

Review

Performance

Review Colloquy: *The Exterminating Angel*

Met Live in HD, November 18, 2017

Music: Thomas Adès
Libretto: Tom Cairns, in collaboration with the composer, based on the screenplay by Luis Buñuel and Luis Alcoriza
Conductor: Thomas Adès
Director: Tom Cairns
Set and Costume Design: Hildegard Bechtler
Lighting Design: Jon Clark
Projection Design: Tal Yarden
Choreography: Amir Hosseinpour
Video Director: Gary Halvorson

Edmundo de Nobile: Joseph Kaiser
Lucía de Nobile: Amanda Echaz
Leticia Maynar: Audrey Luna
Leonora Palma: Alice Coote
Silvia de Ávila: Sally Matthews
Francisco de Ávila: Iestyn Davies
Blanca Delgado: Christine Rice
Alberto Roc: Rod Gilfry
Beatriz: Sophie Bevan
Eduardo: David Portillo
Raúl Yebenes: Frédéric Antoun
Colonel Álvaro Gómez: David Adam Moore
Señor Russell: Kevin Burdette
Dr. Carlos Conde: Sir John Tomlinson

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

The pages of *The Opera Quarterly* have featured individual and panel reviews of opera in performance both in its traditional theatrical domain and on video, including reports from individual critics and from panels assembled to review a single production or series of productions on DVD. What follows represents aspects of all of the above. Recognizing the value of critical engagement with specific events for this themed issue on cinecasts, we commissioned a panel to review a performance featured in the Met Live in HD series. Following the traditional arrangement for performance reviews, each panelist would attend the event individually and submit an independent review to the editors. But new means of disseminating performance call for new means of critical engagement, and we recognized an opportunity to experiment with the review format. So, while the reviewers were indeed attending and reporting individually, they were in fact attending the same event at the same time in five different cities in three countries. And rather than publish the reviews as a series of individual reports, we have tried to reflect the simultaneity of the events described by fashioning the reviews, with the permission of the writers, into a dialogue, or what we are calling here a “colloquy.”

The date was November 18, 2017, the time 5:55pm GMT, the event a live transmission from New York City of *The Exterminating Angel*. Why *The Exterminating Angel*? After all, contemporary work (the opera premiered in 2016) isn't typical fare for the Met Live in HD or any other series of live cinema relays of opera, which tend to feature the same safe repertoire that fills seats in their respective operatic mother-ships. That the latest Adès was unlikely to fill the Met's network of suburban—or even urban—movie theaters was something of a foregone conclusion, and the comments by the reviewers on empty seats bear this out. But what it lacked in popularity, *The Exterminating Angel* made up for in media buzz. A new work by one of the most celebrated composers working today was to be a significant event for the Met, and the publicity machine was in overdrive—judging by the advance press coverage, it succeeded. How, we wondered, would the event match the expectations of our reviewers, who, by November 18, could not have escaped the flow of publicity? Above all, though, it is the provenance of the opera that seemed to single it out as fertile territory for critical assessment in this context. For *The Exterminating Angel* is an operatic adaptation of Luis Buñuel's surrealist film *El ángel exterminador* (1962), and the opportunity to reflect on this media traversal from film into cinemas by way of opera seemed too good to pass up. It's an opportunity that our reviewers evidently sensed and grasped.

Christopher Morris

SETTING THE SCENE

João Pedro Cachopo (AMC River East, Chicago, IL)

The Exterminating Angel, the third and most recent opera by composer Thomas Adès, emblemizes a turnabout in the way we have come to imagine the interaction between opera and film: as an inevitably secularizing, one-way voyage from stage to screen. Indeed, films based on preexisting operas, or re-creating them as films, have been the rule over the last hundred years. *The Exterminating Angel*, taking as its source Luis Buñuel's 1962 homonymous feature, joins the growing number of exceptions to this rule.¹ By the same token, the fact that the reader has in front of their eyes a review of a broadcast at the AMC Chicago Cinema, rather than of the live performance at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, adds a layer of complexity—and, I hope the reader will agree, a touch of irony—to these reflections.

In a nutshell, the opera—faithful to the succession of events portrayed in the film—tells the uncanny story of a fanciful gathering in a bourgeois mansion that turns into a nightmarish prison. After the dinner that follows a night at the opera, the main protagonists—the guests, the hosts, and their most zealous servant—find themselves unable, for unfathomable reasons, to leave the room. In a surrealistic vein, both the film and the opera follow and invert Kafka's bleak *Weltanschauung*: the doors are open—they have always been open—and yet, no one dares to step in or, as it happens, to step out. The opera stresses the sense of collective paralysis and inexplicable incarceration even further as the singers remain on stage for the entire performance. What is preventing them from passing through the proscenium-like limit that separates them from the outside world? What does the “exterminating angel” of the title stand for?

