

# Séminaire du GREAM

Misha - salle de Conférence

Jeudi 24 octobre 2019

9h15 - 10h00

**Emanuele Senici**  
**(Sapienza Università di Roma)**

*Medial Histories of Opera,  
the Rhetoric of Fidelity,  
and Mise en Scène as Interpretation*



Director Olivier Py has recently explained his staging of Giacomo Meyerbeer's *Le Prophète* with the following words: 'There is an orgy in the score, and therefore I stage an orgy. [...] I am completely faithful to the work'. For Py, then, staging an opera means making visible what 'is in the score', a course of action that ensures fidelity to the work. Such statements might seem rather uncontroversial to us now, but until the mid-twentieth century they would have been heard with bafflement: Why on earth should a director stage what is in the score rather than in the libretto? And why is the score equated with the whole work, so that being faithful to the score automatically means being faithful to the work? These imaginary questions from the past prompt more historical ones: How did such beliefs come about? And why?

I argue that the medial history of opera in the twentieth century might help us answer such questions. A comparison between audiorecordings and videorecordings shows radically diverging patterns of consumption, with the former dominating the medial landscape. This dominance, I suggest, contributed to a music-centred ideology of operatic dramaturgy. Such ideology has had a profound impact on the present-day discourse of mise en scène as a

faithful interpretation of the music. This discourse, however, now sits uneasily in a medial context in which video dominates operatic consumption. In my conclusions, I explore a few consequences of this tension, focusing especially on the epistemological issues raised by the coupling of fidelity and interpretation.

*Emanuele Senici is Professor of Music History at the University of Rome La Sapienza. His research centres on Italian opera of the long nineteenth century, on the theory and historiography of opera, especially issues of genre and gender, and on opera on video. Recent publications include Giacomo Puccini and His World (Princeton University Press, 2016, co-edited with Arman Schwartz) and Music in the Present Tense: Rossini's Italian Operas in Their Time (University of Chicago Press, 2019). Between 2003 and 2008 he was co-editor of the Cambridge Opera Journal.*