

Reshaping Opera

Reshaping Opera:

A Critical Reflection on Arts Management

By

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By Paola Trevisan

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	vii
Introduction	1
Chapter One.....	5
Overture	
Chapter Two	15
An Overview of Opera Production	
Chapter Three	31
The Italian Opera Sector: A Fall from Grace	
Chapter Four	45
La Fenice Opera House	
Chapter Five	55
New Management Paradigms at the Opera House	
Chapter Six	71
Behind the Scenes of New Arts Management	
Chapter Seven.....	85
“Oh no! <i>La Traviata</i> , Again!”: The Frustration of the Creative Masses	
Chapter Eight.....	101
Struggling with Meanings: Innovation in the Performing Arts	
Chapter Nine.....	117
Conclusions	
Chapter Ten	129
Methodological Considerations	

Afterword	139
by Cristiano Chiarot, General Manager of La Fenice	
Appendix 1	147
Production Rosters from Season 2004-05 to Season 2014-15	
Bibliography	155

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INTRODUCTION

Conventional wisdom holds that the performing arts, due to the economic nature of the sector, are condemned to a state of permanent financial crisis that only external support (mainly public) can help overcome. However, cuts in public funding and increasingly frequent news about the fiscal troubles at several opera houses (in Italy and worldwide) have also led to doubts about the administrative abilities of top managers and the soundness of the strategies implemented at these organizations.

Using an interpretive approach which applies grounded theory to material collected through intensive case-study fieldwork at Venice's main opera theatre (Teatro La Fenice), this monograph considers specific managerial issues involving the subsidized arts sector in order to arrive at a more thorough understanding of the managerialization process as it applies to arts organizations.

What emerges from a review of the literature on arts management is that the original idea of translating rational and normative provisions from the business to the arts sector is evolving into a more critical reflection on the peculiarities of arts organizations. In particular, the dualism that seems to characterize arts organizations relies on the coexistence of two different ideological orientations. On the one hand, there is the traditional "art for art's sake" mindset, which emphasizes artistic excellence and the autonomy and freedom of the arts with respect to market concerns; and on the other hand, a managerial perspective which aims to increase productivity and efficiency and balance budgets through the adoption of market-oriented strategies. A third orientation may be added which holds that the public nature of the subsidized arts and their concomitant social mission require them to pursue the common good through educational initiatives, cultural heritage preservation, community participation, and inclusive outreach strategies geared towards all social classes.

After a brief overview on opera production generally and on the particularities of the Italian system, this monograph will narrate the story of La Fenice and the implementation of its new business strategy based on a semi-repertory production system. On the whole, the case of La Fenice appears to be an arts management success story. The administration's official description of the adoption of the new strategy and its positive

results shows how artistic and financial objectives may coalesce into a “*virtuous circle*” whereby increased revivals of repertory operas yield more resources which are then invested into other, more original operas. Data show that, while still operating within the confines of publicly subsidized cultural production, a “course correction” through institutional managerialization led to substantial improvements in efficiency and productivity, a significant increase in earned revenue relative to public grants, and a simultaneous increase in the number and variety of operatic performances available for its audience.

La Fenice’s singular strategy and success rate make it a paradigmatic example which enables a better understanding of what happens when a business management culture is introduced into cultural organizations.

Going “behind the scenes” to study this case has revealed that although both managerial and social orientations towards the arts may conflict *ideologically* with an opera house’s traditional artistic and aesthetic mission, they nonetheless co-exist *in practice* in its organizational life.

Managerial jargon, commonly employed at La Fenice at official events and in corporate documents since the adoption of the new strategy, tends to neglect the existence of any tension between arts and management. Instead, it highlights the virtuous circle that an economically responsible management can foster in any arts organization, and emphasizes the rationality and objectivity of managerial thinking. However, as much as managers may avoid acknowledging such tensions, they cannot ignore them entirely. This study demonstrates that managers, in their search for legitimation, implicitly take critiques of both internal and external “discordant voices” into account. These critical voices, contrary to the official version, tend to emphasize the “*vicious circle*” triggered by new management paradigms, and give voice to the latent “art for art’s sake” philosophy.

The case study of La Fenice proceeds by discussing how tensions in the theatre between art and commerce are interiorized by creative professionals, taking the form of professional *frustration*. Creative arts professionals are widely believed to value autonomy, freedom, beauty, and to share an ambition for self-fulfillment. This has been the underlying assumption of many mainstream studies on the so-called “creative class.” However, in structured arts organizations—where creative professionals are organized into artistic *masses*, i.e. the orchestra and the chorus—the autonomy of the artists and their creative impulse are limited by the programming choices as defined by the board. When the production roster of a theatrical season becomes increasingly determined by economic principles, as in La Fenice’s case, the risk is an increasing disregard for the

artistic interests and ambitions of creative arts professionals, making subjugation to managers' decisions more oppressive. The frustration of the *creative masses* can have consequences for the whole organization and must not be ignored but acknowledged and, if possible, kept to a minimum.

