

The challenges of transatlantic opera: the Théâtre d'Orléans company in nineteenth-century New Orleans

From 1819 until the opening of the new French Opera House in 1859, the Théâtre d'Orléans was at the centre of social life for a wide cross-section of New Orleans's population. It was well known for the generally high quality of its operatic productions, its unusually well-behaved audiences, and for the fact that its troupe was recruited from Europe each year. It was the first (and, for a long time, the only) permanent opera company in North America.

While the theatre provided a space within New Orleans in which local issues could be explored, its influence was much wider ranging. Through a series of summer tours, the company played a key role in transmitting French opera throughout the eastern seaboard of the United States. Existing scholarship, however, has typically observed only that the company brought its music and performers from Paris, without giving further thought to the details or wider implications of this process. Nor have such accounts explored the ways in which French opera was transformed in its transatlantic movement, and how its new audiences might have understood it differently from those in Europe.

My paper will, therefore, take a closer look at the processes of cultural transfer at work in the movement of French opera from Europe to New Orleans. It will explore the vital role of human agency in operatic globalisation, in order to argue that the networks of people and places were by no means as straightforward as typically assumed. Nor, I will suggest, were these processes of cultural transfer as unidirectional as generally portrayed. Instead, I will argue that such a study compels us to re-evaluate aspects of the European operatic industry, and reveals an entanglement of local, national and transnational concerns that was vital to the development of a global operatic culture.

Biography

Charlotte Bentley is an AHRC-funded PhD student at the University of Cambridge. She is working, under the supervision of Dr Benjamin Walton, on a thesis which focuses on francophone theatrical culture in New Orleans in the period 1819-1859. Her other research interests include Jules Massenet, operatic realism, and the influence of media technologies on the production and reception of opera in the late nineteenth century.