

# Indigenisation and history: how opera in South Africa became South African opera

First submission: 25 January 2012

Acceptance: 22 August 2012

In South Africa, the exposure of opera to local cultures and circumstances has in time resulted in a number of opera productions that have departed from Western aesthetic norms and prompted innovations to the genre. These innovations can be traced in newly created operas as well as in the production of a number of operas from the standard canon that have been 'translated' to local contexts and social realities. This article explores the historical trajectory of opera production in South Africa from 1801 to the present through the lens of indigenisation and shows that, in its most subtle form, this phenomenon can be traced in local opera productions long before the issue of the reflection of indigenous cultures in opera became relevant. In constructing this history, the author hopes to identify moments when one musical element became another, or changed sufficiently to become a similar, but different element. Clearly, in discovering the South African roots of opera and understanding the many projects that currently characterise the opera scene in this country, the issue is not only one for cultural or textual analysis, but also, very pertinently, a matter for historiography.

## Verinheemsing en geskiedenis: hoe opera in Suid-Afrika Suid-Afrikaanse opera geword het

Die blootstelling van operaproduksie in Suid-Afrika aan plaaslike omstandighede en inheemse kulture het mettertyd 'n verskeidenheid operaproduksies laat ontstaan wat afwyk van Westerse estetiese norme en wat vernuwing tot gevolg gehad het. Hierdie vernuwings kan gevind word in nuut-gekomponeerde operas, maar ook in die herinterpretasie van operas van die bestaande kanon binne plaaslike kontekste en sosiale werklikhede. Hierdie artikel volg die historiese trajek van operaproduksie in Suid-Afrika deur die lens van verinheemsing vanaf 1801 tot vandag, en toon aan dat verinheemsing in plaaslike produksies opgespoor kan word lank voor die verteenwoordiging van inheemse kulture in opera relevant begin word het. Deur die konstruksie van 'n geskiedenis van opera bly die skrywer sensitief vir die momente wanneer elemente van operaproduksie getransformeer of aangepas is terwyl die oorspronklike formaat steeds herkenbaar bly. Die ontdekking van die plaaslike wortels van die genre van opera en die ontwikkeling van 'n begrip vir die uiteenlopende gedaantes van huidige Suid-Afrikaanse operaproduksie is nie slegs 'n kwessie vir kulturele of tekstuele analise nie; dit is pertinent ook een vir historiografie.

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*Acta Academica Supplementum*

2012 (1): 117-155

ISSN 0587-2405

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<<http://www.ufs.ac.za/ActaAcademica>>

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The historical narrative constructed in this article is driven less by the need for history than by the desire to understand how an imported cultural phenomenon in a colonial society – in this instance, opera – changed and adapted by existing for an extended period in its adopted country.<sup>1</sup> The indigenisation of opera in South Africa seems sufficiently reasonable.<sup>2</sup> Cultural exchange, appropriation, mutation, influence, acculturation and a myriad of variously labelled processes that describe cultural change pertaining to traditionally European cultural forms, both serious and popular, seems inevitable when people cohabit. The same can be said of Western influences found in traditional African cultural expressions. At present, in a ‘global village’, the notion of ‘cultural trade’ is even less surprising (Appadurai 1993: 324). We experience and accept cultural flow and diversity where appropriation of cultural artefacts of one culture by another is commonplace, not only in terms of African and European culture in South Africa, but also internationally. However, in post-1994 South Africa, indigenisation has become a political imperative exercising more pressure than implied by terms such as ‘process’ or ‘exchange’.

The term ‘indigenisation’ refers to “the act or process of adaptation or subjection to the influence or dominance of the indigenous inhabitants of a country” (OED 2012). In any discussion of its application in a South African context, this poses the question as to who is referenced when speaking of ‘indigenous inhabitants’? In addition, with regard to opera production, ‘indigenisation’ is often used in conjunction with, or as an alternative for the term ‘Africanisation’, which can be defined as “to subject to the influence or domination of Black Africans” (OED 2012). However, the well-documented complexities of cultural identities in South Africa prevent a simplified or essential discussion, according to which ‘African’ and ‘European’ are viewed as fixed entities that occupy polar positions. In a country marked by a history of cultural diversity and the co-existence of various population groups over an extended period of time, there is a long history of questions concerning those who claim

- 1 This article is derived from the author’s doctoral dissertation entitled ‘Opera production in the Western Cape: strategies in search of indigenisation’.
- 2 In this article, the concept ‘indigenisation’ is used to describe ‘the experience of mutual translations among cultures’.

to be 'indigenous'. In 2012 the debate on such issues continues to play out with unabated intensity in the public and academic spheres.

Although the term 'indigenisation' has rarely been used in musicological writing, studies exploring the use of music from other cultures in Western classical music are commonplace. Alterity has interested the West for centuries, and there is an extensive literature describing these occurrences in classical music. In academic study, where the concept of 'indigenisation' has been used in, for example, ethnomusicology, missiology and economics, it is clear that the context of usage does not pertain to Western composers who make use of music from variously constructed 'others', but tends to point towards something other than a mere interest in the exotic or an exploration of 'other musics' in the music of the 'self'. Whilst exoticism appears to be a luxury afforded to a composer that can be employed at leisure, indigenisation seems to happen when the genre responds to issues regarding the social and political relevance or the survival of a cultural format.

In ethnomusicology the concept of 'indigenisation' has been used in writings by Carol Babiracki and Amy Stillman.<sup>3</sup> The latter sets the 'coexistence and absorption' of two different musical practices as the premises on which indigenisation can take place, both of which can be traced in local opera production. Based on the findings of her fieldwork, Stillman proceeds to set out the process of indigenisation in five stages and analyses the indigenisation of Polynesian Protestant hymnody through these stages:

[...] first, the survival and resurgence of indigenous performance traditions [...]; second, the coexistence of indigenous and introduced repertory and practices; third, the appropriation of materials, structures and processes between indigenous and introduced systems; fourth, the emergence of new musical idioms; and fifth, the absorption of old and new idioms into indigenous conceptual frameworks of musical repertory and practice (Stillman 1993: 93).

Stillman's model suggests that indigenisation follows a trajectory which has a beginning and an end, and that the opposite binaries such as 'Polynesian-European' or 'self-other' can be dissolved in new manifestations of music through indigenisation. Applying this

3 Neither of these writers, however, attempt to theoretically develop the concept of 'indigenisation' for music studies in much depth.

model to opera production provides a tool for possibly measuring the degree of indigenisation. On the other hand, Babiracki (1985: 98) states that indigenisation is “a matter of recovering, relearning and recomposing native music in a mixture of Western and native traditions”. This provides a slightly different angle from which new opera composition as well as the production of opera from the standard canon can productively be discussed. In the case of local opera production, indigenisation is perhaps best understood as a process, a technique or an action whereby A is gradually transformed into B, but with the understanding that A can always be recognised in B, its altered state. This assumption, which has increasingly been challenged in academic discourse on opera, implies that A is an entity of ‘pure’ substance that is somehow changed by the place, space, time and the people that surround it. Musicologists Richard Taruskin and Roger Parker, for instance, illustrated that matters of definition pertaining to opera remain elusive. The reason for this is that the genre has had a long history of hybridity, mutation and adaptation, making claims of opera as a ‘pure’ genre untenable.<sup>4</sup>

There are striking similarities between the development of opera locally and in the rest of the so-called ‘new world’, those countries where Western civilisation imposed itself with force from the seventeenth century onwards and where opera was imported from Europe. These countries include Canada, the USA, Australia, Argentina and Brazil (*Grove Music Online* 2007). To simplify, and of course simplify one must, the pattern seems to be as follows. Initially, touring groups from Europe produced burlesques with singing and dancing, comic opera and operetta. Serious opera only followed later, with productions that relied heavily on musicians imported from Europe. When local opera production began, local companies usually consisted of amateurs who produced operetta and comic opera, again with serious opera only following later. Local opera composition was only able to develop once a solid base for local opera production, including music colleges, sustained vocal training and the implementation of funding mechanisms, was established. This, in turn, implies

4 Cf. for example, Roger Parker (2006: chapter 6) and Richard Taruskin (2009: chapter 42). Taruskin further illustrates the genre of opera’s tendency towards hybridity and adaptability in his discussion of the history of opera throughout his six-part series, *The Oxford history of Western music*.

the establishment and gradual development of major cities. Opera seems to require the stable infrastructure and population density of a relatively powerful economic metropolis in order to exist as a living practice. The history of opera in this country can, therefore, be traced by following the economic and industrial growth of cities such as Cape Town, Johannesburg, Durban, Pretoria and Bloemfontein. Besides the economic viability of these towns, many other factors also played a role in the development of opera production such as, among others, the interventions by specific individuals and, especially in the twentieth century, various important political contexts.

