

## Hybrid critical editions of opera: Motives, milestones, and quandaries<sup>1</sup>

The genre of opera survived from its origins in the early seventeenth century until post-Napoleonic times—a span of two centuries—without benefit of printed scores. Copies were made by hand, usually in great haste. Changes accrued as copies multiplied. Last-minute emergencies were accommodated by hand amendment. An enormous legacy of drafts and revisions, partial scores, adaptations, and the like survives. The pieces pertinent to one work may be found in scattered locations. The more popular a work was, the more likely it is to be survived by a crooked trail of artifacts. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, certain pieces—overtures, selected arias, ballets—stood a chance of being printed, but operas in their entirety remained a rarity. Printed libretti long served the needs of audiences. Performers had to be content with material that was predominately in manuscript.

Three factors underlie the development of opera publishing in the forms that are now familiar. The first is the notion that opera scores could or should be printed. Late in the first decade of the nineteenth century, when Giovanni Ricordi went to Leipzig to learn how music was being typeset at the firm of Breitkopf und Härtel, he was no doubt convinced that there was a future for printed opera scores. When the earliest catalogue for music printed by Ricordi appeared in 1828,<sup>2</sup> opera did not constitute the bulk of its contents. His sense of timing was curious apt, though. Rossini was gaining international acclaim, Bellini was emergent, and a host of other Italian composers roamed across Europe spreading the fame of the genre. Printed collections of extracts soon began to appear. In parallel the “star” culture of opera was stimulated by periodicals reproducing portraits and reports of recent productions.

The second factor was the rise of text criticism in general and promotion of the belief that text-critical editions could affirm the importance of certain works by making them more widely available. More and more purposes accrued to the critical edition between the early efforts of the Bach Gesellschaft (1850) to expand knowledge of Bach’s music beyond his keyboard works to the myriad readings that have commonly been reported in recent

---

<sup>1</sup> This topic has been under discussion for almost a year not only with editors, publishers, and colleagues in the digital world but also with the staff of the music library at Stanford University. In the first group I am much indebted to Norbert Dubowy for his comprehensive account of the objectives and methodology involved in the OPERA series; to the other five participants in the music-encoding roundtable held at the University of Virginia in May 2014 (Selfridge-Field, forthcoming in the proceedings); to Craig Sapp, who recorded the session; to Mimi Tashiro and Rich Power, who followed up with painstaking investigations of details reported in Table 1; and to Brian Locke, who documented his editorial experiences in the current US opera-editing environment.

<sup>2</sup> A listing can be found at <http://opac.sbn.it/opacsbn/opac/iccu/scheda.jsp?bid=IT\ICCU\MUS\0042067>.

decades. The BG audience extended beyond professional performers to amateurs, pedagogues, and then-living composers (Schumann, Liszt, Spohr). Over time many disputes about mission and intended audience have ensued. The “holy image” of the critical text has also been assailed in recent years. Amidst wide-ranging views, an impressive number of complete editions have been produced, but it has only been in the post-war period, from about 1950, that any significant number of fully printed operas have found their ways into *Gesamtausgaben*.

A third factor hovering inheres (US) copyright-inspired notion of fixity. A sense of finality, contracting any notion of nuanced interpretation or messy, hard-to-read underlying sources, hovers protectively over the fruits of publishing. Opera, which was once the most fluid of musical genres, has become in its enshrinement an immutable physical assembly of pages, acts, parts, and critical notes, signified by a shelf-mark or an electronic record in library catalogues. The evidence of an edition’s existence is otherwise invisible.

The rapid growth of digital print technologies (from the 1970s onward) and digital photography (from the 1990s) have stimulated ambitious models of music publishing in many spheres but nowhere more than in the production of critical editions of operas. Particular growth can be noted in the publication of long, complex scores from the nineteenth century and of lesser known operas of earlier times. Table 1 offers a round-up of recently published opera scores. It distinguishes the medium (or media) employed. It indicates physical (but not virtual) length and other details. The rise of digital publishing has also challenged the singularity and durability of “fixed” printed. Experiments over a decade or more with digital music stands raise the specter of paperless performances, but the fragility and physical limitations of tablet computers will probably make widespread use impractical for many more years.<sup>3</sup>