The film allows for multiple readings, the most common of which views the entrapped collective as a metaphor for elites during the Franco dictatorship in Spain, whose aloofness, apathy, and conformism Buñuel sarcastically dissected in his cinematic laboratory. *Mutatis mutandis*, wouldn't this interpretation apply to the opera as well—if seen against the background of our current global situation? Buñuel never confirmed—nor did he reject—the above-mentioned reading, thus leaving the battlefield of interpretation open. As for Adès, he did claim that “everything is metaphorical in music,” but he also answers “not political” when asked about the nature of musical metaphors.² More importantly, he makes a case for the interrogative dimension of art and praises instability as the most noteworthy and meaningful of its characteristics. In any case, the sense of entrapment that runs throughout the opera, but the acknowledgment of its illusory, hence surmountable character also allows for a different reading. Doesn't it reflect the *mise-en-abîme* relationship that seems to characterize the interaction between opera and film today?

Áine Sheil (City Screen, York, UK)

The prefix “inter” springs to mind in various unlikely guises: interArt, interaurality, and interperformativity. InterArt, according to the Freie Universität Berlin, arises from the “increasing dissolution of boundaries between different art forms through performativity, hybridization and multimedia and, second, the aestheticization of everyday life.”³ Here, a film became an opera, and the opera was then returned to the state of cinema by means of live broadcast. The wide shot experience traditionally associated with opera spectatorship was interspersed with close-ups; a full ensemble permanently on stage was broken down into constituent parts, bringing the work of Adès and Cairns closer to Buñuel than would otherwise have been the case. Opera broadcasts have their own cinematic logic, however: this was a good contender for the label of interArt (a product of hybridization and multimedia) rather than film.

If intertextuality is such a well-known concept, why not interaurality? A word is needed for the understanding of one sound with reference to another. During my half-hour walk at dusk to the cinema, the bells of York Minster tolled unceasingly. The church bells that sounded before the action of *The Exterminating Angel* and throughout the performance seemed to borrow not just from Buñuel’s film, but also—uncannily—from the immediate surroundings of the cinema in which I was sitting. In an interview before the premiere in Salzburg, Adès commented: “bells are a kind of music which stays in the same moment all the time. Buñuel often used bells in his films, and especially here in Salzburg I’m struck increasingly by their extraordinary nature: they’ve been ringing for centuries, rang long before we were here and will ring long after we’ve gone.”⁴ This idea connects well with the difficulty of saying when exactly *The Exterminating Angel* starts. Church bells sound as audience members take their seats and before the orchestra tunes and the conductor enters. In the score, this is described as a prologue to scene 1. In the Metropolitan Opera production, the set was visible throughout this prologue, producing a certain liminality that lasted until the entrance of the cast.

Laura Tunbridge (Cineworld Cinema, Didsbury, Manchester, UK)

Before heading to the live Metropolitan Opera cinecast, I went to see a matinee of *Jubilee* at Manchester’s Royal Exchange Theatre. This was a theatrical adaptation of a film, Derek Jarman’s 1977 rude and messy paean to, or of, punk. Amyl Nitrate, “Historian of the void” (played by Travis Alabanza), welcomed the audience:

Good evening, everyone. How nice to be with you. One gets a much better class of audience at the subsidized theater, I must say. The cinema is full of scumbags. Eating their pick’n’-mix and live-tweeting their inane thoughts to their seven followers. Ugh. Thank you for your bourgeois stultification, it makes for a much nicer atmosphere.

So, welcome to *Jubilee*. An iconic film most of you have never even heard of, adapted by an Oxbridge twat for a dying medium . . . I mean really: what is the point of doing plays? And films? And . . . installations?⁵

Amyl’s welcome may well have substituted *Jubilee* for Adès’s *The Exterminating Angel*, another example of an iconic film adapted by an Oxbridge graduate for what seems still more clearly to be a dying medium (particularly in its subsidized form). The social and cultural hierarchies so important to Jarman’s *Jubilee*, and to the source for Adès’s opera, Buñuel’s *The Exterminating Angel*, seem in some ways less fraught now; or, at least, their plots and characters do not necessarily resonate politically as they once did. Watching an upper-class dinner party on the operatic stage—as some critics claimed—may have felt as if Adès was showing the stereotypical opera audience their own reflection, but that is hardly radical activism. What, though, would be the consequences of watching *The Exterminating Angel* in the seemingly more democratic space of the cinema?

Candida Mantica (Barbican Cinema, London, UK)

My first experience at an opera broadcast dates back to December 2004, when I was a musicology student in Cremona. Despite a common belief that Italians are obsessed with opera, not many operatic events are able to attract the attention of the national media and to reach a wide general audience in the way the seasonal opening night of the Teatro alla Scala does. La Scala used to broadcast the seasonal premiere to selected theaters across the peninsula, including the Teatro Ponchielli in Cremona, the birth town of Claudio Monteverdi as well as of Antonio Stradivari. In 2004 the Teatro alla Scala had reopened after a two-year renovation process. On that occasion, conductor Riccardo Muti—then-musical director of the theater—symbolically decided to stage Antonio Salieri’s *Europa riconosciuta*, which was also the first-ever opera to be premiered at La Scala when the theater opened in 1778.

