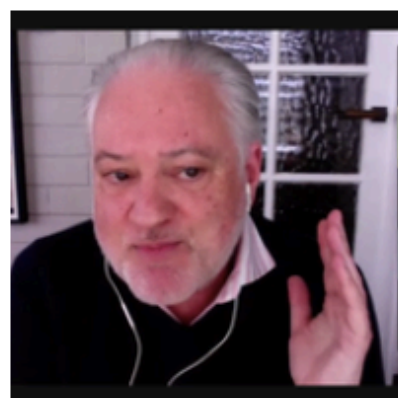
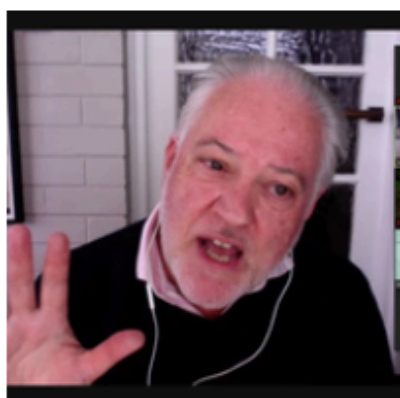
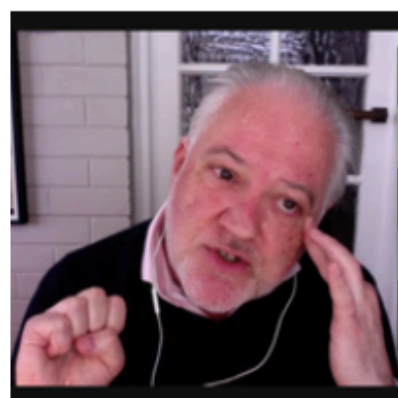
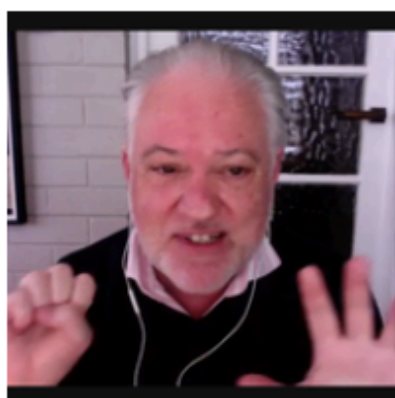
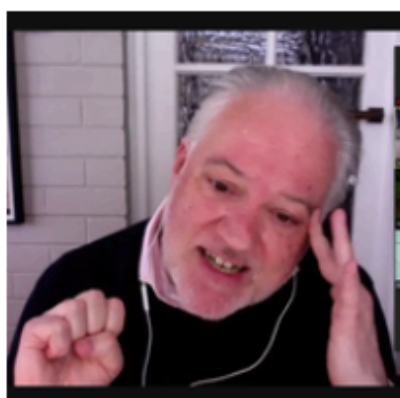
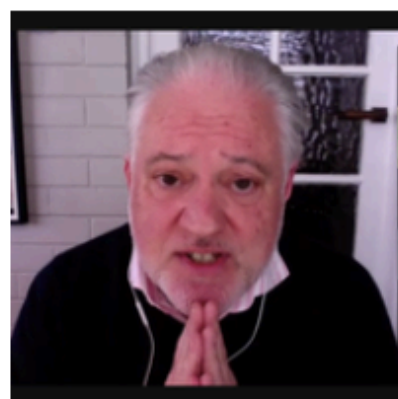
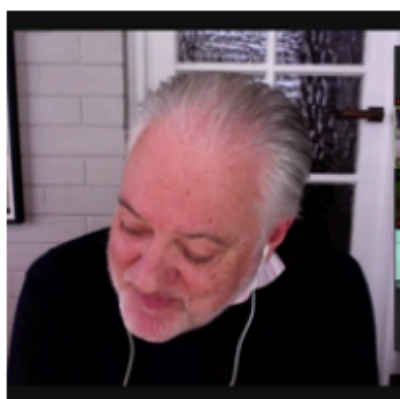
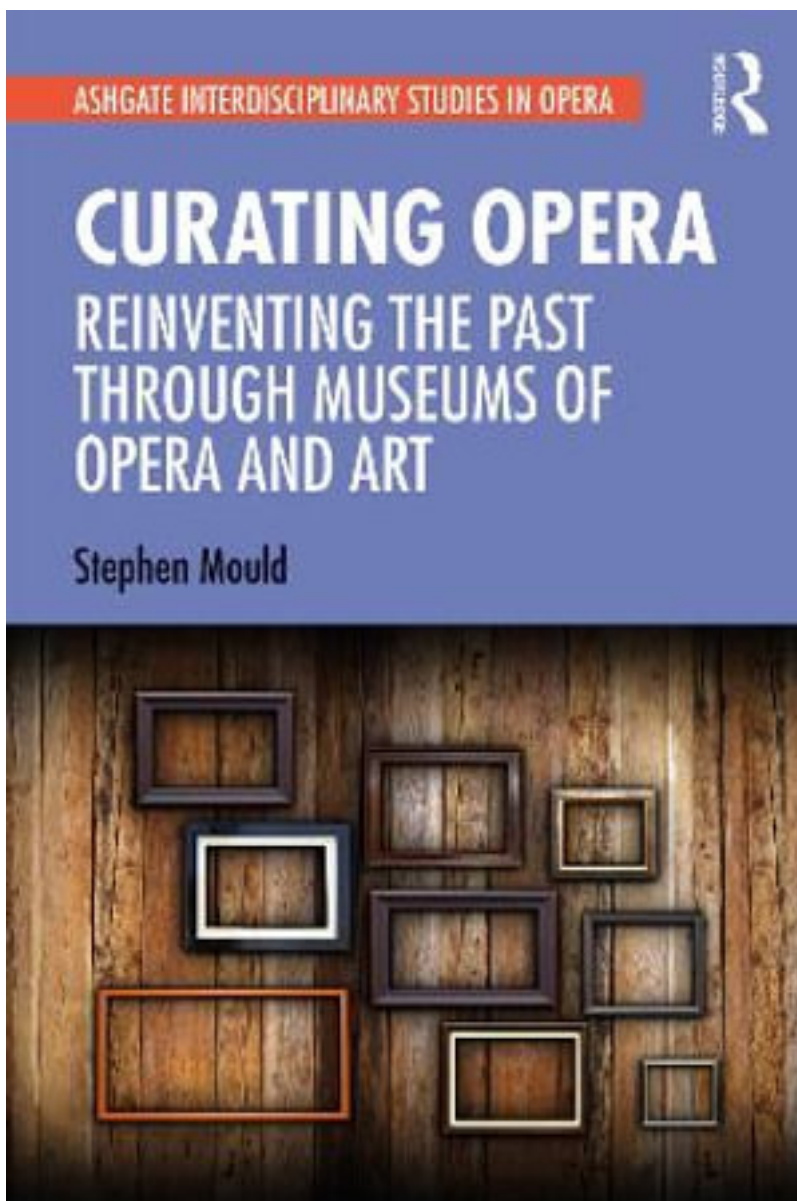