One could conceive of a history of South African opera, starting with the introduction of opera to the country by foreign touring companies, followed by the emergence of local opera production and the gradual development of local opera composition. This article discusses the history of opera in South Africa in three different stages that represent distinctly varying outcomes with regard to the notion of 'indigenisation'. The first section explores the contribution by touring groups from abroad that characterised opera in South Africa during the nineteenth century. By nature of their short visits, these productions allowed little space for home-grown production. The second section presents the establishment of local opera production in the course of the twentieth century. This stage provided the potential for indigenisation, albeit in subtle forms. The final section of this article focuses on local opera composition. It is discussed separately from the production of opera from the standard canon, as indigenisation takes on different dimensions in the composition of new works.

In this article historiography is the vehicle used to explore opera in South Africa. In-depth textual or cultural readings of the works themselves remain beyond the scope of the present discussion. It is also important to note that the way in which opera is presented in the sources used for this article has dictated the manner in which the history of opera in South Africa is represented in this instance. The most important effect of this representation is that the narrative is primarily 'work-centred', and corresponds to a traditional idea of historiography. The text presented in the following pages thus repeats the all-too-familiar hierarchical order of 'work' and 'composer' presiding over a structure that upholds these aspects of music

production as the most important for the historiographer, whereas singers, directors, teachers, artists, scholars and the opera-going public occupy successively lower ranks of importance. A history of South African opera, un beholden to this hierarchy, would almost certainly be different from the one presented in this instance. This article provides little insight into how ‘the idea of opera’ developed, evolved or integrated into South African musical life, but does elucidate how opera production and composition in South Africa was influenced by the political and economic history of the country; how the genre ‘found its place’ in local culture and local circumstances, and how local culture responded to opera as a form of art.

## 1. Touring companies: introducing opera to South Africa

In 1800, Sir George Young, the English governor of the Cape at the time, realised the need for an entertainment venue and instructed that a suitable building be erected on Hottentots Square (Bouws 1966: 129). The African Theatre was completed in October 1801 and, on 10 May 1802, musicians from the English garrison stationed in the Cape during the English occupation performed the first opera production in the country by staging the ballad opera *The devil to pay* (composed 1728) by Charles Coffey. The performance was repeated on 28 June of the same year and the group performed another ballad opera, *The poor soldier* (1783) by John O’Keefe, on 6 September 1802 (Bouws 1966: 130). Taking the limited resources for opera production into consideration, the ballad opera, a distinctively English form in which spoken dialogue alternates with songs set to traditional or popular melodies sung by the actors themselves, was an obvious choice for performance in the rough colonial conditions of early nineteenth-century Cape Town. Most opera was, however, performed by French touring companies visiting the Cape on their way to Mauritius, performing one or two operas from their repertoire to local settlers. The first *opéras comiques* were performed in 1803 when a French group staged *Toinon et Toinette* (1767) by Francois Joseph Gossec and *Le tableau parlant* (1769) by André Grétry. In 1809, the French group De Boucherville staged *Une folie* (1802), a two-act opera by Etienne Nicolas Méhul (Bouws 1982: 24).

During the first half of the nineteenth century there was no consistent pattern of opera production or other musical events at the Cape, and musical events were often dependent on the initiative of individuals. Charles Mathurin Villet, a French cultural impresario who lived in the Cape at the time, staged many *opéra comiques* whereas other notable purveyors, Frederick Lemming from Denmark and Etienne Boniface from France, both of whom settled in the Cape for a number of years, together produced a variety of cultural events. After their departures, to the Eastern Cape and Denmark, respectively, local production ceased again (Bouws 1982: 24). In his writings, Jan Bouws mentions sixteen different groups performing no less than thirty-two operas during the first fifty years of the nineteenth century, most of them performances by French touring groups (Malan 1986c: 350). After the occupation of Mauritius and the Cape by Britain in 1806, visits by French groups became less frequent, leaving a lacuna that could not be filled by subsequent touring groups from Britain.

Although no reviews on the productions of these early years have been found, Bouws refers to the quality of these performances as rather amateurish. He opens his chapter on the beginnings of opera in the Cape in *Solank daar musiek is ...* by referring to the high standards of “proper” opera production in Europe and speculates on the impossibility of achieving similar standards in the Cape at the time (Bouws 1982: 24). Bouws’s concern with “proper” opera raises an ontological question which is seminal to this article. Should the production of operas in extract, or of operas changed and adapted to local conditions, be considered “proper” opera? Historical evidence emphasises the relevance of this question. It appears that many operas performed at the Cape were made into burlesques, or even carnivalesque folk theatre, in the style of John Gay’s *A beggar’s opera* (1728). It is also evident that *opéra comique* and *opera buffa* provided the standard fare for Capetonians in the early nineteenth century. Clearly, this article would like to argue that it is the ‘idea of opera’ that matters most in investigating the notion of indigenisation, and that local adaptations and performance practices become interesting precisely because they deviate from ‘proper’ opera conceived as, for example, Wagner operas as staged in Bayreuth. These early adaptations of opera production are clearly concerned with circumstances that were less

conducive to the performance of ‘proper’ opera, rather than with issues of indigenisation of the genre on the African continent.

South Africa remained dependent on touring companies from abroad for opera productions until the early twentieth century. As a result of the discovery of gold and diamonds on the Witwatersrand after 1880, bigger cities developed and, concomitantly, larger European populations sought opera as entertainment. Touring companies now travelled throughout the country and often returned annually with new productions. The first of these groups was the Miranda-Harper group, who toured the country from 1868 onwards and produced comic and serious opera for nearly a decade (Bouws 1982: 86-7). In 1870, this group also performed the first serious opera to be presented in full in Durban when they performed Giuseppe Verdi’s *Il trovatore* in the newly constructed Trafalgar Hall.

In 1875, the Carl Rosa Group from London and the Italian Opera Company under the direction of Signor Calli arrived in Cape Town. They were followed a year later by Charles Lascelles with his opera company. Lascelles ultimately settled in Natal, where he pioneered opera production until his death in 1883 (Malan 1984b: 143). His enthusiasm earned him the nickname ‘father of opera’ in Natal (Jackson 1979: 421) when he started the Philharmonic Society with whom he produced a number of operas by 1881, among others Gaetano Donizetti’s *La fille du régiment*. The reviewer for the *Natal Mercury* was, however, not impressed by the performance, commenting that “certainly Donizetti would not have recognized that he had ever had acquaintance with the piece that was performed at the Trafalgar Theatre on Monday night” (Malan 1984b: 144).

Enticed by the wealth discovered on the Witwatersrand, many opera companies toured the interior, including those of Bob Bolder, James Henry Harper, Edgar Perkins, Luscombe Searelle and Arturo Bonamici, to name but a few. While Perkins was active in Johannesburg in the late-1880s, Searelle produced 162 operas in Cape Town in 1887 (Malan 1986b: 362). By 1889, Searelle moved his company to Johannesburg where he was active for over a decade, not only producing opera, but also building theatres and even composing three operas during his stay in South Africa. From August to November 1889, he produced fifteen different works in the Theatre Royal, among



others George Bizet's *Carmen*, Giuseppe Verdi's *Il trovatore* and Charles Gounod's *Faust* along with two of his own operas, *Bobadil* and *Estrella* (Malan 1986a: 223). In conjunction with Perkins's Opera, Drama and Burlesque Company, they made for a bustling operatic life in Johannesburg (Stead 1963: 12). By 1900, Searelle left South Africa again for Europe (Malan 1986a: 224).

During the first twenty years of its existence, the newly built Opera House in Cape Town mainly staged operettas by Gilbert and Sullivan and French composers such as Edmond Audran and Robert Planquette, only occasionally producing serious opera. The first such instance was when the Arthur Rouse Company staged the first performance of Richard Wagner's *Tannhäuser* in 1899 (Malan 1986b: 364). The other occasions were in February 1912 and April 1913, respectively, when the Thomas Quinlan Opera Group toured the country and produced six grand operas, namely Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida*, Charles Gounod's *Faust*, Richard Wagner's *Lobengrin* and *Tannhäuser*, and George Bizet's *Carmen*. The 1913 productions coincided with the Wagner Centenary, and Quinlan produced a Wagner Festival in both Cape Town and Johannesburg where they produced *Die Walküre*, *Tristan und Isolde*, *Lobengrin*, *Tannhäuser* and *Die Meistersinger* (Stead 1963: 16). Of this endeavour, Olga Racster (1951: 132) wrote, "to introduce into a void a cult which had taken centuries to grow elsewhere was pioneer work indeed".

