

co-creating opera

Guidance from the
Traction project

co reimagining opera with
art communities & technology



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Foreword

Social and cultural diversity is manifest in all our lives, our food, our media, our literature, ever more in each generation. The world is changed. Enriched. At this time of renaissance, opera, our artform that has a claim to be universal, has its greatest opportunity to demonstrate such capacity to those on its doorstep.

Opera is a shared endeavour. When it creates a shared space, as basic principle and primary mission, it values and protects diversity. Whether through public or private funds, or even unfunded, all opera is co-created. All opera is community opera—the question is, which community?

As social media algorithms cast us into tribes and space, artistic endeavour is often similarly divided or reduced by institutional infrastructures and values, Traction explored a “what if..?” space. What if homogeneity of purpose, generosity, civic value and service were to be a key to unlock our creativity and core mission. What if, in times of division, opera’s universality and public ownership could be the most valuable spaces that we as artists, as citizens, can share and explore at this time? Open the doors. Opera as innovator.

Beyond the three new works detailed here, such an approach can be applied to the canon: we know this in Birmingham, with work as varied as Wagner, Stockhausen and Mussorgsky.

Traction is a valuable contribution to our practice. But, in the end, our challenge is to renew opera’s own protected spaces, mission, business models, institutional architectures and behaviours in an ever-changing world. Co-creation is a powerful resource in that task.

Richard Willacy
General Director
Birmingham Opera Company



Why
co-create
opera?



Why care about opera?

Culture thrives when people care about it, and they care because culture delights, intrigues, inspires and moves them. It speaks to them.

Is that still true of opera? Some people love opera, but many do not give it a thought. Its stories, style and language seem old-fashioned and remote to them; perhaps they see it as expensive and unwelcoming. Opera is still a cornerstone of European culture, but it's easy to pass a cornerstone without giving it a glance.

It doesn't have to be like this. Opera—sung drama—has been changing since it was invented. In fact invention is at its heart—new instruments and orchestras, new stories and aesthetics, new machineries of spectacle. Opera has always been at the leading edge of creation, though it sometimes forgets that in its comfortable middle age.

Opera changes because the world changes. Today, Europe is recognising its historic and renewing diversity. Its people don't live or work like their grandparents—they don't think like their parents. Digital technology is second nature, and people create and share stories in a new culture. Opera can speak to them, it must speak to them, and that means changing too, rediscovering the spirit of invention that breathes life into art. Then everyone might care about opera.

“If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.”

Giovanni Di Lampedusa¹

Opera's future is inclusive

There are two ways in which opera can change—how it is created and who is involved in the creation.

The first kind of change is familiar. Opera loves innovation as much as it loves tradition, and it has always adapted to new technologies. Gluck and Wagner were revolutionaries once: now they are pillars of convention. With new digital tools, from social media to Virtual Reality, the question is not if, but how. Traction's three exploratory operas were all co-created using innovative digital technology in different ways, but always for the purpose of creating and performing opera together.

“Old musical revolutionaries never die, they just get assimilated into mainstream institutions”

Ted Giola²

The second change is more profound and more difficult. It involves opening opera to everyone—or at least anyone who might be interested in taking part. In recent decades, opera companies have done a lot to make seeing opera easier: reduced prices, familiar language and other access measures have helped bring in new audiences.

Now, it's time to bring in new creators.

Through co-creation—the collaboration of professional and non-professional artists—opera discovers new ideas, new stories, new performers and ultimately new advocates. By throwing open the doors of the rehearsal studio and the workshop, as well as those of the auditorium, opera houses can transform their offer to the public, and with it their relationship with society.



Together with SAMP, the inmates created the community opera.

O Tempo (Somos Nós)

And the best of it is that co-creation can be as artistically exciting and socially transformative as opera ever hoped to be. Its productions are different from those created exclusively by professionals but they aspire to equally high standards of excellence. There is nothing worthy about co-creation, nothing dull—unless you're doing it badly.

Opera has always had a revolutionary spirit. Co-creation can help that thrive today, while new technologies can foster innovation and inclusion.

Making opera matter

“There was never a time like now to be a lover of the arts. Mozart never heard most of Bach. We can hear everything by both of them. Brahms was so bowled over by Carmen that he saw twenty performances, but he had to buy twenty opera tickets to do so.”

Clive James³

Art is at the centre of social, cultural and economic life. There have never been more theatres, museums or galleries, more film and media creators, more musicians and writers—in short, more art and culture. Not all of it is good (when was it ever?) but our need and desire for culture in our lives is clear.

Art is a pleasure and a comfort, a companion in life. It is also a mirror in which we find and define our values. It helps us explore our identity and beliefs, and those of others. When familiar systems of meaning, including religion and politics, have less hold on many people, culture is where we can make sense of life and understand our experience.

Opera can and should be as central in this meaning-making as any other art. Its artistic resources and emotive power have made it a radical force in the past. There is no reason for it to languish in the attic of contemporary life like an unwanted inheritance.

People will care about opera when it cares about them. In co-creation everyone matters; everyone can contribute to the artistic process. The stories that emerge, and the ways they are told are new and different but they have room for everyone too. The co-created operas presented here speak of universal experiences in ways that include audiences and their concerns.

Co-creating opera in this way does not mean we abandon conventional productions, or turn away from Mozart or Puccini. It means we also open opera's narratives to speak of diversity or climate change or other matters that did not much concern the 19th century. We stretch the form to accommodate technologies and techniques that did not exist then. We enrich its aesthetics with new styles and cultures. We make opera matter by energising it with our own ideas and feelings, from this time and place.

“És un barri indomable,
però resisteix els embats del destí.
Totes les aigües del món hi fan parada,
un caos fet de vida arreplegada.
Ben amunt l'empenta veïnal,
som la gent, som del Raval.”

Victoria Szpunberg, *La Gata Perduda*

“It's an unruly neighbourhood,
but one that withstands the onslaughts of fate.
All the waters of the world stop there,
the chaos made by a foraged life.
It's rising up, the neighbourhood pushback,
we are the people, we are from the Raval.”



The
Traction
experience



Dublin workshop with teenagers from rural Ireland and adults from Tallaght.

Out of the Ordinary
/As an nGnách

Traction was a research project to explore how new digital tools could support the co-creation of new operas with communities in Barcelona, Portugal and Ireland. Between 2020 and 2023, the Traction consortium of artists and researchers worked on co-creation, social inclusion, digital technologies and learning. The project was funded by Horizon Europe, the EU Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement no. 870610.

www.traction-project.eu

Beyond community opera

Amateur singers have always performed with professional musicians, in opera and oratorios, and some of them do so to the highest standard. More recently, community operas have also become popular, though the term is applied to different things. For some, it means the participation of amateur performers, as in Britten's *Noye's Fludde*, but in the hands of a composer such as Jonathan Dove, the community can play a more central part in conception and performance.

In post-war Europe, when public funding began to be used to support classical music and other elite arts, a policy of cultural democratisation became established. This aimed to bring the arts within reach of the whole population by ensuring that concerts, plays and exhibitions were widely distributed and affordable. Education programmes, also termed cultural mediation, were put in place to make the publicly-funded arts more approachable. Community opera is another expression of this ideal, going further by inviting people to participate directly in performances.

Although new works are sometimes commissioned, community opera usually involves non-professionals in the performance of a repertoire piece, planned and led by professional artists. There are good reasons for this. Singing Mozart or Puccini is exceedingly difficult. Inviting someone who does not have the vocal resources or experience to do it in public is likely to set them up to fail. So community opera generally has amateurs singing chorally and professional singers in the leading roles—a practice that is common in performances of Handel's *Messiah*. Community opera can produce wonderful experiences for audiences and performers alike, but it also risks reinforcing the very social norms it seeks to overturn. The professional artists are the centre of attention, the characters who matter, while the non-professionals become a group without agency or even much individuality.



In Leiria youth prison, inmates performed with their relatives at key points in the opera.