Sunday 8 August 2021, 11.00pm  
A talk by Stephen Mould via zoom  
about his book 'Curating Opera - reinventing  
the past through museums of opera and art'



## About the book

Curation as a concept and a catchword in modern parlance has, over recent decades, become deeply ingrained in modern culture. The purpose of Stephen Mould's study is to explore the curatorial forces at work within the modern opera house and to examine the functionaries and processes that guide them. In turn, comparisons are made with the workings of the traditional art museum, where artworks are studied, preserved, restored, displayed and contextualised – processes which are also present in the opera house. Curatorial roles in each institution are identified and described, and the role of the celebrity art curator is compared with that of the modern stage director, who has acquired previously undreamt-of licence to interrogate operatic works, overlaying them with new concepts and levels of meaning in order to reinvent and redefine the operatic repertoire for contemporary needs.



## Report on the talk

The WSNSW had the great pleasure of hosting Dr Stephen Mould to address us on some of the issues discussed in his latest book “Curating Opera – reinventing the past through museums of opera and art”. This talk was supposed to be a live event but due to the current lockdown, Stephen very generously agreed to do the lecture via zoom. We were delighted that the commitment was kept.

The ideas covered in Stephen’s book span the world of opera and art – with respect to the latter Stephen has published in the area of the visual arts including a monograph on the émigré surrealists Dušan and Voitre Marek. I suspect that we will need several sessions to begin to unpack some of the strands in his book. Not unlike the content of the encyclopaedic “Wagnerism” by Alex Ross, the subject of “Curating Opera” is a very long conversation. Almost fractal in its properties. What a pleasure to have such books and ideas to contend with, to challenge and confound our understanding of opera. The works of Wagner are fodder for a myriad of postulations and studies, let alone Wagner in the context of opera as a living art form.