## 2. Local opera production

### 2.1 The Cape

During the first half of the nineteenth century, local opera productions were, by all accounts, isolated musical happenings, dependant on the initiative of specific individuals living in the Cape at that time. During the early decades of the nineteenth century, there were a sufficient number of local musicians to form an orchestra, and overtures to operas were performed occasionally as individual items on concert programmes. In 1806, for example, the overtures to Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* and Christoph Willibald Gluck's *Iphigénie en Aulide* were part of a concert performed in the African Theatre

under the direction of local musician Johann Christoph Schruppf (Bouws 1982: 28).

On 31 July 1824, a Dutch translation of Pierre-Augustin Beaumarchais's *Le barbier de Séville* was performed under the direction of Frenchman Etienne Boniface (Bouws 1966: 37-8). According to Bouws, the music used for this production was a mixture of the opera setting by Giovanni Paisiello (composed 1782) and Gioachino Rossini (composed 1816). The orchestral parts were managed by the orchestra of the English garrison who were also responsible for the first ballad opera productions in 1801. The evening's entertainment, which took place in the African Theatre, included the aria 'Di tanti palpiti' from another Rossini opera, *Tancredi* (Bouws 1982: 43-4).

The first complete local production of a serious opera in the Cape took place in 1831. Ten years after its première in Berlin in 1821, Carl Maria von Weber's *Der Freischütz* was performed in the African Theatre by the local theatre group All the World's a Stage. The orchestral parts were taken care of by The Amateur Band, a local group of amateur musicians, under the direction of Wilhelm Brandt, the organist at the Lutheran Church. All the World's a Stage had been active as a theatre group for a number of years and had also tried their hand at ballad operas in the 1820s, at times collaborating with groups from abroad (Bouws 1966: 156). The London actor and singer H Booth directed *Der Freischütz*; an English translation of the libretto was used, and the main characters' names were changed from Agathe to Linda and from Max to Adolphe. The production was staged on 29 October 1831 and repeated on 17 December of that same year. The *Commercial Advertiser* reviewed the performance favourably, stating that "the scenery and contrivances in the Bullet Scene were got up with considerable effect and ingenuity, and gave general satisfaction to the numerous audience." The reviewer further remarked that the orchestral accompaniment was "in many of the passages [...] extremely difficult and require[d] very great precision in executing", and concluded that the Amateur Band had offered "their services very handsomely" (Bouws 1966: 156).

By the late-nineteenth century, a number of amateur opera societies had been formed in various cities, including Bloemfontein, Durban, Port Elizabeth, Cape Town and Johannesburg. However, regular opera

seasons by local production houses in the Cape only materialised from the 1930s onwards, when the founding of institutions where voice training took place secured the gradual development of indigenous opera production. The existence of adequate voice training, then as now, was a criterion for sustained and consistent local production.

In 1910, the South African College of Music in Cape Town opened its doors with thirty-three registered students and, over the next half century, two of the College's directors, William Henry Bell and Erik Chisholm, brought local opera production to Cape Town audiences. Bell was appointed head of the school in 1911 and stayed on as director until 1935. During this time, he founded and directed the Cape Town Little Theatre, nurturing the public's interest in opera and ballet and, in 1933, he started producing opera with students. The first student production was Domenico Cimarosa's *Il matrimonio segreto*, followed by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* in 1934 (Inskip 1972: 16). Although opera had been part of the College's activities since the 1920s, it became a more prominent activity after the Second World War when Erik Chisholm, a prolific opera composer and an enterprising and experienced musician, became its director in 1946 (the year of Bell's death). He established the University Opera Company in 1951 as well as the Opera School in 1954 with the Italian, Gregorio Fiasconaro as full-time director. During this time, Cape Town experienced an explosion of opera productions unequalled to this day, as the Company staged many operas from the standard repertory. In less than a decade students produced forty different operas in 650 performances – all accompanied by the University Orchestra under the direction of Chisholm himself. Many of these performances took place in the Little Theatre (Malan 1979c: 272).<sup>5</sup> The Opera Company toured throughout South Africa, also embarking on extended tours to Northern and Southern Rhodesia (currently Zambia and Zimbabwe) and the UK. In the 1956 to 1957 London season, the company presented the first staged performance of Béla Bartók's *Bluebeard's castle* in England. Notable premières of locally composed operas included Chisholm's *The pardoner's tale* (1961) and John Joubert's *Silas Marner* (1961) (Malan 1979c: 272). Reviews of the

5 Cf also Donald Inskip's (1972: 19-157) list of opera productions held in the Little Theatre.

many opera productions held at the Little Theatre in Cape Town reveal that opera production was, at this stage, primarily geared towards the establishment of a European tradition in South Africa where the performance criteria of mid-twentieth-century Europe held sway.<sup>6</sup> Upholding an exclusive European culture was the survival strategy for the establishment of opera production and it is clear that little regard was given towards the possible incorporation of indigenous musical or cultural practices in the genre.

During these years, Cape Town also boasted an amateur opera company in the so-called Coloured community. In 1933 the Eoan Group<sup>7</sup> was launched in District Six, and in 1943 Joseph Manca (a South African of Italian descent) became its musical director. Manca was initially co-opted to coach the small choir and he soon started performing small choral works and simultaneously trained individual singers. The choir's numbers and skills grew spectacularly and, in 1949, the group staged its first operatic production, Alfred Silver's operetta *A slave in Araby*. After a decade of voice training and ever-increasing ambitious musical productions, including light operas and large-scale choral works, Manca started producing serious opera with the Eoan Group in 1956 when the group staged a historic performance of Giuseppe Verdi's *La traviata*, sung in Italian. At least ten more Italian operas were produced in the two decades following the success of this production (Manca 1982: 26).

Throughout the apartheid years, the organisation played an important yet ambivalent cultural and educational role in the Coloured community. They performed under the strictures of the government's policy of 'separate development', with the result that the group's musical activities functioned independently and separately from the operatic activities of the so-called White community of Cape Town. The group's insistence on producing opera in 'true Italian fashion' presents a conundrum with regards to the idea of indigenisation. Apart from the racist expectation that Coloured people would

6 Cf, for instance, reviews published in both *Die Burger* and *The Cape Times* in the course of June 1956 when the University Opera Company produced a series of Mozart operas as part of worldwide bicentenary celebrations of the composer's birth.

7 Its founder, Helen Southern-Holt, named the organisation the Eoan Group after the Greek word 'eos', meaning 'dawn'.

perform opera differently, the group's acceptance of Italian opera as a site of music-making, self-confirmation and shared humanity made of Italian opera a South African genre, without it needing to mutate or change into something 'South African'.

## 2.2 Natal

The development of local opera production in Durban is characterised by the continuous formation of new opera societies, a prevalence of amateur groups, right up to the formation of the Performing Arts Councils in 1963 and the seemingly lasting popularity of operettas by Gilbert and Sullivan, starting in 1886 when Ferguson Brown founded the Durban Amateur Operatic Society. Their first production was Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* (composed 1885), staged in the Theatre Royal. The artists seemed to have been "ladies and gentlemen who placed themselves under the tuition of Mr. J. Ferguson Brown", the orchestra comprising a mere five musicians, "two violins, a cornet, and a double bass, was supported by a piano at which Mr. Brown himself was seated in the capacity of conductor" (Jackson 1979: 411). Playing to packed houses, this production was repeated seven times and *The Mikado* remained a firm favourite with the Durban public for years. Around the turn of the century, local opera production had to compete with the many touring companies from Britain producing the same genre of opera in the city of Durban. Among these were the companies of Luscombe Searelle, Edgar Perkins and Frank Wheeler. A number of local amateur singers were, however, recruited by the visiting companies, Ferguson Brown being one of them (Jackson 1979: 435). By 1919, local opera production was revived by Ferguson Brown's son, Gus Brown. The society was renamed the Durban Opera Society and continued the tradition of staging Gilbert and Sullivan operettas. By 1928, an attempt was made to start the production of grand opera by local singers when Dan Godfrey established yet another society, the Durban Amateur Grand Opera Society, staging Charles Gounod's *Faust* and Giuseppe Verdi's *Il trovatore*. Towards the end of the Second World War, another society was formed, this time the Municipal Choral and Light Opera Society who produced more Gilbert and Sullivan at the Criterion in 1946 (Jackson 1979: 412).

