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## **INNOVATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY OPERA THROUGH THE PRISM OF TEAM DECISIONS**

**Abstract.** Contemporary opera represents one of the most dynamic areas of modern art, combining diverse creative fields and collaborative practices. This study aims to explore innovations in contemporary opera through the lens of collective team decisions, with particular attention to how priorities are determined when departing from established operatic traditions. The research is grounded in empirical analysis of data from Music Theatre NOW (MT NOW), a global platform that documents and evaluates innovative works in musical theatre. To identify trends, we applied a specially developed Method for Determining Primary Contribution. This method interprets the composition of creative teams as formalized in MT NOW applications, transforming such data into indicators of which creative field – musical, theatrical, literary, choreographic, or

conceptual – was prioritized in the process of innovation. Our findings demonstrate that musical art remains the dominant field of innovation in contemporary opera, accounting for over half of all primary contributions. Theatrical art and ideas also play significant roles, though with greater fluctuation across different years. Literature and choreographic art, while less frequent, nonetheless appear as meaningful contributors to innovation. The study also highlights the phenomenon of “incognito contributions”, interpreted as a form of collective authorship that resists attribution to a single creative field. The results confirm the multidimensional character of innovation in contemporary opera and emphasize the importance of recognizing team-based authorship. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of how innovations emerge, compete, and interact within collaborative creative processes, while also providing a methodological foundation for further empirical studies.

**Key words:** contemporary opera; creative team; innovative area; MT NOW; primary contribution.

**Introduction.** Contemporary opera garners significant attention from everyone interested in the evolution of contemporary art: from researchers, artists, and critics to professors and students. Leaving aside the debate about when the term itself emerged, let's look at the essence of the phenomenon it describes. This is, of course, under the assumption that a definition of contemporary opera must highlight the unique characteristics that distinguish it from other operas written during the same period, but which are, so to speak, “non-contemporary” [10] – particularly those that fall under the phenomenon of “contemporary classical music” or “modern opera”, etc.

However, the topics and styles, staging and set design, audience engagement, critique of operatic canons, and other aspects that have been the subject of scholarly research for over

half a century tend to blur, rather than clarify, the essence of contemporary opera. What remains constant in these studies is the understanding that contemporary opera is the materialized result of an innovative quest in art. Yet, any work of art is always a new, unique phenomenon. What's more, the future of classical music as a whole is viewed through the prism of innovation, including the mediating roles of technology and community engagement [8].

On the other hand, if we consider that contemporary opera embodies a different approach to creating modern art – one that is not individual, but collaborative and team-based [11] – then the issues listed above actually clarify rather than obscure its meaning, at least through the multi-focus of its innovations.

At the same time, this multi-focus is not so much confusing as it is a challenge to the established practice in music of assigning authorship of an opera solely to the composer. Therefore, it seems highly relevant to us to clarify the multi-focus of innovations from a creative team by empirically identifying trends in their prevalence and confirming them with quantitative analysis.

**Analysis of recent research and publications.** Our starting point for finding a relevant source on innovations in contemporary opera was data on campaigns, platforms, and/or initiatives that have been regularly studying the practice of team-based contemporary opera creation and openly sharing the results of this work online for at least the last ten years.

Among many globally known artistic initiatives and companies – such as American Opera Projects, the NO Convencional Festival, the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, Opera Philadelphia, and Opera Modo, etc. – we chose Music Theatre NOW (MT NOW). It functions as a large global platform for identifying and promoting innovations in musical theatre. The Music Theatre NOW Award [7], which showcases winning works from creative teams, is a significant public event for

contemporary art. Furthermore, unlike traditional festivals that are often geographically or institutionally localized, MT NOW globally covers discoveries in musical theatre, providing them with expert evaluation and curatorial oversight. It is also important that our previous empirical study of the formal characteristics of these creative teams statistically proved the informativeness of their non-specific metrics [11].

The next step was to review studies dedicated to the empirical analysis of innovations in opera. We consider this review a prerequisite for a well-founded choice of a suitable method for the quantitative analysis of innovations in contemporary opera. Since innovation processes are dynamic, we focused primarily on studies published over the past 3-5 years. In our opinion, this selection helps to obtain up-to-date and relevant information on the evolution of musical theater.

First, we draw attention to the recent study, “Contemporary Opera in Flux”, which is the result of the “Opera in Flux” virtual conference held in the fall of 2020 [3]. The book's origin in a conference indicates a thematic coherence in the discussions surrounding the changing nature of contemporary opera. Focused on productions from the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, the study aims to expand the boundaries of research on contemporary opera, viewing it as a phenomenon that challenges established operatic traditions.