Another significant aspect of the intersection of management and art at La Fenice lies in the clash between the caution of the former and the inherently innovative character of the latter, which results in a paradoxical form of *conservative innovation*. This study suggests that the adoption of core repertoires is a managerial strategy and that the increased conformity of an opera house's repertoire offerings might be better understood as a result of the institutionalization of management in the arts field rather than a lack of artistic innovation. Indeed, the concept of artistic innovation is itself evolving and has gradually taken on the meaning of interpretive innovation, i.e. a form of innovation that relies on the re-interpretation of traditional works. Interpretive innovations can occur even within a conservative repertoire, thus maintaining the innovative character of performing arts organizations. The paradox of conservative innovation is therefore the combined result of managerial innovations favoring conservative repertoire choices and artistic innovations focusing on the re-interpretation of traditional works.

This book does not set out to answer whether the example of La Fenice's recent repertoire strategy is or is not a successful case of arts management. The key question is: Why, in this context and at this juncture, is it considered to be such? When a business management rationale assumes prominence in the realm of the arts, it modifies those shared beliefs and norms that, in a given social order, define what is considered good and what is not. However, the success of a case such as La Fenice in terms of bottom-line fiscal indicators does not imply immunity to critiques. Critiques not only challenge the dominant meaning of success: they also contribute to the *reshaping* of a new social order. Only by looking at the whole picture, i.e. both dominant and critical voices, can we come to a greater understanding of current ideological stances in the arts world and contextualize them within existing discourses on art, management studies, and arts management.

CHAPTER ONE

OVERTURE

It was May 2014. The 2013 financial statement had just been approved, and the Venice opera house was celebrating its third consecutive year of breaking even, despite a continuous reduction in public subsidies. Meanwhile, the board was getting ready to unveil its plans for the 2014-15 season, which was to include a total of 124 opera performances, double the number from 2010.

I had just begun my fieldwork at La Fenice, and one of the first tasks I was assigned was to weed the files of the scene design department, in order to free up some space in the cabinets. Two cabinets were filled with folders, each of which was labeled with the name of a production and the year in which it was performed. I was asked to throw away unimportant documents and to merge folders referring to the same production performed in different years. I started from the oldest folders, dated 2002, and proceeded chronologically. At first, there were very few documents to throw away and no folders to merge. But as I came to the more recent folders, something changed. I noticed that certain titles were increasingly recurrent. I started merging more and more folders, and eventually I was able to empty the last two shelves. While I watched the huge *La traviata* folder grow bigger and bigger (and in which I ultimately had to stick several labels to be able to document all the years in which the production was revived), I naively asked my colleague: “Why did you start repeating the same productions so often?” She replied with her own question: “Don’t you have a Master’s degree in management?” “Yes, I do,” I said. “Then you ought to be about to figure that out for yourself!” she declared.

It was May 2014, and I was just getting acquainted with the opera house’s recent shift in repertory strategy.

What is interesting about this story? It may help to contextualize it within the Italian national system, by recounting another, and far grimmer, story.

In October 2014, the general manager of the Rome opera house announced the termination of 200 members of its permanent orchestra and chorus, whose positions would be outsourced (thereby saving €3.4 million,

according to the G.M). This created a big stir in the national and international press. The board justified its decision by stating that it was the only way the opera house could survive. Only after grueling negotiations with the unions were the layoffs avoided. Still, the workers had to accept pay cuts.

Like Rome's opera house, many Italian opera houses are today facing similar dilemmas. Eight out of the fourteen opera house foundations recognized and subsidized by the national government as *enti lirici* have adopted special recovery plans in order to apply for additional funds from the state and improve their precarious financial situation. All these special plans include strategies to reduce labour costs.

But Italian opera houses are not the only ones trudging through what Aïda might call a "*valle di pianti*." In February 2015, the Arts Council of England put the English National Opera on notice that it would face funding cuts if it did not improve its business model. Overseas, the renowned Metropolitan Opera of New York, one of the world's largest opera houses in terms of both audience size and production resources, was also facing the risk of bankruptcy and, in seeking to cut labour costs, had to wrangle with the unions representing its in-house talent in a series of tough contract negotiations. (The Met had experienced similar problems in the 1970s).

Indeed, the precariousness of the performing arts has a long history. Policymakers have been investigating the causes and seeking solutions for some time.