After 1952, the newly opened Alhambra Theatre became the venue for operetta production by local groups, and more societies were formed. The Durban Opera and Drama Society ventured to revive musical comedy from 1954 onwards, and The Durban Municipal Light Operatic and Choral Society produced Gilbert and Sullivan's *The gondoliers* (composed 1889) as well as *The Mikado* under the direction of Teddy Browne and William Pickerill. The latter two organisations continued to produce light opera until the early 1960s. In 1959, Heinrich Haape launched the Durban Opera Company, the first local opera group to tour to the (then) Transvaal. In 1964, this company was taken over by the Natal Performing Arts Council (NAPAC) who initiated most opera productions after this date (Jackson 1979: 439).

In 1971, George Jackson (1979: 440) wrote in the *South African Music Encyclopaedia* that "Durban is still very British". He probably referred to the White population only, and the popularity of Gilbert and Sullivan operettas until 1971 supports his claim. Notwithstanding the fact that the Durban productions were essentially amateur productions, Gilbert and Sullivan operetta seemed to appeal and contribute to a specific Durbanite culture and, within the Durban society at large, to a specific population group. Although light opera was often performed in Cape Town, it did not achieve the same sustained popularity it enjoyed in Durban. Introducing Western classical music, and specifically opera, to indigenous South African cultures also took hold in Durban. Under the guidance of Dr Charles Hoby, the Durban Municipal Bantu Brass Band not only produced instrumentalists, but also singers such as the tenor Joseph Dhlamini and the mezzo-soprano Esther Makhoba (Jackson 1979: 415). It is, however, not clear from the source of this information what kind of music these soloists sang or how such music was performed.

### 2.3 Johannesburg

Local opera production in Johannesburg owes much of its development to the efforts of the Scotsman John Connell. Connell settled in Johannesburg in 1916 as an organist and was active in the music industry until his death in 1955. Initially, his energies were focused on choral singing but, from 1925 onwards, he actively started producing opera and, by 1950, Connell staged an average of nine to

ten operas annually (Malan 1984: 36). In 1936, the *Rand Daily Mail* reported under the heading ‘Johannesburg’s Free week of opera’ that “Every year Mr. Connell assembles a cast, a chorus and an orchestra and presents opera during Music Fortnight. He does this not for the sake of the box office, not for charity, but solely for the love of the thing and for the sake of bringing music a little nearer to the people” (Malan 1979: 296). Charles Gounod’s *Faust*, George Bizet’s *Carmen*, Giuseppe Verdi’s *Il trovatore*, Gaetano Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor*, Richard Wagner’s *Tannhäuser* and Franz Lehar’s *The merry widow* count among Connell’s many productions. He was also able to stage Modest Mussorgsky’s large-scale opera *Boris Godunov* in 1939 and 1942, respectively. Despite criticism that he produced “too many operas [...] in an unfinished manner”, patrons in the city continued to flock to his productions (Malan 1984: 36).

Connell’s dream was to build a national opera company with its headquarters in Johannesburg and smaller units in the larger cities of the country. The 1942 season was set up as a national opera event, a collaborative effort embracing the main centres in South Africa. The productions during this year included Giuseppe Verdi’s *Aida*, Gioachino Rossini’s *Il barbiere de Siviglia*, Modest Mussorgsky’s *Boris Godunov* and Carl Maria von Weber’s singspiel *Abu Hassan*. The forces comprised the orchestras of Cape Town, Johannesburg and the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), in conjunction with singers and dancers from all over the country. The productions toured from Johannesburg to Pretoria and Cape Town, and in each city local choruses and dancers were used. The ever-growing scope of productions included operas such as Richard Wagner’s *Lohengrin*, Giacomo Puccini’s *Tosca* and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Snow maiden*, being introduced and independent ballet productions added as part of the tour. In 1946, Connell even staged George Bizet’s *Carmen* sung in both Afrikaans and English, an innovation lauded in the newspapers with headlines such as ‘Ovation for operatic invasion’ (Malan 1979: 37). In Johannesburg, the Empire Theatre was booked out night after night during this season, despite criticism of mediocre performing standards. Connell’s 1947 season included the staging of ten operas and four ballets. In an eight-week period, fifty-three thousand people attended these concerts in Johannesburg and eighteen thousand attended an eleven-day season in Pretoria.

Connell's imperialist aspirations with regard to opera production are clear in his statement that "Opera has been established, and has persisted in a way comparable with no other city of similar size in the Empire" (Malan 1979: 38). As was the case in Cape Town, the main focus of opera production in Johannesburg during this time seemed to be the establishment of the production of the genre in its adopted country. Reaching performance standards and frequency that equalled 'the Empire' was clearly of primary concern and one that dominated much of the local opera production throughout the country at this time.

## 2.4 A national body for opera: the Performing Arts Councils

From 1940 onwards, a need developed for a national operatic infrastructure, a move aimed at entrenching opera production as part of South African culture on a more permanent basis. A variety of interest groups initiated national organisations in the 1940s and 1950s with the aim to sustain opera production in the country. In 1940, Alessandro Rota launched the 'National Opera Company' in Cape Town, an organisation that floundered due to his internment when Italy joined the Second World War (Malan 1986: 198).<sup>8</sup> John Connell set up a 'National Opera Society' in Johannesburg in 1946, another venture that could not establish itself in durable fashion (Kapp 2008: 15). In 1948, the newly elected South African government established the first state-funded organisation to support the arts, the National Theatre Organisation (NTO). Based in Pretoria, this organisation was, to a large extent, ineffective due to insufficient funding and the huge geographical area in which it operated (Blanckenberg 2009: 7).

In the 1950s, two new private organisations were launched, this time with more success. The 'National Opera Association of South Africa' was founded in Johannesburg in August 1955 with the aim "to encourage indigenous opera and ballet and to encourage South African artists to remain in the country" (Emdon 1984: 312). A year later, its counterpart for Afrikaans speakers, the 'Operavereniging van Suid-Afrika' (OPSA), was launched in Johannesburg with the aim to "promote the art of opera in all its facets and, in particular, to

8 Rota was an Italian national and therefore interned during the Second World War.



encourage the performance of operas in Afrikaans in order to make opera more intelligible to Afrikaans-speaking members of the public, and to encourage the development of an indigenous operatic art” (Botha 1984: 313). The desire to establish an indigenised format of opera through the adoption of Afrikaans is significant. These two societies collaborated in several productions and both applied for subsidy from the Department of Education, Arts and Science. However, the Department was not willing to subsidise two separate bodies and the societies decided to merge. In October 1958, the ‘South African Opera Federation’ was founded (Kapp 2008: 19).<sup>9</sup> However, it was evident that the merger took place on the basis of financial convenience rather than principled conviction. After the merger, the original societies did not in fact disband, and both continued producing opera with much friction between them as each pursued their initial interests. In the Cape, the Opera Company of the University of Cape Town as well as the Eoan Group from District Six continued to produce opera, touring not only the bigger cities of South Africa, but also rural towns. In 1957, the Afrikaanse Kultuurraad of Pretoria launched yet another organisation named the ‘Opera-organisasie van Suid-Afrika’ (OPEROSA). Its stated aim was to grow into a national organisation and to lobby for funding from the state (Kapp 2008: 20).

In 1960, the government held a conference in Pretoria to discuss the need for a centralised body to manage and support the arts on a national level. On 1 April 1963, four Performing Arts Councils were established in each of the provinces of the Republic of South Africa, namely the Cape Performing Arts Board (CAPAB) in the Cape province; the Performing Arts Council of Transvaal (PACT) in Transvaal; the Natal Performing Arts Council (NAPAC) in Natal, and the Performing Arts Council of the Orange Free State (PACOFs) in the Orange Free State (Blanckenberg 2009: 8).<sup>10</sup> These councils were not about government control in the first place, but answered to a genuine need for support within the artistic community. However,

<sup>9</sup> According to Emdon (1984: 312), the year was 1957.

