Radbourne et al., 'Knowing and measuring the audience experience', the authors found that four key attributes of the audience experience emerged: knowledge, risk, authenticity, and collective engagement. In Chapter 5, 'In the context of their lives: how audience members make sense of performing arts experiences', Foreman-Wernet and Dervin identify eight themes common in participants' experience of the arts: truth/beauty; captivation; self-expression; self-awareness; cognitive/intellectual growth; community/connection; well-being; social judgement. Brown and Ratzkin (2012) identify the following 'impact indicators': captivation; emotion; intellectual and social (they also subdivide each of these indicators). Reason (2004) identifies two key criteria – believability and liveness – as significant markers of quality for audiences at live performance events. The categories in each of these studies emerged from the concerns of the respondents themselves, and this is the path we followed in devising our themes. The themes from these other studies inevitably remained present in our minds as we conducted the interviews and devised our themes: however, we attempted to maintain as open as possible an attitude towards the concerns and interests of the interviewees. We found some similarity between the categories identified in these studies, and the themes that emerged as results from our own investigation. For example, we found that the collective nature of attending opera is important for our respondents, as is the 'truth effect' of the narrative (where relevant). These two themes are similar to Reason's truth and liveness.

The philosophical field of aesthetics provides a parallel theoretical approach to investigating what people get out of their participation in the arts. Dutch art theorist Hans Van Maanen, building on the work of Kant and Gadamer, proposes a tripartite division between different functions for art (Van Maanen 2009).¹ He first describes *intrinsic functions*, which stem from the Kantian notion of disinterested aesthetic contemplation, and include the following: (i) development of new understandings; (ii) joy at a beautiful play of forms; (iii) allowing a group to imagine and reflect on new ways of being; and (iv) making these perceptions available for communication. These functions tie in with the factors such as 'truth', 'cognitive/intellectual growth', 'knowledge', 'beauty' identified in the studies outlined above. Van Maanen also describes *semi-intrinsic functions*, which are similar but relate to a personal interest in the art form or the skills and charisma of the performers and are thus not properly 'disinterested'. These functions correspond to factors such as 'captivation' and 'skill'. Van Maanen finally describes *extrinsic functions*, where arts serve the personal and social needs and desires of the audience, including socializing, entertainment, the building of social cohesion, and so on. These functions correspond to the

'social' factors outlined above. Much of what are currently measured as benefits the arts bring to society fit with Van Maanen's idea of *extrinsic* functions; functions the arts can accomplish, but that can also be achieved in other ways (for example, through participation in sports or religion). Van Maanen's concept of *intrinsic* functions is that they can *only* be achieved through the arts. McCarthy et al. (2004) distinguish between *instrumental* and *intrinsic* benefits, which are broadly similar in conception to Van Maanen's *extrinsic* and *intrinsic* functions. Accordingly, we suggest that the social science approach and the aesthetics approach have developed similar parameters with which to think about the value of the arts.

In this paper, we have drawn on both approaches to provide a framework for conducting and analyzing interviews with our respondents. In the following section, we examine sixteen themes that emerged as important to the interviewees.

Interviewing and Coding

Our interviews were enabled by our collaboration with the Guildhall School of Music and Drama and the Barbican Centre. We contacted audience members for the Guildhall School's opera performances via the Barbican Centre box office and invited them to participate in our research. We interviewed all those who responded (a total of 19; one of which could not be transcribed for technical reasons). Our respondents were therefore self-selecting. Thus, the sample is drawn from those who (a) are highly engaged by opera and (b) have the time and interest to meet a researcher and talk about it. The group's demographic characteristics skewed towards older, male retirees. Of the 18 transcribed interviews, there were four female and fourteen male interviewees. Five (all male) were over 70 years old. Eight (two women and six men) were between 60 and 69 years of age. Six (two women and four men) were between 50 and 59 years of age. Four (two women and two men) were in full-time employment. Two men were in part-time employment. The remaining twelve were retired. The postcodes represented were as follows: TN33 (x2), WD23, N1, SW13, SW17, HA5, BN14, GU7, W2, W8, N3, NW6, SE10, BN7, SW15, TN13, IG8, unknown(x1). With only the first half of a postcode, the area indicated is relatively large and it is not possible to pinpoint exact socio-economic position; however, the postcodes indicated are, broadly speaking, relatively affluent areas. It is notable that the overall area covered by these postcodes is large, extending up to 77 kilometres from the performance venue. The large distance travelled by a number of our respondents indicates their high level of commitment to attending opera performances.

We make no claims that this study is representative of a wider, opera-going public; rather, we present this group as a snapshot of the most highly engaged opera-lovers.

One author (O'Neill), who is knowledgeable about opera and comes from a background in professional opera production, conducted hour-long, semi-structured interviews with our respondents.² Interviews were transcribed and anonymised, and participants gave written permission for the transcripts to be used for research. All interviewee names have been changed for publication. The interviewer allowed the

concerns of the respondents to shape the conversations, using open-ended questions about respondents' opera-going lives to encourage them to talk, in particular, about high points or strong experiences they had. In order to minimize unconscious bias from the interviewer towards her own concerns and interests, the interviews were conducted in as open a manner as possible, taking the form of a free-flowing conversation led by the interviewee. The questions (listed in **Appendix 2**) were a tool to get the respondents talking but were not prescriptive and the structure of the interviews varied as a result. The interviewer encouraged fruitful digressions by following the emotional reactions of the interviewee. The interviewer herself attempted to remain as neutral as possible, while also maintaining a warm and open attitude in order to encourage frankness.

Analysis

This section of the paper analyses the interview transcripts. Transcribing the interviews yielded approximately 5,000 words of material per interviewee. We coded the transcripts using sixteen themes. The themes were not pre-determined, but emerged through repeated readings of the material. They represent subjects that we considered to (a) represent discrete areas of respondents' experiences, and (b) recur sufficiently frequently throughout the material to stand out as particular concerns of the respondents. The coding was conducted by counting the number of transcript lines accounted for by each theme. We then adjusted the scores according to the total number of lines in each transcript, so the final coding scores used represent percentages of each interview. The nature of the transcript material means that the coding should not be seen as a set of quantitative results; rather, we used the codes to discover our respondents' tendencies and allow us to navigate through this qualitative material. We cannot discount the possibility that the researchers' knowledge of other, similar studies inflected the selection of themes. The risk of this bias was minimized by careful consideration of the material and of each interviewee's intended meaning. Furthermore, the themes form only the first part of our analysis: the second level of analysis involves close reading of small sections of the material in order to further delve into the experiences of our interviewees.