In Italy, the process of reforming the operatic system began in the mid-1990s and has comprised a number of legislative interventions meant to address what for too long has been defined as a state of emergency. (The possibility for opera houses in dire straits to receive special funds on the basis of a recovery plan is only the latest of these interventions). Since the roots of the problems were to be found in inefficient management, both the governance and the funding systems of such organizations have been overhauled, with the aim of mandating a business-like managerial approach more typical of the private sector. However, political policies have largely failed to provide adequate solutions to what seems to be a systemic and perhaps not fully understood problem.

If, as is usually claimed, poor management is the real cause of the financial problems of opera houses around the world, then good management is solution. But what do we mean by good management?

A thorough understanding of what the managerialization process entails for cultural organizations seems to be in short supply. There may

be numerous formulas and normative provisions, but nothing that really encapsulates the peculiarities of an arts organization.

The story I narrated at the beginning of this chapter suggests that La Fenice might represent an example of how to cure a sick system through good management, an example of “having it all,” in which both financial and artistic goals are met. By narrating and analyzing the specifics of the Venetian case, this study aims to improve our understanding of the managerialization of cultural organizations: its rationales, tensions, and implications.

The fieldwork for this study was conducted over a period of six months at La Fenice opera house, during which I worked shoulder-to-shoulder with its employees in the production and technical department. As a neophyte in the opera sector, the lines of research came into focus little by little through a sense-making process in which I matched my observations with existing theories and studies on cultural economics, the arts, and public management, while always bearing in mind the peculiarities of the case study rather than obscuring them for the sake of generalization. The result was a research journey to a destination that determined before the fact, a journey in which my readings were suggested by the field itself rather than defined *a priori*, as the careful reader will appreciate from the citations and field narratives in each chapter. In line with my ontological and epistemological standpoint, this study aims at providing a better understanding of the phenomenon rather than a model for generalization and prediction. (See the chapter on methodological considerations for further details).

Structure of the Book

In this chapter I will give an overview of the controversy surrounding arts management, retracing its origins and major influences, and outlining some critical reflections that will be explored further as the actual analysis of the case study unfolds.

In what follows I will trace some general features of opera production around the world (chapter 2) and the particular case of the Italian opera system (chapter 3). Experts in this arena of business management can easily skip these two chapters and proceed directly to the case under investigation.

The description (chapter 4) and the analysis (chapter 5) of the case study outline the basic features of La Fenice’s “New Arts Management” regime, drawing on observations from the field, interviews, and official house documents. What results is a sort of “official version” which

emphasizes the positive results of the managerial “course correction” strategy both in terms of financial performance and production capacity.

Chapter 6 takes us behind the scenes of La Fenice’s new administration, allowing us to question the rationality, neutrality, and universality of the managerialization of arts organizations.

Chapter 7 will delve deeper into the implications that arts management decisions have at the individual level, by contrasting the figure of the “creative masses” (as derived from the analysis of the case) with the concept of the “creative class,” and by exploring the concept of frustration.

Chapter 8 contrasts the meaning of innovation in the artistic field with the use of the same word in management studies. It highlights, thanks to field observations, how management tends to take a conservative approach to the arts sector, focusing more on efficiency and optimization of existing resources rather than fostering creativity and innovation.

In light of prior analysis, chapter 9 reconsiders the field of arts management from a critical perspective. It starts from the overview provided in this introductory chapter and enriches it with critical reflections coming from critical management studies, sociology, and philosophy.

I provide my methodological considerations only at the end of the book (chapter 10) because they contain “spoilers” of the narrative in this book.

Arts Management, Part I: Origins and Developments

The Antecedents: Cultural Economics

In 1965, Baumol and Bowen published a paper in *The American Economic Review* entitled “On the Performing Arts: The Anatomy of Their Economic Problems” in which they state that the financial problems of performing arts organizations are due more to their basic economic characteristics than to poor management and institutional structure (Baumol and Bowen, 1965). The dilemma, known as “Baumol’s cost disease,” refers to the limited room for technological improvement which characterizes the performing arts sector and stifles productivity gains. Stable productivity, added to continuous increases in wage levels in the economy as a whole (including its cultural sectors), results in an inexorable rise in labour cost per unit of output. Consequently, unless tickets prices rise or production quality lowers, government and private funds have to increase indefinitely in order to fill an ever-widening financial gap (Baumol and Bowen, 1965; Baumol, 1967).

