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OPERATIC ART IN THE DIGITAL MEDIUM: KEY TRENDS AND ADAPTATION PROBLEMS

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Abstract

In today's world many spheres and industries face the problem of adapting their activity to digitization. In the context of the highly competitive cultural market, theatres and concert halls increasingly feel the need of attracting new consumers, which can primarily be achieved with the help of digital communications. In order to build a good communication strategy and improve the theatre's economic efficiency it is highly important to analyze how the consumers perceive the new technologies within the framework of the traditional genre. The authors have analyzed a wide social background of the audience's attitude to the cultural product nowadays, as well as overviewed a general classification of digital instruments in the operatic sphere and their role in the period of the pandemic. To that end an empirical research has been conducted in the form of an online survey of Russian and Italian audiences represented by the users of opera-themed groups in the social networks. A comparative analysis of the audiences' opinions has been effected regarding the positive influence of digital technologies on opera; their presence on the platforms of operatic institutions and in social networks; the possibility of replacing live theatre by the digital analogue. The results of the analysis allow to interpret digitization of opera as an important applied instrument which plays a significant role in promoting and popularizing this sphere in society but should be prevented from transforming the authentic essence of the operatic art.

Keywords: Digitalization, audience, marketing communications, opera

1. Introduction

Digitization is one of the pivotal communicational processes in the modern world, one that urges various social structures and industries to adopt digital technologies. Mainly applied to economic and business-related spheres, this trend also actively finds its way into humanities, including the sphere of culture. While the laws of digital transformation are generally uniform, particular fields where the process takes place modify it in their individual manner, commanding each their own instruments and methods. No exception in this case is the field of opera - a unique synthetic genre which combines music, word and stage action. Studies of the phenomenon of opera today have far transcended traditional musicology and theatre sciagraphy. They have assumed the inter-disciplinary character which embraces economic, sociological and cultural aspects (Bunakova, 2020).

The relevance of the topic is determined by the fact that in today's reality where the amount of multimedia content is ever-expanding and the offer of alternative types of entertainment is wide, there arises a necessity of promoting opera with the help of innovational digital instruments which render this form of theatre more attractive in the eyes of the consumers, modernizing its public image and providing greater economic effectiveness to opera houses.

2. Problem Statement

The problem of the research stems from the inevitable transformation which the traditional paradigm of opera as a genre undergoes in the conditions of dominant mass culture and intensified competition on the cultural market. This circumstance prompts communication specialists in theaters and concert halls to seek new touch points with the consumers. While for such numerous spheres of life like business, economy and politics digitization has already become part and parcel of their working process, for opera and academic art it still largely remains a controversial phenomenon. The traditionalism and academic character of many spheres of culture often sparks arguments and does not always find unanimous support in their consumers. In order to be able to accurately evaluate the effectiveness of digital instruments and work out a sound communication strategy, cultural establishments like opera houses and philharmonic halls must be well informed about their target audience's attitude towards new trends.

The necessity of adaptation of the cultural field to the digital world has been widely touched upon in scholarly works. The terms "digital culture", "multimedia culture" and "electronic culture" have come into active circulation since the late 1990s. They are used in analyzing representation of traditional products of art and culture as created by informational and communication technologies which include electronic libraries, online streaming, virtual museums, multimedia reconstruction of memorials etc. (Veltman, 2002). Speaking of the main issues in connection with digitization of opera in the modern world one should single out two aspects:

2.1. The transformation of public attitude to cultural product in the digital epoch

Western researchers associate the modern transformation of cultural economy with the ever-growing "participatory culture" (Crawford et al., 2014). The communication between the "network public" and the

media environment in this case is not one-sided but presupposes interaction - the consumer's immediate participation in the process (Ito, 2007). This facilitates and democratizes the dialogue between the audience and a cultural establishment. Kaiser defines employing digital technologies by cultural institutions as a transformational strategy which is able to fundamentally change the consumers' attitude to a particular cultural institution (Kaiser, 2018). A number of explorers also point out the ability of cultural digitization to expand the possibilities and personal space of the users, as it ensures their privacy by means of the process called «face-to-facelessness» (Griffiths & Walmsley, 2018). Conner stresses the importance of isolation and "keeping quiet" for efficient consumption of cultural product and notes that this is easier to achieve on the Internet rather than at a personal meeting. Effective online interaction can democratize the discussion and expand the audience's access to paratextual meanings thereby considerably intensifying "the meaning creating process" (Conner, 2013).