<sup>10</sup> <[www.pmg.org.za/docs/2007/070529pacofspres.ppt](http://www.pmg.org.za/docs/2007/070529pacofspres.ppt)>. In Afrikaans the names of the four organisations were as follows: KRUIK (Kaapse Raad vir Uitvoerende Kunste), TRUK (Transvaalse Raad vir Uitvoerende Kunste), NARUK (Natal Raad vir Uitvoerende Kunste) and SUKOVS (Streeksraad vir Uitvoerende Kunste van die Oranje Vrystaat).

these institutions facilitated government control, as the management of each council resided in a Board of Directors appointed by the Minister of Cultural Affairs (Performing Arts in South Africa 1969). With secure state funding, opera in South Africa was, for the first time, able to offer professional and sustainable careers to local artists. However, within the framework of the government's apartheid policy, these councils provided opportunities for White singers, dancers and instrumentalists only. Until 1980, access to their productions was likewise only for Whites.

## 2.5 Opera in translation

From the 1940s onwards, a strong movement existed among Afrikaans-speaking intellectuals and art patrons to have operas from the standard canon performed in Afrikaans. This is a particularly interesting aspect of the indigenisation of opera in South Africa. The development of the Afrikaans language dates back to 1875 when the 'Genootskap vir Regte Afrikaners' was established (Hugo 2008), and the promotion of the language must be viewed against the backdrop of its emancipation from both the Dutch and English languages, an emancipation not innocent of political motives. The negative association of political oppression with the Afrikaans language in later years was a result of the segregationist politics of the government after 1948. However, the argument in favour of translating opera was that of accessibility of opera to the general public; hence, operas were translated into both Afrikaans and English (*Scenaria* 1977: 31).

In Europe, the translation of opera libretti enjoys a history dating back to the eighteenth century with many operas by Georg Friedrich Händel, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Christoph Willibald Gluck and Gioachino Rossini translated into English, Italian, German and French, depending on the country where these works were performed (Jacobs 1992 (4): 786). Even Richard Wagner's operas were translated into French and English with the intention of making them more accessible to audiences (Jacobs 1992: 787). The first serious opera performed by local musicians in the Cape also happened to be an English translation of Carl Maria von Weber's *Der Freischütz* in 1831. In Europe, the trend was common until the 1950s, after which the idea of 'fidelity towards the original text' made the practice unpopular.

The first opera translated into Afrikaans was Pietro Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana*. The work was translated by Cornelius de Villiers (also known as Dr Con de Villiers) and performed in Stellenbosch in April 1940 by the Afrikaans National Student Association and the Radio Association. It was produced by Alessandro Rota who also sang the tenor role of Turridio (Kapp 2008: 16).<sup>11</sup> In Johannesburg, John Connell was responsible for a 1946-production of George Bizet's *Carmen*, sung in English and Afrikaans (Malan 1984: 37).<sup>12</sup> In 1948, Connell also produced Richard Wagner's *Tannhäuser* and, in 1950, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*, both in Afrikaans (Kapp 2008: 15). All of these productions were directed by non-Afrikaans speakers. In 1951, OPSA was established with the explicit aim to promote the performance of opera in Afrikaans and to popularise opera under Afrikaans speakers (Botha 1984: 313). They committed themselves to producing at least one opera in Afrikaans annually. It is not clear to what extent they succeeded in this goal but, in 1958, they produced Giacomo Puccini's *La Bohème* in Afrikaans (Kapp 2008: 9). In 1959-1960, a series of operas in Afrikaans was launched during an opera tour in Johannesburg's neighbouring towns.<sup>13</sup> Among them were Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Così fan tutte* and *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, Bedrich Smetana's *Bartered bride* and Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*. During this same tour, Giuseppe Verdi's *Rigoletto* was performed in English (Kapp 2008: 19).

In the former Transvaal, a division between the Afrikaans-speaking and English-speaking partisans of opera developed over time. The latter preferred Italian opera and the former prioritised opera translated into Afrikaans. Combined with a number of headstrong individuals working in the industry, a general lack of co-operation and distrust existed between the two groups (Kapp 2008: 18). The formation of the Performing Arts Councils resulted in a truce between the historically antagonistic camps of Afrikaans- and English-speaking opera interests. The translation of opera was generally unpopular with singers and

- 11 At the time, Rota learnt the Afrikaans language to enable him to take part in the production.
- 12 According to Stead (1963: 22), the opera was in Afrikaans only and translated by Gideon Roos.
- 13 These towns were, among others, Randfontein, Brakpan, Rustenburg, Bethal, Alberton, Ontdekkeers and Springs (Kapp 2006: 19).

staunch opera lovers, and the practice was often criticised in the arts magazine *Scenaria*.<sup>14</sup> By 1982, such translations had been abandoned by PACT and described by *Scenaria* as “an outdated practice”, although CAPAB at the time continued to perform operas translated into Afrikaans and English (Eichbaum 1982: 7). A decade later, in celebration of the bicentenary of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s death in 1991, Mozart’s *Bastien und Bastienne* (the first opera to be translated into Zulu), now renamed *Themba no Thembile* was performed by The Durban Arts Association. The leading roles were sung by Walter Mdleshebi and Thokozami Mkhize and the opera was translated by David Smith. *The Times* mentioned of this pioneering work that “in perhaps the most exotic tribute of all in this bicentenary year, even the Zulus will today honour the 200th anniversary of Mozart’s death” (*The Times* 1991).

Can the translation of opera libretti into Afrikaans, English or Zulu be viewed as movement towards indigenisation? Although appellated differently, the concept of indigenisation is present in the discipline of translation studies where the practice of adapting a text for readers of a different language is called ‘domestication’. Maria Teresa Sánchez writes that domestication “refer[s] to the inevitable process of having to adapt the foreign text to our own linguistic and cultural background when we translate” (Sanchez 2007). Translating an English text into French, Pierre le Tourneur (2000: 16) articulates his intention “to distill from the English [...] a French [text] to be read with pleasure and interest by French readers who would not have to ask themselves whether the book they were reading was a copy or an original”. Although both statements imply a translation of high artistic quality, the adaptation of a libretto to the “linguistic and cultural background” of the adopted country certainly points towards opera production becoming embedded in the local environment and can therefore be interpreted as a sign of indigenisation.

14 *Cf.* for example, an interview with Mimi Coertse in *Scenaria*, May-June 1977: 40, as well as Julius Eichbaum’s article ‘A language of love, some thoughts on the translation of opera’, in *Scenaria*, July 1978: 3.

## 2.6 Opera production by the Arts Councils 1963-1994

After the formation of the Performing Art Councils, opera production was predominantly taken over by these well-funded and organised structures. PACT's first opera production was Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* and Giacomo Puccini's *Tosca* in 1963; PACOFS and NAPAC followed a year later with Johan Strauss's *Die Fledermaus* and Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, respectively, and CAPAB's first production took place in February 1965 with Bedrich Smetana's *The bartered bride* (Performing Arts in South Africa 1969).<sup>15</sup> Within the first five years of their existence, all four Arts Councils produced an average of three operas and/or operettas annually and, from 1963 until the demise of the Arts Councils in 1998, opera production experienced a period of stabilisation, with the gradual development of local talent and expansion of repertoire.

State funding was also made available for the building of new theatres, providing much needed new technology and stimulus to arts production as a whole. In May 1971, the Nico Malan Theatre was inaugurated in Cape Town, a performance complex including a 1204-seat opera house and various other venues for the performance of theatre, music and ballet. This inauguration coincided with the tenth anniversary of the Republic of South Africa and was celebrated with a performance of Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida*. However, during the inauguration, protests were held and performances boycotted due to the venue's racially exclusive policy. Although the Nico Malan was formally declared open to all races in 1975 (*Scenaria* 1977: 14), it took five more years before singers of other races joined CAPAB's opera chorus. In 1980, a few former Eoan members, Ronald Theys and Keith Timms, accepted employment as members of CAPAB Opera Company (Allen 1980: 2). In Pretoria, the State Theatre was opened in May 1981, a huge state-of-the-art building comprising five auditoriums, including an opera house with 1300 seats. In Bloemfontein, the Sand du Plessis Theatre Complex was completed for PACOFS in 1985, and the new theatre complex for NAPAC, The Playhouse, was opened in Durban the following year.<sup>16</sup>

15 Cf lists under 'Presentations by the Performing Arts Councils' at the end of the book (no page numbers).

16 <[www.playhousecompany.com](http://www.playhousecompany.com)>

During the thirty-year lifespan of the Performing Arts Councils in South Africa, opera was most consistently produced by CAPAB in Cape Town and PACT in Johannesburg and Pretoria. CAPAB was the first Arts Council to enjoy modern production facilities, but it also benefitted from the UCT Opera School that provided the Arts Council with a continuous stream of able singers. Despite many managerial and financial problems, CAPAB was able to stage an average of eight to ten opera productions annually (Eichbaum 1981: 2).<sup>17</sup> The repertoire performed during the first twenty years of CAPAB's existence predominantly showcased the Italian repertoire, a fact for which they were often criticised (Botha 1989). In 1982, the appointment of Murray Dickie as head of CAPAB's opera section paved the way for the stabilisation and expansion of a local opera corps (*Scenaria* 1982: 36). Dickey was responsible for the much needed development of local singers and produced the CAPAB premières of a number of Richard Wagner's operas, among others *Die Walküre*, *Tristan und Isolde*, *Die Meistersinger* and Richard Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier* (Botha 1989).

