

Making History: Directorial Authorship in the Metropolitan Opera HD Transmissions

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For this paper, I intend to introduce the production mechanics of an intermedial hybrid, the live HD transmission, and then to look at some authorship issues. Since this paper is eventually about authorship, at the outset let me introduce the key players, the Metropolitan Opera HD transmission directors.



Brian Large (b. 1939) joined BBC 2 Television at its inception in 1965 as a director with responsibility for music and opera television and was appointed chief opera producer in 1970. He is an experienced director of opera since his first *La Traviata* in 1975, directing so far over 150 such productions. He has directed six of the Metropolitan Opera live HD transmissions over five seasons.

In his long career he has worked exclusively with music performance and is definitely old-school: he always cuts with the music.



Although Gary Halverson trained at Julliard, he has made his career directing for television; his cinematic formation is directing television sitcoms performed in front of a live audience, usually switching three cameras. He is known for dozens of episodes of *Friends* and *Two & Half Men*, as well as *Everybody Loves Raymond*, and the live coverage of the Macy's Christmas

Parade. By now, he is effectively the director in residence for the Met HD transmissions, having directed 20 productions in the first four seasons. His modus operandi is to cut on action and to keep the show moving.



Barbara Willis Sweete has a more varied cinematic background than either Halverson or Large. Rhombus Media, the production company she co-founded, has become an international force in cultural television and 'quality' films such as *Thirty-two Short Films About Glenn Gould* (1993) which Sweete produced. She is



well-versed in television drama, having produced *Slings and Arrows* (a TV series about the Canadian Shakespeare theatre at Stratford, Ontario) and adaptations from theatre to television. In addition, she has directed a range of cultural documentaries including works on dance, YoYo Ma, and avant-garde music. Peter Gelb, Metropolitan Opera General Manager, was acquainted with Sweete when he was working at Sony Classical Records. He invited her to direct Met HD transmissions in the second season (2007-08) and she has directed

twelve of the 45 transmissions over five seasons.

It is Sweete's work that I will concentrate on in this paper, for a number of reasons. First, she is the lone woman in this enormous new enterprise, working with an all-male film crew, who are – as she says – all thoroughbreds.¹ Second, she has registered the most attention in the opera blogs. The comments are often negative, but they are indications that people are paying attention to her work and that – whether the bloggers like it or not - she is doing something distinctive.² In addition, she's a woman from my home town who is operating now on a global stage that is highly publicized but in which her role as director is virtually unknown.³ In this she epitomizes the historical profile of the female film author, who must constantly be re-authored by the woman scholar, as Giuliana Bruno argued so long ago.⁴

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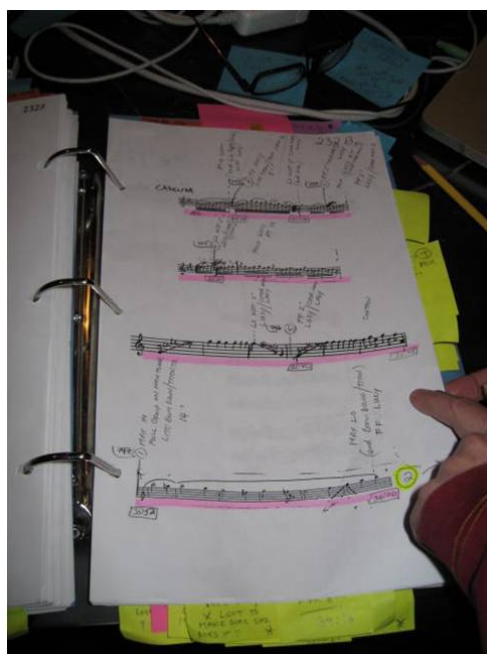
First, I'll just briefly explain the mechanics of the HD transmissions and raise a few theoretical issues that arise therefrom. There are ten HD cameras in locations throughout the house, including a robotic camera that can track, pan & zoom from the floor level at the front of the stage, and two on long gib arms that operate effectively as cranes. The ten cameras feed to monitors in a mobile video unit – a truck - outside Lincoln

Center where the directors and technicians edit from ten screens simultaneously.



Now that I have outlined the technical elements, for the next few paragraphs I will offer a description of the incredibly exacting creative process that Sweete undertakes. What interests me most these days is materiality: production mechanics and inter/medial specificity. For this research, I had the extreme thrill of watching the process over the nearly ten-day run-up to the live transmission of *Lucia di Lammermoor* (19 Mar. 2011).