Baumol's cost disease laid the foundations of cultural economics as an economic sub-discipline aimed at understanding cultural phenomena from an economic standpoint. While the cost-disease theory has had its follow-ups (e.g. Heilbrun, 2011) and some (partial) empirical confirmations (e.g. Felton, 1994; Last and Wetzel, 2011), investigations of traditional economic issues in the context of the cultural sector have broadened the field of cultural economics. Interest in this sector is justified by the acknowledgment of its increasing economic relevance on national economies, as affirmed in practically every introduction of every book-length study by every cultural economist. The field was further enriched with contributions from Bruno Frey, Alan Peacock, David Throsby, and Ruth Towse, just to name a few. Some of the topics most frequently studied by cultural economists are: art consumers' behaviours and tastes; price and income elasticity of demand; the labour market for artists; public subsidies for the arts; pricing strategies; and the structure and governance of arts organizations. (For a review, see Throsby, 1994; Blaug, 2001). Regarding the performing arts specifically, there is a considerable branch of studies, alongside Baumol's still-current cost disease theory and its corollaries, which focuses on the structures and governance of arts organizations as they intersect with theories on non-profit and public sectors, welfare economics, and the notion of market failure and the public good (for which Hansmann's 1981 article entitled "Nonprofit Enterprise in the Performing Arts" is a seminal text).

Arts Management and the Managerialization of the Arts

In the meanwhile, debates have evolved around the need for managerialization of cultural organizations. The sociologist Paul DiMaggio, in his 1981 study on arts managers, highlighted how administrative roles were becoming more formalized in the cultural sector and how new arts managers were more likely to have administrative experience and managerial degrees than their senior peers (DiMaggio, 1987). His findings highlighted the beginning of a managerialization process prompted by arts organizations' need for stronger management.

Indeed, in the two decades preceding DiMaggio's study, arts management had taken its first steps in the U.S. as a sub-discipline of management studies. In 1969, the first arts management journals were established (*Performing Art Reviews* and *The Journal of Arts, Management, Law and Society*) and arts management training programs had begun to flourish (Evard and Colbert, 2000; Chong, 2000). As the

number of specialized journals grew, so did the number of publications on arts management (Rentschler and Shilbury, 2008).

Among these publications, Raymond and Greyser's paper entitled "The Business of Managing the Arts," published in 1978 by *Harvard Business Review*, represents an evocative example of the approach adopted by many arts management scholars. Here is the abstract:

"It is folly to rely on the taste of the public for a particular 'product' of an arts organization, be it a theater, museum, dance group, or whatever. In view of the competition for the public's attention and entertainment dollars these days, any arts institution needs to market itself. It is also folly to fly financially by the seat of the pants; a realistic budget, strictly adhered to, is a necessity. A clearly stated and clearly understood purpose and a formalized structure (not dependent on the artistic driving force) are other prerequisites to the vitality of the arts institution that permits it to continue offering its product to the community." (Raymond and Greyser, 1978: 123)

Raymond and Greyser stress how arts organizations, like any other business, need a business model, careful planning, sensible financial administration, marketing mechanisms to build audiences, and so forth.

The idea is that, independently of the reliability of Baumol's disease theory and without necessarily advocating for more public funding, there must exist ways of overcoming the financial problems of arts organizations by economizing, eliminating inefficiencies and waste, finding alternative financing for rising costs, and increasing scale and technical efficiency. These solutions must be found in better management, where "better" is used to mean "business-like."

For this reason, arts managers' knowledge and skill sets should include planning, organizing, leadership, supervision, financial management, labour relations, marketing, and fundraising (Martin and Rich, 1998; Sikes, 2000; Rhine, 2006). Artistic sensitivity and aesthetic expertise, while important, are qualities that are no longer considered sufficient for proper management of an arts organization.

With the aim of increasing managerial effectiveness in arts organizations, the mainstream approach to arts management is to take a topic in management studies (marketing, leadership, planning, human resource management, accounting) and adapt it to an artistic context.

The most mainstream writings in line with this view are probably the textbooks adopted as part of arts management course curricula. For example, in Byrnes's *Management and the Arts* (2012), once a preface on characteristics specific to the arts sector is out of the way, the bulk of the

book is taken up with providing general management theories in parallel with descriptions of arts organization practices and managerial cases.

Similar approaches characterize other managerialization processes, such as those involving the public sector. In fact, parallels can be drawn between arts management and the public sector reforms inspired by the literature on New Public Management (NPM). Both arts management studies and NPM recommend that organizations increase efficiency, productivity, and flexibility by adopting business-like managerial tools and strategies (Lindqvist, 2012). Moreover, the two fields often intertwine since many arts organizations are publicly owned or deeply dependent on public sector decisions in terms of funding and their own governance.