O Tempo (Somos Nós)

Because of this, since the 1960s, many have called for a more generous idea of cultural participation. Advocates of cultural democracy argue that access to a fixed and narrow artistic canon is not enough because it treats people as passive consumers. It does not enable them 'freely to participate in the cultural life of the community', as promised by Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.⁴ Instead, cultural democracy recognises the diversity of human culture and the potential in everyone to create as well as to enjoy the cultural life of the community. This idea has grown as an alternative vision of cultural life, leading to a huge rise in community art, participatory art and co-creation in recent decades.

In the 2020 Rome Charter, drafted and endorsed by United Cities and Local Government, this vision was expressed as a promise that everyone should have the capability to discover, enjoy, create, share and protect culture.

Cultural democratisation and community opera have done much to help people discover and enjoy opera. Now co-creation is providing the means to extend this experience and enable everyone to create, share and protect opera.

Why co-creation?

There are many ways of reimagining opera, and many artists experimenting with its forms, music, narratives, aesthetics and technologies. Opera has always been an inventive art, as greedy for spectacle as for the sublime. But that experimentation has been internal, within the form and its standards. It is driven by people whose knowledge, craft and position legitimise their efforts to bend the art to their vision. Stockhausen's placing of each member of a string quartet in a different helicopter to beam the sounds into the concert hall might be the pinnacle of such inventiveness, but it is conceived—and only comprehensible—within the tradition of art music.

What happens when that tradition is opened up to other people, with different voices, ideas, interests and desires?

That is the question posed by co-creation, which suggests that art can develop in only one direction if it relies on its own resources exclusively. When, in contrast, it embraces other realities, other ways of knowing, it enriches its own meanings and resonances. The results might be unexpected and unsettling but they are also fresh, reaching out to make new connections with audiences. Co-creation is a vital but still underappreciated resource for any opera producer keen to renew their relationship with society and to make opera matter more widely than it currently does.



Co-creation between professional and non-professional artists often leads to new and unexpected artistic work.

La Gata Perduda

There is an obvious objection to this idea: the sophistication of opera itself. No other artform presents such barriers to entry. Untrained actors have performed in extraordinary films, but no one, however naturally talented, can expect to compose an opera or sing an aria without lengthy and costly training. It can take decades to master this art form, and many who try find ultimately that its standards are beyond them. How then can people with no experience of the form or even music education hope to create opera?

The answer depends on understanding what co-creation means and how it works.

What is co-creation?

Traction adopted a simple definition of co-creation: it is the creation of a work of art by professional and non-professional artists.⁵ In participatory art projects, it has been common to describe some of the people involved as artists and others as ordinary people, community members or simply participants. Implicit in this language is a belief that the artist is different, if not superior, to those they have invited to join them in a creative process. This difference makes it difficult, if not impossible, to work on the basis of equality.

Co-creation, in contrast, recognises that everyone who contributes to the artistic process is an artist, just as everyone participating in a marathon is a runner. What matters is the act: how well it is performed is another question. The Berlin or London Marathons include world record holders and runners for whom completing the course is a lifetime achievement. All contribute to the cultural meaning of the event.

But there is an important difference between professional artists and people for whom the artistic act is not a life choice: they bring different resources to co-creation.

Each group can create art without the other, although for several reasons the non-professionals will find it harder to fulfil their potential. Co-creation happens when they work together, and the result is greater than the sum of the parts because it is art that neither could have made alone. The interaction of professional and non-professional artists challenges everyone, sparks new ideas and insights, and generates novel forms and alternative meanings. It destabilises assumptions, producing creative energy that makes art unknown, risky and vital. Co-creation is a thrilling, joyous process that, once experienced, is never forgotten.



Workshops at Coláiste Naomh Eoin on Inis Meáin brought the participants together with a team of creative professionals to get to work on the opera.

Out of the Ordinary
/As an nGnách

Professional artists have artistic training, skills and expertise, as well as knowledge of their field which helps them make informed judgements about it. They can draw on experience from previous work and confidence in familiar processes and their home ground. They have authority from public recognition of their artistic identity, and years of practice. They have artistic talent and aptitude.

Non-professional artists have fresh ideas, questions and solutions because they have not been trained to see things in a particular way. They have knowledge and expertise too, but in aspects of life that nourish the subject and meaning of the art being created. They have things to say and a need to say them, since they know that this might be their only opportunity to create with professional artists. They too have artistic talent and aptitude, though perhaps in unexpected forms.

The spectrum of co-creation

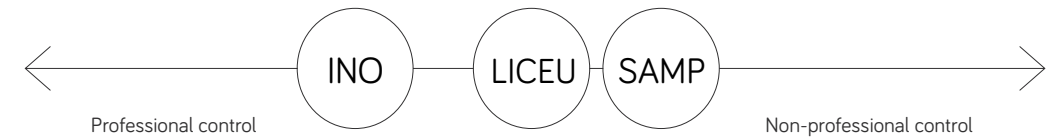
The music for the Traction operas was written by professional composers; the librettos were the work of established writers. How then can they be considered co-creation?

Part of the answer is in the different resources that professional and non-professional artists bring to the process. If the aim of the group is to perform a new opera, it is normal that the score should be written by those with the knowledge and skills to compose orchestral music. But the sounds, shape and sense of that music might draw on the imaginations of people who write an orchestral score.

In **Ireland**, Finola Merivale used material created in workshops with non-professional artists in her score for ***Out of the Ordinary***, weaving their ideas and sound sketches into her composition. She also wrote parts specifically suited for three non-professional musicians, including an accordionist and a bass player, who performed in the recording, as did two choirs of non-professional singers.

In **Portugal**, the three composers and the librettist spent weeks in music and drama workshops with inmates at the Leiria Youth Training Prison before they wrote anything. The workshops brought beatbox and rap into the performances, while the young men shared stories of loss, separation and choice that became in the libretto of ***O Tempo (Somos Nós)***.

Arnau Tordera wrote the music of ***La Gata Perduda*** in his studio outside **Barcelona**, but integrated performances of rumba and rock by local musicians. The libretto, by Victoria Szpunberg, drew on interviews with 26 residents of Raval, an experience that led her to decide that professional artists would play only the characters outside Raval, so that the non-professionals would represent their own community.



The figure above presents an interpretation of how the three operas might be placed on this spectrum.

But the score and libretto are only the start of a production and co-creation shaped how the operas were brought to life. In Barcelona, the posters were designed by artists with disabilities and art students, while the costumes were created by two local NGOs who work with vulnerable people. Scenes in the Portuguese opera were conceived and created by inmates and their relatives, working with the stage director. Non-professional artists did not learn to write code for the Virtual Reality (VR) opera in Ireland, but they did perform animations wearing motion-capture suits. Ultimately, all three operas were performed by professional and non-professional artists together.

There is, in short, no end to how artists working together in co-creation can influence one another's input and shape the final work so that it is not always clear or important who was responsible for which element. Co-creation is alive and shifting.

Traction developed a model for thinking about this fluid relationship of co-creation in the three operas, which we called 'the spectrum of co-creation'. It is a simple way of visualizing the balance of control between professional and non-professional artists, which can be applied to individual elements, such as a libretto or a performance, or to the project as a whole. The figure above represents an interpretation of how the three operas might be placed on this spectrum after the performances, though they might have been placed differently during the period of co-creation.

Like all pictures, this is an interpretation, not a reality. Nor does it imply a judgement since there are often good reasons why professional artists exercise more or less control in one situation than another. For example, with little or no experience of a VR opera, it was often difficult for the non-professionals in Ireland to imagine or control how the final production would appear. The spectrum of co-creation has value principally as a tool for thinking and talking.



Co-creation Stage is a web-based tool that enables performers in different locations to connect in real time. In Portugal, it was used to connect artists performing at the prison with others in a concert hall 150 km away.

O Tempo (Somos Nós)

If it reveals that people have different ideas of who is in charge, that might open important conversations and a rebalancing of the process. It is easy in co-creation to believe, or pretend, that the balance is more equal than it is: the spectrum is a tool that can help uncover such discrepancies.