### I. Motives for digital editing

In the generalized arena of activities and expenses associated with the preparation of a critical edition, business models in Europe and America are widely variant. In Europe a critical edition is typically launched only with the aid of a substantial outlay to underwrite the collection of digital reproductions of sources, to prepare a draft score (“the edition”), and to provide a critical report in which the myriad details of grooming the score to provide a “best reading” are indicated. In various indirect ways, these costs are unwritten by tax-payers. Generous funding has enabled the entire infrastructure of music-publishing (editors, publishers, libraries, printers, performing organizations) to thrive in ways that are barely imaginable elsewhere. Editors, who generally work under the auspices of an

---

<sup>3</sup> Notwithstanding a current flurry of announcements of tablet apps for viewing notation.

institute that handles paperwork and permission, are rarely responsible for the direct expenses associated with collecting or permissions.

In the US individuals usually contract individually with a publisher and in most cases are paid a flat fee for editing the score and providing introductory material and critical notes. That they are usually expected to produce electronic files containing the score (i.e. the new edition) is acknowledged but rarely well rewarded. One editor recently surveyed spent nine years preparing the music files for his new three-volume opera edition. The case was exceptional because of the work's length and complexity, but the difference is only one of extent. The qualitative experience of editing long works with little assistance is relatively similar to case to case. Editors find themselves caught between a desire to bring an inaccessible work to attention and an inability to respond as fully and promptly to production demands as publishers may request. Of course many editors from North American, the Antipodes, and other countries in Europe contribute to editions originating in Europe and, conversely, European editors often contribute to American series without partiality.

Because costs of opera editions have continued to rise (sometimes in proportion to great length but also in response to sharp rises in paper costs), the outlays for producing them came to the notice of funding agencies in Germany in the first years of the current century. Publishers were reporting significant decreases in sales of critical reports, not only in music but across all "humanistic" fields.<sup>4</sup> The German Academy of Science and Literature and the German Research Foundation (DFG), which in concert enable a large number of text-critical editions across the humanities sought to stimulate the development of alternative, digitally-based approaches to the preparation of critical editions both to facilitate desktop editing and to reduce the paper presence of an edited work to the text or score itself.

In response to the call a coordinated effort, a digital initiative was launched by the University of Paderborn and the Musik Hochschule of Detmold. Led initially by Joachim Veit, it was focused on developing ways of enabling editors to view multiple sources simultaneously; to facilitate selection of preferred content; to keep track of all editorial changes electronically; and to find ways to synchronize the critical details with the resulting score, so that users could quickly see variant material and readily grasp information pertinent to edition. Over the intervening decade an entire generation of young, technically savvy digital editors have been trained in the program, which has also offered a summer course for those located elsewhere. Several have risen to leadership positions. Any number of recently announced critical editions now have some involvement with the fruits of this project.

---

<sup>4</sup> The ratio of critical-report purchases to score purchases was reported to be 8:100.

Meanwhile, the work of Perry Roland, a librarian at the University of Virginia, rose to become a primary focus of the Detmold-Paderborn group. Since 1999 he had been developing an open-source, XML-based approach to music markup that would permit the display of short musical examples, such as incipits, in electronic catalogues and would facilitate the rapid creation of independent descriptions and thematic indices of rare materials within library collections. By analogy with the TEI (Text Encoding Initiative), which had been established in 1981, he had called it MEI, the Music Encoding Initiative.<sup>5</sup> The European and North American enterprises were fused during two three-year projects funded jointly by the DFG and the NEH (National Endowment for the Humanities). MEI is now an independent collaboration with an elected board of directors currently headed by Johannes Kepper. The virtual “workbench” for creating critical editions that has been developed by the Detmold-Paderborn collaboration is known as the Edirom.<sup>6</sup> The “read-only” status reflects restrictions imposed by libraries providing source material.

## II. Milestones: *Prima la musica, e poi il furore*<sup>7</sup>

Late in 2013 Bärenreiter Verlag released a new edition by Thomas Betzwieser of a *divertimento teatrale* in one act, Antonio Salieri’s *Prima la musica, e poi la parola* (Burgtheater, 1786). The title was a tongue-in-cheek reference a long-running dispute about whether text or music played the more dominant role in an opera. The object itself was a triple harbinger—of a new conception of critical editions, of an expanded definition of theater music, and of a digital apparatus to contain source and supplementary materials. The combination of a printed score and the new digital adjunct constituted a “hybrid critical edition”. *Prima la musica* is riddled with allusions to other recent operas.<sup>8</sup> It quotes portions of Giuseppe Sarti’s *Giulio Sabino* (1785) and has debts to Angelo Tarchi. Intertextual links to its milieu made it especially well suited to presentation in the new digital hybrid format.