Along with a number of above-mentioned advantages some researchers also see significant drawbacks in digitization of performing arts. Digital formats often intensify fragmentariness and "clippiness" of the perception of the content by the audience (Kahneman, 2011). Wajcman (2014) refers to this phenomenon as "the acceleration of life in digital capitalism", while Turkle (2011) points out that, although the digital aborigine gets a feeling of a full perception of the content, in effect there is no full "connection" between the consumer and the product.

2.2. The influence of the pandemic on the representation of operatic art

The existence of digital technologies opens up new commercial horizons for theaters and concert halls - those that transcend traditional merchandising and publishing (Avanzini et al., 2020). The relevance of digital trends for opera has been vividly demonstrated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic forced the entire operatic world to switch to a "total online" mode: theaters and halls which had previously regarded direct impact on the spectator as their main communication channel, now, under the threat of impending financial collapse as a consequence of this channel closing down, felt compelled to adapt the operatic product to the digital challenges of the epoch. Online resources which used to be mere complimentary means suddenly became the sole channel of communication with the consumers.

One could single out the following digital instruments applicable to operatic art:

- Using digital instruments for a distant demonstration of operatic content: via broadcasting and online streaming, without a "live" sound. Digital libraries of opera houses should also be mentioned in this connection - professional recording, demonstrations, digitization and archiving of the best performances and concerts. This allows to broadcast content in real time (online broadcasting in cinema theaters, online streamings, online concerts from empty halls in the times of a pandemic etc). This helps to significantly expand geographical boundaries of the audiences and preserve artistic heritage for the generations to come. This, however, also greatly transforms the essence of the art which traditionally exists in the conditions of "live" sound and professional acoustics.
- Making use of the new technologies for promoting operatic art. In the contemporary world digital formats are one of the inalienable components of promoting: be it digital advertising

(digital billboards, banners), digital PR communications (innovative projects for the public, online conferences, sending press materials via bluetooth), or non-standard instruments (engaging AR and VR technologies, advergaming, virtual tours of halls etc).

Of paramount importance is also the role of representation of operatic institutions in the digital medium and SMM (Social Media Marketing). Operatic organizations use social networks for spreading information about their activity and performances for real and potential audiences (Wroblewski, 2017). Filling social media with relevant content has a number of functions (Besana & Esposito, 2019): informing the audiences about forthcoming events, building loyalty by means of efficient direct marketing (communicating with the spectators in the comments and through direct messages), posting target advertising, attracting new audience with the help of marketing influence (live streaming and online interviews with famous singers, producers, conductors).

3.   Research Questions

What is the consumers' (i.e., the operagoers') attitude to employing digital instruments in opera in Russia and abroad? (using Italy, one of the most important centers of world opera, as an example)

- How well are the consumers aware of the digital transformation in the operatic industry, as reflected in their presence at the digital resources of musical institutions in Russia and Italy?
- Do the consumers in Russia and abroad see replacement of traditional opera products by their digital analogues as a plausible thing?

4.   Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research is to reveal the consumers' (the operagoers') opinion on applying digital technologies in operatic art and promotion of its products in the Russian and Western life contexts.

Research hypothesis is that the audience regards digital technologies as an effective instrument of popularizing and promoting opera.

5.   Research Methods

For conducting this research the authors have chosen the empirical method of online surveying in Google Forms which is one of the most optimized platforms for doing this type of online studies. The research was conducted exclusively in the online medium, as the posed questions were connected with the medium of the respondents "being". Questionnaires in the Russian and Italian languages were distributed from 17 December 2020 to 10 January 2021 via two large opera-dedicated social networks.

Representativity of the respondent selection is based on the narrow thematic character of the group all members of which are operagoers, i.e. the target audience of the research.

