

“OPERA MEETS NEW MEDIA – PUCCINI, RICORDI AND THE RISE OF THE MODERN ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY” April 18 – May 16, 2024, daily 11 a.m. – 6 p.m. in Berlin



Interview with curator Christy Thomas Adams

Christy Thomas Adams is Assistant Professor of Musicology at the University of Alabama. She received her PhD from Yale University in 2016 and previously taught at the Yale School of Music. Her research focuses on the intersection of Italian opera and new media technologies in the early 20th century, including performance and mediation. Her monograph on Casa Ricordi's involvement with sound recording and silent film in the first decades of the 20th century will soon be published by Oxford University Press. She has also published various articles and book chapters on Verdi, Puccini, and Mascagni and is an active singer herself. She is currently Editor-in-Chief of The Opera Journal.

Professor Adams, how did your collaboration with the Archivio Storico Ricordi for the Puccini exhibition come about?

I've conducted extensive research in the Archivio over the last ten years, not only in relation to Puccini but to the broader ways in which the opera industry responded to the emergence of new media technologies. I was excited when they asked if I would be interested in contributing to this exhibition.

What do you feel makes this exhibition special?

This exhibition is particularly exciting because it unites the histories of different kinds of artistic production, including opera, cinema, and sound recording, and how they intersected over a hundred years ago. This exhibit gives us a chance not only to see and hear early recordings and films related to Puccini's operas, but it also contains interesting and exclusive

behind-the-scenes information, thanks to the participation of the Archivio Storico Ricordi. Because Ricordi was the leading music publisher in the 19th and 20th centuries, and because so many of their documents have survived, no other archival collection can give such rich insight into how the world of opera reacted to the implications of sound recording or film.

In your research piece, you examine the significance of the new medium of film for Puccini's career. Cinema and opera – how do the two fit together?

This is a question that Puccini and Ricordi were asking, and one that we still ask today. In some ways there are no rules for how they should fit together—people were experimenting with this when Puccini was alive, and we're still experimenting today. Although there has always been a fear of competition between opera and cinema, the two have existed side-by-side for over a hundred years, with exciting opportunities for a reciprocal exchange of influence. Cinema has looked to operas for inspiration because of opera's artistry, music, and ways of engaging audiences in both imaginative and deeply human experiences of the world. And opera has looked to cinema for new modes of seeing and storytelling, and for reaching audiences who otherwise might not experience opera.

When was the first movie about a Puccini opera made?

Film companies were interested in Puccini's operas from the earliest years of cinema. Their popularity on the operatic stage meant that people wanted to see them on the screen as well, and their artistry promised to help elevate the new cinematic medium from being seen simply as a new technological curiosity to being seen as more of an artistic medium. Because most films have not survived, sometimes it is impossible to know if a film entitled *Tosca*, for example, is based on Puccini's opera or on the play that inspired it. Based on what we know today, the earliest examples of films connected to Puccini's operas are likely from 1908: Itala Film's *Manon Lescaut* and Nordisk Film's *La Tosca*.

How were the first opera films received by audiences?

At first, film screenings fascinated the public because the new technology of moving pictures seemed almost magical. The ability to see a famous opera via this new technology was really exciting, and early on there were even experiments with having opera films accompanied by sound recordings so audiences could see and hear some of their favorite portions of operas. Enrico Caruso, for example, was featured in one of these early experiments. The

synchronization between sound and image was far from perfect, but people were excited about the technological possibilities.

Did cinema open up new sections of the population to opera, making it less elitist?

In some ways, yes—it also meant that people who didn't live near a major opera house had the opportunity to see (and eventually hear) opera. This is something that we see media technologies doing for opera since at least the 19th century—affordable printed scores, for example, meant people in the 19th century could play excerpts at home. Sound recordings meant you could hear famous singers, and you could listen over and over again. Film did something similar, as did the radio, and now there are even more ways that technology disseminates opera—streaming, video broadcasts, and so forth.

Your research period also covers the transition from silent film to sound movies. What implications did this have with regard to Puccini's music? And what did it mean for Casa Ricordi?

Three important implications come to mind. First, films were rarely going to be accompanied live, which had implications for musicians as well as for Casa Ricordi, whose scores would no longer be used for film music accompaniment. Second, the synchronization between music and moving image could now be achieved with essentially the click of a button, with systems designed to work seamlessly every time (instead of hoping that you started the gramophone at the right time so everything wouldn't be out of sync), so now you might have movies where you could see and hear a character singing instead of just seeing someone act accompanied by some music. Third, for Ricordi it meant that music might now be used regularly, because all films would eventually need music—and Ricordi had the rights to a rich collection of music that film companies might want.

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