One could argue that the series it introduces maximizes the ability to be inclusive in the selection of works included. *OPERA: Spectrum of European Music Theaters in Single Editions* (*Spektrum des europäischen Musiktheaters in Einzelditionen*) seeks to produce a rounder picture of the diversity of genres that spread across the Continent’s stages between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries. Generalizations that typify the whole set are difficult to come by.<sup>9</sup> The role of *Prima la musica* in the series is to give evidence of musical values in

---

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.music-encoding.org>.

<sup>6</sup> Software at <http://www.edirom.de/>. Further information in English at [http://www.edirom.de/fileadmin/Literatur/TEI\\_MM\\_08\\_Plakat.pdf](http://www.edirom.de/fileadmin/Literatur/TEI_MM_08_Plakat.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> First the music, then the furor, a parody of the operetta’s title.

<sup>8</sup> Betzwieser explains the intricacies of the works and the utility of the methodology in *Philomusica online* 9/2, Sez., 1, 245-259 (<http://riviste.paviauniversitypress.it/index.php/phi/article/download/919/961>).

<sup>9</sup> The time-span ranges from 1689 (Agostino Steffani’s *Henrico Leone*) to 1966 (Bernd Alois Zimmermann’s *Musique pour les soupers du Roi Ubu*. Featured composers include Arne, Spohr, Smetana, Glinka, Zeller, Spontini, Humperdinck, and Satie. *Prima la musica* represents parody operas, Paer’s *Leonora* (1804) and the

Vienna in the late years of Emperor Joseph II, when Vienna was a magnet for aspiring composers and musicians of diverse backgrounds and values. Salieri, who was notably versatile, found a worthy librettist in Giambattista Casti.<sup>10</sup>

The digital critical apparatus made its debut on a storage medium that contains all the paraphernalia of the work's history—musical sources, libretti, and textual information. Its substance won rave reviews in Europe, where the German Music Publishers' Association gave it the 2014 Best Music Edition award. The report's confinement to a credit card-sized device fitted with a USB connector was not well received by US libraries, however. We explore the reasons below.

### III. Quandries

The comments made on the Music Library Association List (MLA-L) in the winter of 2014 mainly concerned the inconvenience of the distribution medium and the cost of the edition. The contents of the USB cannot be mounted on a network. Its use is intended for someone with dual access to the printed score. Opera scores are generally non-circulating, but circumstances may not allow dual access without special arrangements. The requirements are unfamiliar from North American practice because it is relatively absent from the opera edition marketplace.<sup>11</sup> The extensive reaction and relative paucity of background information about the purposes of the format prompted the convening of a roundtable discussion at the music-encoding conference held at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, in May 2014.

To some librarians “digital” seems to be taken to mean “available without cost in a web browser”. This is not the case with *Prima la musica*, nor is it the currently intended approach for other volumes of the series. Hybrid critical editions will be with us for the foreseeable future, since Bärenreiter has announced the inclusion of a digital critical report in all the forthcoming volumes of the OPERA. Schott is committed to MEI and, in principle, to the delivery of critical reports on some kind of ROM for the *Gesamtausgabe* of C. M. von Weber's works. Other critical editions of music in preparation in Europe have involvements with the same technology. The *Beethoven Wertstaat* project involving the Beethoven-Haus and the Detmold-Paderborn musicology program, now funded until 2030, employs MEI, particularly to synchronize sketches, variants, and full-fledged scores. RISM is experimenting with the MEI-linked *Verovio* software for screen rendering. Various

---

Steffani work complex issues of performance practice and interpretation. Each sub-series is focused on a particular aspect of opera across the breadth and depth of the genre's history. The full contents of the series (21 volumes in all) are itemized at (<https://www.baerenreiter.com/en/program/complete-editions/opera/list-of-volumes/>).