“Contemporary Opera in Flux” employs a wide range of research methods that vary depending on the content of each chapter. In-depth thematic and structural analysis, case studies of contemporary productions, analysis of interviews with creative team members (directors, composers, and performers), archival research, interdisciplinary, and contextual interpretation all enable well-argued interpretations of evolutionary shifts in opera. These shifts are explored through indicators such as technological innovations and the social parameters of a production.

The absence of quantitative or experimental methods is entirely justified given the chosen interdisciplinary approach to analyzing contemporary opera and the format that presents a wide variety of authors' viewpoints, including experts in musicology, media studies, dramaturgy, philosophy, and music theory. This in no way diminishes the value of this book of twelve essays as a significant contribution to the academic discourse on contemporary opera.

As an example of using quantitative data to determine the future of opera, we can refer to Sai Wei's study [9], which is based on a secondary analysis of existing cases. Focused on the experience of consuming opera, the author outlines its survival through the impact of digital technologies. In the context of our research interests, we note the author's use of a secondary data analysis from 2010-2023, specifically on the educational and age characteristics of the audience, the business models of opera houses, and the role of streaming media for new consumers. She uses this data to draw conclusions about the future challenges of the opera industry in the data age. For instance, the visualization of retrospective data (Fig. 1, 2) in the article illustrates trends that were identified even before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Given the impact of the pandemic on the arts (specifically live concerts [2; 4; 5], and future music industry-related policy interventions [1]), we believe it would be more interesting to clarify whether the described trends are still valid today. Specifically, we question whether the link between education level and the frequency of opera consumption, identified in 2018, has been maintained in the post-COVID era. We also question whether the age stability of the audience, established in a study over fifteen years ago and characterized as a "tired audience" (Khokhlova, Elena) [6], has been confirmed. This factor is a significant driver of the opera industry's development, according to research based on an analysis of Operabase statistics. This method of collecting empirical data

provides a foundation for the fruitful study of the international circulation of opera productions, including identifying the most performed composers and their works and comparing the most popular opera titles in representative groups of theaters across different seasons.

The identified gaps in the application of quantitative methods to study the full diversity of innovations, particularly those introduced by a creative team, are not unexpected. This is because musicology traditionally relies more on qualitative research methods, such as historical-descriptive analysis, drawing on an interactive-analytical approach and an interdisciplinary methodology (e.g., culture institution studies).

Given the lack of research focused on the quantitative analysis of innovations, the relevance of studying their localization within specific fields of creative activity is beyond doubt.

Thus, the main research question of our study is: Which creative fields are the object of innovation in contemporary opera, and which of these fields is used most frequently?

To address our research question, we needed to: a). define all innovative areas as collections of related creative fields of activity implemented by the members of the creative team, and then b). pinpoint the primary innovative area – the one where these innovations are most common.

The purpose of the article: to present the results of the study of innovations in CO using the method of determining the primary contribution.

**Results.** Since the innovations included in the scope of our study are not all existing innovations, but only those introduced by the winners of the MT NOW competition and documented on its website – that is, innovations whose importance for the evolution of musical theater is expertly validated – we will, for the purpose of this study, define contemporary opera (hereinafter referred to as CO) as a work

from a creative team selected for a MT NOW Award (hereinafter referred to as MT NOW). Such a work is a priori a tangible embodiment of recognized innovations in musical theater [11].

We assumed that within the framework of the CO, such an area should be musical art. To confirm/reject the assumption put forward using quantitative analysis, we developed a Method for Determining Primary Contribution.

Conceptual provisions of the method.

1. The Method for Determining Primary Contribution serves as a mechanism for marking innovations. We define this marking as the process of transforming formal information about a creative team – as provided by its members in the MT NOW application – into a meaningful message about the innovations they have introduced. This mechanism either reinforces the content of the message or shifts its focus. For this study, the documented description of the creative team's composition, which is part of the information about the recorded event (the première of a CO), is the subject of this transformation.

2. If a creative contribution is defined as the effort each team member makes to create a contemporary opera, then a primary contribution is the effort that the creative team itself considers to be the most significant creative input in introducing innovations.

3. The operationalization of the primary contribution is based on the order in which a team member who made this contribution is mentioned within the creative team. We emphasize that this order is not coincidental. The sequence of team members was chosen (a) by the team itself and (b) deliberately, as they understand that the order reflects the significance of each member's efforts to the innovations introduced.