At the final lighting test of the production, which is the last dress rehearsal as well, a rough taping

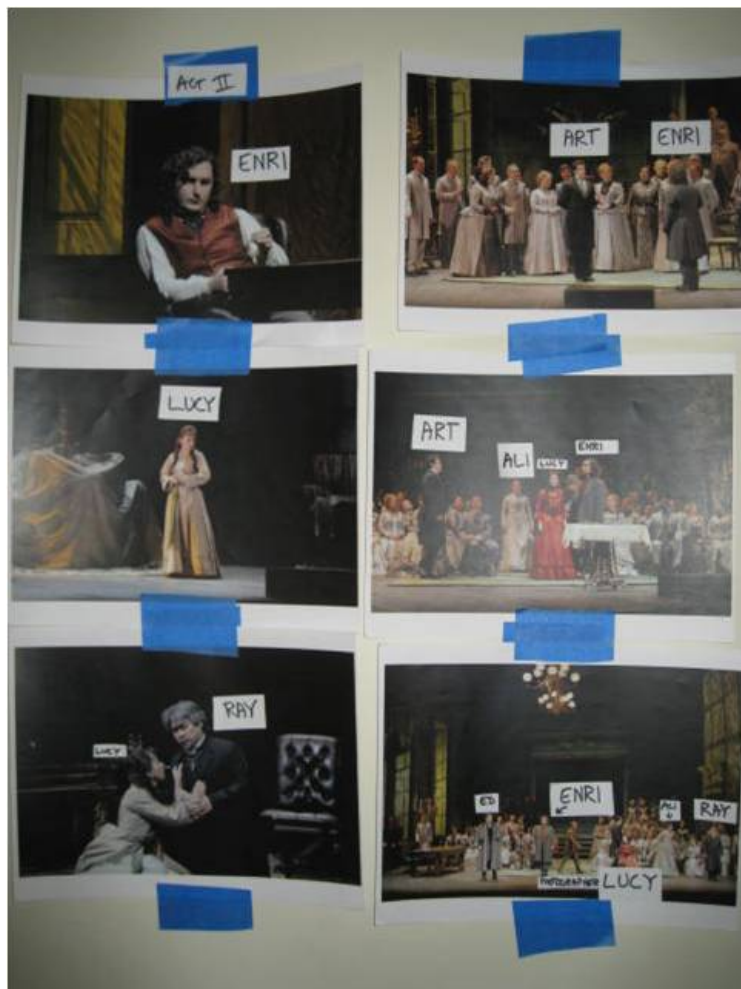


is done with five cameras, one of which is locked off in a full proscenium shot, while the others follow the principal characters. Sweete works with this taped record, with a piano reduction of the score in front of her and a musical expert at her elbow, making notes on the staging and blocking, actions of the performers, orchestral score, tempi and timing. This aspect of the process, the scripting, is an immensely laborious and creative task, as Sweete scripts every shot for coverage of the action, significant details of narrative and

characterization, musical and visual metaphors and motifs, cinematic language and editing.⁵

In the next phase of the process, all the cinematographers and the Assistant Director meet to go over every shot in the script – on average 900-1000 shots for each performance and sometimes many more, if there are dance sequences or other unusual elements such as comedy. Each cinematographer gets a separate script, with every one of his shots detailed – some with many cues to track, zoom, tilt, reverse directions, etc. These cinematographers have not yet seen the

production, nor will they before the taping run-through – the ‘scratch taping’; they work from photos of the characters in costume.



The ‘scratch taping’ takes place on the Wednesday before the Saturday afternoon HD transmission. Having finished at close to midnight on Wednesday, Sweete is back to work on Thursday at 9:30 a.m. for a meeting with Peter Gelb and Mary Zimmerman, Production Director – not a good start to the day. After that, she sets back to work with the document from the previous evening, working with the A.D. and her musical assistant to rescript many sequences. They pull an all-nighter on Thursday, finishing just in time to shower before the all-day meeting with the cinematographers on Friday.

This is now the day before the final live transmission. Together they all go through the scratch taping, which has been edited of course – switched and locked live - and also through the new script that Sweete has produced in the previous twenty-four hours. On Saturday, basically the second run-through, the live transmission goes out to 1500 screens in forty-six countries. Yipes!

This highly pressurized process works to render into cinematic language a medium - live operatic performance – that is essentially non-cinematic. As a result, although the camera movements, shot types and cues are planned in advance, certain constraints are at play at all times. That these HD broadcasts are going out live is a crucial factor from a range of exigencies. For one thing, camera positioning is severely constrained by the requirements of the performance and respect for the house audience. Opera stage blocking is also considerably looser than in film production, as performers move or not as they are inclined while they are singing. On a huge proscenium such as the Met, it's not so important to hit a mark. Natalie Dessay (the star of *Lucia di Lammermoor*), for example, knew that she was in the light for the most famous mad scene in opera if she was in the bottom five steps on the third act staircase, and that's all she needed to know for that segment's performance. Whatever she did within that space would be legible for the audience in the house.