The first section of our analysis – *Themes* – takes a quantitative approach to the transcript material. The meaning of each theme is explained, and the frequency of its occurrence discussed. Within this discussion, we demonstrate that the frequency with which a theme occurs does not necessarily reflect how important that theme is to respondents. Counting and ordering are useful analytical tools to make an initial assessment of the material, but the qualitative nature of this material demands a finer analytical tool with which to proceed. In the next section of our analysis – *Emotional Engagement* – we use the respondents' emotional engagement with the themes as an analytical pathway, starting with an overview of all the material and then following a case study approach. Our analysis thus moves from the general and the quantitative towards the specific and the qualitative.

Themes

The following is a list of the themes, each of which we will describe more fully below, in descending order of their predominance in the coded material:

- (i) History of Attendance
- (ii) Other People
- (iii) Emotion
- (iv) Character, Narrative, Truth
- (v) Production
- (vi) Performer Charisma
- (vii) Other Art Forms
- (viii) Live/Non-Live
- (ix) Repertoire
- (x) Beautiful Singing
- (xi) Affordability
- (xii) The New
- (xiii) Combination of Art Forms
- (xiv) Response to Music
- (xv) Respondent Making Music
- (xvi) Having to Work Hard/Challenge

Some interview answers yielded more than one theme, as in the following examples (note: the 'score' shown here for each theme reflects the number of lines of text; in the final coding, this was converted into a percentage):

He was a good communicator. The voice is not a particularly high tenor voice and he can do a lot of things with it. But he just communicates everything. Even if it's not in a language you understand, he's such a wonderful communicator and so beautiful to listen to (Nicholas, I. 111-114). [Coded as *Performer Charisma* (3 lines) and *Beautiful Singing* (1 line)]

To me it's the perfect opera... you know, it has a wonderful balance to it, as an opera. The story is a bit far-fetched... I think the music is absolutely glorious (James, I. 214-216). [Coded as *Repertoire* (1 line), *Character, Narrative, Truth* (1 line) and *Musical Response* (1 line)]

And they said, perhaps we should take him to see it, and the D'Oyly Carte were coming, so they took me to a matinee. And it was the most wonderful thing I had ever been to in my life. And I can still remember it and I was hooked (Michael, I. 14-16). [Coded as *Other People* (2 lines); *Emotion* (2 lines)]

Once we had coded the transcripts and counted the instances of each code, as in the examples above, we then adjusted the numbers according to the varying lengths of the transcripts, to show the percentage incidence of each theme for each respondent (**Appendix 1**). We did not code material that was not about opera or the respondents' relationship with opera (28% of the total response is uncoded).

Figure 1 shows the occurrence of each theme as a percentage of the total coded material.

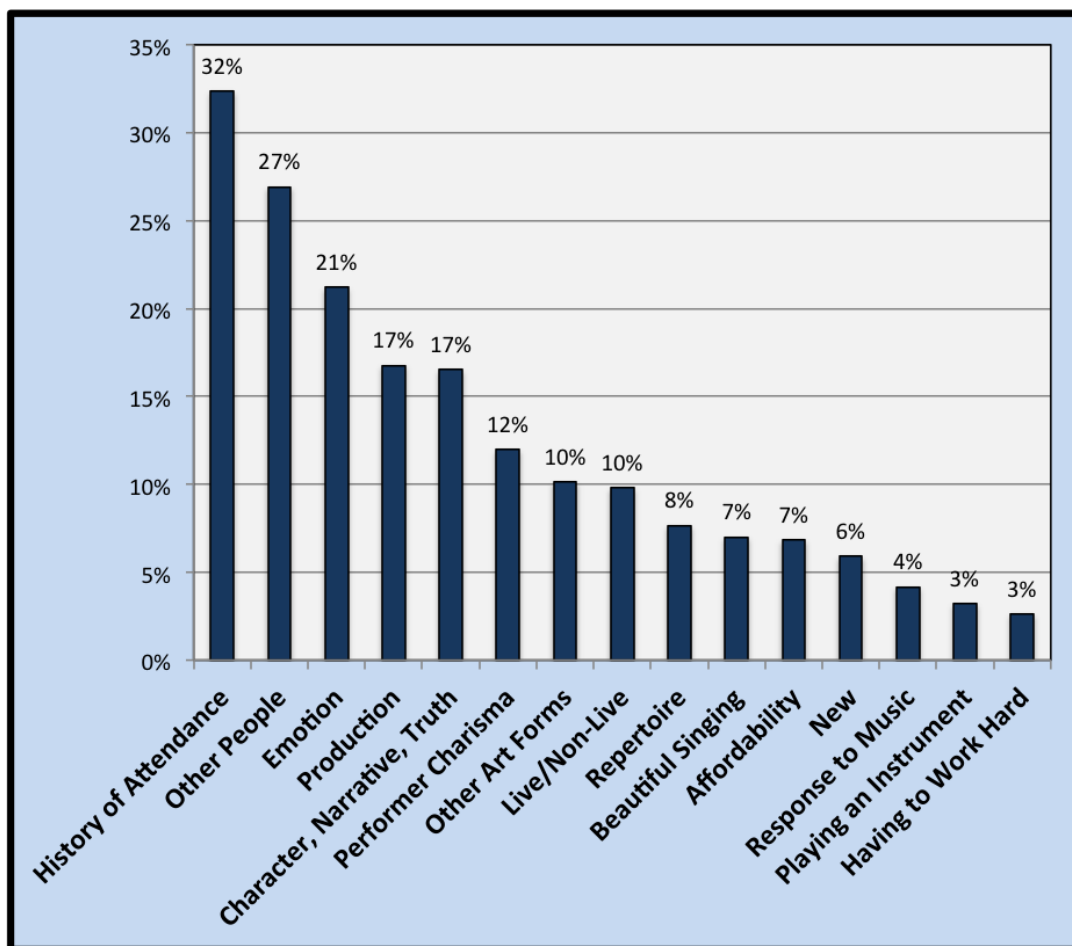


Figure 1: Themes as a percentage of the coded section of transcripts

The following brief explanation of each theme will give an overview of the material as a whole. Themes appear in descending order of their occurrence in the coded material (as per Figure 1), though we shall see in the next section that this order does not necessarily give an accurate picture of the importance of each theme to the respondents.