During the first twenty years of its existence, PACT had been performing mainly in the Civic Theatre in Johannesburg, producing an average of four operas annually. Like CAPAB, they also performed predominantly Italian repertoire, including operas by Verdi, Puccini and Donizetti. During the first decade, other external factors contributed to PACT's lower output. The organisation had no permanent opera company and the Transvaal (as it was then known) had no opera school to provide trained singers. Because PACT could not offer professional careers to local singers, they lost local talent to countries abroad (PACT 1972). It was only with the inauguration of the State Theatre in Pretoria in May 1981 that PACT's productions increased. The first opera season held at the State Theatre consisted of four Italian operas, Giuseppe Verdi's *Othello* and *La traviata*, Pietro Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana* and Ruggero Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci*. However, all principal roles were sung by singers imported from Europe (Starck 1981).

17 In 1981, CAPAB was declared bankrupt. Cf 'Scenaria interviews CAPAB (*Scenaria* 1981: 25); Eichbaum (*Scenaria* 1982: 3. CAPAB's managerial and financial misfortunes are also extensively discussed in Blanckenberg (2009).

Until the early 1980s, the Natal Performing Arts Council (NAPAC) in Durban was described by Don Ridgeway (1988: page nos?) as the “graveyard of the performing arts in South Africa”. Between 1963 and 1970, NAPAC had no fixed venue for their productions, but they settled into the Alhambra Theatre on 23 April 1970 after this historic building was renovated (Ridgeway 1988). James Conrad was appointed as NAPAC’s opera director in 1963 and, by 1979, he had produced twenty operas, an average of little more than one annually (*Scenaria* 1979: 30). It was only in 1982, when Rodney Phillips joined NAPAC, that the Arts Council was placed on a more solid managerial and artistic footing (Ridgeway 1988). He created the NAPAC ballet company, launched the Natal Philharmonic Orchestra, and provided much needed managerial structures. In 1987, the Natal Playhouse was inaugurated as NAPAC’s new home. James Conrad produced Richard Wagner’s *Der Fliegende Holländer* for the opening of the Playhouse (Ridgeway 1988).

The operatic output of PACOFS in Bloemfontein was, compared to the other councils, also rather small. By 1987, the average annual output of opera production was two operas, one musical and one operetta. However, there were substantial financial constraints at the time, and the opera board was considering operatic concerts in order to produce more opera and stimulate public interest (Ulliat 1988). A fifth and independent opera company, the Roodepoort City Opera under the guidance of Weiss Doubell, also produced opera for a number of years in the 1980s in the then Transvaal (Viljoen 1986: 11).

Until the late-1980s, Italian opera dominated the choice of repertoire performed by all four Arts Councils by a margin of 75%, with works by Gioachino Rossini, Giuseppe Verdi, Giacomo Puccini, Vincenzo Bellini and Gaetano Donizetti. German opera by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Richard Wagner and Richard Strauss were in second place, although George Bizet’s *Carmen* was always a favourite with all companies and audiences. Occasionally, an opera by Benjamin Britten, Bedrich Smetana or Leos Janáček was performed (Viljoen 1988: 41). Julius Eichbaum (1988: 42), editor of the arts magazine *Scenaria*, criticised this trend in 1987: “For the best part of twenty-five years, the Performing Arts Councils pursued an artistic policy, which stated with every assurance that opera in South Africa had to be predominantly Italian by nature”. It is certain that professional opera

production by the Arts Councils faced significant problems. One of the main issues that had a major influence on the logistics of opera production was the cultural boycott instituted in the 1980s.<sup>18</sup> Neels Hansen, director of PACT opera in 1987, mentioned that, although some good European artists, singers, conductors and producers did accept invitations at the time, the big names in the industry stayed away from South Africa (Krummeck 1988).<sup>19</sup> The boycott also completely disrupted planned productions, as finalised contracts with singers and conductors from abroad were often cancelled on short notice (Jones 1985). In the long run, the boycott resulted in cultural isolation and a lack of development for opera in South Africa (Krummeck 1988). Hansen further noted: “I do believe we do good work, the standard of opera is high in this country. I do believe that we are miles behind in the development. We are now where German opera production was in 1966. We are twenty years behind” (Krummeck 1987). South African opera singer, Elizabeth Connell, who sang with the English National Opera in London at the time, commented on the local opera scene as follows:

What really struck me is the tremendous isolation [...] call it artistic isolation. Geographically South Africa is, of course, far away from Europe and America, but today that is no excuse for being isolated. People here, opera people, just don't seem to know what is going on overseas. They have little knowledge of the development of opera over the last decade or so; they don't seem to know of the singers that are at the top today, and have little cognizance of directors and conductors (*Scenaria* 1980: 7).

Another problem was that well-trained local singers, musicians and ballet dancers often found more lucrative jobs in Europe (Krummeck 1988). Orchestral players had to be imported from Europe, an expensive exercise exacerbated by an ever-weakening South African

- 18 In Britain, the ‘Equity Ban’ was put in place in 1985. Equity was the name of the organisation to which all artists performing in Britain belonged to by law. The ban stipulated that all artists from Britain who accepted invitations to take part in arts productions in South Africa would be penalised. In reaction to this, an anti-Ban campaign was also launched as some artists in Britain were of the opinion that the ban was instituted by the minority of artists (Gelling 1986).
- 19 Some international stars did, however, visit South Africa, among others, sopranos Victoria de Los Angeles in 1977 and Birgit Nilsson in 1980, pianist Alicia de Larrocha in 1980, and guitarist Narciso Yepes in 1984. *C/Tidboald* 2008: 84-92.



currency coupled with the fact that many of these players stayed in the country for a short time only. Training centres for local singers were insufficient; by 1977, only two cities in the country offered opera training, one company in Cape Town and the other in Pretoria (*Scenaria* 1977: 31).

The artistic model followed by South African opera companies during these years is revealing. Opposing views can be found in a 1987 panel discussion broadcast on SABC Radio. Neels Hansen of PACT opera challenged the idea that La Scala in Italy or the Metropolitan in New York should be models for South African opera production. He mentioned that “our biggest endeavor here is to create something which is South African, which fills the opera world with a small piece of South Africa” (Jones 1985). The tension between creating an indigenised operatic identity or following European standards as closely as possible was highlighted in the same interview. One of South Africa’s stalwarts of the operatic world, soprano Emma Renzi, noted that “opera is not South African, [...] we have to see to it that we can get that far that we can do [opera] stylistically correctly, as far as we can possibly get” (Jones 1985).

Surveying the history of opera in South Africa, it is clear that little has been done to stimulate indigenous arts production. No local opera compositions were commissioned or performed by the Arts Councils prior to 1994. The first locally composed opera performed by an Arts Council was Roelof Temmingh’s *Enoch, prophet of God*, performed by CAPAB in 1995. So-called Black and Coloured principal singers started emerging only by the 1980s and experiments with indigenous interpretations of the standard repertoire only occurred after the demise of the Arts Councils by 1998. In addition, apartheid legislation had severely hampered the growth of racially inclusive audiences, a legacy still painfully obvious, and it is nearly impossible to find glimpses of a truly South African opera tradition during the thirty years of Arts Council productions.

## 2.7 Opera production after 1994

After the first national democratic elections in South Africa in 1994, government structures in the country changed radically. Due to the fundamental shift in state power and the nature of the history that

preceded it, much of what was achieved by the previous government, also with regard to the arts, was viewed with suspicion (Eichbaum 1998: 3). The years following 1994 saw the demise of the four Performing Arts Councils, as the new government set other criteria and revised subsidy policies for arts production fundamentally.