<sup>10</sup> Their collaboration in 1785, on *La grotta di Trofonio* (*The Cave of Trofonius*), produced the first *opera buffa* to be printed in full score by Artaria, which had begun to publish music seven years earlier.

<sup>11</sup> Only A-R Editions, Inc., of Middleton, WI, offers new critical editions of opera. Although the number of titles on current offer is modest, it is also increasing.

degrees of involvement with MEI can also be found in [Bach Digital](#), [Freischütz Digital](#), and [Le Livres de Chansons Nouvelles de Nicolas Du Chemin](#).

Both Norbert Dubowy, who worked for more than three years on the OPERA series, and Douglas Woodfull-Johnson, a music editor at Bärenreiter, underscored in the Virginia roundtable complicating issues that force the hand of publishers in the selection of delivery media for electronic material. Among these some libraries impede the work of would-be editors by making access to materials all but impossible. Reproduction may be prohibited. Perhaps libraries that offer open access to digitized materials from their own collections could promote the standardization of terms of usage for reproduction of images of underlying sources. Such an effort would undoubtedly encounter myriad political obstacles: rules governing access to sources may be under the jurisdiction of a country, a state, a religious institution, a music conservatory, a town, or a private individual. Librarians cannot recreate the world that they inhabit, but they can make colleagues aware that restricting access can contribute to the high cost of some editions. For now, the “air pocket” between a library network and content committed to a single-use physical storage device is the only collateral that publishers can provide to anxious owners of rare materials.

In the MLA-L discussion of *Prima la musica*, the fact that it was a single-act operetta contributed to the impression that the edition was overpriced. Complaints flew onto the internet well in advance of any exploration of digital critical apparatus. Table 1 suggests that it is priced entirely on the basis of the score and entirely at the going rate for paper; the critical report simply rides along. In its simplistic computation of price per page, Table 1 shows that price is primarily dependent on bulk and binding.<sup>12</sup> It also documents substantial increases over the past decade. These partly reflect escalating costs of paper. The table includes randomly selected works available in spiral bindings and on a print-on-demand basis, hard-bound scores, and soft-bound ones. Hard bindings greatly increase prices. What the table cannot make clear is that apart from costs reflected in the price, other costs also accrue to the overall production of such scores. Publication subsidies are indicated to the extent they could be determined. Because foreign exchange rates were fluctuating wildly while this article was in preparation, costs per page are computed only on the basis of prices in US dollars. The rate at which prices are adjusted to reflect currency changes is much slower is infrequent. The discontinuation of sea mail in c. 2010 has also contributed to uncertainty about the final price of Transatlantic shipments.

---

<sup>12</sup> A more just computation would give greater weight to score pages over separately bound critical reports, which are less expensive to produce. However, this change would not alter the overall picture significantly.

At the Charlottesville roundtable and in subsequent water-cooler conversations, other recently published operas have sometimes been held up as more egregious examples of pricing. The first is recent Ricordi (Munich) editions of Meyerbeer operas, among which I selected *Robert le diable* (*Robert der Teufel*) of 1831. It was published (2010) with a four-volume score (with prefaces in German, English, and French), a two-volume piano-vocal score, and a separate critical report. A-R Editions Inc. recent release of David Locke's edition of Zich's *Vina* has also been cited as highly priced, but it is also bulky (three 11"x17" volumes in a laminated binding<sup>13</sup>). The number of orchestral parts is unusually high, unless one considers the heavy use of winds, brass, and percussion in other works of the era.<sup>14</sup> A-R's enterprising program to make neglected works available is well known.<sup>15</sup> *Vina* was the subject of much controversy in its own time but was many times revived. Locke's work was, he tells me, a labor of love, nine-years in the making. Owing to the fact that access to its principal source is severely restricted, the preparation of the edition involved numerous consultations with Czech colleagues. The work is unlikely to see another edition in this century, if ever.

Numerous other models of cost mitigation have been floated. Shared purchases through buying consortia and reciprocal exchanges between cooperating libraries were probed in the roundtable. Library accommodations of rising prices leave aside the broader question of how high prices can go before libraries will stop buying opera scores. When confronted with prices that reach into the thousands, one must ask how many sonatas, concertos, symphonies, and vocal pieces must be sacrificed in order to purchase one opera edition. In many cases the long list of less expensive works will prevail over the single opera edition. This question poses a reciprocal one for publishers: How low can sales go before opera lists are scrapped altogether? Citations for holding libraries can be numbered on the fingers of one hand for some of the more expensive titles in Table 1, but all the editions cited are recent and figures undoubtedly lag reality.