But when there are cameras in play, there may be different requirements of light, movement, detail.⁶ Some performers are very mindful of the needs of the cameras, but others – such as Natalie Dessay, who is an extremely physical actor - are blithely improvisational. A planned shot can easily go missing if the performer changes his/her movements in the moment, and there are no second takes in the live transmission. Aside from such uncharted diva variations, there are other conventional cinematic tropes of visual narrativity that are simply not possible, such as close-ups of the contents of the matching lockets in *Simon Boccanegra*, which would be de rigueur in a cinematic melodrama. Sweete gets such details when she can: the crew in the truck applauded for the exchange of rings sequence in *Lucia* (19 Mar. 2011).

Although Sweete and the other directors aim for cinematic perfection within the limits that bind them technically and temporally, the new theoretical category of ‘liveness’ or ‘presentness’ that these intermedial events are inaugurating suggests consideration of new issues of materiality. We understand already that the sense of being present at the simplest of events is always highly synaesthetic: all the senses participate in the global impact of the event, constituting what Michel Chion calls a perceptual ‘boule’ (lump). Yet even in HD, cinema is ontologically incapable of reproducing the effect of being in the presence of the event represented. No cinema can actually replicate Chion’s boule; instead it renders it with a battery of devices that are not simulations – but instead devices of editing, shot scale, contrast. Chion asserts that the most visceral moments of presence in the cinema are ‘renderings’, not replications, of reality; on the other hand, Noel Burch argues to the contrary that the representation of ‘reality’ is not so much a matter of compensating for the deficiencies of the recording apparatuses, as it were adding to them, but rather of controlling and often literally reducing their powers.⁷ Both suggestions resonate powerfully with these HD transmissions, in which the sense of ‘liveness’ – a crucial element also of opera theory -

is often a function of the incomplete realization of the digital cinematic apparatus (Burch), which is at the same time the element that makes Chion's 'rendering' immediately visible.⁸

In the relation between the cinematic and the operatic, the live HD transmission is an embryonic cultural object, caught between intermedial recording apparatuses and live performance. With the addition of the pre-edited credit sequence and the live address to the HD audience by an opera luminary, backstage documentary ('Maestro to the pit please'), we are in a new terrain even before the curtain opens – a regime of musical and theatrical performance, costume and setting, progressive narrative, and cinematic rendering.

Barbara Willis Sweete is one director who is propelling this new cultural object out of its zygote state into a more definable form, employing specific strategies in the development of this hybrid form. Two principal aspects of her practice are visual narrativity and visual architecture.

In the setting of a live theatrical performance, to achieve visual narrativity requires specific strategies. To give an example: in the plot of *Simon Boccanegra*, disguise plays a significant part and, as in Shakespeare, the convention in opera is that once in disguise, the character is unrecognizable. For the audience in the opera house, all the action is visible – at greater or lesser degrees according to the price point of your seat. Thus it can be assumed that if a character assumes a disguise, even one so flimsy as just donning a hood, the narrative will be comprehensible to the audience (many of whom know the plot already anyway). In the HD transmission, however, we see only what the cameras have caught, which can be limited by many factors. Therefore to achieve the dis-recognition required by the narrative, the HD audience must also see the donning of the disguise, as in the prologue, when Fiesco pulls his hood up (signifying

unrecognizability) so that later when he doffs his hood, Simon Boccanegra can exclaim 'Fiesco!' without appearing to be an idiot. All this has to happen on camera to be visually comprehensible. For another example, in *Lucia di Lammermoor*, in order to install the sense of fear and dread that underwrites the complex musical motifs and presages the narrative tragedy, it is crucial that the HD audience see Lucia pick up the knife (with which she will later murder her husband) and slip it up her sleeve. For these significant narrative actions to be visible to the HD audience, there has to be a camera in place, in the right shot and in focus - not always easy if the cinematographers don't know where and when that action is happening. On a large stage, with many characters moving in and out, it's possible to miss a great deal - signifying gestures, crucial entrances and exits - or conversely to render relationships confusing if the camera follows a character as s/he crosses the axis.



In *Boccanegro* Act 3 there is a similar plot exigency, when Fiesco exits the council chamber and then peaks back in. For the narrative to make sense visually, the audience in the movie theatre has to know what the characters in the libretto and the audience in the house know. So we need to see that peak

through the door, which lasts only a second, and we need to see it in close-up to make sure that we recognize the character.