Traction's experience suggests that artistic co-creation often leads to a gradual increase in control by the non-professional artists. At a project's inception, power lies principally in the hands of the professionals, who have normally conceived and planned the work, and are on their own home ground. But as it develops, and the non-professionals gain knowledge, skills and confidence, they are more ready to articulate their views and needs.

Because they are not being paid, their opinions can carry a particular authority in discussion; there is also nothing to stop them leaving if they are unhappy with the choices being made. At the same time, the professionals have invested too much to risk the project collapsing and become more open to external input as they learn how much others have to offer. None of this is a problem. On the contrary, it is intrinsic to the process of co-creation and the back-and-forth exchange is what leads to new work.

Opera and new technology

“I’ve come up with a set of rules that describe our reactions to technologies:

1. Anything that is in the world when you’re born is normal and ordinary and is just a natural part of the way the world works.
2. Anything that’s invented between when you’re fifteen and thirty-five is new and exciting and revolutionary and you can probably get a career in it.
3. Anything invented after you’re thirty-five is against the natural order of things.”

Douglas Adams⁶

Opera exists because of the continuing evolution of technology: musical instruments, stage machinery, lighting, acoustics; the list of technologies that serve opera today is very long. As the pace of its development grows faster, there is always a temptation—especially, as Douglas Adams says, when we approach middle age—to shout ‘Enough! I have what I need, now please leave things as they are.’

New technology can be hard to understand. It took decades for painters to adapt to the invention of photography. Arguably, they are still. It took almost as long for photographers to understand the language and grammar of their new art. Making phone calls may be one of the less important uses of the smartphone, but it was certainly the one its inventors were focused on. So it is understandable if opera—for whom the unmediated voice is an almost sacred ideal—is still searching for ways to accommodate the digital revolution in information and communication technology.



One of the background visuals from the Virtual Reality opera.

*Out of the Ordinary
/As an nGnách*

Traction did not set out to answer all those questions, and still less to advocate for digital technology as a solution to opera’s challenges. Indeed, our research highlighted not only its potential but also its problems, especially when access to technology is experienced as another dimension of social exclusion. For better or worse though, digital technology is now part of our lives so we need to learn what it can do for us.

Traction’s purpose was to pilot some new tools and learn how they might support the process of co-creation and offer new possibilities in performance. The Co-creation Space tool proved very useful in Ireland during the Covid pandemic because it enabled people who could not travel to collaborate on artistic ideas in their own time. In Portugal, the Co-creation Stage tool enabled inmates who were not permitted to leave the prison to perform in real time with others who were in a Lisbon concert hall. The Virtual Reality opera found a novel use for an existing technology.

Co-creation in the Traction operas

Co-creation was central to the three new operas developed by the Traction project because it was key to moving beyond the more established practice of community opera. Traction's intention was not to introduce people to the existing repertoire but to invite them to co-create new operas that enriched that heritage. It was not to teach them how to sing existing music, but to co-create new music from their own cultures and experience.

In bringing co-creation to opera, the organisations leading each project drew on ideas and methods with long roots in cultural education, and on the more recent innovations of the community arts movement. These rich and well-tested techniques were a strong foundation on which to experiment with new methods and tools, including digital technology, in each project's unique situation.

The three operas varied widely in their social context, culture, resources, scale and artistic vision. This diversity enabled Traction to test ideas across a range of situations and helped identify the common ground that inform the principles set out in the final section. It also demonstrated the adaptability and viability of co-creation.

The operas are described more fully in the next chapter, while the accompanying website, www.co-art.eu has more information about the process, including videos and links to other resources.





Three
exploratory
operas

La Gata Perduda The Lost Cat

El Gran Teatre del Liceu Barcelona, Catalonia

The Liceu theatre stands proudly on the Rambla, the famous pedestrian street connecting Barcelona's historic heart with the sea. After a fire in the 1990s, its 2,300 seat auditorium was restored in velvet and gold, but now also has state of the art backstage facilities. Off the Rambla and behind the theatre, is Raval, a bustling neighbourhood of narrow streets where 47,000 people live in about one square kilometre. Half were born outside the European Union, and you might hear Tagalog, Urdu or Arabic as often as Catalan or Spanish. Raval is lively and dynamic, home to 250 community associations, a dozen amateur choirs and four independent music schools. And yet, despite 175 years of proximity, one could say that the Liceu and Raval had never met: it's not the people of Raval who queue at the theatre's great portico on the Rambla.



Local people were involved in the co-creation of the visual branding, costumes and other aspects of the production, while amateur choirs and music students performed alongside professional artists.

La Gata Perduda

In 2018, the leadership of the Liceu began to build on its existing access policies, such as *Aproxa Cultura*, with a larger ambition to renew the opera house's relationship with local people, and become a cultural centre for all of Barcelona. The natural place to start was with the theatre's own neighbours. So began a process of dialogue among the theatre's 300 staff and with key partners in Raval, starting with the Tot Raval Foundation which supports the work of all those social and community groups. They looked for connections between activities in-house and in Raval. The Liceu has a costume department so it was paired with two NGOs who train migrants and vulnerable women in sewing and design. Similar links were made with music schools, the art college, a training centre for unemployed people, schools, clinics and libraries—all this to lay the foundations of working together on the many crafts involved in opera production, and to build trust, understanding and common purpose.



A playwright, Victoria Szpunberg, was commissioned to produce a libretto for a score to be composed by the popular Catalan musician, Arnau Tordera. A creative team was recruited to lead stage direction, design, costumes and music. Interest was growing in Raval and beyond: TV3, a Catalan broadcaster, began to film a documentary about the process.

Then the pandemic hit Barcelona. For months, everything stopped. The people of Raval were especially hard hit, as the tourism that sustains so many jobs vanished overnight. The idea of working on an opera must have seemed absurd. As the crisis went on, the Liceu made some hard decisions, including postponing the production by 11 months. It would now be part of the opening week of the 175th anniversary season with its première on 5 October 2022.

Small steps were possible during the pandemic. Students from Escola Massana, the art and design school in Raval, worked with disabled artists from the Sínia Occupational Centre on posters for the production. Unable to meet face-to-face they exchanged their work in progress online, and perfectly met the theatre marketing department's brief with four complementary designs. Meanwhile, the Liceu team visited health centres, schools and libraries to talk about the project, and to perform chamber music to introduce the project to people who were not linked with social organisations. Everywhere they went, they met interest and enthusiasm and by the time the score was ready, in October 2021, hundreds of people were committed to the Raval opera.

A dozen community choirs wanted to take part, each one gathering a different social group and performing a different style of music: retired people who loved traditional songs of Raval, Filipino kids who danced with as much energy as they sang, teenagers with a passion for musicals, women of African heritage who sang gospel. Under the musical guidance of Cristina Colomer, leader of one of the community music schools, these diverse elements were recomposed into three choirs for the opera. Here, the Co-creation Space, one of Traction's digital tools developed by CWI Research Institute in the Netherlands, proved to be invaluable in facilitating communication between people. Over 200 people used the web-based platform, to share music, videos and their feelings about the work they were learning. With just four weeks of rehearsal, this new choral ensemble performed the key song from *La Gata Perduda*—'Som del Raval', (We are from Raval)— in November 2021, at an open air concert for the Raval Festival.

Over the following winter and spring, many other aspects of the production came together in a partnership between the Liceu's professional artists and a huge range of community groups and individuals in Raval. Students set up a photo studio in the street, to make portraits of local people that were screen-printed onto the singers' shirts by Top Manta, a street-wear brand created by immigrants. The costumes of the principal characters were made by Dona Kolors, a fashion producer supporting vulnerable women. The stage floor, a map of Raval, was painted outdoors by graffiti artists, with the assistance of painting trainees from Impulsem workshop.



Many amateur musicians who live in Raval also took part in performing the music. They have varied backgrounds and experience but all contributed to making the opera a true community production.