Before Salieri’s opera started, people gathered in the cafés surrounding the theater, wrapped in their elegant outfits and thrilled by the astonishing opportunity to “attend” the seasonal premiere of Italy’s most celebrated opera house. The theatrical location fostered the illusion of being part and parcel of the “real” premiere, and the extraordinariness of the event was palpable as the night unfolded. When the orchestra played the national anthem (a tradition at the season premiere), people stood with their right hands on their hearts, in an ideal continuity with the Milanese audience. For the occasion, the theater management had set up a refined buffet, and the spectators—holding their free drinks—wandered in the foyer, chattering and commenting (desirably) on the performance. As the opera ended, the Cremonese audience clapped at the bi-dimensional screen framed by the theater curtains, in a provincial soiree that, living under La Scala’s spotlight, aspired to self-legitimation.

At the time of my first opera cinecast in Cremona, the Metropolitan Opera had not yet launched its Met Live in HD series. The series title emphasizes the *live* and *HD* as surrogates for the *hic et nunc* of opera in the theater. Like opera videos, cinecasts offer their audience the opportunity to enjoy an opera production—albeit remediated—they would not otherwise be able to access. Unlike opera videos, reproducible and repeatable with no space-time bond, cinecasts allow their audience to share at least the temporal dimension—the *nunc*—of the *live* performance. The *high-definition* transmission alludes to an attenuation of the medium's technical limits and, therefore, of the implied spatial distance from the spectacle itself. The specific locations involved, however, impact significantly on the caesura between the theatrical performance and its transmission. The La Scala broadcast, relayed to a historical theater, stood as a fetish surrogate of the Milanese premiere. "Opera at the cinema" situates itself as a separate aesthetic object.

Francesca Placanica (Light House Cinema, Dublin, Ireland)

It is Saturday evening in Dublin. We get to Smithfield ahead of time. I have been eagerly awaiting the event, curious to see how my favorite cinema in town will deliver the broadcast of the latest Met sensation. It is not the first time I have attended an "Evening at the Met" at the Light House, an independent cinema in Dublin that "strives to be at the cutting edge of the cinematic experience."⁶ I am fond of its thriving neighbourhood, its hip atmosphere, the intimate settings of its halls, the friendly layout of the cafés and foyers. I am expecting to experience at least a hint of the excitement I feel conveyed in posters advertising the event in the main lobby and in billboards of pre-screenings of the Luis Buñuel movie.

But it does not take long to realize that the landing of *The Exterminating Angel* has left Dublin cold, whatever the commercial strategy of the hosting cinema. Nothing there signals that the live broadcast of the Met matinee is about to take place. While I pick up my pre-booked tickets and the Met HD production leaflet, we hear from the box office staff that at least seventy-five other people have purchased their tickets. As we walk through the halls and down the stairs, we take a look at the demographics: most of the younger people in the hall are queuing for the film being shown on the screen next door. The buzz actually fades as we reach the door of our cinema.

PLEASE TAKE YOUR SEATS . . .

Candida Mantica

As the live coverage starts, the cinema audience can hear the sounds of the Met. Before the performance commences, title cards inform the broadcasting audience about the filmmaker, the composer, the creative team, and the cast. After the last title card, we hear the sound of a bell. (Is that sound meant to gather the audience in

the theater, or is it a reference to the film?) Then the screen presents a five-minute countdown, suggesting that the performance is about to commence. The house lights go down when there is only one minute to go. Disappointingly, the countdown gives way to a commercial, thus revealing that it was meant to anticipate not the performance itself, but the beginning of the live show, in which Susan Graham now offers an account of the opera plot and background, of the instrumental forces, and (again) of the three sheep included in the cast. You cannot choose not to read these “live programme notes”: they are an integral part of the show. Our attention and capacity to identify is continuously manipulated. During the *opera* interval, not many cinema spectators leave the amphitheater. Whereas the operatic spectacle is temporarily suspended, the broadcast carries on to guide the audience through the performance.

Laura Tunbridge

The audience at *Jubilee* had been diverse, as you might expect of a play featuring transgender and disabled actors of multiple races and ethnicities, with several scenes of full frontal nudity and Toyah Willcox singing “I Want to Be Free” in the role of Queen Elizabeth I. The audience for the opera broadcast at Cineworld was less so. Granted, it was Saturday evening and the nearby Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival might have lured away new music enthusiasts. But there was little chance of being disrupted by live-tweeting or pick’-n’-mix scumbags. I was almost certainly the youngest person in the cinema, at the not-so-tender age of nearly forty-three; unlike other viewers, we had forgotten to sneak in a Tupperware of homemade sandwiches for the interval.

Whether watching a broadcast from nearby or faraway, the shots of the audience at the other venue are strangely compelling glimpses of what seems to be another world. This is the case even when the opera house is familiar: I was disappointed that my favorite moment when watching things live at the Met—the ascension of those sputnik chandeliers just before the show starts—wasn’t captured by the cameras, then realized that for once I wasn’t watching from the gods. Before the performance in New York, in the stalls, two young girls with bows in their hair were still wearing their coats. Was it really cold in the theater or were they already planning their escape?