The platform for placing the survey in Russian was the group called "Voci dell'Opera" in the widest spread Russian social network VKontakte (https://vk.com/operavoci). The group is an open one; the number of its subscribers as of 13 January 2021 was 55606 persons which makes Voci dell'Opera one of

the most popular Russian thematic groups in the opera segment. According to the group's description, it is a kind of art covering magazine oriented towards acquainting a wide audience with the world of opera, ballet, academic vocal and classical music. The group publishes articles featuring opera music and theatre, singers of the past and the present, reviews of performances and musical events, musical selections as well as announcements and targeted advertisements of music festivals, opera schools and academies, broadcasts, books about opera etc. The community has their own Instagram account and Internet site - www.vocidellopera.org reposting much of the material published by the group.

For the survey in Italian a Facebook-based group was chosen, one named L'Opera lirica dal Loggione & Musica in Opera (https://www.facebook.com/groups/musicainopera). The number of subscribers in this community is lesser than in Voci dell'Opera (13330 persons as of 13 January 2021, more than 9000 of which are Italians). Much like the Russian group, this one also posts news covering operatic performances and broadcasts, but more frequently the subscribers themselves share interesting notes and opinions. The comments contain active discussions of today's operatic realia as well as the theater of the past.

While formulating the questions the authors focused on the following factors:

- Socio-demographic indicators of the respondents (gender, age, place of residence);
- The respondents' general attitude to introducing digital technologies to operatic art and the process of promoting opera;
- The respondents' degree of awareness of employing digital technologies in the operatic world (whether they themselves have often observed such instances);
- The respondents' presence on digital platforms of musical organizations an in social networks; whether they follow the content;
- The possibility of replacing a live performance by an online digital analogy.

The total number of participants in the survey was 345 respondents (210 Russian- and 115 Italian speakers).

The survey in Russian yielded the result of 57.7 % of female and 42.3 % male participants; the survey in Italian – 50.4 % female and 49.6 % male respectively.

The respondents were segmented into age groups traditionally for this type of sociological research: 15-24, 25-44, 45-64 и 65+. The majority of the Russian respondents (56.9 %) are in the 45-64 age group, followed by 23.6 % of those aged 25-44. Then come 11.5 % aged 15-25, and 7.8 % - 65+. Among the Italians the first place also belongs to the 45-64 age group (49.5 %), the second - to the one 25-44 (27.3 %). Persons over 60 years of age account for 17.4 %, those younger than 20 - for 6.1 %.

Thus it can be concluded that in both countries in question the overwhelming majority of operagoers are persons at the age of 45-64, while young participants under 20 years of age are practically absent in this survey. At the same time, Italy accounts for considerably more 65+ respondents, while in Russia their amount is less than 10%.

The age segmentation of the respondents is representative and generally conforms to other surveys of target audiences in the sphere of classical music. According to the Statista survey conducted in 2018, the

majority of classical music lovers are 55+, while 35% of the classics' admirers are younger than 35. The online platform of our survey and its thematic specifications determined the low number of older respondents (65+), while the age of many participants fell just into the "representative" gap between 55 and 64.

Among the Russian respondents there were revealed to be residents of the country's various regions, including the major cities like Moscow, Saint-Petersburg, Novosibirsk, Voronezh, Omsk, Samara, Perm and Volgograd. The survey also covers the segment of medium-sized Russian cities/towns like Vladimir, Kursk, Krasnodar, Habarovsk, Ryazan and others. The presented overseas states are Ukraine (Odessa, Lugansk, Novorossiisk), Belarus (Minsk), Israel (Holon, Modiin), Germany (no city/town specification), Austria (Graz).

All the respondents who took part in the Italian survey come from various towns and provinces of Italy: the majors Milan, Rome, Naples, Turin, Venice, Genoa, Palermo, Florence, Verona, as well as the medium segment towns - Ferrara, Padua, Modena, Brescia, Rimini, Bergamo, Taranto, Livorno, Lecce, Salerno. The Italian group included also residents of small towns like, for example, Sant'Agata di Militello.