The Duality of Arts Organizations

Mainstream arts management literature is based on the assumption of a parallelism between arts organizations and traditional businesses and, thus, a positive relationship between business-like management and (artistic) results. In this sense, arts management can simply be seen as general management applied to a specific field of practice.

However, many arts management studies have increasingly focused on the dichotomy between artistic and business management cosmologies coexisting in arts organization, and have highlighted the potential conflicts between the two.

The above-cited paper by Raymond and Greyser (1978), one of the founding documents of arts management studies, repeatedly points to the distinctiveness of each of the two spheres and suggests making the managerial sphere more professional through “the advent of more sophisticated managers” able to provide arts enterprises with “the right combination of artistic sensitivity and administrative background.” For instance, they suggest limiting the financial power of the artistic director by appointing an administrative director at his/her side.

Later, the dualism inherent in arts organizations was highlighted by several studies in arts and cultural management, as can be seen in two special issues published in two separate journals.

The first special issue appeared in *Organization Science* in 2000 and was entitled “Cultural Industries: Learning from Evolving Organizational Practices.” It focuses on cultural industries’ intrinsic polarities and calls for a “balancing act” between the “opposing imperatives” that characterize them (Lampel et al., 2000; 263). These polarities arise from the fact that cultural products serve an aesthetic or expressive, rather than a utilitarian,

purpose (Hirsh, 1972). The introduction to the special issue outlines five polarities that shape organizational practices in cultural industries:

“First, managers must reconcile expression of artistic values with the economics of mass entertainment. Second, they must seek novelty that differentiates their products without making them fundamentally different in nature from others in the same category. Third, they must analyse and address existing demand while at the same time using their imagination to extend and transform the market. Fourth, they must balance the advantages of vertically integrating diverse activities under one roof against the need to maintain creative vitality through flexible specialization. And finally, they must build creative system to support and market cultural products but not allow the system to suppress individual inspiration, which is ultimately at the root of creating value in cultural industries.” (Lampel et al., 2000; 263)

The second special issue, entitled “Paradoxes of Creativity: Managerial and Organizational Challenges in the Cultural Economy,” was published in 2007 by the *Journal of Organizational Behavior*. Here, the need for a balancing act is re-stated in order to solve the paradoxical challenges and dilemmas faced by managers and other involved in cultural industries (DeFilippi et al., 2007). Adopting the term creativity, the special issue covers various activities (not only the artistic core sector, but also handicraft and design industries).

Conflicts between artistic/cultural objectives and financial/commercial imperatives have been investigated both at the organizational (arts organizations) and at the individual (artists) level. Glynn (2000) investigates the tensions of a multifaceted organizational identity by examining the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. Cray, Inglis, and Freeman (2007) focus their analysis on the application of a business-like management style within structures with dual institutional imperatives. Ekman (2013) investigates the ambiguities between creative professionals’ conflicting contractual and self-fulfillment practices, while Gill and Pratt (2008) focus on cultural workers’ job insecurities. Eikhof and Haunschild (2007), drawing from Bourdieu’s concept of “logics” of practice, studied the interiorization of the existing tensions between artistic and economic logics of practice in artists engaged in German theaters.

The oft-cited need to balance artistic and managerial imperatives in arts organizations lies in the recognition of the opposition of the two views. The act of balancing implies the existence of different elements which should be put into equal or fair proportion in order to achieve equilibrium and stability. (Simply put, there is no need for balance if there is no antagonism between the two forces). On the other hand, the desired

objective of such a balancing act is not a given. Equilibrium can change according to the prevailing view and shift more towards one pole or another. When a business management culture is introduced into an arts organization, equilibrium is defined as the point where the enterprise achieves good financial and economic results that allow it to continue to pursue its cultural activity well into the future without risk of failure. At the same time, acknowledgment that dualism is a distinctive, typical feature of arts organizations suggests that management (as a discipline) should take a “modest approach” (Zan, 2006: 7) rather than trying to impose its paradigm. This, however, would imply abandoning the initial spirit of conquest that seemed to motivate business management interests when they first approached the arts sector, as well as acknowledging the relevance of artistic, aesthetic, and social factors that differentiate arts management from business management.

CHAPTER TWO

AN OVERVIEW OF OPERA PRODUCTION

This chapter outlines general, internationally standard features of opera organizations. Opera houses in different countries have certain similarities but also important differences. In fact, while the production process and the categories of professionals involved are more or less the same worldwide, legal status, structure, governance, and financial structure can vary considerably between and even within national contexts. The organization's size, production values, and of course its local context influence each opera house's organizational structure and budget levels, while different national contexts influence its legal status, governance, production strategy, and financial structure. As we will see, differences between national contexts are primarily due to historical traditions of the operatic sector and to the differing roles played by respective governments in the cultural sphere.