During the three years following 1994, the Arts Councils continued to function under the existing structures. In the case of CAPAB, 1995 even showed an upsurge in opera production, as the company launched its first Opera Festival from 18 January to 6 February. Angelo Gobbato initiated the festival and one of its aims was to break down the image of opera as a euro-centric cultural activity. Apart from the production of three Italian operas, this festival also saw the première of a new locally composed opera, Roelof Temmingh's *Enoch, prophet of God*, with Fikile Mvinjelwa singing the title role (Richards 1995).<sup>20</sup> CAPAB was disbanded in 1998 and its existing opera corps was transformed into a private organisation called Cape Town Opera (Gobbato 2008). This immediate transition guaranteed uninterrupted opera production in Cape Town.

In Pretoria, PACT Opera was transformed into the State Theatre Opera Company in 1996 (*Scenaria* 1998: 1). The company continued to produce opera on a smaller scale until the State Theatre was temporarily 'mothballed' by the government in 2000 after exposure of alleged financial mismanagement. A government finding suggested that "the board and management of the State Theatre did not restructure itself in line with the principles laid out in the White Paper nor has the Institution shown much public impact" (State Theatre 2000: page nos?). Both PACOFS and NAPAC continued to produce opera, albeit on a small scale. In 1997, PACOFS managed to stage Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* with former Eoan singer, Virginia Davids, in the leading role. It was, however, their only production for that year (Eichbaum 1997: 21).

The *White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage*, released by the Department of Arts, Culture and Technology in June 1996, stipulated the new government's vision on the development and funding of

20 Crouse described the work as a mix between opera as a European art form and African rhythms. Additional African music for this opera was composed by Lungile Jacobs. Personal interview, 25 August 2009.

arts in South Africa. Although the far-reaching implications of this document on the performing arts, in general, and on opera, in particular, cannot be discussed in depth in this article, a few quotations from Chapter 4 of the *White Paper* will suffice to illustrate the implications of the new policy on opera production:

18. In 1995/96, the Performing Arts Councils operating income was R160m, of which box office receipts accounted for 18%. R112m was granted by the State, which represents a very high level of subsidy.

19. Analysis of box office returns shows these do not even cover administrative costs. The inescapable conclusion is that government is subsidizing expensive art forms and infrastructure for a small audience at an unaffordable level. The activity based costing exercise indicates that ballet and opera consume in the order of 30% of the total expenditure. These activities are exclusive to PACT and CAPAB (*White Paper* 1996: 13).<sup>21</sup>

The state subsidies enjoyed by the four Provincial Arts Councils since 1963 were phased out over a period of three years and, by 1998, the Arts Councils were disbanded, forcing opera houses to become private companies. Although times have been very trying for opera companies in South Africa since then, the door to radical indigenisation has been opened wide, a transition that happened as a matter of urgency and not without political motives. In 1998, Cape Town Opera produced a boldly indigenised version of Giacomo Puccini's *La Bohème*. Re-named *La Bohème Noire*, the music was kept intact, but the libretto was re-written and set in Johannesburg during the 1976 student boycotts. In addition, the production included Black singers only. Although a risky undertaking, exposing the company to potential loss of support from a mainly White audience, the production was successful. The issue of 'Black singers only' was branded as apartheid-in-reverse, although critics such as *Scenaria's* Julius Eichbaum (1998: 11) wrote that "despite my already stated reservations regarding the policy behind such exercises, I enjoyed *La Bohème Noire* enormously".

In 2012, four professional opera companies had been producing opera in the country for a number of years: Cape Town Opera (CTO) and Isango Portabello,<sup>22</sup> both situated in Cape Town, as well as

21 <[www.dac.gov.za/white\\_paper](http://www.dac.gov.za/white_paper)>

22 This company also produces film and theatre.

Opera Africa<sup>23</sup> and the Black Tie Ensemble, situated in Johannesburg and Pretoria, respectively. These companies produced a variety of indigenised interpretations of operas from the standard canon. These include CTO's 'Africanised' version of Giuseppe Verdi's *Macbeth* in 2001 (repeated in 2007), which was set in a guerrilla war in Sierra Leone. Although sung in Italian, the opera was substantially shortened with the specific goal of highlighting a postcolonial message. Sections of Verdi's music were also transcribed for alto saxophone, marimba and djembe, and stage props included, among others, that ubiquitous symbol of postcolonial Africa, the AK47 (Wasserman 2008). In 2009, CTO performed George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* in a 1950s Soweto, highlighting the issue of buildings that were invaded in Johannesburg.<sup>24</sup> Indigenous instruments such as the penny whistle and mouth organ were also used for this production (Crouse 2009). Strongly indigenised interpretations of Georges Bizet's *Carmen* (translated into *uCarmen eKhayelitsba*) and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* by Isango Portabello pocketed prestigious international accolades such as the Golden Bear Award at the Berlin Film Festival in February 2005 and the Laurence Olivier Award in London in March 2008. However, besides indigenised interpretations of existing operatic works, local opera companies also commissioned the composition of new operas, a development endeavour with the potential to establish an indigenised South African operatic practice. This is discussed in the next section of this article.

### 3. Local opera composition

In the interest of clarity, I have chosen to discuss the composition of opera in South Africa as a separate narrative to that of local production of opera. This subsection will, therefore, revert to the beginning of the nineteenth century to trace the roots of local opera composition in the country.

Compared to other new-world countries, local opera composition developed late in South Africa. In the USA, operas were composed

23 Opera Africa was established in Durban in 1994 but relocated to Johannesburg in 2005.

24 In *Porgy and Bess*, the characters live in a former aristocratic mansion which they have illegally invaded.

regularly as early as the late-eighteenth century (Kirk 2007), while similar trends in Brazil (Béhague 2007), Argentina (Franze 2007) and Canada (Jones 2007) followed a century later. However, it is difficult to speak conclusively to the question as to what constitutes a South African opera. Is South African-ness a matter of place, or a matter of content, or both? Is it convincing to classify an opera composed by William Henry Bell in 1910 (shortly after his arrival in Cape Town) as a South African opera? On the other hand, should John Joubert's operas, composed after he had left South Africa and containing no apparent reference to local content, still be considered South African operas? This is perhaps a less vexing problem when considering the process of indigenisation, which assumes a process in which culture continues to become more adapted to its context. For the discussion at hand, I have decided to include all operas composed on South African soil, irrespective of their frame of reference or musical 'language', as well as operas composed by composers originating from South Africa, but residing outside the country.

According to Bouws, Frederick Carl Lemming, a Danish musician living in the Cape between 1810 and 1817, composed and produced *Sapho*, a musical work in three acts for theatre in 1815. The first performance of *Sapho* was described in the local newspaper as "mixed with speech, song and dance" and Bouws is of the opinion that this work may well have been the first opera composed on South African soil. Lemming returned to his native Denmark in 1817, presumably taking the score of this work with him (Bouws 1982: 30-2). Although there were a few South African-born composers active in the Cape during the nineteenth century, none of them composed opera,<sup>25</sup> and the only operas currently known to have been composed in South Africa during the remainder of the nineteenth century were those of the British opera impresario Luscombe Searelle who lived in South Africa between 1887 and 1899. During this time, he composed *Black Rover*, *Kisses of Circe* and *Evalina*, all performed in Durban in 1899, the year of his return to England. The critic of the *Natal Mercury* dismissed these works, describing *Circe* as a "curious compound of

25 They were mainly from the De Villiers family, the most notable being Jan Stephanus de Villiers (1827-1902), a church musician and composer, also called 'Jan Orrelis'. De Villiers composed four oratorios (Malan 1979: 339-45).

crude cleverness and monotonous musical drive!” and *Evalina* as “a musical mélange and that not of a very high order” (Malan 1986: 224).

A trend similar to the development of local opera composition in other countries of the ‘new world’ can be traced in South African opera composition. The earliest generation of home-grown composers initially took on smaller and lighter opera, with operetta for schools and musical comedy being followed by serious opera some years later. However, as a result of the migration of European musicians to South Africa, the first serious operas composed on South African soil were those by William Henry Bell (*Hippolytus*, *Isabeau*, *The mousetrap*, *Doctor Love*, *The wandering scholar*, *The Duenna* and *Romeo and Juliet*) (Van der Spuy 1979: 160); Erik Chisholm (*The inland women*, *Murder in three keys*, *The midnight court*, *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Caucasian chalk circle*, *The importance of being Ernest* and *The life and loves of Robert Burns*) (Malan 1979c: 275), and Percival Kirby (*Open or shut* and *A maid of Amsterdam*) (Malan 1984a: 109). In 1946, the renowned English conductor and composer, Albert Coates, settled in South Africa with his South African wife Vera de Villiers and composed *The boy David*, *The duel* and *Van Hunck and the devil*, an opera based on local folklore and composed for the Jan van Riebeeck Festival in 1952 (Malan 1979d: 283).