4. Innovations include both ideas and their practical implementation. We deliberately avoid dividing new developments into “innovations” and “novelties”, justifying this

with their equifinality. We believe that the complete transition from diverse starting points of innovation – which may differ in development stage, required resources, implementation complexity, etc. – to the same final product, a high-quality CO, is a sufficient basis for observing the similarity of their impact. We note that if we had access to the entire database of applications, a comparison of the weight of innovations introduced by creative teams versus innovations in CO would be valuable for a more complete understanding of the evolution of musical theatre.

5. The primary innovative area is defined by the largest number of primary contributions in a specific creative field, that is, by its size. Therefore, the largest area of innovation serves as a quantitative confirmation of the priority area of innovation in CO.

6. The main document used to record all primary contributions is the Set of Primary Contributions. It was specifically compiled to track a temporary set of these contributions, each of which is recognized as the most significant for a particular contemporary opera.

In the case where the first team member works in several different creative fields of activity, the primary contribution is considered to be the one indicated first. Thus, in the application submitted by the team “History of the Present” (MT NOW 2023), among the indicated “Writer and Co-Director”, from the team “TRENOS” (MT NOW 2021) – “Stage and Music Direction”, writer and stage direction were added to the set.

In other words, the set is a document compiled by us that describes the totality of our research in chronological order (by time of participation in MT NOW from 2008 to 2023). An analysis of it is designed to identify, describe, and explain/interpret facts that demonstrate the scope of innovation in CO.

In accordance with the specifics of the emphasis on the significance of a certain creative fields of activity for the introducing of innovations, the following types of primary contribution were found

- Main contribution: The initial contribution among all those noted.
- Absolute contribution: This is the sole contribution specified.
- Incognito contribution: This is a contribution made without defining the direction of creative activity.

The set of contributions is primarily formed by a predominant majority of main contributions (N=75). There are isolated absolute contributions and incognito contributions, which, particularly during the first Award, were applied entirely. Together, they don't reach the number of main contributions (44, 3, and 28, respectively). The shares of each type of contribution are shown in the figure 2. Primary contributions: types and their shares. Even though the share of incognito contributions exceeds one-third of the entire set of primary contributions, it's worth considering that they are, in a way, temporally localized – primarily pertaining to the MT Now event in 2008. A quite probable explanation might be that this was the first MT Now where a rather noticeable tradition of composer's opera was demonstrated. Therefore, creative teams didn't consider it necessary to clarify, or more precisely, to duplicate what was self-evident.

A near-complete departure from this tradition already by the subsequent 2012 Award (with the exception of “Josefine sings, (Not) a recital after Franz Kafka” which constitutes less than 6% of the total number of primary contributions), along with the two most recent MT NOW in 2021 and 2023 having no incognito contributions whatsoever, serve as valid confirmations for this explanation.

However, the appearance of, albeit a small number of incognito contributions on MT NOW 2015 (“Coup Fatal”, “L.I.|Lingua Imperii – violenta la forza del morso che la ammutoliva”, “Shifting Ground”, “Two Acts”, “Comfort Ye”, “Ribald Flowersong”, “Private View”, “Slumberland”) and MT NOW 2018 (“MUSRAROPERA: sounding situations”, “AQUASONIC: Between Music”) is an undeniable reason to look for another explanation for its use [Fig. 2. Dynamics of incognito contributions]. However, the appearance of even a small number of incognito contributions on MT NOW 2015 and MT NOW 2018 is an undeniable reason to look for another explanation for its use. We believe that incognito contributions should be considered a manifestation of collective authorship, when team interaction not only exceeds individual efforts but also fundamentally makes it impossible to single them out in the finished creative product. It is also likely that the process of introducing innovations is so improvisational that the change in the direction of creative activity becomes not only unplanned but also unpredictable, and therefore cannot be marked. Other explanations also seem plausible, in particular, that incognito contributions are a protest position, a criticism of the hierarchy in opera art, or that they are related to legal aspects, such as intellectual property rights, etc.

The above interpretations require a separate study, which cannot be carried out without the use of additional sources of information. However, within the framework of this study, we proceed from the fact that the information about its composition officially reported by the creative team contains the necessary and sufficient facts about the efforts made by each of its members regarding the innovations introduced. Therefore, the very lack of a specific direction of creative activity is an argument for the views of creative teams on innovations in CO as a self-sufficient and legitimate component of it, which does not require additional explanations and/or description.