(i) History of Attendance

This theme was developed after the transcripts had been coded for all the other themes. It is a way of assessing how much of the remainder of the material was about respondents' opera-going history, even if it did not fall into any of our themes. *History of Attendance* marks things like how frequently respondents attend, what venues they habitually attend,

the logistics of attending, and so on; anything that was spoken about in unemotional terms and that did not seem to form part of their understanding of their own response to opera itself. Parts of the conversation coded *History of Attendance* tend to frame other themes, while not quite falling within those themes. Thus, *History of Attendance* is not a focus of this analysis, despite appearing dominant in Figure 1.

(ii) *Other People*

As shown in **Figure 1**, *Other People* is the most frequently-occurring theme (once *History of Attendance* is discounted), with many interviews dominated by this subject. The interviewer asked respondents if they usually attended with the same person, and whether they liked discussing their experiences with other audience members, but in most instances, respondents introduced this theme themselves. The majority of interviewees stated quite explicitly that their opera-going habits were determined by their own tastes, and were not dependent on social factors such as whether their friends or partners were interested in attending. They reported that they were quite happy to attend on their own and many reported frequently doing so. They did not view going to the opera as an opportunity to socialize, but rather saw it as an activity that related directly to the performance being presented. However, references to other people seemed to creep into respondents' discourse when they were ostensibly telling the interviewer about other things. We found that other people performed an essential function in how respondents contextualized and made sense of their own opera-going history. Other people usually introduced our respondents to opera in the first instance, and their interest and knowledge was furthered through discussion with others. Strong emotional responses were often closely related to respondents' perception of other people's responses. Our interviewees' memories of opera were very often explained using other people, and the significance of other people to respondents' opera-going experiences is one of the main findings of this study. This finding coheres with the work of Benzecry, whose subjects (devoted opera-goers in Buenos Aires) often attended on their own, experiencing opera as 'an intense one-on-one relationship with that work', but were nevertheless involved in an intensely social process of learning, initiation and bonding centred around knowledge about repertoire, singers, and performances (Benzecry 2009, 140). Our respondents showed similar histories of first discovering and later learning about opera through other people.

The following example comes from the respondent who had the highest percentage response for *Other People* (26% of his transcript). James answered many of the interviewer's questions with a reference to other people, before going on to describe the nature of his experiences:

What do you like about it?

Oddly enough, this was... many years ago I had a discussion about this with [my friend X]. We went on a picnic up in the Wendover Hills, which isn't very far from where I live in Hemel Hempstead, and I said to [him], . . . (James, I. 67-70)

James's memories of his opera experiences are intertwined with memories of conversations and interactions with friends and acquaintances. In his case, other people are quite central to his memories. In contrast, for some respondents, other people are less integrated into their experiences, but nevertheless feature in their accounts. Shane's percentage for *Other People* was in the middle of the range, at 16% of his transcript. While he did sometimes talk about other people in similar terms to James, more often they appeared as an aside, as in this example: 'And then in the late 80s I went to my first ever opera because I was gifted a ticket from somebody who couldn't go.' (Shane, l. 15-17) In this example, the other person mentioned is responsible for the respondent's experience, but is not fundamental to what the respondent felt about that experience.

In some cases, this theme relates to everyday socialising, while in other instances it is closely linked with a strong emotional response, as in the following example: 'The entire audience was silent, it was listening, it was engaging with the drama. And that was one of the two or three really great experiences I've been to' (Michael, l. 77, 78). Here, the presence and responses of other people are fundamental to the quality of the experience for the respondent.

When we ask 'what do opera-lovers love about going to the opera', then, we find that references to other people imbue respondents' memories of their experiences, and in some cases are considered by the respondents to be a fundamental part of the experiences. The frequency of references to other people supports the claims made by Reason (2004), Foreman-Wernet and Dervin (2013), Radbourne, Glow and Johanson (2014), and others that communality, co-presence and shared experiences are a key part of what audiences value in arts attendance.

(iii) Emotion

This theme includes any mention of emotion in connection with opera. It includes observations of performers' emotions, although most occurrences refer to the respondents' own emotions. Some instances of this theme describe the response of the audience as a whole, and they are often linked to another category. *Emotion* also includes responses that do not specifically mention emotion, but where it is implied: for example, 'It was absolutely magical. I've never experienced anything like it before' (James, l. 308). Other responses are specific descriptions of emotion: 'I wanted to rend my hair and wail and fall over the seat in front. And of course you can't' (Gemma, l. 121,122).

Our respondents displayed a strongly emotional relationship with opera. *Emotion* was the second most dominant theme, after *Other People*. Although the high response rate for the theme *Emotion* may occur partly because we specifically asked respondents to describe particularly emotional experiences, nevertheless emotional language recurred throughout the interviews, even in response to questions that were not directly about emotional experiences.

The sections coded *Emotion* are often intertwined with other themes. The theme *Emotion* thus gives us an opportunity to examine what respondents feel strongly about. We assessed which themes were associated with *Emotion* by noting when (i) respondents used emotional language while speaking about that theme, and (ii) respondents themselves said that a particular theme accounted for their emotional response. The association of a theme with *Emotion* enables us to assess how important that theme was to respondents.

(iv) Character, Narrative, Truth

This theme relates to the fictional world depicted on stage. It encompasses responses about the plots of operas and commentary on how well performers embody their characters. Believability is a key aspect of this theme:

I find them too close [performers in 'pub opera']. To me I can't suspend my disbelief anymore, it starts to become too real, it's them singing it. I need a little bit of a chasm. (Sarah, l. 318-320)

Respondents want to believe in the stories portrayed on stage, and their assessment of the quality of a performance often rests on its believability. Believability is expressed as a 'truth effect', with respondents wanting what they see on stage to seem 'true'.³

A sense of truth is also related to remarks about opera helping respondents to reflect on life and on the human condition, as in this example: 'It tells you things, just as theatre does, about sacrifice, about love, about politics, about the way people interact' (Michael, l. 214, 215). Remarks about truth and humanity most often occurred in relation to the plots and characters of operas.