The first serious operas composed by composers born in this country were those by John Joubert. He composed *Antigone* in 1951, *In the drought* in 1953 and *Silas Marner* in 1961, all of them composed outside South African borders. Joubert had left South Africa in 1946 for Britain and never returned to South Africa except for occasional short visits. He still considers his South African roots important, stating that “any introduction to my life and work would have to take account of the fact that I was born and spent the first 19 years of my life in South Africa” (Oosthuysen 2009: 11). In 1967, Cromwell Everson composed *Klutaimnestra*, a serial composition set in the Afrikaans language (Brukman 2005). Other operas composed in the 1960s were Stephen O’Reilly’s *The coming of the butterflies*, a radio opera which made use of serial techniques (Malan 1984d: 317), as well as Luigi Bezzio’s *Il grande viaggio*, an opera about the Great Trek composed in Italian (Malan 1979b: 167).

Commissions for locally composed opera have been few and far between. The SABC commissioned several radio and television operas

as well as operettas from the 1940s through to the 1970s. An unusually large number of local operettas were composed, predominantly for use in schools, but also for radio broadcast. The majority of these were in Afrikaans, emphasising the educative and developmental dynamic responsible for these compositions. Some examples are Adolph Hallis's *Jakaranda, Port of call* (both 1943) and *Love is gold* (1946) (Malan (ed) 1979-86, 2: 159); Lourens de Kock's *Potjierol, Soetkoek* (both 1950) and *Willemien* (1951) (Malan (ed) 1979-86, 1: 328); Hans Olaf Andresen's *Die heidenooientjie* (1957), *Die drie astertjies* (1960) and *Die mieliefeetjie* (1961) (Malan (ed) 1979-86, 1: 42), and Lourens Faul's *Prins van Manakato* (1957), *Skoenmaker Stillewater* (1960), *Die seemeu roep* (1962), *Mooifontein se meisies* (1964), *Ons vir jou* (1965) and *Ponkie en sy donkie* (1975) (Malan 1981a: 59).

The mid-1980s marked the beginning of a wave of new serious opera compositions by local composers.<sup>26</sup> Hendrik Hofmeyr composed *Il principe Barbablù* in 1986 and a year later *The fall of the House of Usher* (1987), a chamber opera for which he won the Nederburg Opera Prize that year (Roos 2000: 17).<sup>27</sup> Since his return to South Africa in 1992, three further operas were composed, *The land of heart's desire* (1990), *Lumukanda* (1995) and *Die laaste aand* (2001) (Roos 2000: 90-2).<sup>28</sup> Kevin Volans composed *The man with footsoles of wind* (1988-93), the dance opera *Correspondences* in 1990 as well as *Confessions of Zeno* (2001).<sup>29</sup> In the mid-1990s, Roelof Temmingh wrote three operas based on South African themes, *Enoch, prophet of God* (1994), *Sacred bones* (1997) and *Buchuland* (1998), all performed by CAPAB at the time. Temmingh's choice of themes decidedly points towards an indigenisation that does not evade the politically charged history of the country. *Enoch*, for example, is based on the story of Prophet Enoch Mgilima and

26 For the sake of the historical overview, as the aim of this article, the instances of indigenisation of local opera production continue to be superficially traced through the themes that these operas employ. Textual and musical analyses of the works themselves remain beyond the scope of this article.

27 Hofmeyr was living in Italy at the time.

28 Many of Hofmeyr's works are based on literary works. His *Fall of the House of Usher* is based on Edgar Allen Poe's short story of the same title; *The land of heart's desire* on a short play by William Butler Yeats; *Lumukanda* on sections of Credo Mutwa's novel *Indaba my children*, and *Die laaste aand* on a poem by Christian Louis Leipoldt.

29 <[www.kevinvolans.com](http://www.kevinvolans.com)>

his followers The Israelites, of whom 200 were killed in the Bulhoek massacre on 24 May 1921 near Queenstown in the Eastern Cape (Sichel 2012),<sup>30</sup> whereas *Buchuland* addresses the contentious issue of the disowning of land and subsequent displacement of South Africa's indigenous people (Visser 1998).

The increased trend towards the indigenisation of opera themes, language as well as performance forces is well illustrated in operas composed after 2000. These include, among others, Mzilikazi Khumalo's *Princess Magogo kaDinuzulu* (2002), Thomas Rajna's *Valley song* (2005),<sup>31</sup> Hans Huyssen's *Masque* (2005) and Michael Williams' children's opera *The orphans of Qumbu* (2007). In 2010, Cape Town Opera commissioned the innovative *Five:Twenty*, a project that consists of five twenty-minute operas, each composed by a different composer and each addressing a social or political issue particular to South African society. These range from political figures such as Chris Hani to controversies related to language, indigenous peoples and xenophobia (Blackman 2010). Bongani Ndodana-Breen's 2011 *Winnie: the opera* re-imagined Winnie Mandela as "a combination of those tragic heroines, Tosca and Lucia de Lamermoor" (Brooks Spector 2012). In March 2012, Opera Africa produced Phelelani Mnomiya's *Ziyankomo and the forbidden fruit*, an opera sung in Zulu. *Ziyankomo* tells the story of two of King Mpande's wives who find new lovers, an act that, according to Zulu tradition, is punishable by death. In his review on this opera, J Brooks Spector (2012) declared that "South Africa may now be finding its own, distinct national operatic voice".

#### 4. Conclusion

The title of this article seems to imply that the process of opera indigenisation in the country has been completed to a degree and that this process has unfolded linearly and incrementally over time. However, the aim of this article was not to write a history of opera in South Africa *per se* – for this more intensive scrutiny of primary sources and a more expansive narrative would be imperative – but to explore

30 In 2011, Bongani Ndodana-Breen attributed the beginnings of 'African style opera' to this opera (Zick 2011).

31 This opera is based on the play by Athol Fugard with the same title.



the establishment of opera in South Africa since it first occurred in 1801 and to trace the presentation of the genre as influenced by the circumstances, governments, people and institutions involved with opera performance. Although the history constructed, in this instance, from a wide range of secondary sources attempts to show how opera ‘found its place’ in local culture and local circumstances, further studies involving cultural and textual analysis as well as aspects of reception remain pivotal to the concept of the indigenisation of opera in South Africa.

Returning to Amy Stillman’s model, discussed in the introduction to this article, some preliminary observations can be made. Except for the translation of opera libretti into Afrikaans, English and Zulu in the course of the twentieth century, opera in South Africa established itself as a European art form without much reference to indigenous cultural practices for the greater part of two centuries. During these years, “indigenous and introduced repertory and musical practices” co-existed (Stillman 1993: 93) and, as a result of the political structures governing South Africa during the apartheid era, such practices were artificially kept apart. Decisive and bold initiatives towards indigenisation were, therefore, initiated only towards the end of apartheid, and it is clear that many aesthetic changes have occurred since. The production of opera from the standard canon and new opera composition in South Africa in 2012 could possibly be placed at stage three on Stillman’s (1993: 93) scale that refers to the “appropriation of material”. However, in-depth readings of individual operas such as Mzilikazi Khumalo’s opera *Princess Magogo kaDinuzulu* as well as Phelelani Mnomyi’s *Ziyankomo and the forbidden fruit* may reveal further stages of indigenisation according to this model. It is, however, clear that a more sophisticated theoretical framework on the idea of indigenisation can further unlock the debate on this issue in local opera production.

Finally, the notion of indigenisation carries with it expectations of historical embeddedness, of time having passed and rituals and practices having had time to become sedimented and layered in new contexts. This article acknowledges that any discourse of indigenisation, regardless of its underlying ideological premises, depends on a historical narrative. It stands recorded in this article how opera functioned as an expression of White settler culture, later of

Afrikaner nationalist arrogance, and currently claims to have found a 'distinct national operatic voice'. Thus the translation of opera into local languages, the effects of the cultural boycott and the implications of the political changes of 1994, emerge historically as important moments of indigenisation in the interpretations of standard works from the canon as well as the creation of new operatic works in South Africa. All these uses, however politically compromised in the past or the present, play a role in establishing a position for opera in South African society.

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