Áine Sheil

Just as the performance got underway, two people rushed out of the auditorium. Were they in the wrong screen and perhaps there to see *Paddington 2* rather than the bear in this performance, or had they a premonition, like the servants in the opera? Those left behind were like the guests at the dinner party, perhaps not enchanted, but somehow obliged to see the performance through. Why, for that matter, do audiences for difficult contemporary operas generally stay put? Are they

bound by some overwhelming force that keeps them in place? Is this some kind of Foucauldian internalized discipline? Adès himself quipped before entering the pit to conduct act 3 “if I don’t go through that door we might be stuck here forever.” There were moments when the vocal writing made me wonder if we would indeed become stuck forever.

Francesca Placanica

We finally enter and take our seats, keeping a close watch on the entrance door as if the real show will be happening there. Will young people be coming to see the Buñuel adaptation? Will contemporary opera be able to draw a diverse audience? Will the subtle bourgeois criticism informing the 1962 movie be translated in ways that can still speak to younger generations through the powerful medium of opera? My childish excitement is confronted with a matter-of-fact revelation: fewer than fifty attendees take their seats and, as in many an operatic broadcast and live production I have watched, we—two people in their late thirties—are among the youngest members of the audience. A younger couple sits beside us: they are quite vocal connoisseurs of the film, and their chattering betrays the sense of expectation we were sharing a short while ago.

The countdown to the broadcast begins. Information about the librettist, the composer, and the Spanish/Mexican film rolls up the screen, accompanied by “live” images from the Met. The camera shifts from the informal audience attending the matinee to the orchestra tuning up in the pit, then hesitates for a while on the sheep led on center stage. The wait is marked by the ringing of one bell, soon joined by a second one. An impending sense of doom captures us all, while the keenest among us experience a collective thrill of expectation. At 18:05 (GMT), Susan Graham takes the stage and introduces librettist Tom Cairns, announces the all-star cast and, with her down-to-earth nonchalance, presents us with the calling cards of the production: the cast (live sheep!), and the score, especially graced by the exceptional presence of the ondes Martenot and by the highest note ever sung by a soprano in the 137-year history of the Metropolitan Opera.

Candida Mantica

The list of London venues offering the Met cinecast is dominated by some of the UK’s most prominent chains (including Curzon, Vue, Everyman, and Odeon), and I could not find any of my favorite independent cinemas. In the end I chose the Barbican, “a world-class arts and learning centre,” where over the years I have attended art exhibitions and pop music concerts, as well as recitals and one opera concert performance (Bellini’s *Adelson e Salvini*). A few weeks before the *Exterminating Angel* event, I had approached the Barbican Box Office to ask whether I could distribute a questionnaire (which I would eventually be denied) the night of the broadcasting. Over the phone, I had tried to define the nature of the event, but

my interlocutor could not decide whether to pass my call to the Film or to the Music Unit.

As I entered the labyrinthine building, my attention was drawn to advertising images from the current arts exhibition (*Basquiat: Boom for Real*) and, as I kept walking, I was surrounded by shops, restaurants, a martini café, a wooden installation—*The People's Forest*, by contemporary artist Gayle Chong Kwan—and, along a large corridor, a free stage with a quintet, part of the EFG London Jazz Festival. Art, in all of its forms, provided a continuous stimulus. An elevator brought me two floors underground: here, in the area of the complex devoted to the seventh art, was Cinema 1. The diversity of customers wandering around the floors above gave way to a more consistent group: of the about thirty people constituting the audience of *The Exterminating Angel* broadcast, no more than five (including myself) seemed to be younger than their mid-fifties. There were two groups of friends, some couples, and a few solitary spectators. The latter seemed to be the oldest, although a film student seated next to me looked to be in her twenties. During the interval she told me it was not her first time at the Barbican, as she normally attends so-called classical music concerts (she had never been at the opera, though). That night she was there because she is a fan of Luis Buñuel.

There was no special menu at the bar outside Cinema 1: they served chips, sandwiches, and muffins. Some spectators brought their own “dinner boxes”—a custom even at the Royal Opera House (especially at the upper levels). Although it was a Saturday night, spectators—irrespective of age and gender—seemed to privilege comfortable clothes over more formal attire: this was less a social event than a cultural experience. Paradoxically, what emerged was that here—maybe more than in the opera house—most seemed to gather to experience the opera (or a *live* “reportage of a performance,” to quote Götz Friedrich).

Unlike standard live operatic spectacles, seats were not assigned and there was no hierarchical subdivision of the auditorium. As I entered the theater, I was disoriented: first, because, I could choose my own seat; second, because I was unsure about the protocols and behavior associated with the event. The price of the ticket (£37) corresponds to a medium range ticket in the amphitheater at the Royal Opera House, where the UK premiere of *The Exterminating Angel* took place in April 2017. During the break, I learned that a group of people attended the opera's UK premiere. A distinguished man in his sixties confessed to me that he prefers cinecasts to opera in the theater as—despite the film director's superimposed perspective—you can see singers' expressions. Actually, you can see their expressions, their make-up (probably slightly lighter than usual), as well as the perfect manicures of the ladies on stage.