#### IV. Reflections

Are we headed towards an updated model of early opera, whereby editions will be handed around in computer files among performing groups? Like singers in the Baroque era, will *prime donne* carry their own arias from venue to venue and work to work? Many US performing groups have been making their own editions for as many as two decades. Part-production is not especially difficult and, as in the Baroque, adjustments can be made up to the last minute. These more informal editions are not listed in library catalogues, but

---

<sup>13</sup> Given the large format, its content is roughly equivalent 1,800 pages in a more conventional size.

<sup>14</sup> *Vina* (*Guilt*) is scored for five singers, flutes, clarinets, bassoons in numerous sizes and pitches; English horn; ordinary horns, trumpets, trombones, tuba, and timpani; harp; and a full complement of strings.

<sup>15</sup> A-R has made its own explorations of digital distribution in its online subscription service for teachers and students. Here access is offered to viewable scores from items in the A-R catalogue for specified academic periods.

a virtual lending or leasing library of such material could attract many users unable to afford the best, most durable products on the market. Sources locked down by sundry restrictions will not form part of any critical report, but many musician-editors are more conversant with online source material than the average musicologist-editor.

The DFG's preliminary recommendations on the future of critical editions was accurate. There *is* a crisis in the pricing of critical editions generally and it affects opera disproportionately.<sup>16</sup> Digital tools are on the whole enabling and over time they should reduce some of the costs of edition preparation. The inclusion of a digital critical apparatus, when funded on the German model, actually seems to reduce the total cost of an edition. On the US model, costs per page are lower, but permanent bindings increase costs and cause delays in access. Editors are less well supported.<sup>17</sup> The indirect costs of offering access to any physical medium separate from the product itself cannot be calculated. The implementation of license agreements for web-based access is a well understood process with much infrastructure in place. In the context of the OPERA series and other editions on the same model, it has a great deal to recommend it.

If we move from the critical-edition environment to that of professional opera houses, which constitute a prominent component of the market for critical editions, we see that the cost of editions—old or new, traditional or hybrid—is trivial by comparison to production expenses. As in the Baroque, the quest for new audiences seems to be invested heavily in staging, to the detriment of some opera companies' balance sheets. At New York's venerable Metropolitan Opera, one reluctant benefactor told James P. Stewart, writing in a recent *New Yorker*, that the Met's current financial situation could be described (in paraphrase) as a dollar of debt for every dollar earned from ticket sales. It can be explained several other ways as well, but in none of them does the future of opera look secure. An irony inheres in the lingering question of sustainability of the genre, for it echoes one often asked by librarians about digital materials as well.

## References

Betzwieser, Thomas. "Editing musical quotations: The paradigm of Antonio Salieri's *Prima la musica e poi le parole* (1786)", *Philomusica online* 9/2, Sez., 1, 245-259 (<http://riviste.paviauniversitypress.it/index.php/phi/article/download/919/961>).

Di Bacco, Giuliano, ed. *Proceedings of the Music Encoding Conference held at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville* (May 2014), forthcoming.

---

<sup>16</sup> The fact that on Table 1 the most costly recent volume, based on page count, contains masses by Josquin is anomalous. Defects in the unsophisticated metric cause several other anomalies.

<sup>17</sup> It would be very difficult to compute an average rate of editorial productivity per hour. While digital-score typesetters often estimate one score-page per hour, the editing process can contribute days to a single bar, especially when a source is unreadable or cannot be unambiguously interpreted.



Pugin, Laurent. "Going digital: Finding the right path for critical music editions," *À Fresco: Mélanges offerts au professeur Étienne Darbellay*, ed. Brenno Boccadoro and Georges Starobinski (Bern, CH: Peter Lang, 2013), pp. 247-68.

Selfridge-Field, Eleanor. "From Scholar to User: Hybrid Editions in the Context of Library Resource" in *Proceedings of the Music Encoding Conference*, ed. Giuliano di Bacco, forthcoming.

Stewart, James B. "A Fight at the Opera," *The New Yorker* (March 23, 2015), pp. 56-67.