La Gata Perduda

This wide engagement made sense because the opera was a portrait and a celebration of Raval itself. The title, *La Gata Perduda* (The Lost Cat) refers to the huge cat sculpture by Botero, standing in La Rambla del Raval and a popular symbol of the neighbourhood. In the opera, it has been stolen by a tycoon who plans to redevelop Raval for sport and tourism, but the sculpture has mysteriously vanished. The narrative uses the developer's efforts to find the lost cat to present the people of Raval in all their diversity, pride and creativity. His criminal schemes are exposed and the neighbourhood is successfully defended against the predations of outsiders by its inhabitants and the living spirit of the cat herself, sung by a young woman from the Filipino community of Raval.

The performances in October 2022 were sold out, and demand for tickets was so high that a thousand people were invited to attend the dress rehearsal. Most of the audience was setting foot in the Liceu for the first time, and their reception of the opera was passionate and enthusiastic. The curtain call lasted more than 15 minutes, with everyone on their feet applauding the 300 Raval people on the stage. It was a powerful validation of a community that is used to being disparaged in the media, and a moving culmination of the four-year journey of co-creation. It is hard to imagine a more artistically and socially ambitious opera, or one with more profound effects on the people involved. The scale of the project, intended to be the first in a long-term programme of co-created operas by the Liceu, shows that there need be no limits to what opera producers can imagine as they seek to renew their art form's place in society.

O Tempo (Somos Nós) Time (As We Are)

Sociedade Artística Musical
dos Pousos, (Samp)
Leiria, Portugal

The Artistic and Musical Association of Pousos was founded in 1873, when Pousos was a village, on the edge of Leiria in central Portugal. For generations, SAMP's staff have taught local children to play music, with an orchestra, wind band, choir and other ensembles to enrich community life. One of those youngsters, Paulo Lameiro, went on to study music and sociology in Lisbon, and perform in the city's opera house. Then, about 20 years ago, he came home to become the SAMP's director. Under his leadership, the music school expanded into a true community art organisation, taking music and art into hospitals, schools, villages and prisons.



O Tempo is a community opera, created with young inmates, family members, former inmates, residents of Leiria and prison service staff.

O Tempo (Somos Nós)

Leiria has two prisons, a local one for adults and a training prison for young offenders, aged 16 to 25, from all over Portugal. SAMP has worked in both, but mainly in the youth training prison, known as EPL-J, which was where the Traction opera was co-created. SAMP had previously performed Mozart with the inmates and professional singers, but this opera would be a completely new work. There was no template from which to work, and sharing videos of other operas risked giving the inmates false expectations. Time was one asset at SAMP's disposal. The support of the prison staff and the Ministry of Justice was another. The plan was to run exploratory workshops each week so that the inmates and SAMP's musician educators would develop ideas, capabilities and material that would lead eventually to the creation of a new opera.



There would be some 'capsule' performances along the way, to share and test work in progress. Three young composers were brought into the project, and each spent two weeks in Leiria meeting the young men and learning about the prison context. The original plan was that each of the composers would write one capsule and the inmates would then choose who they wanted to work with on the final grand opera. In the event, everyone got on so well that it was decided that the three composers - Francisco Fontes, Pedro Lima and Nono da Rocha - would compose the opera together with librettist Paulo Kellerman.

SAMP's work is deeply humanist, and the opera project was intended to bring together people normally kept apart by prison life. The inmates were at the heart of the co-creation process, but SAMP also wanted to involve their relatives—parents, partners and even children—as well as prison staff and people in the local community. The difficulties are evident because the situation and rights of each group are so different. To take an obvious example, prison staff are responsible for ensuring that nothing is given by a relative to an inmate that might compromise their safety or security. The barriers that separate people in this situation cannot be wished away. The answer lay in another digital tool developed for Traction, this time by Vicomtech in the Basque country. Co-creation Stage is a web-based tool that makes it possible to combine live video performances from different locations in real time. It took some experiments to find how to use it in an artistically coherent way but the final performance was hugely enriched as a result—and new connections between people became possible.

The pandemic affected the project from early 2020, regularly suspending or curtailing workshops. With hindsight though, it may have caused fewer difficulties than in the other operas because there was time to adjust and the environment was more controlled. Still there were problems along the way, with a week of rehearsal lost before the première in June 2022 when the stage director, Carlos Antunes, fell ill with Covid-19. It also meant that there were fewer capsule performances than planned. A 30-minute work in progress was performed in June 2021, in the prison and at the Gulbenkian arts centre in Lisbon, with a video link to Leiria. This was valuable in revealing weaknesses in the artistic concept and in how the Co-creation Stage was being used to support it.

Intensive co-creation work involving inmates, composers, librettist, director and the SAMP team, led to a change of direction, away from the realism of the first version towards a more abstract, symbolic work based on the myth of Ulysses and Penelope. Their separation, and the life choices that contributed to it, provided the emotional heart of what the inmates and relatives wanted to express about their experience. It was presented in six long scenes (two scored by each composer), in which the two principals were kept apart until the final scene.

Thirty young inmates performed alongside four professional singers, sometimes singing chorally, more often reciting text in a specially-devised rhythmic chant, and also performing rap and beatbox at certain moments. Half were on stage, with the rest projected onto the back walls of the set and forming a kind of Greek Chorus. They performed from the Mozart Pavilion, a former prison workshop converted into a music studio. The combination of a larger than life chorus with the physical presence of other performers was powerful and moving.

The opera—*O tempo (Somos Nós)*, Time (As we are)—also included short scenes that connected and interrupted the main narrative, in which inmates performed with their mothers, and participants from the operas in Barcelona and Ireland contributed by video. In June 2022, two performances took place in the prison, one for the rest of the inmates, and the other for family and guests. Two more took place at the Gulbenkian Concert Hall in Lisbon, with the support of the prison service. Some of the inmates were able to come to Lisbon, with the rest performing by video-link as before from the Mozart Pavilion. Both performances were sold out and a total of about 2,500 people saw the production, including the Portuguese Ministers of Culture and of Justice.

SAMP are steadily building the case for the arts in the rehabilitation of offenders, demonstrating through their quiet, careful projects the transformative value of the work. Many former inmates keep in touch—two were members of the project's advisory board, where they sat alongside a judge—and several came to see the performances in Lisbon. But there have been cruel setbacks too: visitors to the performances in the prison will have seen candle-lit portraits of two young men who had participated in earlier projects but died violently after their release. There is nothing easy about this work and the SAMP team's creative skills, experience and commitment are critical to its success. And it continues, with funds to support music workshops and performances in the prison for the next three years. In November, the two ministers made a joint visit to the prison, to meet the inmates again and see the work on site. After the high point and huge demands of the opera, and the difficulties of the pandemic, everyone agrees that the next phase may be quieter and smaller scale, but it will be equally centred in people's lives.

Out of the Ordinary As an nGnách

Irish National Opera Ireland

Irish National Opera (INO) is the youngest of the organisations co-creating opera in the Traction project. Founded in 2018, it is an opera producer with no theatre building of its own, which has allowed it to develop a very diverse range of work. During the pandemic, INO's small team responded creatively to lengthy lockdowns and travel restrictions. Among other initiatives, it commissioned and produced new five-minute opera films under the title *20 Shots of Opera*, that showcased young artists and digital technology's potential for the art form. The Traction opera was even more experimental: the world's first opera in Virtual Reality (VR) co-created with communities.



What audience see on their headsets becomes a reality which they can investigate and explore in all directions.

*Out of the Ordinary
/As an nGnách*

The original proposal had been to involve three very different communities in distinct aspects of the opera. School students would work on the composition with Finola Merivale, supported by Music Generation in Offaly, in the rural heart of Ireland; the narrative would be the focus of people living in Inis Meáin, one of the Aran Islands in the Gaeltacht, or Irish-speaking west of Ireland; finally, adults living in Tallaght, on the edge of Dublin, would contribute to the visual design of the Virtual Reality opera. These plans were thrown into disarray by the pandemic, and time was lost during the first year organising workshops that had to be cancelled as restrictions were lifted and then reintroduced. It was finally decided to begin the process by working online, through a series of workshops focusing on music, design and narrative, but open to everyone who had expressed an interest in the project. In particular, this drew in young people from different parts of Ireland, as it became clear that Music Generation was no longer in a position to support the activity.