That's why scripting is so important, and also why Sweete has found ways to intervene in the performance, to make sure these plot points take place on cue and on the mark so that a camera will be in place with the appropriate movement and shot scale. Sometimes she meets resistance, as with Nathalie Dessay, who is virtually a method actor, but usually she is able to broker the

camera needs through the very cooperative stage manager or other performers. In *Lucia*, for example, Ludovic Tezier, who plays Lucia's cruel brother, was willing to keep his hand on Dessay's shoulder until she was seated in the proper place to reveal a crucial narrative element. In these ways, Sweete creates a comprehensible cinematic narrative that actualises the stage and libretto narrative.

What Sweete calls visual architecture is an intermedial equivalent to the musical architecture. Here the cinematic responds to the emotion in the music and drama through particular kinds of movement, shot scale and mise en scene. On a simple level, this can mean that when the music soars, so does the camera. Sweete has used the two gib-arm cameras particularly effectively in such tropes. Although their only possible movement is to boom up or down, with the addition of simultaneous zooming these cameras can create the impression of soaring or swooping that aligns the visual architecture with the music. In the third act of *Simon Boccanegra*, the repeated stately and slow forward-soaring movement of gib-arm cameras on either side of the stage formally underline the gravitas of the concluding narrative movement of the libretto while limning the grandeur of the Doge's court at the same time. In *Lucia*, for another example, all elements of the score, setting, character movement and narrative emotion come together as the priest descends the great third-act staircase, his movement a metaphor for the narrative and musical descent into tragedy that he recites - Lucia has murdered her husband and is descending into madness - and which the score underlines with his bass aria that dips into the deepest notes in the opera. In Sweete's rendering, the camera booms down following his physical movement, the spiral arc of the staircase, and the narrative trajectory, producing a visual metaphor that rhymes with all the other elements of the piece.⁹



One last example, deploying a well-understood cinematic trope. In the final act of *Simon Boccanegra*, the eponymous hero (performed magnificently by Placido Domingo) dies by degrees, repeatedly collapsing and rising to his feet to sing again (it's opera!). In the HD

transmission, as Boccanegra is on his feet for the last time, the shot is a medium portrait in which Domingo plays fully to the camera, heroically dominating the frame as well as the narrative, the court, the music, and our empathic emotions. With the last fall to his death, there is a cut to a high overhead shot in which the formerly powerful Doge now lies small and weak in death – a mere mortal: a conventional trope, but sublimely effective.

With Sweete's emphasis on both visual narrativity and visual architecture, we see in her HD transmissions the emergence of new forms, as the limitations of camera placement are exacting their own reworkings of film grammar and technological evocations of affect and sensation. Rather than excoriating the cinematic as intrusive or manipulative, deploring the experience as different from attending a performance in the opera house – what W. Anthony Sheppard calls "presence envy"¹⁰ - I think we will come to see these broadcasts as a truly intermedial hybrid that, as Marcia Citron puts it, "is a carefully crafted construction that is distinct from the performance it is recording."¹¹ Barbara Willis Sweete is at the centre of this intermedial formation.

¹ Unpublished personal conversation, 11 Mar 2011.

² Especially about the split-screen *Tristan and Isolde* (2007), her first commission.

³ Technical credits for the Met HD transmissions are available on IMDB, but they are not included in the hand-outs available at the cinema, do not appear on the Met website, and whizz by on the roll at the end of the transmissions.

⁴ Giuliana Bruno, *Sleepwalking on a Ruined Map* (1993).

⁵ In contrast to Sally Potter's invocation of a "magical, strange and alchemical process of making something come into being," Message to Sunderland Conference Participants, 13 April 2011.

⁶ In the video truck, communication with stage lighting is particularly important, as warmth, colour and tone are exactly monitored for the HD image.

⁷ Ben Brewster, Lea Jacobs, *Theatre to cinema: stage pictorialism and the early feature film* (Oxford University Press, 1997): 7.

⁸ In contrast, for the PBS broadcasts that come much later, the director has time to go back over the coverage from all ten cameras and re-edit to rectify the slips, camera jiggles, off-time edits or missed shots, 'perfecting' rendering and eliminating the element of liveness.

⁹ Halverson also directed an earlier version of *Lucia*, starring Anna Netrebko. This version has not been available for comparison.

¹⁰ W. Anthony Sheppard, "Review of the Metropolitan Opera's New HD Movie Theater Broadcasts," *American Music*, Fall 2007: 383-87.

¹¹ Marcia Citron, "Opera on Screen," 66.