In some cases, being physically close to the performers is important:

It's that real detail that you can see, the detail of the set, the detail of performers, just feeling 'oh gosh', you can almost eyeball them, you don't, but you can really feel the communication. It's so immediate. (Orla, l. 279-281)

Other respondents preferred to be farther away. In both cases, the preference is to do with the truth effect: in Orla's case, proximity enhances communication, while those who preferred distance found that it enhanced their ability to believe in what they saw on stage.

In many cases this theme is quite close to *Performer Charisma*, as in the following example:

But the bass there is an example [of a very moving singer], the dad ... her dad's peering through the window and he's singing he's lost his daughter. That aria ... Daddy singing of lost daughter, that was just stunning. (Sarah, l. 358-361)

It is evident from this and other similar examples that respondents' assessment of performers may centre around the performers' skill in portraying characters and dramatic situations, so that *Performer Charisma* and *Character, Narrative, Truth* are often closely related.

Character, Narrative, Truth is a frequently-occurring theme, coming just after *Emotion* and accounting for 17% of the coded material. It is highly associated with *Emotion*.

(v) *Production*

This theme covers any discussion of a production itself as a work of art (that is, 'Richard Jones's *Falstaff*', as opposed to 'Verdi's *Falstaff*'). Some responses in this category relate to the director. Others describe the set or other noteworthy aspects of a particular production. Some respondents reported annoyance with productions where they felt the artistic vision of the director was out of keeping with their own understanding of the opera. Equally, some respondents were excited by specific productions or by the work of particular directors. This theme is closely associated with *Character, Narrative, Truth*, as in this example:

I don't like it if I feel the producer's not taking the opera seriously. For me there's a centre to the drama, and if they've missed that then they're saying, that's not important. That bothers me. (John, l. 366-369)

Here, the importance of believability is implicit. The respondent wants to be able to engage with the drama, and makes a qualitative assessment of the production according to whether or not that desire is fulfilled.

(vi) *Performer Charisma*

This theme refers to terms such as 'presence', 'personality', and the 'cult of the singer'. It mostly relates to singers, but does encompass conductors as well. We use it to categorise the things respondents say about performers that are not about the beauty of the voice or musicality, but about charisma, presence, and so on. It is not limited to famous or even named singers; some respondents mention an experience of seeing a performer whose name is unknown to them. *Performer Charisma* occurs relatively infrequently overall (12% of the coded material deals with this theme), but it is highly associated with *Emotion*.

(vii) *Other Art Forms*

This theme refers to discussions about spoken theatre, the visual arts, orchestral concerts, and so on. The interviewer specifically asked about respondents' experiences of other art forms in order to gauge how important opera was for them in comparison. In most cases, opera was the dominant passion of the interviewees, although one or two reported experiencing equally strong emotions at spoken theatre or orchestral concerts.

(viii) *Live/Non-Live*

The nature of 'liveness', given the development and growth of the livecasting of opera to cinemas, is clearly complex and deserving of in-depth consideration, for which we refer readers to Phelan (1993), Auslander (2008), Morris (2010), Barker (2012), and Radbourne et al. (2014). In the context of our interviews, this theme refers to attending opera in other formats, for example at the cinema, on DVD, and so on. The interviewer specifically asked whether respondents experienced opera in these other formats, in order to gauge the importance to them of the 'live' experience. In most cases, our interviewees were more engaged by opera performed live in a theatre than by other available options. They were stimulated by the risk of live performance, and felt excited and privileged to be in the same space as the performers. We suggest that for our respondents, physical co-presence was a more important aspect of liveness than simultaneity. This preference may not be typical for all audiences; Barker notes the importance of simultaneity for audience members of cinema livecasts (Barker 2012, 46).

(ix) *Repertoire*

This theme encompasses references to specific operas or sub-genres of opera that were not related to particular performances, productions, recordings, or performers, for example: 'A favourite opera, I usually say *Rosenkavalier* because it was my first' (George, l. 290). Although this theme has a low percentage score in **Figure 1**, it was important to respondents, associating relatively highly with *Emotion*, as in the following example: 'I've got a particular affection for *Figaro*.' (Matthew, l. 225).

(x) *Beautiful Singing*

This theme refers specifically to beautiful singing, excluding other responses to music or performers, because the beauty of the singing voice was of considerable significance to many respondents, and indeed was sometimes identified as the key to their strong emotional response to opera. One interviewee remarked, 'you could almost have somebody singing scales and it would do something to me, not to everybody, I know' (Sam, l. 484). Another said: 'It's a pure, animal reaction when I hear a bass, a really great bass' (Sarah, l.339). These responses are about the sound of the voice, rather than about communication, character, or musical response, which is why we made *Beautiful Singing* an independent theme. *Beautiful Singing* is strongly associated with *Emotion*, in contrast to its relatively low occurrence overall.

(xi) *Affordability*

This theme refers to any reference to ticket prices or other costs associated with attending opera. The interviewer never raised the question of affordability, so it is noteworthy that its occurrence is consistent for all respondents. Our interviewees were all frequent attenders, and were all concerned with the cost of attending, seeking bargains and inexpensive tickets,

or in a minority of cases attending less frequently than they would wish because they preferred to sit in more expensive seats.

(xii) The New

This theme does not feature strongly, but is consistent in its occurrence across respondents. The interviewer did not ask about this theme but it was independently brought up by all respondents; we found that our interviewees mostly seek out operas or productions that are new to them, in some cases travelling great distances to see rarely-performed repertoire.

(xiii) Combination of Art Forms

This theme occurred in all the interviews, despite not appearing in the interviewer's questions, and is relatively strongly associated with *Emotion*. Some respondents trace their strong response to opera to the combination of art forms:

I think again it's the musical element of it that makes the big difference [to my emotional response]. And you're melding together the sort of operatic drama, this drama of character and plot and event with the music. (John, I. 276-279)

(xiv) Response to Music

This theme captures responses to music that are not about the beauty of the singing voice. The overall incidence of *Response to Music* is surprisingly low, at 4% of the coded material; however, it is strongly associated with *Emotion*. Our respondents did not talk very much about their musical responses, but when they did, it tended to be in the context of an emotional experience, as in this example:

I'm not trained in any musical way at all. But in the last 2 or 3 minutes, there's a sequence of notes, the hair absolutely stands up on the back of your head. (Shane, I. 187, 188)

(xv) Respondent Making Music

Certain respondents related their experience of opera to their own music-making, whether singing in a choir or playing an instrument. However, these instances were not frequent, nor did they associate strongly with *Emotion*.