General Features of Opera Production and Opera Houses

The Product: the Seasonal Roster

Since the main product supplied by opera houses is live performance of an operatic work, the roster of productions can be seen as a sort of catalogue in which the opera house presents its products each season (which usually starts in September or October and ends in May or June).

It consists of a list of operas, each of which is performed several times over the course of the season. The number of operatic works and performances can vary considerably according to structural factors (such as the size of the organization and its physical facilities) and to the production strategy adopted by the administration. (See the next section for more details on different production strategies.)

As for the works included in the roster, we can identify at least two kind of product differentiation: first in terms of artistic genres and traditions and second in terms of criteria of originality.

Over more than four centuries of history, opera as a genre has developed many different sub-categories, artistic movements, and national traditions from which an opera house may draw to differentiate its products. Works of the eighteenth century range from the *opera seria* and *opera buffa* of the Italian Baroque era, to the French *tragédie lyrique* and classical-era *opéra comique*, to German Singspiel and works of Viennese classicism (e.g. Mozart and Beethoven). The most famous works come from the nineteenth century, in particular the Italian *bel canto* (with works by Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, and particularly Verdi), the French *grand opéra* (e.g. Meyerbeer) and romantic-era *opéra comique* (e.g. Offenbach, Bizet), and the German *romantische Oper* (which began with Weber and whose most significant exponent was Wagner). Some works inspired by neoclassicism and modernism were written in the twentieth century, and in more recent times opera has followed new trends and experimented with new genres (e.g. musicals).

Usually, the seasonal roster presents works from different historical, national, and artistic traditions. However the rosters of some theatres are more conservative, concentrating more on nineteenth-century repertoire, while others tend to prefer more recent genres, such as musicals. Some rosters appear to be more nationally or locally oriented, with an emphasis on the works of influential “home-turf” composers such as Wagner in Germany and Verdi in Italy, or with a tendency to commission or promote the new works of domestic rather than foreign composers.

Further differentiation in seasonal offerings can be made according to the originality of operatic works, either in absolute terms or relative to the history of the opera house. Operas in the roster may be brand-new, meaning that both the libretto and the musical score are new, or, more often, they may be new interpretations of past works in which the artistic team (in particular the stage director and conductor) work on pre-existing musical and dramatic material. When interpretations of past works are new and presented for the first time, we call it a new production. After the first presentation of a new production, it can become part of a repertory and be performed in subsequent seasons (or more than once in the same season). A performance of a repertory production in subsequent seasons is called a revival. Opera productions can also be rented to and from other opera houses. In the case of guest productions, the staging can be “new” to the opera house in which it is currently hosted and performed, even though it has already been presented elsewhere.

The degree to which a seasonal roster is composed of new works or productions as opposed to works already in the house’s repertory is often the result of a production strategy adopted by the opera house. In the next

section, I will discuss in detail the *stagione* and the repertory systems and their varying propensities for the staging of new works or productions.

The seasonal roster reflects the artistic strategy and identity of the opera house (e.g. conservative, traditional, innovative). However, the choice of the titles to present each season also has a financial rationale. Some operatic works are more expensive than others, because they need additional artistic personnel (e.g., musicians able to play non-standard instruments), more lights, luxurious costumes, two or three changes of set, etc. New works and new productions are usually more expensive because they require more time for rehearsals and additional investments in costumes, sets, and props. Nonetheless, the same title can be produced with different budgets, by avoiding hiring very expensive guest soloists, or by simplifying technical components, sets, and costumes. For the seasonal roster to be financially sound, the management of the opera house must take all of these aspects into consideration. The programming of the roster of performances for each season must therefore involve both the artistic director, mainly responsible for its artistic coherence, and the general manager, who must ensure its financial feasibility.

The Production Process

An operatic work is based on a “libretto”—which contains the text or script—and a musical score. It is a combination of musical, dramatic and visual aspects.

In order for the production process to officially commence, the organization must provide all necessary resources in terms of manpower (employed staff and guest artists), time and space (a rehearsal schedule), and financial resources (a dedicated budget).

With the composer’s musical score and the librettist’s text in hand, the initial phase of the production process begins with the ideas of the artists and creative personnel involved in the design and interpretation of the opera.

According to the stage director’s vision, designers make plans for the sets, props, lights, and costumes and provide sketches and blueprints that go either to the workshops of the opera house for construction, or to the scenic design office to be purchased or rented.

In the meanwhile, musicians and singers start studying the music on their own.