By thoroughly analyzing the main and absolute contributions, we were able to group them based on their equivalence, which refers to the similarity of their creative fields.

It should be noted that, given the objectives of this part of the study, we deliberately disregarded the differences in how efforts were designated, whether by focusing on a creative team member's professional qualifications, their specific duties, or the field in which the effort was made. Thus, we artificially ignored the distinctions between Composer and Composition, Direction and Director, Text and Librettist, etc.

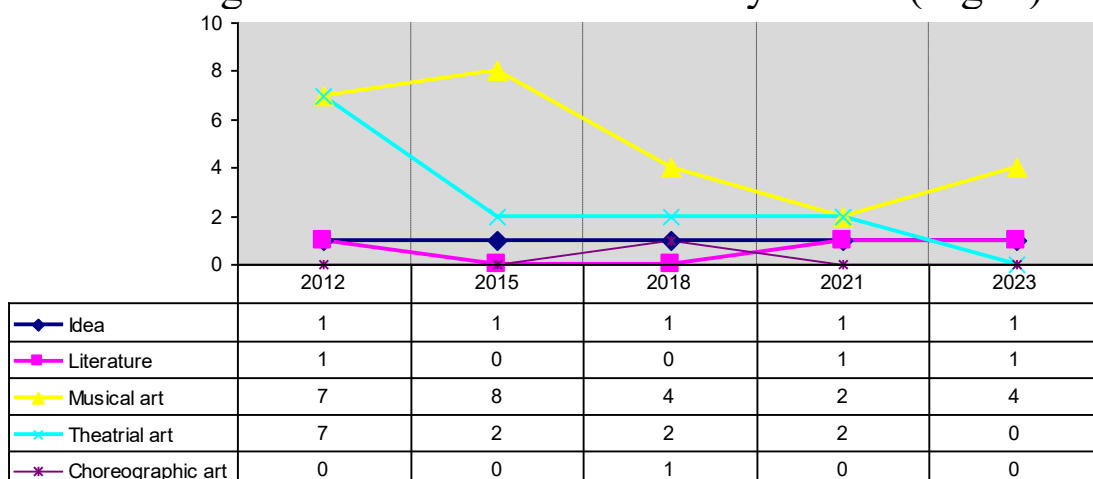
<b>Creative fields of activity</b>	<b>Primary contributions</b>
Musical art	Music
	Composer
	Composition
Theatrical art	Staging
	Stage Direction
Literature	Writer
	Text
	Librettist
Choreographic art	Choreographer
Idea	Concept

*Fig. 1. Equivalence of primary contributions. Source: compiled by the authors (The Music Theatre NOW Award, 2008-2023).*

As shown in Tab. 1, we identified five creative fields of activity. Of these, four are directly related to the practice of introducing innovations (musical, theatrical, choreographic arts, and literature), while one is indirectly related. This one either precede the practice (idea – as the generation of the main concept or design of the innovations). The number of primary contributions in each of the identified innovative areas is visualized in the figure below. Innovative areas in contemporary opera: absolute indicators of size. Musical art, representing a 54% share, is the most in-demand area for innovation. It is followed by theatrical art and ideas, which are represented in 28% and 11% of the contributions. Choreographical art is the least popular, at only 2%. While literature and management appear three times more often, their 6% shares still show them to be in low demand.

A look at the dynamics of these innovation areas at each MT NOW reveals a few key trends: Ideas remain the most consistent area, as they are prioritized by a creative team at every single one of the five MTs NOW. In contrast, the top priorities – musical and theatrical arts – are the most unstable, with music fluctuating from 8 to 2 and theater from 7 to 0. For instance, while they were the clear leaders at MT NOW 2012 (with 7 contributions each) compared to the limited presence of literature and ideas, this changed significantly by MT 2015. At that point, theatrical art lost its quantitative advantage (-5), and musical art, increasing its number to 8 contributions (+1), gained an even stronger lead.

The figure below illustrates these dynamics (Fig. 2).



*Fig. 2. Dynamics of innovation areas: absolute size indicators.  
Source: compiled by the authors (The Music Theatre NOW Award, 2008-2023).*

As we can see, the visualized size of the innovation areas highlights the prevalence of innovations in musical art at each MT NOW. The share of priority contributions in this creative field ranges from a third at MT NOW 2021 (33.33%) to almost three-quarters at MT NOW 2015 (72.73%). At other MTs NOW, the priority of musical art stands at 45.75% in 2012, 50% in 2018, and 66.67% at the most recent 2023. However, it is worth noting that among the absolute contributions, two-thirds belong to theatrical art ("Paradise Interrupted" at MT NOW 2015 and "War Sum Up" at MT NOW 2012), while only one-third belongs to musical art ("El GRAN TEATRO DE OKLAHOMA" at MT NOW 2012). This can likely be explained by the spread of so-called "director's opera," which is a strong factor in diminishing musical art as a leading creative field in the innovative development of musical theater.