(xvi) Having to Work Hard/Challenge

A number of respondents mentioned having to work hard to understand some opera plots or music. Some respondents enjoyed the experience of having to work hard or be challenged. However, the percentage occurrence is low and there was no significant association between this theme and *Emotion*.

Having examined the incidence of each theme, we now use *Emotion* as a tool to assess how important the themes were to our respondents.

Emotional Engagement

To enable comparison between themes, we counted the total number of transcript lines when *Emotion* was associated with another theme; the results are shown in **Figure 2**. An association was noted whenever respondents used emotional language while talking about a particular theme, or when they themselves said that their emotional response was caused by a particular theme. **Figure 2** shows each theme’s association with *Emotion* as a percentage of the total associations with *Emotion*.

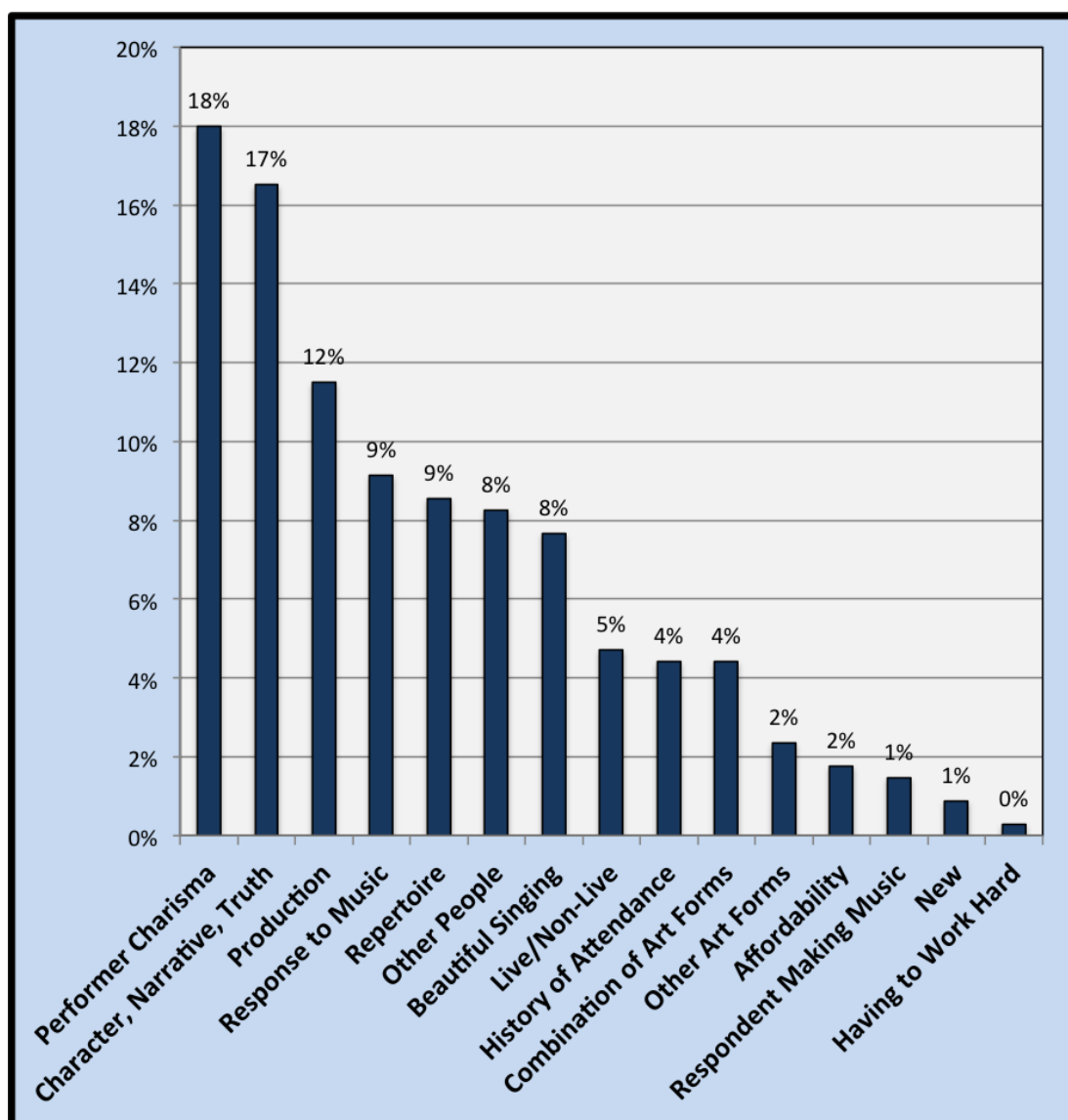


Figure 2: Association of other themes with ‘Emotion’

This chart gives us a more nuanced picture of the emotional priorities of respondents than **Figure 1**, which showed the quantity of discourse occupied by each theme. The theme most

associated with *Emotion* was *Performer Charisma*, closely followed by *Character, Narrative, Truth* (and indeed, these two themes are closely related to each other). *Production* is the next highest associated theme. *Response to Music* and *Repertoire* both feature much more highly in **Figure 2** than in **Figure 1**, where they appear relatively insignificant at 4% and 8%, respectively. *Other People*, in contrast, is only the sixth most highly associated theme in **Figure 2**, having featured as the most dominant theme in **Figure 1**. *Beautiful Singing* is shown to have some association with *Emotion*, and the associations taper off after that.

Using **Figure 2** as a starting point, we can now analyse our respondents' concerns more closely. For reasons of space we confine ourselves to the two themes that associate most strongly with *Emotion*: *Performer Charisma* and *Character, Narrative, Truth*. These two themes are closely related, with a common focus on ideas of 'truth', encompassing communication, self-examination, the condition of personhood, and shared humanity. In examining these two themes, several of the other themes in **Figure 2** are drawn into the discussion, demonstrating the interrelated nature of many of these themes, and the difficulty in separating them into quantitative findings. We now adopt a case-study approach to examine three respondents' emotional engagement with *Performer Charisma* and *Character, Narrative, Truth*. We conclude our analysis with some remarks about our respondents' understanding of the significance of music and its link to a sense of truth.