CURTAIN UP

Francesca Placanica

Diligently instructed by Susan Graham on what to engage with through selective hearing, we can finally sit back and enjoy the performance. Hildegard Bechtler's lavish sets and costumes are in stark contrast to the black-and-white atmosphere of the movie, and we salute the faithfully rendered opening scene with a sense of restored hope. Apart from a few misses (the camera completely neglects to catch the waiter's fall), the surreal dialogue unfolding among the characters almost literally duplicates Buñuel's imprint. Endless tracking shots highlight the crowd gathering around the table, shaping a nauseous sense of accumulation and non-directionality, and accentuating the looping of the score.

From the very first measures of the piece, we realize with excitement that the music can only enrich the narrative trajectory of the film, conveying a number of witty references, subtle subtexts, and dramatic threads that the black-and-white moving image could not otherwise have enacted.

But we are not here to judge how Adès competes with Buñuel, are we? Right, because it soon becomes clear that his musical writing is unnecessarily hieroglyphic, and the vocal parts, especially those of Lucia and our "Valkyrie" Leticia, redundantly pushed to extremes. I understand that having two sopranos sing in their high register all the time might well translate respectively the hideous vanity of the aristocratic status quo and the redeeming agency of our operatic *deus ex machina*; but to me, such treatment of the voice screams a torturous reminder of composer-performer power dynamics. An intuition, alas, confirmed by Adès during his intermission interview, where he openly admits to refraining from any form of co-operation with his performers during the creative process. Whatever Adès writes on paper is meant to remain there: "You can do it! And they eventually do it!" He describes his "stratospheric singing" almost as a transcendental translation of the state entered into by the singers and their stage figures, "pushed by a force" to the top of the frame and against their extreme limits.

I might forgive his authoritative rigor and almost demiurgic take on the composer's mission. I might even understand the necessity to sacrifice the performer's peace of mind on the altar of metaphysics. But there is one element that ultimately does not convince me: if compositional rigor and truth to the "text" led the composer's intentions, why did he settle for an English libretto adapted from the Spanish script? Why do we have to tolerate a text that cannot help but sound like a caricature? In a cultural moment in which post-colonialism, post-imperialism, and minority empowerment finally find a place in the public debate, Adès's choice and attitude ("I don't know Spanish myself, unfortunately") sounds like an unbearable reminder of patriarchal privilege, where boundaries no longer need to be pushed and limitations are endorsed only if you are a bourgeois in a position of power—ironically,

exactly the target of Buñuel's criticism. Perhaps Adès's default perspective depowers his capacity to grasp and project that criticism poignantly, as he strives manneristically to re-enact the existing text in a remediation that floats on the surface rather than diving into dark waters.

Áine Sheil

"Music can be powerfully levelling, because it tends to want to resolve everyone into the same place," Adès has said. "The whole process is heightened in [*The Exterminating Angel*]. The music is a sort of destiny the characters are subject to."⁷ This proved all too true: the words were delivered slowly and in a declamatory fashion, syllable by syllable, and with very little variation between the characters, except for pitch. These lines sat on top of highly varied orchestral colors, with snatches of dance-like music providing temporary distraction (including, incongruously, a waltz to accompany the Maltese ragoût served by the hosts, and *Rosenkavalier*-like moments in act 2).

Francesca Placanica

Some of the opera's numbers are particularly effective, like the solo sung by Leonora in act 3 of the second part, and the utterly bewildering love duet between Beatriz and Eduardo. The cast, on stage and in sight all the time, and often caught in recovery positions by a nervous camera, spares no energy: the performance works especially because their embodiments engrain all nuances of the complex dramaturgy. In act 1, their singing and acting ooze a compelling sense of humor and self-irony, and they are able to turn the tables and fall into complete abnegation in the second half of the opera, when the psychedelic twist requires an immersive enactment of claustrophobia and mental alteration.

Laura Tunbridge

I had seen the first night of Adès's *The Exterminating Angel* at Covent Garden on April 24, 2017. Then I was, yet again, somewhere in the amphitheater, and the stage seemed a long way away. Something about the set design—its scale, in large part, which dissipates the claustrophobia of the domestic setting so successfully exploited in Buñuel's film—meant that "staginess" did not disappear on seeing the production onscreen. The projections of a crawling hand also underwhelmed, suggesting that theatrical spectacle does not necessarily translate across media. The ability to have close ups of the singers, however, was a huge boon in allowing me to notice humorous details, such as Leonora Palma (Alice Coote) clutching her capacious handbag throughout. (Even if it also meant the cinema audience could observe that it seemed from its anatomy not to be a sheep, but a pig, that was eventually roasted onstage.) The large cast of soloists was much the same as in London (six of the fifteen were replaced), with the inclusion of some outstanding male voices—especially

Frédéric Antoun as Raúl Yebenes—alongside those stratospheric sopranos. Whatever you make of the musical dramaturgy of Adès's *Exterminating Angel*, the virtuosity required of the singers, with their ability to more than accomplish it, is astonishing. That said, the sound quality in the cinema was not as good as I have experienced at other broadcasts, meaning that striking passages (most obviously the percussion-heavy interlude between the first two acts) were not as acoustically impressive as they were in the opera house.