6. Findings

The first question of the survey was whether the respondents felt that introducing digital technologies (within the framework of a performance as well as among the instruments of promotion) in the world of opera today improved the perception of this art by the modern people.

In the Russian group, practically half of the respondents (44.6 %) gave the answer "rather yes than no". 20.8 % gave a unilaterally positive answer (definitely yes), while only 15.4 % unconditionally denied any positive influence of digital technologies on operatic art.

Among the Italians, 40.9 % of the respondents answered "rather yes than no", followed by 35.7 % of those completely rejecting the possibility of positive influence of digital instruments on opera. Only 17.4 % gave a unilaterally positive reply, and a still lesser percentage (6,1%) were inclined to a negative one.

Thus, both in Russia and abroad (in Italy) the majority of respondents hold the opinion that introducing digital technologies nowadays improves the perception of opera music. In Italy, however, a much greater percentage of people are traditionalist and opine against digitizing opera, while the amount of those unconditionally accepting digital technologies in opera is smaller than in Russia.

Next question is connected with concrete innovative technologies that the respondents have had a chance to observe in opera themselves. The frequency of encounter with a certain innovative format reflects the degree of integration of this technology in today's opera: whether it is noticed by the consumers; whether it has become part of the modern world as an effective instrument of promoting and popularizing.

The respondents were asked to choose between several variants: mobile apps of theaters and halls, viewing a performance in 3D glasses, opera-themed video games, digital billboards in the streets.

The results (Table 1) showed that overall awareness of various opera digitization formats is much greater in the Italian than the Russian audience. There are twice as many Russian as Italian respondents who have never encountered digital technologies in opera.

Table 1. The Russian and Italian audiences' awareness of digital instruments in operatic art

Innovative technologies in opera	Russian respondents	Italian respondents
Mobile apps of theatres and halls	52.3%	61.5%
Viewing performances in 3D glasses, AR- и VR-technologies	12.2%	56.6%
Opera-themed video games	12.2%	13.8%
Digital billboards	36.6%	44.4%
Never encountered	16.2%	7.7%

It must be also noted that such an instrument as AR- and VR-technologies which is becoming increasingly involved in performances in Western theaters, is practically unknown to the Russian audience (it was reported as being aware of by the mere 12.2 % of the Russian participants).

The survey allowed the respondents to add their own answers. Among the variants suggested by the Russian participants there were:

- Online broadcasts, online concerts and streamings;
- Online interviews and master classes;
- Including video clips and live cuts in performances

The Italians suggested the following individualized answers:

- Online broadcasts and streamings;
- Online concerts involving animation.

Next question dealt with the respondents' using social networks of theaters and philharmonics, for, as was noted above, SMM today is one of the most important digital instruments for opera institutions. Over 40% of the respondents in both cases (42.3 % and 44.7 % in the Russian and Italian groups respectively) are subscribed to operatic social media and regularly follow the content. Meanwhile, there were also respondents who did not use social networks – 33.1 % in the Russian group and 25.4 % in the Italian. 24.6 % and 29.8 % Russian and Italian opera goers respectively are subscribed to the accounts of opera houses and halls in social networks but do not follow the content.

Regarding the social networks used by the respondents, Vkontakte enjoys the greatest popularity among the Russians (46.9 %) and Facebook among the Italians (50%). Instagram, YouTube и Twitter are more popular with the Italian respondents, although used by the Russians too.

The survey also analyzed the opinion of the respondents in regard to the possibility of replacing live opera sound by online broadcasts. Over a half of the surveyed (49.2 % in the Russian group and 56.5 % in the Italian) believe online broadcasts completely unable to replace a real performance. 38.5 % of Russian- and 36.5 % Italian speakers regard the possibility of replacing as a partial one. Less than 10% in both cases are ready to replace a live performance with its online version.