Again, the Co-creation Space proved valuable in enabling people who were able to meet only online to share visual material, sound recordings and other media and comment on work in progress. The second part of the project began in August 2021, with the first face to face workshop in Dublin, albeit still under controlled health conditions.



For the first time, people from different parts of Ireland who had met only online, if at all, were able to begin exploring ideas together and experiencing the potential of VR headsets. The two day workshop was very successful and it was followed by further face-to-face activities in the subsequent months. Eventually, the non-professional artists were involved not only in developing musical and visual ideas, but also in shaping a narrative that drew on Irish myth and folk tales to create a new story about environmental catastrophe and renewal. They also took part in performing the music and choral singing as well as movements in VR through motion capture suits.

Out of the Ordinary/As an nGnách is a 20-minute VR opera, sung in English and Irish, and experienced by audiences through a headset. Groups of six are introduced to the experience by a host, who is on hand throughout in case of difficulties. The experience itself is solitary, and sometimes disorienting, but visually and musically intense. The viewer, for want of a better word, finds herself on the deck of a ship in the role of Nalva, as she leads her people away from a devastated homeland. Daol, an ambiguous spirit released by Nalva's people from the earth is following them and seems to cause a storm that wrecks the ship, plunging everyone beneath the waves and eventually into a new world where life might flourish again. The opera has two possible endings, one hopeful and the other not. Whether the viewer experiences one or the other is defined by what they have been drawn towards in the VR world.

It will be clear from this brief description that *Out of the Ordinary /As an nGnách* is an operatic experience unlike any other. The response to the final piece has been very positive, both from the non-professional artists who contributed to its co-creation, and audiences at the festivals where it has been presented. A few people have been less enthused, which is understandable given the novelty of the concept and the nature of Virtual Reality. Does opera have a future in VR? Only time will tell. The technology is too new and unfamiliar to be confident about what it offers, and even how to use it. And that proved to be its limitation in co-creation. Whether they were professional or non-professional artists, almost no one involved could easily imagine what they were working towards.



The work is a fully immersive, 360-degree digital experience. Audiences' interaction with the work influence the endings that they see.

Out of the Ordinary /As an nGnách

As a result, the process was often difficult and people had less control over their input than in the more conventional operas staged in Barcelona and Portugal. But there is a model now, a precedent that others can experience and respond to. The next iteration of a co-created VR opera would undoubtedly be much easier. The INO project has opened radical new ground that others can explore in years to come.



New ways
of making
opera



La Gata Perduda will make history because it will stir up many things in the neighbourhood: not just music, but feelings, memories, experiences, and love.

La Gata Perduda

“[Universalism] is explicitly unhistorical (that which is universal by definition excludes historical or cultural particularity), implicitly assumes that the values of one’s own culture are universal, and takes no account of the different subject positions that people occupy as the result of culture, gender, class, race, sexuality and so forth.”

Nicholas Till⁷

New processes

Opera is a complex art. It requires many different artists, technicians and craftspeople to combine their work with precision towards the fixed point of a performance. In an opera house, their methods combine with the efficiency of clockwork because everyone knows their role and responsibilities. In co-creation, such a smooth process is all but impossible because most of the people involved are doing things for the first time, at least at the beginning. Even the professionals will find that they have to work very differently to include people with no previous experience of opera.

In *La Gata Perduda*, for example, the Liceu's creative artists and craftspeople could not create the production over a few months of concentrated work as they usually do. The non-professional artists had jobs, school and personal commitments so they were only available at evenings and weekends. There were also many more of them than are involved in a typical production, which meant using school halls and other community spaces for rehearsal. Even communicating with everyone presented new challenges, which the Co-creation Space helped solve. A conventional production relies on knowing who will perform, but *La Gata Perduda* was rehearsed without such certainty: one small illustration is that no one knew how many batucada drummers would be available to perform until the dress rehearsal.

Pushing back the date of the première by 11 months presented further worries, including how to sustain everyone's commitment and enthusiasm over a longer timescale. The answer was to create and perform a showcase of work in progress for an invited audience in March 2022. *El Cabaret de la Gata* was a new departure for the theatre, but it succeeded in giving everyone a focus to work towards, and opportunities to test and learn from the performance, and the use of Co-creation Stage to involve the operas in Portugal and Ireland. Performing so early in the autumn season was another challenge.

The rehearsal schedule had to be suspended for six weeks over the summer holidays, because the non-professional artists would be away or have other commitments. So the process had to pause between late July and early September—an unthinkable hiatus in a professional production. It left just four weeks before opening night to bring the performance back to readiness. The opera did come together beautifully, but only because the professional artists were able to adapt their usual processes, and hold their nerve in an unfamiliar situation.

Comparable challenges were experienced in both the other operas. In Portugal, for example, the prison service decided which inmates would be permitted to perform in Lisbon, and the selection was based not on artistic questions but offender management needs. The final choice was also made quite late and there was no alternative but to make it work. In Ireland, the unfamiliar world of VR made the co-creation process longer and more difficult for everyone, but perhaps especially for the professional artists who were most aware of its problems. Again, much was beyond their control, and they could only adapt their ideas and plans to the conditions.

Such challenges are not unusual in any opera production, but co-creation requires exceptional flexibility, imagination and confidence because it happens in unfamiliar and uneven ground. Success depends on the artists involved paying real attention to one another's needs, not only the artistic ideas, but the whole spectrum of human feelings and obligations. Trust is essential in this process. It takes time to grow, and is easily lost.

Co-creation is like going off road. There is no longer a smooth, mapped path to follow, only the driver's intuition and sensitivity to new conditions as they appear. The journey is as important as the destination, and its rewards can be exhilarating.

In the liner notes for *Decade*, a 1977 retrospective of his music, Neil Young wrote that having a hit record with 'Heart of Gold' put him in the middle of the road: 'Traveling there soon became a bore, so I headed for the ditch. A rougher ride but I saw more interesting people there.' He could have been writing about co-creation.

New narratives

The opera repertoire is full of riches but they are sometimes entangled with problematic stories. Attitudes to sex and race, to take only the most obvious examples, have changed greatly since the 19th century, and today's audiences are as willing to express their disapproval as they ever were. The difference is that where opera once caused controversy by challenging current values, it is now more likely to do so by seeming to prolong out-of-date ones, or in misguided efforts to modernise them.⁸ Of course, opera has always been a territory of contestation. Like their predecessors, today's artists will find their own way across troubled waters.

Co-creation may offer ways of reimagining the repertoire but its greatest strength lies in extending opera's range through new stories that reflect today's societies and their concerns. Each of the Traction operas did this in different ways.

Out of the Ordinary/ As An nGnách uses new technology to recast Irish folk tales into a fable about climate change whose two main characters are both female.

In ***La Gata Perduda*** the central character is an entire neighbourhood represented by 250 performers and symbolised in the figure of a gender-changing cat.

O Tempo (Somos Nós) told a philosophical story of separation, temptation and imprisonment in which the married lovers stay faithful and are reunited at the end.

Such stories could only have been imagined and produced through co-creation. Their characters and situations arise from lived realities. They belong to people marginalised by society and in opera, if they appear at all, it is as caricatures imagined by outsiders.



The opera *O Tempo (Somos Nós)* included short scenes that connected and interrupted the main narrative which inmates performed with their mothers.

O Tempo (Somos Nós)

Through co-creating opera they represent their experience in ways powerful enough to challenge dominant cultural narratives. Co-creation empowers people to tell new stories that shine an interrogative light on the old ones.

Community operas are rooted in time and place. They are rarely, if ever, revived, and do not tour. Their specificity is at once their strength and their weakness. As co-creation matures it may overcome that limitation. Although it would be logistically impossible to perform *La Gata Perduda* in Berlin or Paris, it is not hard to imagine audiences in those cities enjoying the opera as much as those in Barcelona. The community it portrays has parallels in every city. The social, economic and political pressures that drive the narrative exist everywhere too. Likewise, it would be perfectly feasible to produce *O Tempo (Somos Nós)* elsewhere: it would not even need to be done in a prison. And *Out of the Ordinary* might one day be staged as a chamber opera. In the rooted specificity of their stories, each of these operas created something with wider resonance, not universal perhaps, but with things to offer audiences without any knowledge of their origins.