The role of curator outside of the visual arts is a relatively new phenomenon. A term freely and loosely applied to Arts Festival directors and stage directors alike. But like the role of scenographer and dramaturg in the theatre (and opera) it can also be specific and laden with certain traditions and associations. Curating opera can be applied to both the music and the performance tradition. Historically informed performances, for instance, embrace both aspects at the same time. And this is its connection to the visual arts. Opera as a frozen exhibit, a museum piece, rather than as a living (and relevant) work, alive at the time of its performance. The distinction can be moot and academic. However, it goes to the core of how/why we react (favourably and unfavourably) to certain productions by certain directors of the works of Richard Wagner. The curatorial role of specific institutions and stage directors “has acquired previously undreamt-of licence to interrogate operatic works, overlaying them with new concepts and levels of meaning in order to reinvent and redefine the operatic repertoire for contemporary needs”.

The Bayreuth Festival post the death of The Master in 1883 was set in aspic by his widow, and new Festival Director, Cosima. The productions of The Ring and Parsifal overseen by the composer/librettist/dramaturg were considered by Cosima to be definitive. Nothing changed much until her death in 1930. Such was, and is, the hold of that “tradition” that even to this day we feel more comfortable watching a Ring with horned helmets and bearskins, spears and naturalistic looking rocks and trees. With the advent of the New Bayreuth, starting in 1951, Wieland Wagner, the grandson, managed to blow away decades of tradition (“varnish” to use one of Stephen’s analogies) with minimal sets and light to create a world closer to the roots of the Ring as a piece of theatre – the world of the Classical Greeks. So, by removing the yellowing opaque varnish of the Bayreuth tradition, Wieland reset the operas of his

grandfather in a new light, a new tradition (?), that at the same time reflected the theatrical origins of the work and as myths. Myths that spoke to the post war audience of universality, of cautionary tales, of the human condition. So, Bayreuth became once again a laboratory for renewal and experimentation, closer to Wagner's ideal, rather than an operatic museum. This process of stripping away the layers of varnish, of tradition, reveals the work as new, sometimes shockingly so.

The thesis is inconclusive in that each generation will look at and appreciate works of art in different ways. The beginnings of opera, discussed in the book, could be both an exploration in reconstructing the performance traditions of Ancient Greek plays or the expensive entertainment of the aristocratic class. Assuming the role of opera developed from an ephemeral experience in a temporary space, a ritual even a religious ritual, to a commodified event in a physical permanent space, the commercial theatre, what is the art form to become as we head well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Is Bayreuth going to remain an experiment, a public institution of contemporary relevance and social value, or is it a private operatic museum? Can it sustain the Wunderkammer approach of a Frank Castorf and antagonise the audience into non attendance? Temple/museum or commercial enterprise? Or both?

Towards the end of the talk we discussed, all too fleetingly, the various reformers of opera over its 400 or so years: Monteverdi, Gluck, Wagner and Glass. There is no clear idea as to where opera as an art form, and Wagner with it, is heading. Time will do its work. The varnish of tradition will obscure some works only to be restored and revealed in a new light by a future curator, a stage director or scenographer or dramaturg of genius. There is still much to discuss. The role of the Artistic Director for one. Think of Richard Bonyng's tenure as head of The Australian Opera and the repertoire he championed and cemented into the company. I've made this review Wagner-centric, not doing justice to Stephen's talk or the importance

of his book. I wholeheartedly commend Stephen's book for the simple reason that just reading through the contents page is enough to set the mind ablaze in debate about this difficult and unwieldy artform we all love. I hope we can tempt Stephen back for another tranche of this fascinating thesis.

**Esteban Insausti (0433)**

**Wagner Quarterly, September 2021**

## About Stephen Mould

Stephen Mould studied music in Sydney and London, subsequently pursuing a career in opera houses, where he has been employed as a coach, musical assistant, conductor and senior administrator in Germany, Belgium, Australia and the USA. For thirteen years he was a member of the staff of Opera Australia, as a musical assistant, conductor and Head of Music. He is currently senior lecturer in conducting and operatic studies at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, The University of Sydney.