LIVE FROM NEW YORK . . .

Áine Sheil

With the arrival of the dinner party guests in scene 3, each one in turn portentously declaring themselves enchanted, I became aware of another “inter-effect” at play: this time, the word that springs to mind is “interperformativity,” which could mean several things or nothing at all. But for my purposes, interperformativity had to do with understanding the individual performances on stage not just in relation to previous performances by these singers in other roles, but also in relation to other sources of information, such as singers’ blogs, Facebook posts, and various mediatized and online forms of performativity. That I had seen many of the cast perform on previous occasions isn’t surprising, since there was a sizable contingent of British singers on stage who have appeared regularly at the Royal Opera House and English National Opera, institutions where I have seen a lot of opera over the years. In such a big ensemble cast, this was one way in which individuals acquired meaning, definition, and depth (for me, at least).

Two artists stood out not just for past performances, but also for reasons to do with performativity, or that “constitution of self” that Elizabeth Bell mentions in *Theories of Performance* (2008).⁸ Audrey Luna had been Madame Mao in a *Nixon in China* in Dublin, in which several of my family members were involved, and since then I had sometimes seen her posts popping up in my Facebook news feed. Did her take on recent American politics encourage me to see her character, the opera singer Leticia Mayner, as a voice of principle within the increasingly barbarous plot? Leticia resists the events of the opera, first by throwing an ashtray through a window, as if to stave off entrapment within the room, and later by halting an attempt to sacrifice the host of the dinner party, Nobile. It is she who enables the other characters to break out of the room by means of a reprise of material from act 1—a meta da capo, you could say. At any rate, thanks to Facebook, I was primed to hear her sing “the highest note ever sung at the Metropolitan Opera.” I listened diligently, but there were so many extravagantly high notes that the highest didn’t stand out. I felt suspicious of this scoring: did it not parody opera singing and sopranos in particular, and cynically align opera with the surrealism of Buñuel’s film and the

strange vacuity of the characters' world? And yet it was the opera singer who saved the day for the other characters, if only temporarily.

The other artist who stood out, Iestyn Davies, played one of the more troubling characters, Francisco de Ávila. Francisco is self-absorbed, fragile, and frequently hostile toward the other characters. Chaos and confinement bring out the worst in him, revealing his anxiety and irritability, but also turning him into a target for bullying. His sister Silvia compares him with "a little girl," and another character, Raúl, calls him "an incestuous little man," a "deviant," and a "little queer." The character of Francisco is sung by the only countertenor in the cast; there is an uncomfortable hint of stereotyping here, the high voice appearing to suggest a lack of masculinity and potentially atypical sexuality. Layered on top of my discomfort with the character was the knowledge that Iestyn Davies is from York, where I was watching the performance. On a previous occasion during a Live in HD broadcast (*Rodelinda*, 2011), Davies finished an interval interview with a greeting to all those gathered in the cinema in York. It happened again this time: "Hello to everyone at City Screen in York," he said, and the audience in City Screen clapped and waved as if he could see us. At moments like these, opera broadcasts confound definitions of live performance such as Erika Fischer-Lichte's in *The Transformative Power of Performance* (2008): they produce feedback loops that depend on digital means and digital co-presence rather than the traditional conceptions of bodily co-presence propounded by Fischer-Lichte and others.⁹

Davies's greeting to everyone watching in York went down well, but elicited a wry "all ten of us" from the person seated next to me. In fact, about forty to fifty people were gathered for the live broadcast (perhaps three of them under fifty years of age), but for some reason the screening was in the largest auditorium, which has a capacity of 199. This was in contrast with the Metropolitan Opera auditorium, which appeared full, and where the camera operators relentlessly picked out any young faces in the audience that they could find. I reflected on the small size of the audience of which I was part, and was slightly surprised: after all, this was a major new opera by a British composer that had also been staged at the Royal Opera House, and York's most high-profile opera singer was part of the cast. At the same time, I wasn't surprised at all given the attendance patterns for opera broadcasts that I have observed over the years (full auditoriums for Wagner and the most popular Italian operas, an almost empty auditorium for Shostakovich's *The Nose*).

Francesca Placanica

During the performance, someone in the audience reacts to the open references to Buñuel's film, stirring exactly when the quotations from the film are more manifest; and there are actually numerous occasions (particularly in act 1) when the musical renderings of these references are absolutely spot on. The audience's tendency is, in

general, to remain quiet, apparently not that intrigued by the production, even during passages that elicit the Met audience's laughter.

Bears have roared, blood has been spilt, sheep have been sacrificed, dead animals' heads put to sleep, and socialites have been temporarily set free (from their own hallucinatory trip?), only to find themselves trapped again in a final downstage *tutti* scene pushing against an invisible yet sturdy fourth wall.