The core of the production process takes place in the rehearsal rooms of the opera house. Here, the production director is in charge of planning the rehearsal schedule. The duration of the rehearsal process can vary from

more than a month to a couple of weeks depending on the complexity and novelty of the work. A new production, with new scenery, costumes, lights, blocking, and more, is considerably more labour-intensive and time-consuming than a revival of an existing production in which many of the most important elements are already in place.

During the rehearsal process, each group works separately before gradually coming together onstage once the interrelationships among them all have been worked out. At the beginning, the soloists meet for the *Leseprobe* (reading rehearsal) in which performers read through the language of the text as if it were a play. Next, music rehearsals begin under the guidance of the conductor. At first, they are held separately for soloists, chorus, and orchestra. Later, with the *Sitzprobe* (sitting rehearsal), singers and orchestra come together to rehearse, concentrating on the music rather than on the dramatic aspects. Soloists (and later the chorus and extras) are also involved in the staging rehearsals, which take place under the guidance of the stage director. In the staging rehearsals, the focus is on the dramatic aspects of the opera. A rehearsal pianist accompanies them, but usually the conductor is not present and the soloists often “mark” their sung part in order not to put too much strain on the voice. Staging rehearsals initially take place in rehearsal rooms, where the set is usually sketched with tape on the floor outlining its contours and only props that are handled by the soloists are used. The last staging rehearsals are on the stage itself, with the complete set assembled and the performers in costume. The technical corps (prop, stage, lighting, and sound technicians, as well as the costume-makers) are also involved in the staging rehearsals, while specific “tech” rehearsals are scheduled in order to set and test lights, sound effects, and other special effects, and to rehearse the set changes. These also give the various designers the opportunity to see how their respective designs coalesce and to make final changes. At the end of the rehearsal process there is a pre-dress rehearsal and a dress rehearsal, which take place a few days before opening night. Here, all the elements of the opera come together, and the entire performance is run from beginning to end, exactly as will take place in the actual performances. Sometimes a select audience can attend the dress rehearsal (e.g. school groups and/or employees and their relatives or friends).

The Costs of Doing Opera

Opera is a highly labour-intensive activity because of the large number of artists, technicians, and administrative staff that an opera house requires

just to function. This is reflected in the cost structure of performing arts organizations, in which personnel costs represent the largest expense and can absorb as much as the three-quarters of the total budget. (Baumol and Bowen, 1965; Globerman and Book, 1974; Auvinen, 2000; Mariani, 2006). Personnel employed on a long-term basis are a fixed cost that does not depend on the level of production. Consequently, the cost structure of an opera house is generally very rigid, although it might benefit from economies of scale (Globerman and Book, 1974).

Personnel costs can be divided into administrative, artistic, and technical expenditures: administrative personnel costs cover staff who handle planning, finance, bookkeeping, communications, marketing, human resources, etc.; artistic personnel costs cover long-term artistic employees (orchestra players, chorus, company singers, chorus masters, and principal and assistant conductors); and technical personnel costs cover in-house technical departments (electricians, sound and stage technicians, stage managers, tailors, etc.).

After personnel expenditures, production costs are the second main expense at most opera houses. These cover the purchase and rental of materials and services needed to mount the production: stage scenery, props, costumes, lights, and sound systems (Auvinen, 2000; Mariani, 2006).

Other expenditures cover the maintenance of the opera house's facilities, and these can represent a significant share of total costs for those opera houses located in historic buildings of which they are formally the owners. General operational costs, such as utilities and supplies, are part of overhead costs, which usually account for a smaller part of the total budget (Auvinen, 2000; Mariani, 2006).

By taking the performance of a single production as the object of analysis, we can identify both fixed and variable costs. Fixed production costs include rehearsal time, the work hours of the workshop crew, and the purchase of services and materials for the physical construction of stage sets, costumes, props, and for the arrangement of lighting and sound systems. (These same costs become variable when the opera house decides to rent the production, or part of it, rather than build it internally). These latter costs are potential investments when the new production becomes part of the repertory and can be performed again in the future (which is usually the case with opera houses that adopt a repertory strategy) or rented out (either in whole or in part, e.g. just the costumes). Otherwise, they are so-called "sunk costs." Variable costs for each performance are mainly those related to guest artists (conductors, stage directors, designers, and soloists), additional musicians and artistic professionals, and extras. Evidently, variable costs are higher for opera houses operating on a

stagione system, whose soloists are freelancers contracted for a specific production. In addition, for each and every performance there are the marginal costs of “having the theater open,” including salaries of fire marshals and ushers.

A new production is thus characterized by relatively high fixed costs, but over the long term the average cost per performance declines because of the decreasing marginal cost of each performance after the premiere (Globerman and Book, 1974; Throsby, 1994), thereby allowing the opera company to take advantage of economies of scale.