(i) Performer Charisma

The material we coded *Performer Charisma* can be further broken down into the following subjects: (i) communication, (ii) truth, (iii) empathy, and (iv) presence. The first two subjects are closely tied up with *Character, Narrative, Truth*, in that they are related to the quality and believability of the performance in the context of the opera's narrative. The second two are about the audience member's perception of the performer as a person separate from their character.

We use Gemma as a case study to further explicate these ideas. Gemma discussed *Performer Charisma* more than any other respondent, and it was also the highest-occurring theme in her interview. All four aspects of the theme are evident in her response. Gemma had a negative opinion of opera in her early life, because her early experiences failed to provide her with sufficient believability:

The first real opera I went to would have been at Covent Garden when I was 13 or 14. And it had, I wish I could remember her name, a huge soprano who I didn't believe anyone could ever fall in love with because she was so ugly. I must say that that experience rather put me off for a long time. I found that it was over-theatrical and over-false, and that the voices were fake and the production of the voices was fake, and that it was a confection rather than an art form. (Gemma, l. 15-21)

In this quotation, the respondent refers to both communication and truth in the context of performance. The performer in question could not be believed in the situation of the story (someone falling in love with her), and performers generally are criticized for not producing a ‘true’ sound. She goes on to contrast this early experience with later experiences where the voice production was not ‘fake’, and it becomes clear that she means that the intention of the voice production should be about communication, rather than about sound production: ‘for the first time ever you saw people behaving like human beings, but just singing in order to communicate their message’ (Gemma, l. 42, 43).

In describing a particularly strong emotional response that she had to a performance (an audio-visual recording of Joan Sutherland as Lucia in *Lucia di Lammermoor*), Gemma remarked: ‘the thing that I remember most was ... it was almost like being inside her. You had her experience’ (Gemma, l. 128, 129). Here, the truthful communication of a fictional situation is connected to empathy and presence. The performance gives Gemma a profound engagement with the fictional situation by allowing her to share the protagonist’s experience. She is able to expand her understanding of her own selfhood by imagining that she is sharing someone else’s.

Gemma considered the voice of the performer to be fundamental in communicating truthfully and in facilitating the sort of experience she describes above:

I think that’s what I like about opera. Because the voice is such an intrinsic part of one’s emotional self, you can’t sing opera and have any boundary between you and the character you’re playing. Of course you can but you shouldn’t. . . . And the thing about having a musical line is that it takes you into the experience and allows you to forget all those things that might otherwise intimidate you. (Gemma, l. 269-272 and l. 279-281)

Once again, Gemma expresses a desire to be drawn in to the world of an opera and its characters, and she wishes to feel that the performers are also completely absorbed by that world. Communication, truth, empathy and presence—the four components of *Performer Charisma*—are thus all closely bound up with Gemma’s response, enabling her to fully believe in the fictional world being portrayed. She identifies music as a tool enabling her to fully empathise with the characters: a common impression amongst our respondents.

Gemma and other respondents also discuss *Performer Charisma* without reference to communication, truth, or the fictional world of the plot:

I just like the bigness of the voice. It’s a voice that is so powerful but she has complete control over it. You sometimes feel when you listen to people that they’re worried that they might push it too far and not be able to control it and you can hear that anxiety in the back of their heads. You never hear that with her. She just lets rip and out it comes. (Gemma, l. 331-334)

This example is about presence and empathy; the respondent ascribes a particular emotional state to the performer, and her assessment of that state affects how she feels about the performance.

Performer Charisma was the theme most closely associated with *Emotion* for our respondents. Their emotional response to a performance depended on the success of performance as regards communication, truth, empathy and presence. On the one hand, respondents' emotions were stimulated by a performance that allowed them to empathize with the characters in the story, and on the other hand, their empathy with the performers could have a positive or negative effect on their ability to do so.

(ii) Character, Narrative, Truth

The material we coded *Character, Narrative, Truth* can be further broken down into each of its component parts—character, narrative, and truth. It relates closely to *Performer Charisma*, as demonstrated by Gemma. It is highly associated with *Emotion*, apparently forming a fundamental part of how audience members assess and respond to an opera experience. The idea of 'believability' is a significant part of this theme, but it also encompasses considerations of the nature of humanity and the self, as in this example from Michael:

[Opera] tells you things, just as theatre does about sacrifice, about love, about politics, about the way people interact. Even something as silly as *I Puritani* . . . it's a really—I think—effective presentation of people evading each other and acting in a very human way. . . .It's about people, the way they relate to each other and the way they do things. . . . I don't think I'd go if it didn't do that. I'd just say, it's quite nice entertainment. (Michael, l. 214-223)

In this quotation, the importance of believability is not specified, but it is implied—as a vehicle that enables the 'truth' effect to operate; even though *I Puritani* is 'silly', believability is implied by the phrases 'effective presentation' and 'acting in a very human way.' The similarity with the constituent parts of *Performer Charisma* is evident, although in *Character, Narrative, Truth*, truth and believability are not necessarily related to specific performers or performances.

Just as Michael used the word 'silly' to describe *I Puritani*, David insisted that he was not interested in 'story', saying (of *Così fan Tutte*), 'Oh it's a stupid story like all opera' (l. 50) and 'we went for the music' (l. 52). While our respondents tended to imply that the stories of opera were not the most important thing, they also displayed strong feelings about believability, truth effect, and the representation of character. Having said that opera stories were 'stupid', David went on to talk a great deal about verisimilitude, commenting on his experience of a production of *Turandot*: 'And she was a princess in a mask the whole time. Well, how the hell did Calib fall in love with a mask? That was the only thing about that' (David, l. 315, 316). Despite dismissing opera stories, David was highly invested in them

and wanted to believe what he saw. On the subject of Calixto Bieito's *Fidelio* at ENO, he responded very negatively to perceived inconsistency in the production:

When Leonora goes down there, she ... goes down into the prison with a holdall and a fresh suit, and he puts his fresh jacket and trousers on. And at the end of the opera the local governor comes in and says, 'oh, take his fetters off.' But what I wonder is, how the hell did he get a clean suit on if he had fetters on? (David, l. 156-159)

In these examples, it is evident that *Character, Narrative, Truth* is closely allied to *Production* and that criticism (or praise) of a production is often made according to its believability. It is therefore consistent with our developing understanding of the importance of believability that the three themes *Performer Charisma, Character, Narrative, Truth* and *Production* are all strongly associated with respondents' emotional reactions (see Figure 2).