Candida Mantica

The audience's perception is constantly filtered through the video director's eye. The latter frustrates our fetishized engagement with the operatic spectacle while stimulating, with close-ups, a different, performer-focused, fixation. In the case of *The Exterminating Angel*, whose characters are trapped in a single room for much of the opera, the video director's mediation (and mediatization) is particularly decisive: the camera's movements neutralize the intentionally claustrophobic fixity of the set, allowing the cinema spectators a (somehow misleadingly) dynamic experience of the spectacle.

João Pedro Cachopo

After the second act, a friend of mine who happened to attend the screening with me left the room for a couple of minutes. When he returned, I rebuked him for being away while the "show" was still going on: he had missed the comments by the presenter and her interviews with the performers (including the composer, who was directing the orchestra). Needless to say, my remark was nothing but an anodyne joke, but the hesitation between staying in or leaving the room suggests a decisive tension between two ways of understanding what the "show" was about. If "the medium is the message," then the backstage moment was also to be taken into account. The "message," therefore, was not only—nor even, by right, primarily—the one conveyed by the operatic performance. It was also the one intimated by The Met: Live in HD broadcast, with all of its—to use Genette's terminology—intertextual and paratextual components.

A paradox stands at the core of this multilayered message: on the one hand, the virtues of mediation are highlighted, but only, on the other hand, as long as they do not overshadow the supremacy of the "original" live experience. The stakes of the Met Live in HD discourse have been critically analyzed before.¹⁰ Of particular interest for us here is that such a discourse is at one with not only a successful marketing strategy—the most obvious part of the story—but also a broader vision, very common in academic circles as well, that poses film, either as a medium or as a genre, as the redeemer of opera in our media-saturated world.

The Exterminating Angel couldn't be further from this salvific view. It confirms, in a refreshingly liberating way, that opera may turn an eye to film in search of something entirely different from a lifeline: a gratuitous, yet meaningful

touchstone. Hence the irony of a review dealing with an opera that in subtle but decisive ways circumvents the assumptions inherent in the discourse behind its broadcast.

Candida Mantica

In the case of video recordings, the mediatization of the performance implies textualization. Do cinecasts imply textualization too? I wonder whether our perception of the opera broadcasting as a *text* makes us harder to please. We tolerate imperfections and accidents during a live performance in an opera house (including technical problems, wrong notes, etc.): first, because we experience it live (a different shade of liveness compared to broadcasting); second, because we can interact with the performance, even expressing our consensus (or disapproval). Are we more demanding in the case of cinecasts, in our comfortable clothes, watching singers with perfect manicure, whom we cannot cheer or whistle?

Laura Tunbridge

Personally, I don't find access to the orchestral pit, or backstage, adds much to my operatic experience, though it's fascinating to see the ondes Martenot being played from above. The live intermission interviews of which the Met in particular is fond strike me as too much like the kind of broadcasting that takes place around sport, though at least in football or tennis they manage to wait until after the game is over before quizzing the players on how things went for them. In fact, the musicians responded to Susan Graham's questions with good grace—even a slightly giggly Thomas Adès, about to go on to conduct. The New York audiences laughed more often than those in London, we were told by Iestyn Davies and Sally Matthews. (There was one joke viewers from around the world might have missed, though: the request of the pianist for “something by Adès” was mistranslated in the subtitles as “something by Hades.”) When performers were grilled about how they were feeling, in and out of character, there were no concerns for spoilers here: Davies and Matthews (brother and sister Francisco and Silvia de Ávila), dishevelled for the second half of the opera, revealed what would happen next, before sending messages to their family and friends at home. It was one of those moments when making opera accessible—all-too-human—stands in direct contradiction to the absorption that might be expected conventionally in the opera house but, perhaps more importantly, is also essential for the dramaturgy of Buñuel's film. Escaping from the hell of being stuck in another's house for an evening, with other people, for intermission drinks, sandwiches in Tupperware, or Susan Graham commentating on the floor of the set being quickly repainted, is far from the surrealist mind games of *The Exterminating Angel*. Or maybe it is a vision of hell reimagined for the digital age—unable to concentrate or survive without access to everyone's innermost thoughts and feelings via the media.

LIGHTS OUT

Áine Sheil

As the end approached, we saw the ondes Martenot again, and eight violinists in the pit playing one-thirty-second size violins. The stage cleared and suddenly appeared vast. The characters walked through a huge doorway—through a limen into further liminality. Unlike the characters on stage, the small audience in City Screen soon dispersed. The eventness and enchantment of the performance in New York had not entirely survived the transition to old York.

Laura Tunbridge

Later I discovered that a good friend had been at the Metropolitan Opera House for the performance; in fact, she had slipped into the front of the orchestral stalls during the intermission, while seats were emptying. Had the camera turned on the audience at the end of the show, then, I might have seen her there as a heartwarming example of the ever-shrinking world of opera enthusiasts. I suspect those young girls who'd kept their coats on, though, would have been among those who had left.