Organizational Structure and Professional Profiles

The organizational structure of each opera house reflects the number of different activities it performs. (Some opera houses, in addition to opera, also present ballets, concerts, and plays). In a study by Auvinen (2000) examining four different opera houses, each of them have a relatively flat organizational structure, consisting of a general manager and a team of administrative directors in charge of their respective departments. Although the size of the organization, and therefore the complexity of its organizational structures, can vary considerably, in general there are five basic departments into which the organization may be subdivided: the finance department (which includes human resources, public relations, outreach, broadcasting, fundraising, etc.); the artistic programming department, which oversees programming and production planning; the music department, in charge of the orchestra and chorus; the ballet department, in charge of the ballet corps; and the technical department, in charge of the stage management and technical crews and the various workshops. In larger organizations, these basic departments can be subdivided even further. The core activity is artistic production, and the organizational structure serves to facilitate the production process through its planning and production, music, ballet, and technical operations, while the role of the managing director is to ensure that the opera house complies with its financial and organizational obligations.

In this formal structure, there does not seem to be any vertical interaction among the departments, since all the administrative directors answer to the general manager. This led Auvinen (2000; 2001) to theorize the existence of a dual organization: an informal organizational structure which exists alongside the formal one to allow communications and interactions among departments (without going through the general manager) and to give artistic personnel, as the centerpiece of the company's operations, more organizational power than is depicted in the

formal organizational chart. The existence of a dual organization, as Auvinen claims, is often a source of conflict and confusion regarding authority and jurisdiction.

An opera house employs a large variety of professionals. Some of them are permanently employed; others are hired or contracted specifically for a single production. Some have artistic backgrounds, others perform technical jobs, while still others simply have extensive experience in the performing arts and operate as support staff in the production process and during the performances.

Creative Professionals

The creative team of each production is headed by the director and the conductor (or music director), who collaborate to give to the production a unique interpretation. The conductor is in charge of musical aspects and oversees the orchestra and the soloists. The director is in charge of the dramatic and visual aspects of the production. He defines how soloists and choristers should behave on stage in order to express his/her interpretive vision of the work. The director also defines what the production will look like, and s/he communicates his/her vision to a creative team made up of set, lighting, sound, prop, and costume designers. S/he also collaborates with the choreographer if the opera has one or more ballet numbers. The designers sketch and make blueprints and models of the visual aspects of the production. In order to do this, not only do they need to understand the director's vision, but they also need to research different aspects of the opera and collaborate with each other.

The soloists are the key elements of the performance. Even though they answer to the conductor and the director, they play an active part in the interpretation of a work, and both the conductor and the director usually tailor their interpretive ideas about the opera's characters to their soloists' specific characteristics, strengths, and suggestions. Orchestra, chorus, and soloists are the first link in the chain between the conductor's musical and the director's visual ideas, and what actually happens on stage. It is they who transform artistic vision into performance through interpretation.

Technical Professions

For a production to be realized, technical aspects also need to be considered. The director's vision, through the work of the designers, comes to life thanks to the work of a large number of technical

professionals: blueprints and a model of the set are sent to the carpenters in the workshops where it is built, and to the stage technicians responsible for assembling it and maneuvering it onstage; the lights in the lighting plan are hung and focused by electricians and lighting technicians; costume sketches go to the costume workshop where tailors make them according to performers' measurements; and craftspeople construct or assemble the props (purses, swords, wall lamps, puppets, etc.). Technicians and employees who work on sound, lighting, scenography, and costumes may be coordinated by a technical director.

Other Backstage Professions

Another important professional figure is the stage manager, who provides practical and organizational support to the creative, artistic, and technical teams throughout the production process, from the first rehearsals to the final performance. His/her task is to ensure that the production runs smoothly: from the scheduling and running of the rehearsals, to making sure that props and costumes are ready and on-hand in the rehearsal room, to alerting the artists when their stage entrance is approaching during the actual performances.

Important backstage work is performed by stage masters. They usually have a background in music because they need to be able to read the score so that they can follow along with the conductor and be prepared for the next scene at all times. They give signals at the right moment to the lighting and stage technicians when they have to change the scene or the lights, and to performers when it is time to go on stage.

Administrative Staff

In addition to the above-mentioned professional profiles, there are also administrative personnel involved in functional support and supervisory activities. Casting, archival services, rehearsal planning, facilities upkeep, work schedule and shift planning, and purchase of scenic materials are all functional activities that facilitate the production phase. Additional support activities include marketing and communications, ticket office operations, outreach and education, and IT management, while supervisory functions include human resources management, accounting and reporting, and general administration.