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OPERA AND VIDEO

TECHNOLOGY AND SPECTATORSHIP

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Since the nineties, audiovisual technology has been a threat to the mystique surrounding live opera as an aesthetic experience that is unique to the genre. Many spectators have been watching opera on screen for years and, in most cases, this experience is not exclusive but may actually encourage attendance at live opera. In late 2011, with the economic crisis at its most destructive peak, very few theatres have managed to keep their budgets intact. In Spain, the country whence I write, there has been a considerable decline in public funding for most of the country's theatres, as in many other places. However, the fragile economic context does not seem to have paralyzed certain technological practices that have become widespread over the last decade in opera theatres worldwide. Audiovisual productions of main titles have not decreased significantly. It seems that the crisis is not seriously affecting technology projects of major opera theatres. What reason lies behind this?

I think we may well be looking at a second trajectory in the impact of digital technology on opera. The experiences that have transformed opera fans into digital consumers bring us closer to the paradigm of cultural convergence. A spectator used to watching opera on TV is now fast approaching the stage of watching it on a computer, perhaps on a big screen at home, or on a tablet PC equipped with excellent headphones. Convergence has knocked on opera's door, and the answer can be experienced in what is on offer at several theatres. In 2011, the *Teatro Real* in Madrid launched a digital box, which allows us to watch live or to record a significant number of their productions. Over the last two years, the MET has increased several services based on the use of the Internet as a distribution platform. The best-known is MET HD, which distributes live productions in high digital quality to many cinemas around the world. The Met Player service is also a remarkable initiative, by which means the institution makes available to Internet users around the world (with very few geographical restrictions) its private catalogue of recorded productions, many with a choice of subtitles and at truly affordable prices.

With the development of convergence, live experience at opera theatre increases possible alternatives. Convergence is not about the adoption of one type of device but rather the inclusion of many types of experiences within a device, which today can be a smart TV, game console, computer, smart phone or tablet. That convergence should give rise to the possibility of a new experience of digital content is one of the chief attractions of technological devel-

opment. Watching opera on screen no longer means being in the living-room; it can take place on a train, in a park, at an airport, or while in a hospital waiting room. These are all opportunities resulting from technological developments, and it seems that the initial barrier that identified a type of art with a kind of experience in very specific conditions has definitely been broken. Theatres themselves not only broadcast live opera in very suitable spaces, such as cinemas, but also in squares and parks, and even after hours. In many cases, the latter type of experiences consists of promotional acts by theatres trying to expand their influence and to bring new spectators to the house. There is no doubt that the breakdown of barriers implied by the second wave of technology convergence causes not only the variety of watching experiences to proliferate but also the scope of potential recipients. Not only do those who attend in parks and squares do so for free, but those who now enjoy opera streamed via Internet do so at a reasonable price. Unlike other major cultural areas, where convergence is blocked by certain prejudices, above all in Europe, opera seems to be making good use of this opportunity in positive ways.

But the relationship between opera and communication technologies is much older than the recent developments we have raised. Some important contributions in this volume are concerned with phenomena that require a historical perspective on the relationship between spectators and technologies. It all reflects the efforts of musicology to understand a hybrid area whose main attraction is that it offers numerous aspects that have yet to be explored as objects of study. This volume aims to address this challenge by offering a balance between cultural and aesthetic issues that have emerged in the history of the relationship between opera and audiovisual technology from its origins to today.