Francesca Placanica

After polite applause, the audience of the Light House quietly reaches for their own exits. (Wait! Can we really get out of here?) A glass of wine is in order. Disappointed with the moderate reaction of my fellow audience members, I check my Twitter feeds and engage in the #ExterminatingAngel #MetHD @MetOpera dialogue, reaching for some action at least out there. Other than tagging the wrong Adès (#wrongthomas), I discover that the audience's amusement is central to the debate: during the broadcast, Graham made the enjoyment visible across the Met stalls quite a point of honor for the production, comparing the New York audience's response with the colder reception of London and Salzburg. Bette (@swisskale) advises me that audience laughter could be heard in Geneva, while Brian (@MrBrianStone) admits that half the audience in a local New Jersey cinema had walked away during the intermission, puzzled by the nonsense. I can testify to a lukewarm reception in Dublin, of which the religious silence at the end of the broadcast was a clear sign. I have heard warmer applause at the end of other operatic broadcasts at the Light House, some of which were not easy listens at all.

One problem with the production is perhaps that its marketing machine capitalized on its extraordinary components rather than its specific legacy and underpinned sociological criticism, hoping to attract a larger audience of neophytes rather than the politically inclined. Yet the opera was clearly aimed at a niche, and I still believe that the most successful passages of the score were the direct references to the cinematographic text. Perhaps the audience's amusement was not obvious, because Buñuel connoisseurs would laugh just between themselves, and this despite the

opera's most sensational features that were sonorously sold to us in advance: the presence of live animals, the out-of-this-world soprano part, the precious appeal of the ondes Martenot. And perhaps these are simply shortsighted marketing conventions that, after all, are conveniently supposed to keep looping in the current operatic production landscape.

João Pedro Cachopo

The Exterminating Angel doesn't limit itself to instilling opera with a new dynamism. It also, possibly unwittingly, responds to its cinematic counterpart. In Buñuel's film, we are reminded that the operatic universe stands at the heart of the "habitus" of privileged people. Among the participants in this lavish dinner, we encounter not only aristocrats and bourgeois but also intellectuals and artists, including the soprano who had sung the title role of *Lucia di Lammermoor* that very evening. This is, regardless of the extraordinary merits of Buñuel's masterpiece, a common cinematographic trope—one whose subtext Stanley Cavell, better than any other theorist, has disclosed in its undeclared message: as an affirmation of cinema's own promise of a truer, less conventional, closer-to-the-heart-of-common-people form of art.¹¹

Now, isn't it the case that the crisis of opera has been inextricably linked to this sense of opera being both socially and artistically an endemically conservative genre? And couldn't this connotation be the core ingredient of the spell cast by a Bartlebian-minded, angel-haunting opera and preventing it from both stepping into the future and coming to terms with the past? So viewed, Adès might have mimicked the group's last-moment, if successful, move, as they eventually leave the room upon carefully repeating every gesture that preceded their sudden paralysis. Liberation, it seems, is only achieved through the repetition of trauma: re-enacting cinema in operatic terms, no longer as a sarcastic rival or a benevolent savior but as an equal in play.

*Christopher Morris; Áine Sheil; Candida Mantica; João Pedro Cachopo;
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NOTES

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1. Indeed, quite an impressive number of operas based on films have recently seen the light of day—from Olga Neuwirth's 2003 *Lost Highway* to Missy Mazzoli's 2016 *Breaking the Waves*, not to speak of Glass's Cocteau opera trilogy (1991–96), which precedes this set of works by one decade—that makes us wonder whether a new trend is about to gain momentum.

2. Thomas Adès and Tom Service, *Thomas Adès: Full of Noises: Conversations with Tom Service* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 8 and 17.

3. Freie Universität Berlin, "International Research Training Group Interart Studies," www.geisteswissenschaften.fu-berlin.de/en/v/

interart/kolleg/forschungsprogramm/index.html (accessed January 14, 2018).

4. Christian Arseni, "Director Tom Cairns and Thomas Adès interviewed before tomorrow's world premiere of *The Exterminating Angel*," boulezian.blogspot.co.uk/2016/07/director-tom-cairns-interviews-thomas.html (accessed January 14, 2018).

5. Chris Goode, *Jubilee*, from the original screenplay by Derek Jarman and James Whaley with additional material by the Company (London: Oberon Books, 2017), 18.

6. "About Us," The Light House: An Element Cinema, lighthousecinema.ie/about/about-us/ (accessed January 28, 2018).

7. Christian Arseni, "Director Tom Cairns and Thomas Adès Interviewed."

8. Elizabeth Bell, *Theories of Performance* (Los Angeles and London: Sage, 2008), 176.

9. For more on this topic, see Pedro Manuel, "Absent Audiences," *Performance Research* 19/5 (2014): 69–76; and Christopher Morris, "Digital Diva: Opera on Video," *Opera Quarterly* 26/1 (2010): 96–119.

10. For a particularly insightful analysis, see James Steichen, "The Metropolitan Opera Goes Public: Peter Gelb and the Institutional Dramaturgy of *The Met: Live in HD*," *Music and the Moving Image* 2/2 (2009): 24–30.

11. See Stanley Cavell, "Opera in (and as) Film," in *Cavell on Film*, ed. William Rothman (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005), 305–18.