

From Film to Opera – A Note from the Guest Editors

On November 8, 2023, Mikael Karlsson's opera *Melancholia*, with a libretto by Royce Vavrek, premiered at the Royal Swedish Opera. As portrayed on the operatic stage, the world teeters on the brink of destruction, both at the individual and planetary scale. These days, one may wonder whether the imminent collision of a colossal planet – initially appearing sublime from a distance but growing increasingly horrifying as it approaches – is merely a work of science fiction or serves as an allegory for human desperation and disorientation. Metaphorically, melancholia takes on various meanings. Can they be brought to bear on a discussion about the relationship between opera and film?

Adapted from Lars von Trier's 2011 film of the same name, *Melancholia* joins a constellation of other recent operas drawing inspiration from existing cinematic works. This constellation marks a reversal of the historical trend that saw operas transitioning from stage to screen during the twentieth century. Philip Glass's "Cocteau trilogy" (1993-1996), encompassing three operas based on films by Jean Cocteau, stands as a seminal experiment in this direction, alongside other attempts by René Koering (*La Lune vague*, 1982), Benedict Mason (*Chaplinoperas*, 1988), Giorgio Battistelli (*Teorema*, 1992), and André Previn (*A Streetcar Named Desire*, 1998). Since the turn of the century, several other composers, including Olga Neuwirth, Tan Dun, Hans Gefors, Charles Wuorinen, Thomas Adès, Missy Mazzoli, or Sebastian Fagerlund have embraced this approach, reinventing masterpieces by Bergman, Buñuel, Hitchcock, Mizoguchi, Lynch, among others.

The premiere of *Melancholia* in 2023 is significant for several reasons. It suggests that the trend, which gained momentum in the early twenty-first century, continues after the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The abrupt suspension of live productions in 2020 prompted questions regarding the articulation of opera with screen media, transcending those related to the opera-cinema encounter. In this context, the retrospective or prospective relevance of these cinematic-operatic experiments becomes a matter of debate. How do these new operas reflect or engage in a broader

transformation of the operatic genre? Will the trend persist, or was it merely a fleeting fashion?

Melancholia avoids direct evocations of Wagner's music, which features prominently in the film. Nevertheless, visual reminiscences of the latter are evident on stage through the creative decisions of director Slavá Daubnerová and set designer Boris Kudlicka. Moreover, projections of the melancholic planet adorn the foyer walls before the audience enters the auditorium. The symmetry is unmistakable: just as Trier's film embraces Wagner's opera at the beginning (featuring the prelude of *Tristan und Isolde*), Karlsson's opera commences with allusions to Trier's film. Is the opera already underway, even before the performance starts? This playful manipulation of opera's limits implies that *Melancholia* goes beyond confirming a continuing trend. It also suggests that the challenge of adapting cinematic works to the operatic stage serves as a catalyst for generating innovative solutions, posing fresh questions, and experimenting with novel devices. Thus, the debate on the relationship between the operatic genre and the cinematic form intertwines with a broader questioning of opera's mediality in the digital era.

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Designed to facilitate nuanced and pluralistic discussions, this thematic issue appreciates the complexity of the phenomenon and the uniqueness of each work, while identifying thematic points of tension and intersections with broader societal, cultural, and artistic forces. The first contribution, "When Film Becomes Opera: The Challenges of Adaptation on the Verge of Metamorphosis" by João Pedro Cachopo, offers a comprehensive overview of the phenomenon, highlighting its singularity and exploring its significance beyond the promise to broaden the thematic scope of opera. Some of these operas go beyond merely telling a cinematic story in an operatic way; they purposefully embrace the medium of film, undergoing a metamorphosis in the process. Delphine Vincent contributes "Philip Glass's Cocteau Trilogy, or the Multiple Ways of Adapting Film into Opera", focusing on the seminal and inspiring case of Glass's trilogy, where the importance of *Orphée* (1993), *La belle et la Bête* (1994) and *Les*

Enfants Terribles (1996) is illuminated by a meticulous examination of their differences, grounded in their utilization of visual, sonic, and literary elements. Delving into the enigmas of David Lynch's *Lost Highway*, Nick Stevens examines their ramifications in Olga Neuwirth's opera, examining the intricacies of its libretto and score, where the importance of video is clearly indicated, as well as the manner in which Yuval Sharon's production engages with both the opera and the film. Finally, in exploring the transformation of Kore-eda's film into Michel van der Aa's opera *After Life* (2005–6), Michal Grover-Friedlander delves into themes such as spaces for singing and speech, intermedial slippage, operatic afterlife, singing simultaneously with a virtual self, and opera as estrangement from reality.

The issue concludes with an interview featuring Keeril Makan discussing his opera *Persona* (2015), a collaboration with Jay Scheib based on Ingmar Bergman's film. Jelena Novak guides the conversation toward questions such as who possesses the voice, how the concept of liveness is redefined between film and opera, and why there is a desynchronization between the visual and acoustic stages. Finally, there is an exploration of why singing remains relevant in contemporary times. The concluding section also features preexisting writings by opera creators, such as Olga Neuwirth's "Afterthoughts on *Lost Highway*" and contributions from the authors of the opera *Melancholia* (2023), including Royce Vavrek's analysis of visual cues in Lars von Trier's film and Michael Karlsson's exploration of empathy in deciphering the various female personae in *Melancholia*. Spanning the last two decades, these texts, deserving broader visibility beyond their initial publication in programs and booklets, offer insights into the artistic, medial and thematic implications of new operas based on films. We believe that they will enrich the reader's experience by helping them delve into the incompleteness and vibrancy of a phenomenon that continues to evolve.