**Conclusions.** Innovations in contemporary opera appear as a multidimensional phenomenon, which is characterized by a complex combination of technologies, disciplinary knowledge, organizational culture and social interaction. Their study through the prism of the functional and role features of the creative team that introduced them and then presented them for expert evaluation allows us to outline trends in the evolution of musical theater, at least in the MT NOW environment. The absence of requirements from its organizers for a unified format of the creative team ensures maximum expression by its members of their vision of the methods and formats of prioritizing the innovations they have introduced. At present, it can be stated that musical art is a primary innovative area in contemporary opera; the significance of theatrical art is recognized 2.5 times less often than it, but twice as often as the idea; but the one-time significance of choreographic art forms a background against which the significance of literature and idea no longer seems to be completely unnecessary for the introduction of innovations in musical theater. Without a

convincing answer, questions remain about the creative team's decision not to link the introduced innovations with a concrete creative field of activity. This decision cannot be ignored, since the unexplained motives of its decision are a barrier to a full understanding of the phenomenon of contemporary opera.

Probably, creative teams, through the innovations they have introduced, demonstrate the progress of contemporary opera to a borderline genre, but the problem is not in this progress, but in comprehending innovations that currently appear as an unlimited phenomenon. It is also possible that the fundamental unlimitedness of innovations should be considered as a phenomenon of team opera thinking. We also assume that contemporary opera is capable of demonstrating musical, or more broadly artistic, agonism – a competition of creative teams in who will reach the edge in abandoning opera traditions.

The results of our study, based on the methodology for determining priority contributions, may be important for creative teams working on innovative projects. Understanding the diversity of innovations and the consequences of their team implementation, they can more effectively create new products, services, and formats that meet the challenges of modernity. The presented study, dedicated to outlining the areas of innovation in contemporary opera through primary contributions, provided only the first results of the application of the innovation labeling mechanism we developed as a possibility of quantitatively reflecting their diversity, strength, and consequences.

Further research into the phenomenon of contemporary opera suggests that other innovation marking methods we have developed will be presented. This will help develop our idea for an innovation marking mechanism, verify it through academic peer review, dialogue between experts, etc.

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## **ІННОВАЦІЇ В СУЧАСНІЙ ОПЕРІ КРІЗЬ ПРИЗМУ КОМАНДНИХ РІШЕНЬ**

**Анотація.** Сучасна опера є однією з найбільш динамічних сфер сучасного мистецтва, що поєднує різні творчі напрями та колективні практики. Метою дослідження є вивчення інновацій у сучасній опері крізь призму колективних рішень творчих команд із особливим акцентом на визначенні пріоритетів у відході від усталених оперних традицій. Емпіричну основу становлять дані «Music Theatre NOW» (MT NOW) – глобальної платформи, що документує та оцінює інноваційні твори музичного театру. Для виявлення тенденцій було застосовано спеціально

розроблена методика визначення провідного внеску. За цієї методики результати аналізу складів творчих команд, зафіксованих у заявках на МТ NOW, трансформовано у показники того, який саме творчий напрям – музичний, театральний, літературний, хореографічний чи концептуальний – є пріоритетним у запровадженні інновації. Результати засвідчили, що домінуючою сферою інновацій у сучасній опері є музичне мистецтво, яке становить понад половину провідних внесків. Театральне мистецтво, як і ідеї сучасної опери, відіграючи значну роль, виявляють більші коливання за роками; література та хореографічне мистецтво рідше постають пріоритетною сферою інновацій. Дослідження виокремлює феномен «інкогніто-внесків», які можна трактувати як форму колективного авторства, що уникає приписування інновацій певному напрямку. Отримані результати підтверджують багатовимірний характер інновацій у сучасній опері та підкреслюють важливість визнання командного авторства. Дослідження робить внесок у розуміння того, як інновації виникають, взаємодіють та змагаються у процесах спільної творчості, а також створює методологічне підґрунтя для подальших емпіричних студій.

**Ключові слова:** сучасна опера, креативна команда, інноваційна сфера, МТ NOW, провідний внесок.

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