New forms

The Virtual Reality opera co-created with communities by INO is an obvious way in which opening up the art can lead to the emergence of new forms. The length of the opera, the number of characters, and the viewer experience were all shaped by the formal constraints of VR. Not many people would wish to wear a headset for the length of a conventional opera. However, this opera could also have been made by professional artists working alone, even if it would have had a different character. In suggesting that co-creation leads to new formal solutions for opera itself, we are concerned with more subtle differences.

Take for example the structure of *O Tempo (Somos Nós)*. The decision to create an opera with six scenes written by three composers was not originally planned: it came from the relationships between the artists that grew from the co-creation workshops in the prison. Likewise, the linking vignettes, which were particularly moving and memorable, were introduced in response to ideas developed during rehearsal. They responded to the situations of individual people involved in the process and could not have been meaningfully imagined in the abstract. Similarly, the creation of a chorus that was present only by video link was enabled by the new Traction technology but it was made necessary by the conditions of working in the prison. Only by using the Co-creation Stage was it possible for 30 inmates to perform together in a Lisbon concert hall, since security clearance could not be obtained for them all to be physically present.

The most striking ways in which co-creation determined the form of *La Gata Perduda* arose from the sheer numbers of people who wanted to take part. Thus the cast of 250 non-professional artists on stage determined decisions about the stage design, which had to support so many people to move and sing safely. It also defined the ideas behind the costume design and other aspects of the production. The effects rippled out to every part of the opera house.

In the absence of dressing rooms for so many performers, the Foyer Room was set aside for their use, so it was no longer possible to serve the elegant interval refreshments normally enjoyed here. On the two nights *La Gata Perduda* was performed, audiences were served only soft drinks and potato chips at a fixed price of two euros. Even the box office had to adapt, not just in the ticket prices but in making them available to the people of Raval before they went on sale to the public. On the other hand, the usual offer of complimentary tickets to politicians and other eminent people was not made. They had to buy a place.

Since the pandemic, the Liceu has provided its programmes only in digital form, but it saw that the people who had contributed to *La Gata Perduda* should have a permanent, physical trace of their work, so this was the only printed—and free—programme of the season.

All these details matter less than the principle. Co-creation will invite and sometimes require new approaches that will influence the formal solutions not only of the opera itself but potentially of every aspect of its production and presentation to the public. And why not? The forms of art have always been in dialogue with social needs and norms, and equally quick to adapt when they change.

New aesthetics

As already discussed, co-creation is shaped by the different resources brought to the table by professional and non-professional artists. The differences are unavoidable but fruitful. It is in their interaction that co-creation's interest lies and why co-creation is different from the other kinds of creative collaboration between professional artists.

The differences arising from co-creation by professional and non-professional artists are especially large in opera. It is not unusual for film directors to cast untrained and inexperienced actors with strong results. But if formal training may not be necessary in some kinds of art, no one believes that it is possible to play the violin or sing an aria without instruction and practice. That is why community opera gives the principal roles to professional singers and uses non-professionals chorally, where individual limitations are less important than the collective sound. But this is not the only solution, and others may be more artistically rewarding.

Streetwise Opera, which works with homeless people to co-create new opera in the UK, has developed its own aesthetic, using film as well as live performance in its productions. In 2016 Streetwise Opera's production of *The Passion* was broadcast by BBC TV on Easter Monday.⁹ It is based on the Bach oratorio, with a new finale composed by James McMillan, and co-created by Streetwise members with The Sixteen, a leading British choir. At first hearing, it would seem absurd to combine the voices of non-professional singers with experience of homelessness with those of singers who have trained and performed at the highest level for decades. In fact, the imaginative decision was taken to ask eight different Streetwise singers to play the role of Jesus in succession. Women and men, of different ages and ethnicities, they fused into a person who would be the victim of state power, felt in the vocal force of the professional singers.



An artistic coherence was achieved because each person performed out of the truth of their experience, in the confidence of one another's respect.

O Tempo (Somos Nós)

In this way, a weakness became not so much a strength as an integral part of the performance's artistic meaning. The result was an exceptionally moving and memorable experience that renewed the sense of the original composition.

Similarly creative solutions were found in the three Traction operas. They ranged from the rhythmic chant invented for the chorus of inmates in Leiria to the distribution of the music across different choral groups in Barcelona. The introduction of non-operatic musical languages such as gypsy rumba, rock and rap became a natural enlargement of the palette. Many small decisions, and some large ones, led not to a dilution of operatic standards but an enlargement of them.

Not everyone sees this, especially if they go expecting to hear opera as they have always heard it. They may leave believing that they were offered nothing but a poor imitation of a professional production. So it is important to frame a co-created opera in ways that will help audiences to set aside familiar expectations. For *Out of the Ordinary*, that was done by the hosts who welcomed audiences and explained something about the genesis of the piece and VR itself. In other cases, the venue and the organisation of the performance may signal the difference indirectly. There are many possible solutions, but it is always important to present a co-created work so that audiences will approach it without preconceptions and respond to it on its own terms.



Learning
from
experience



Turning experience into principles

Recording the choral parts of *Out of the Ordinary/As an nGnách* sung by young people from Inis Meáin.

Out of the Ordinary
/As an nGnách

Co-creation is many things

It will be clear, if you have read this far, that we do not see co-creation as a fixed or rigid process. On the contrary, it is intrinsic to the practice that it adapts to the values, interests and needs of the people involved, as well as the external conditions in which the artistic work happens. Therefore, co-creation has no road map or guidebook, no step-by-step method. The three operas presented here are wildly different in almost every way—except the most important. Each is a new work of art, co-created by professional and non-professional artists. Their artistic presence in the world, like the meaning that audiences may find in them, arise from that fundamental fact.

Getting started in co-creation

How then can people begin to explore co-creation? The answer is simpler than it might seem. Co-creation is a forgiving practice. It welcomes beginners, especially professional artists, including producers and mediators, who want to involve non-professionals in creating art. In the absence of training opportunities or qualifications, there are few little alternatives to starting work and learning as you go.

This is not an invitation to naively rush in where wiser souls might fear to tread. As with any journey, preparation is essential. Reflect on why you want to undertake it, and how others might interpret your intentions and your actions. Think about your existing resources, including artistic skills and practice, and consider how transferable they might be to a new way of working. Ask yourself what assumptions you are making and what you don't know—remembering that the real surprises come from what we don't know we don't know. Other aspects of preparation include:

Read about co-creation (bearing in mind that many other terms are used to describe it, including community art, participatory art, cultural democracy etc.). Explore the Internet, where you can find films, podcasts, blogs and much more.

Meet people who know about co-creation, listen to their stories and their advice. Don't limit yourself to professional artists, though. Talk to people who have participated in co-creation as non-professionals. Mostly people are generous in sharing their ideas and experiences to those who are really interested.

Meet people who don't know about co-creation. Talk to community organisations in your neighbourhood, learn about their work, and look for common ground. Tell them about your own work and your ideas about involving new actors. The Liceu spent 18 months in community dialogue with local groups before beginning the co-creation process.



Workshops at Coláiste Naomh Eoin on Inis Meáin began to explore the themes that had come up again and again: love, grief, change, belonging, journeys, the supernatural, climate change and more.

Out of the Ordinary
/As an nGnách

As you read and talk to people about co-creation, you can start thinking about a project. Don't be too ambitious though: start small and test the water. Success is a route to empowerment. A small project that exceeds everyone's expectations is better than a bigger one with mixed results; good experiences build skill and confidence. They encourage people to be more ambitious next time. And if the work doesn't succeed in every aspect, don't be disheartened. Talk honestly about what has happened and ask everyone how it might be done better next time.