In addition to matters of consistency and verisimilitude, David had a strong interest in the portrayal of human relationships in opera. He informed the interviewer that *Otello*, *Don Carlos* and *Simon Boccanegra* were his favourite three Verdi operas, because of 'the recognition that goes on' (David, l. 102/3). (We took this phrase to refer to the characters' recognition of each others' true, but previously concealed, identities, and to demonstrate David's affection for key moments of the plots of these operas.) He initially chose *Così fan Tutte* as his favourite opera because of the beauty of the music; however, later in the interview he remarked;

What I like about *Così*, in many productions, is at the end of *Così*, you never know what's happened. You've seen *Così* where the partners will come together again. I saw Jonathan Miller's *Così*, where they haven't the faintest idea what they're going to do. They really go off stage separately. And I've seen others where they've parted, not with the original partner but with the new partner, so you really don't know what's happening. (David, l. 113-118)

Once again, in this example we see the close relationship between *Character, Narrative, Truth* and *Production*. David is typical of our respondents in that he did not necessarily have fixed opinions or expectations about what interpretation a production should present, but he did very much want it to be believable, and was upset if it was not.

Figure 1 shows that *Character, Narrative, Truth* and *Production* (each accounting of 17% of the material) were more discussed than music (with *Musical Response*, and *Beautiful Singing* accounting for 4% and 7%, respectively). We should be cautious about concluding that this difference is an accurate representation of peoples' feelings on each subject, because it may be easier to talk about the effect of a story than the effect of a musical experience, and indeed the musical response categories appear more significant when we examine their association with *Emotion* in **Figure 2**. Together, *Beautiful Singing* and

Response to Music account for 17% of associations with *Emotion*, the same as *Character*, *Narrative*, *Truth*. It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the association between the two musical themes and the other themes. However, we propose that our respondents found the 'truth effect' of narratives to be increased by music. As mentioned above, all respondents cited the combination of art forms as one of the aspects that made opera so appealing to them. It seems that the combination of music with dramatic portrayal made the stories and characters seem more 'real,' as in the following examples:

John:

To me opera is on a completely different plane from spoken theatre. I like spoken theatre and it's very moving and involving, but the experience for me is never quite as intense. . . .Because it's like another language at a deeper level in your psyche, if that's the right word. And I can hear a few notes or a phrase of music that instantly does something that I respond to, in a way that words never provoke. (l. 53-60)

I think again it's the musical element of it that makes the big difference. And you're melding together the sort of operatic drama... this drama of character and plot and event with the music... and sometimes they work together. (l. 276-278)

Gemma:

Suddenly you could see the potential of music to amplify what you were seeing rather than the reverse. And that was a real eye-opening moment. (l. 47, 48)

And I think that what I like about the [live] orchestra is that it gives a reality to the performance. It's like a four-dimensional thing that you're getting . . . (l. 143-146)

The idea that music can bring a sense of reality to the drama recurs throughout our interviews. In particular, music is considered to make the portrayal of emotions more accessible and seem more real. It enables audience members to fully enter into the narrative and situations of the plot, and to relate more strongly to the characters than they would in spoken theatre. This is a counter-intuitive finding, since many non-opera-goers cite a difficulty in suspending disbelief and accepting the unreality of the characters singing.

Conclusion

This paper has used opera as a case study to explore the self-reported responses of highly engaged audience members. Our analysis demonstrates that audience engagement with the arts, even when examined within highly restricted parameters such as those of this study, is complex, multivalent, and difficult to reduce to simple generalisations. Our findings

are broadly in line with the formulations and categorisations of previous research, as outlined above (*Methodologies and Theories in Arts Audience Research*). At the same time, our open-ended approach to the interviews, and our in-depth qualitative analysis of the transcript material have highlighted the interconnectivity of a number of themes, which is, in itself, a key aspect of the audience experience.

Our respondents describe their experiences in highly emotional terms. They are deeply engaged by the characters and stories of opera, and their engagement in these factors is enhanced by their response to music and by the skill and charisma of performers. They have a strong desire to believe in the narratives portrayed, and they make qualitative judgments of productions and performances according to whether or not those aspects interrupt or enhance the believability of narratives. Believability is often expressed as a 'truth' effect. Respondents use opera narratives to explore and reflect on human relationships and dilemmas, and they are better able to do that when they are captivated by the music.

When our respondents talked about opera, they often also talked about other people. References to other people took diverse forms. Some respondents attended the opera with one other person, and referred to all their tastes and interests in the first person plural as a result. Others attended on their own, but had a strong desire to tell someone else about the event when they returned home. Most respondents reported that their experience of live performance could be disrupted or enhanced by the behavior of other audience members. Accordingly, we conclude that opera-going is an intensely social experience, even for those who attend on their own. At the same time, however, references to other people were only partly associated with emotional language. Although other people are clearly a significant aspect of our respondents' attendance of opera, they only occasionally trigger a strong emotional response.

Thus, we suggest that three key factors pervade the experience of highly engaged opera-goers: *Emotion, Truth, and Other People*.

Therefore, we can say that the values ascribed to their experience by highly engaged opera-goers relate largely to the *intrinsic* and *semi-intrinsic* functions of art identified by Van Maanen (2009), or the *intrinsic benefits* noted by McCarthy et al. (2004). At the same time, the importance of other people to our respondents points towards Van Maanen's *extrinsic* functions (or McCarthy et al.'s *instrumental benefits*). This social aspect is evident throughout the interview material, but its emotional significance for respondents is much lower than the *intrinsic* and *semi-intrinsic* functions. The particular combination of the three functions may be different for different groups and for different art forms, although that question falls beyond the scope of the current study.

The basis of our methodology is that it is possible to find out about the value of the arts by asking those who love an art form about their experiences with that form. Interviewing, transcribing, and analyzing this sort of material is time-consuming, and the research findings cannot easily be summarized in general terms. The very complexity of the research results is significant, since individuals' experiences are complicated, irreducible,

and difficult to compare. The qualitative data yielded by interviewing audience members is unwieldy; however, it can provide a deeper understanding of what Van Maanen terms the *intrinsic* functions of art.