The following question is connected to a recent global situation which became a serious trial for the opera industry: the pandemic of COVID-2019 when theater activity was completely stopped and the leading opera houses switched to showing online broadcasts of their best performances given in recent years. The

frequency of using these services reflects the operagoers' degree of involvement as well as efficiency of this promotional instrument (i.e. regular demonstration of performances in the digital medium). As the responses to the question about the frequency of broadcast viewing during the pandemic show, this form of operatic art representation in digital medium is not in particularly high demand. Even in the times of such a crisis as the pandemic, it did not acquire absolute significance for the music lovers.

Since the pandemic started, 41.5 % of the Russian- and 42.6 % Italian speakers have only watched the broadcasts several times. 37.7 % and 29.6 % respectively have not watched the broadcasts at all, while only 20.8 % and 27.8 % respectively have watched them regularly.

The final question in the survey offered the respondents to choose between several options in case of not being able to go to the opera house: watch broadcasts; listen to old records; not listen to opera music at all.

Most Russian as well as Italian respondents did not choose the digital "analogue" of a live performance and preferred classical old recordings to the modern broadcasts. 44.4 % of the Russian respondents and only 31.3 % of Italians are willing to watch online broadcasts. 16.2 % and 16.5 % among the Russian and Italian respondents respectively choose not to listen to any opera music at all if they cannot go to a real opera house.

7. Conclusion

After analyzing the results of the online survey the following conclusions can be drawn:

- The majority of respondents in Russia as well as Italy positively regard introducing digital technologies to operatic art and believe that their presence can improve the perception of opera today.
- A wide range of the respondents have encountered digital technologies in opera and in its promoting functions which proves that these technologies are actively present in the communication field and are noticed by the consumers. Meanwhile the degree of awareness of digital instruments in opera is much greater among the Italian than Russian audience.
- The better part of the respondents are subscribed to the social media of opera institutions and regularly follow the content updates.
- At the same time, a significant number of the respondents are not prepared to forego live theater, nor believe that transferring theater online is possible.
- Online broadcasts which had to replace live theater during the pandemic were only watched by a limited number of the consumers: most music lovers said they would choose to listen to old classical recordings.

Thus the hypothesis seems to find a confirmation, though only a partial one.

From the point of view of integrating new instruments into the opera show and applying them for promoting the cultural product, digital technologies are approved by the respondents as a positive influence on the perception of an operatic performance by the modern listeners. This concerns innovation in the opera content per se (unusual technologies able to attract audiences and promote the art by their sheer

colorfulness) as well as interactive channels of informing the consumers, such as social networks. The practice of online broadcasts as a complimentary activity of opera institutions perfectly serves their brand, expands geographic boundaries, intensifies the interest of potential opera viewers. With such an approach digital formats and platforms do not lead to the crisis of live performing, denaturation of art and loss of its meaning (European Network for Opera and Dance Education, 2015).

This is corroborated by major researches, including the survey of the audiences of the transmission project Live in HD in the NYC Metropolitan Opera conducted by Opera America: the majority of the respondents then admitted that the highest quality HD transmissions did not substitute live opera for them, and in the future they will most probably go to the live theater.

Open for discussion is still the question of the opera "transferring" online as a new phenomenon equal to the traditional theater - with the live sound being substituted by a "surrogate". On the one hand, for a number of respondents, distant transmissions and broadcasts are a possibility to see certain performances/events which would not be accessible for them offline. On the other hand, for the majority it is important that the essence of the art should remain the same: the theater should, first and foremost, exists in real acoustics, that is why transfer to the online format is not seen as a legitimate replacement for live impressions.

The connection with the tradition remains firm: the pandemic has shown that "switching to online" is not always viewed positively by the audience and does not always contribute to successful promoting. The operagoers' adherence to the "live" theater remains largely unaffected even by such a powerful circumstance as a pandemic, and the tectonic shifts that have occurred in other spheres easily forming new customers' habits (e.g., e-commerce), have not gone down so well with opera.

From the aforesaid it can be deduced that, though being an important tool, digital technologies in today's reality still remain only an accompanying auxiliary for promoting live opera. They should not tangibly change or distort either the form, or the content of the traditional art, but instead harmoniously compliment it while conforming to the requirements of modernity: herein lies the main problem of adapting an essentially rather conservative genre like opera to the digital reality.

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