In co-creation, what matters first is the quality of the journey. It should be enjoyable, meaningful and rewarding in itself, irrespective of the destination. If the artistic result is good—and it's much more likely to be if getting there has been good first—it will validate the journey. This is not to place the process above the product. Both are essential parts of the same co-creation whole, because they reinforce one another, and each should be of the highest possible quality. But the process comes first, literally and metaphorically. If that doesn't work, the result will not be co-creation, however good it might seem in other terms.

Why principles?

The scale and range of the operas, the diversity of the organisations, and the knowledge of the people involved all combined to make Traction an exceptional chance to experiment, adapt and above all learn about co-creation. The most experienced among us learned as much as any because human creative interaction has limitless possibilities. But how to distil what we have learned into practical, helpful information that can support future co-creation projects, whether in opera or in other artistic fields?

Our solution is to offer some guidance from the Traction experience in the form of principles. Principles are ideas against which to test practice, reminders of the values that co-creation depends on. We have kept them broad and few. Ideally, these should be memorable—coming easily to mind rather than having to be looked up.

The principles should be helpful at the conceptual and planning stage of a project, but also in day by day activity. Like a compass, they help keep the project on course, but only if they are regularly checked and corrections made as needed. So they should be public and discussed among the people involved in co-creation. They are standards for the project, and everyone is responsible for upholding them.

Because co-creation is flexible and responsive, the principles are broad and open to interpretation. What one project sees as ambitious might be different from how another interprets the principle. But a co-creation project that does not aspire to achieve the highest standards in its own terms is likely to be in trouble, and should do some thinking. It is possible—but in our view unlikely—that one principle may have less importance than in another particular situation. If so, you should be able to say why. The key point is that the principles are not instructions, but tools for thinking.

Principles of co-creation

These principles are written mainly with professional artists in mind, because it is they who most often begin the process of co-creation, but the ideas suggested here apply to the practice itself and everyone involved. It should also be noted that the term ‘artist’ includes a range of roles in co-creation, such as producing and mediation.

Our experience suggests that successful co-creation projects are:

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- Aware** because a conscious, informed understanding of people, context and actions is the foundation of good co-creation
 - Equal** because each participant has the same right to contribute to co-creation
 - Ambitious** because everyone deserves to benefit from the best process, artistic work and human outcomes
 - Honest** because integrity is the foundation of trust, learning and empowerment
 - Responsive** because complex situations require flexibility to meet changing needs and opportunities
 - Patient** because relationships, learning and growth all take the time they take
 - Hopeful** because hope in uncertainty enables us to work towards the outcomes we want

Aware

Awareness is the foundation of co-creation, starting with an informed understanding of the practice itself. Co-creation is fluid and open to interpretation, but it is not just a fashionable label that can be applied to any form of artistic work involving public participation. It is a demanding and rigorous way of making art because its freedoms place responsibility on those who choose to practice it.

But that is only the beginning of awareness. You also need to know the people with whom you want to work—their culture, needs, interests, ways of living and so on. Why would they want to take part in an artistic creation? What have you to offer them? How could they benefit and what difficulties might they encounter? There is no better way of learning some of these things than listening to people. All the Traction operas spent months in ‘community dialogue’—meeting people, learning about their organisations, speaking openly about possibilities, but without preconditions.

Listening is an underestimated skill, perhaps because it is not so easy to develop. It requires care and concentration, paying attention to what may be hinted at or not said at all. It means being aware of our own assumptions and how we might be (mis-) interpreting what we hear. It means checking in with the other by telling them that what you think you have heard. It also involves listening to what you say, and how that might be interpreted: does it sound like more of a promise or a commitment than you intended?



The stage floor of *La Gata Perduda* was based on a map of Raval, painted outdoors in the neighbourhood by local artists and students.

La Gata Perduda

Errors and misunderstandings will always arise in co-creation, along with dilemmas and ethical tensions. They are unavoidable when people work together, and especially when some have more resources, authority or power than others. But it is not the disagreements or missteps that matter: it is how they are managed and resolved.

Some of the other principles mentioned below, like honesty, responsiveness and patience are resources that can help you handle problems in ways that leave everyone stronger. But everything begins with awareness. Without it, you might not even know there's a problem until it becomes too big to resolve well.

Equal

The Charter of the United Nations affirms ‘faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women’.¹⁰ That principle of equality underpins the concept of human rights, including our right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community. Co-creation, which sets out to make that right a reality, therefore depends on equality between everyone involved.

“Human rights require three interlocking qualities: rights must be natural, (inherent in human beings); equal (the same for everyone); and universal (applicable everywhere).”

Lyn Hunt”

Equality is the foundation of our autonomy, and it protects co-creation from falling into paternalism or manipulation, and consequently working against its own fundamental purpose. Each participant must have the same rights in the process, including the right to be heard, to be answered and to withdraw if the answer is not acceptable. Artistic co-creation depends on everyone understanding and being involved in decision-making. Only then does the work truly become the expression of the group, because people usually accept decisions they understand, even if they would have chosen differently.

The principle of equality is not simplistic. It does not mean that everyone has the same role in the co-creation process, or that everyone’s opinion has the same value. Expertise matters, but it is also important that it can apply as much to community sentiment as to lighting design. The Traction operas had professional composers, librettists and directors and the quality of the final productions depended on their skills. But their expertise was open and shared.



The INO team spent two glorious days on the magical island of Inis Meáin running development workshops with secondary school students of Coláiste Naomh Eoin for *Out of the Ordinary* opera.

Out of the Ordinary
/As an nGnách

Their work began when they met the people who would be part of it and, in varying degrees, it was open to their ideas. That worked in different ways and degrees but there was discussion about every aspect of the productions, as there are between professional artists. Equally, the Traction operas succeeded because of the respect accorded to the expertise of Raval’s NGOs, the staff of the Leiria prison, and the Irish-speakers of Inis Meáin.

The principle of co-creation—and it is not always an easy one for professional artists to adjust to—is that everyone has the same right to be heard. Professional artists are often silent in rehearsal, even if they have doubts, because the conductor or the director can decide if they will be hired next time. Non-professional artists choose to be there, often at considerable cost to themselves. If they do not understand or believe in what they are asked to do, they can also choose to leave. Their voice has authority. Their knowledge might not be named or accredited but it might be critical to the success of the work. Professional or non-professional artist, each person’s agency must be respected in a co-creation process. That means ensuring that they know that their views are legitimate and welcome, whatever choices are finally made.

Ambitious

Co-creation with non-professionals is not a second-rank artistic endeavour. Unless you go into it with the aim of achieving the best art of which you are capable, and through the best process, you are cheating yourself and everyone else. People who are invited to take part in a professional artistic creation, perhaps for the first and only time in their lives, are entitled to expect that they are being offered the best possible opportunity. People know when they have participated in good work, though their criteria for judgement are not always those used by professional artists.

Any uncertainty a non-professional artist might have about the quality of their work, will be quickly settled by the audience's reaction. Everyone is sensitive to condescension. No one wants to hear that they were really good, 'for an amateur' or 'considering you've never performed on stage before'. Such words from a relative or friend can be enough to undo all the hope and confidence a person has gained during the process, making them feel foolish to have trusted the professional who told them their work was better than it truly was.

“The beatboxer showed a level of insurmountable, superlative virtuosity, putting the performer at the level of the best singer or instrumentalist on stage.”

Expert response to O Tempo (Somos Nós)

The only thing they are likely to take away from such a disappointment is the conviction that they should never have got involved. Far from being empowered by the co-creation process, they are strengthened in their belief that culture is not for them and change is not possible.



The introduction of non-operatic musical languages such as gypsy rumba, rock and rap became a natural enlargement of the palette.