It is easier to measure the *extrinsic* than the *intrinsic* functions of art. Box office data can yield quantitative information about who is attending, where they come from, and in what size group they are attending. We propose that qualitative research must supplement this information in order to provide a richer picture of both audience experience and of cultural value.

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Appendix 1: Percentage Incidence of Themes for Each Respondent

Fictional Names	Gemma	Michael	John	Matthew	Orla	Amanda	Sarah	Peter	Nicholas	Shane	Geoffrey	David	Andrew	James	George	Sam	Andrew	Luke
Identifier for Filed Transcripts	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
History of Attendance	9.3	22.9	14.8	9.1	18.8	12.5	16.7	19.8	10.1	32.0	11.5	26.1	15.7	19.4	10.2	20.6	17.2	31.2
Playing an Instrument	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.0	1.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	7.5	0.0	1.0	0.0	2.7	3.1	4.9	6.9	0.0	0.0
Response to Music	0.0	1.4	2.1	5.4	3.1	0.4	2.8	2.3	2.8	2.5	1.5	1.0	0.2	1.4	7.2	1.9	4.9	0.0
Having to Work Hard	2.9	0.3	1.4	0.9	7.8	1.1	0.0	0.5	0.0	1.6	4.1	0.0	0.2	1.4	0.0	0.8	1.9	0.9
Repertoire	3.2	5.5	4.5	4.0	5.3	3.0	1.7	5.2	9.5	3.8	4.6	3.1	6.1	3.8	1.5	3.8	4.5	2.0
Production	1.3	14.3	13.8	9.7	0.9	4.2	8.9	17.7	21.2	8.5	7.4	5.2	7.5	7.3	7.6	13.2	9.7	6.3
Other Art Forms	13.2	8.2	4.1	2.6	6.0	8.7	0.0	2.7	11.5	5.3	0.0	9.8	9.7	1.0	3.8	2.5	1.9	8.6
Live/Non-Live	10.6	2.0	4.1	0.0	4.4	15.1	1.9	10.9	2.5	0.0	7.7	8.7	2.9	5.5	4.2	1.9	9.4	4.3
Beautiful Singing	1.3	2.7	3.4	1.4	1.6	4.9	3.9	0.9	0.3	0.0	12.5	0.7	13.8	1.7	1.1	12.1	3.2	3.2
Performer Charisma	19.3	8.9	6.6	1.1	3.1	2.6	3.9	3.2	9.2	1.6	4.8	10.1	3.4	12.1	2.3	3.8	10.4	11.2
Character, Narrative, Truth	7.7	18.1	17.6	5.1	5.3	0.4	2.8	16.8	3.1	17.9	17.1	10.5	0.5	6.9	15.9	11.5	1.9	3.2
Affordability	1.9	0.3	1.0	6.3	1.9	2.6	3.3	2.5	5.3	3.8	2.8	5.6	11.6	1.4	5.3	2.7	3.6	5.2
Emotion	10.9	12.3	9.7	6.5	19.1	17.0	20.3	9.3	7.8	6.0	8.2	5.9	17.2	14.2	8.0	10.4	16.5	8.9
New	2.9	0.3	9.0	4.0	3.8	3.8	1.4	3.6	4.2	4.1	3.8	0.7	0.5	4.5	1.5	1.6	1.6	6.6
Other People	10.0	14.0	10.0	12.2	22.3	18.5	25.6	7.0	6.4	16.3	9.4	12.2	8.7	26.0	18.6	8.8	23.0	15.5
Combination of Art Forms	3.9	0.7	6.6	5.1	0.6	1.1	3.9	0.5	0.0	2.2	2.0	0.7	0.7	4.2	0.4	0.8	1.3	1.1
Interviewer Questions Spoken by Respondent	22.4	33.1	25.3	21.8	29.1	29.5	12.8	20.3	16.2	28.5	15.5	30.8	24.1	24.1	32.1	27.6	23.3	20.7
	77.6	66.9	74.7	78.2	70.9	70.5	87.2	79.7	83.8	71.5	84.5	69.2	75.9	75.9	67.9	72.4	76.7	79.3

Appendix 2: Interview Questions

1. I believe you attend the opera very frequently; how often do you go?
2. What were your earliest experiences of opera?
3. What do you remember feeling when you first went to the opera?
4. Can you reflect on a memorable high-point in your opera-going life?
5. Can you reflect on an occasion when you had a strong emotional response to opera?
6. Have you had equivalent strong emotional reactions to other art forms (for example, spoken theatre, instrumental music, visual art, etc)?
7. Can you reflect on the difference between opera and other art forms (according to the response to Q. 6)?
8. Who do you go to the opera with?

9. Does your companion (if relevant) have a similar strong emotional attachment to the opera?
10. Have you brought people to the opera for whom it was a new experience, and if so, how did you encourage them to prepare for the experience, if at all?
11. What opera or production would you recommend for a new opera-goer, and why?
12. What is your favourite place to sit?
13. What is your favourite venue?
14. Can you pick a desert island singer/conductor/director/opera/composer, and reflect on what makes that person/opera different to others?
15. How do you prepare, if at all, before going to an opera you don't know?
16. Do you listen to recordings of opera?
17. Do you watch audio-visual recordings of opera?
18. Do you attend opera broadcasts in the cinema? Can you reflect on the difference between opera in the cinema and in the theatre?
19. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about your experiences of opera?

Notes:

¹ Van Maanen leads an academic working group of theatre sociologists from smaller European countries called the Project on European Theatre Systems (STEP), which is attempting to take theories of how the arts function for people in society and to test them out by means of a large-scale survey of theatre audiences in seven smaller cities around Europe, coupled with comparative analysis of these seven cities' theatrical infrastructure and supply. (One co-author of this paper (Edelman) is a member of the STEP group, currently carrying out research on theatre in Tyneside.) The initial findings of this project were published in 2015 in a special double issue of the Slovenian journal *Amfiteater* (vol. 3, nos. 1-2).

² The complete transcripts (lightly anonymised) are archived and are available to scholars on request. Please contact the corresponding author.

³ To be clear, what respondents are describing is not a claim to, for instance, an accurate presentation of historical facts, but rather a rhetorical claim to an affective truth of the opera's narrative that accords with the ways we narratively experience our own lives. The nature of such claims has been explored by, amongst others, Paul Ricoeur (1992). Despite its multiplicity of meanings, we use the term 'truth' to reflect the language of both our interviewees and our academic interlocutors.