O Tempo (Somos Nós)

But ambition does not mean working towards the same skills or standards professional artists aim for. Clearly, an untrained singer cannot perform like a trained one. Co-creation involves finding new ways to make art, and new ways of understanding its value too. It means focusing on what a non-professional artist can do, rather than what they can't, and what they might not yet know they can do. That is how a young beatboxer gave some of the stand-out moments in the prison opera, leaving many of the orchestral musicians wide-eyed and speechless at his expertise. It is why there is an accordion in the score of the Irish VR opera. It is why *La Gata Perduda* included gypsy rumba and a rock band. None of these things was tokenistic or gratuitous. All were performed to high standards in their own terms. Excellence in co-creation involves demanding the most of the artistic and human resources present, to invent something wonderful from the ingredients to hand. That is why every co-creation is absolutely unique—if it is truly co-creation. It begins with working from what you have and imagining where it might lead you. It is about someone achieving their best, not an arbitrary standard, and the authenticity of personal realisation makes it meaningful and true.

Honest

Non-professional artists who join a co-creation project make a leap of faith into a world of which they probably know little. So they look for guidance from the professional artists who have encouraged them to come on this journey. A guide knows the difficulties and dangers of the mountains, the hidden places and the best views. They know when to stop and rest, and where to find water. But a guide can only accompany. They can advise, warn and encourage, but they cannot walk the ground for them, or find the courage to climb. People trust their guide: it's in the nature of the role. But trust is easily lost if the guide is not honest—if they say that something is easier than it is, or better, then people will lose confidence in them. And trust, once lost, is almost impossible to regain.

Professional artists need to be scrupulously honest in co-creation, not because their opinion is infallible, but because it is a fixed point on which others rely. It may be tempting to encourage by giving too-generous feedback, but such well-meant deceptions are always a mistake. The professional's word must be reliable. It must also be available. Openness is part of honesty. It involves being accessible and ready to explain your thinking. In *La Gata Perduda*, Stage Director Richard Soler took the time to explain to a single person why she could not sing in a part of the opera she had set her heart on; she understood and accepted his thinking and was then happy with the role she played. There was a place for everyone who wanted to sing in *La Gata Perduda*, though not always the place they thought they wanted. There may be many such conversations in a co-creation process, and it depends on taking the time and care to have each one. These moments, founded in equality and mutual respect are as critical to the quality of the work as any artistic decision.

Do what you say, keep your promises, and be cautious about what commitments you make: this is how trust is won and kept.



There was a place for everyone who wanted to sing in *La Gata Perduda*, though not always the place they thought they wanted.

La Gata Perduda

Responsive

Conventional opera productions take a good deal of trouble to avoid anything that might interfere with the creative process. As far as possible, they attempt to create a serene environment in which artists can focus on their creative work. Co-creation is not like that because it is open to the world. It begins by inviting strangers into the studio, workshop or rehearsal room, or perhaps inviting itself into other people's spaces and lives. How other people live, their needs and habits, their way of seeing—all these enrich co-creation, but they also make the process unstable. Rehearsals in Leiria Youth Prison were always unpredictable because the professional artists could never be sure who would be present. It was not only a matter of the inmates' own feelings, though that could be important. There were the needs of the administration: a person might have a legal or medical appointment or, more seriously, be punished or even transferred. Since anyone might be unavailable on the day of the performance the opera had to be conceived as a collective piece, without inmates in individual roles.

Co-creation demands this kind of responsiveness to the specifics of situations. In Barcelona, it was impossible to rehearse in August, when many of the non-professional performers would be on holiday and others would be working long hours at the height of the tourist season. In Ireland, the long process of coding for VR required INO to organise ways of keeping contact with the non-professional artists. Planning and preparation is vital, but so is a willingness to adapt plans to meet other people's needs or when situations change. An opera house is like a liner, following a course under its own steam. Co-creation is a sailing ship, keeping its heading by making continual adjustments for the winds and tides. The skills needed are very different.



Their separation, and the life choices that contributed to it, provided the emotional heart of what the inmates and relatives wanted to express about their experience.

O Tempo (Somos Nós)

Patient

More than once in these pages, we have compared co-creation with a journey. It is a useful metaphor because it underlines the importance of travel as well as that of the destination. The journey, the process, is worth undertaking in its own right. It is not something to be got through. It gives meaning to its end. Slow travel requires patience, but its rewards are many. Co-creation is not usually a quick process, and certainly not if it centres on something as ambitious as opera. Professional artists, who might be able to create a new production in months, must change gear when they co-create with non-professionals. Simply gaining people's interest and trust might involve months of talking and familiarisation. That is only a problem if you have set unrealistic timescales for the work. Co-creation takes the time it takes. If it is rushed, it will be hollow and weak.

Long timescales present their own problems though. People's lives change, not everyone will be able to stay the course. The destination can seem distant, out of reach. The answer is to plan staging posts, smaller, closer objectives that can be reached in a few weeks or even days. A few weeks after receiving the score of *La Gata Perduda*, the non-professional choirs performed the Raval anthem at an open air music festival in the neighbourhood for an audience of two thousand people. A few weeks after that, they sang again at the switching on of the Christmas lights. The following spring they performed in *El Cabaret de La Gata*, a presentation of work in progress for an invited audience in the Liceu Theatre's Foyer Room. Each of these moments was achievable in its time and at the level the non-professional artists had reached. Each was a success with audiences and a joy for the performers. This incremental approach brings smaller goals within reach, and each achievement builds skills, confidence and hope for the next stage. Even when things do not go quite to plan, the effect can be positive as people see what needs to be done and are motivated to correct the problems. Such staging posts are an effective way to work towards a destination that cannot be reached in a single leap.



The value of community art, like life itself, is determined by progress in areas such as relationships, learning, communication, self-knowledge and possibility.

O Tempo (Somos Nós)

Working with people who do not know or understand things which professionals take for granted does take patience. Co-creation is a development process for everyone, people are learning all the time. So the need to go back over ground already covered arises regularly as people rethink what they were told in the light of what they now know. This is not repetition, it is a deepening of understanding in the light of new experience. Time spent in this way is almost always worthwhile because it reduces the likelihood of future misunderstandings.

Hopeful

Rebecca Solnit sees hope as a response to uncertainty. Optimists and pessimists, she writes, are equally sure they know what will happen. Hope accepts that the future is unknown and therefore that it is open to us to create it. We work in hope towards the art, the community, the world we want to see. Co-creation is the most uncertain of art practices, if only because its endless variables make it impossible to control. And yet, it works, time after time, consistently producing experiences that are artistically and socially transformative. None of the Traction operas happened quite as they were imagined. All of them met and overcame serious difficulties. And each one exceeded the hopes of the people who brought their creativity, effort and generosity on the journey. Once accepted, once embraced, uncertainty changes from being a threat to an offer. It says there is always another way forward when the expected path is blocked.

“Hope in this sense is not a prize or a gift, but something you earn through study, through resisting the ease of despair, and through digging tunnels, cutting windows, opening doors, or finding the people who do these things.”

Rebecca Solnit²

Hope is not naïve, but nor does it accept easy excuses. Inexperience is not a good reason to avoid starting a co-creation project, it is a good reason to learn how to do it. With hope, people gain confidence—not in the outcome, which remains uncertain, but in their ability to find answers, overcome problems and reach a satisfying conclusion. In hope, you plan for what comes after the conclusion, because life goes on and the good created during the project needs to be invested, like a seed, so that it can continue to grow. Hope is a virtue, not a feeling. It grows in being shared, encouraging and strengthening us. It may be the most valuable resource we have.



The VR opera explores new methods of co-creation, placing our communities at the centre of the opera creation process.

Out of the Ordinary
/As an nGnách

Appendices

The Traction project

The Traction project was undertaken by a consortium of opera producers, research institutes, universities and other experts in art and digital technology from six European countries. It ran from January 2020 to December 2022 and was supported by the European Commission through the Horizon research and innovation programme under grant agreement no. 870610.

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CWI (Netherlands)
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Colophon

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Notes

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Social and cultural diversity is manifest in all our lives, our food, our media, our literature, ever more in each generation. The world is changed. Enriched. At this time of renaissance, opera, our artform that has a claim to be universal, has its greatest opportunity to demonstrate such capacity to those on its doorstep.

Opera is a shared endeavour. When it creates a shared space, as basic principle and primary mission, it values and protects diversity. Whether through public or private funds, or even unfunded, all opera is co-created. All opera is community opera—the question is, which community?

