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Questioning culture, striking a chord

Discourse on the legitimacy of opera and high culture on social media

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Abstract

Opera and highbrow culture have traditionally occupied a position of high prestige, but over the course of the last few decades, that foundation has seemingly weakened. Traditionally in-person mediums such as opera are more bound to physical spaces and therefore more limited in reach and exclusive than most mass media products, especially with increasing digitalization. Previous research has mainly focused on institutional contributors to hierarchy and in-person audiences, and how opera can be translated into digital formats. Building on this, this project addresses how audiences on social media discursively construct cultural hierarchy through a case study. In particular, on the basis of Instagram comments responding to a controversial incident that brought into question the position of opera in the contemporary cultural landscape, this thesis conducts discourse analysis to find out how users negotiate the legitimacy of high art, their own affinity or dislike towards it, as well as how systemic barriers to accessibility are discussed and how social media may impact these discussions.

While discourse around opera under regular circumstances is rather sensible in tone and manages to address barriers to accessibility in a respectful manner, it becomes more agitated in times where the status and legitimacy of opera is questioned: The legitimacy of popular culture and its affiliates is continuously questioned, while high culture is elevated and personal dedication to it is highlighted and used to signal legitimate enjoyment of opera. In reference to the theoretical framework by Bourdieu, a destabilizing of the field of opera can be noted, specifically in regard to the concept of *illusio* that is facing external threat. Audience members attempt to make explicit the symbolic capital that they derive from their alignment with the field, sometimes in contradiction with the very principles of such capital. Discourse around opera on social media is therefore characterized by a struggle to combine traditional ways of performing cultural authority with the logics of digital media.

Keywords: opera, highbrow culture, social media, symbolic capital, discourse analysis

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Introduction

A woman, dressed to the nines, leans against a balustrade on the highest level of the opera house – the nosebleed seats. You can barely see the stage from here, though some say the sound is better up high. Behind her, a brilliant chandelier contrasts with the velvet-clad theater walls. The lighting here is not ideal, but she takes the photo anyway. Later, she will caption it “At the opera tonight #lifestyle”.

Over the past decades, the cultural landscape in modern societies has undergone a significant transformation: Globalization, digitalization, and the expansion of mass media and popular culture have contributed to the blurring of once stable cultural hierarchies. Strict boundaries between what is called ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture or art (also called highbrow or lowbrow culture respectively), from which social classes had derived a sense of cultural identity, have become difficult to maintain: Nowadays, high art circulates in the same spaces as ‘low’ or popular culture and has to keep up with it instead of setting the pace. The authority of high culture as a marker of social status appears, at first glance, to have weakened. However, forms of high culture, such as fine art, canonical literature, ballet, or opera, still carry a considerable symbolic weight, especially in European cultural contexts, where they are often tied to national heritage, and as such, often embedded in public institutions which are financially supported by the states themselves. This is especially pronounced in Germany. These institutions still carry within them the glamour of decades past, yet are not untouched by mass media logics, and often need to justify their appeal in conjunction with the amounts of public funds they require in order to survive.

Thus, the position of high art in contemporary society is subject to many developments. But it is not only the art itself that needs to navigate changing circumstances; its enjoyers are also confronted with change: What once was a marker of elevated and intellectual taste is now seemingly put into irrelevancy as viewed from the mainstream. How do those individuals negotiate or derive a sense of meaning from an aspect of culture that continuously needs to defend its legitimacy? Against this backdrop, opera in particular offers a highly interesting foundation for a case study: As an art form deeply associated with high culture, institutional authority, and historical prestige, opera occupies a complex position in today’s cultural landscape that typically emphasizes consumers’ choices. At the same time, opera in its traditional form is far from a mass medium, yet needs to be translated into one to ensure its relevancy, for example by producing and distributing digital recordings of performances, or by establish-

ing visibility and reach on social media. How opera is engaged with on social media platforms then provides insight into how legitimacy and distinction that can be gained through it are articulated: How do people partake in those discussions? Who can claim authority to speak on it, who is excluded from speaking in the first place? And how do institutional structures enable or limit access?

The rise of social media as a central arena for expression further contributes to the tension that high art faces. Platforms such as Instagram or TikTok in particular have transformed the ways in which culture is perceived and how the renown gained from interacting with it is negotiated. On the one hand, this may democratize access to high culture by lowering entry barriers and making restricted forms of culture more well-known through mass media. On the other hand, the logics of social media incentivize comparison and imitation (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 120), which may create new pressures to perform taste, knowledge, and belonging: Cultural consumption and social class are increasingly staged for public recognition and validation. This is further evidenced by the emergence of ‘old money’ aesthetics on social media, which turn traditional markers of class and the visuals of inherited taste into palatable trends to follow – but underlying them are often notions of sexism, racism, classism and fascism (Bezold, 2025, pp. 213). The nature of such social media trends invites imitation, and those who are not in an economic position to realize them may still see such status as aspirational. In this context, engaging in high culture can give individuals a way to interact with elements of the cultural spheres they aspire to move in. If such developments do indeed occur and remain unaddressed, institutions and the field of high culture could become a battleground for grander social struggles.

Opera in Germany

As opera derives a lot of symbolic status from its history and tradition, a brief overview of its background has to be given. Opera’s roots are typically traced back to late 16th century Italy, where a group of creatives known as the *Camerata Fiorentina* sought to combine story-driven elements of the drama with the emotivity of music (Cannon, 2012, pp. 17), meaning that opera looks back on over 400 years of history. At first, opera houses in Italy, and later in Germany, were commercially operated (Raynor, 1972, pp. 169; Story, 2006, p. 436; Walter, 2016, p. 112), but with the emergence of court theaters (*Hoftheater*), opera became more restricted, associated with nobility and high artistic standards (Walter, 2016, p. 63; Ther, 2014, p. 31). Due to financial restraints, however, those court operas opened up over time (Walter,

1997, p. 71), giving more power to the audience and way to opera becoming a core aspect of cultural life.

The case of opera in Germany is especially interesting as the country is a rich site of operatic practices: A search in the database of the *Deutsches Musikinformationszentrum* (German Music Information Center) reveals that around 127 houses that produce musical theater are located in Germany, thereof 97 institutions which fall under the responsibility of federal states or municipalities, meaning that the majority of opera institutions in Germany are publicly funded (Burns & van der Will, 2003, p. 134). While state-initiated creative direction is not part of this model (Zahner, 2018, pp. 98), it does bring an interesting question: If opera institutions in Germany are funded by the public, does that also entail an active responsibility to signal openness, or is ‘passive’ accessibility enough?

This question about access, and the democratic mission that is implied in it, gains even more weight in Germany, as it looks back on a period of time where opera was used by the National Socialists to further their political and cultural goals (Dennis, 2002, pp. 279; Paige, 2021, p. 166). Among the better-known examples is their fixation on Richard Wagner, who to this day, is one of the most celebrated and performed German composers, and a prolific antisemite himself: Wagner’s stance on opera’s mission seems strangely timely, as he aimed to elevate the audience to a nation-audience (*Volk*) that he contrasted to the contemporary audience of mass-consumers which he saw as subject “to the manipulative forces of the entertainment industry and its opinion-maker allies in the media” (Vazsonyi, 2015, p. 93). After World War II, given its utilization in political affairs, high art was discursively removed from the arena of politics, the consensus being that “high art itself was rightfully apolitical, the Nazis having corrupted the arts by suggesting otherwise” (Pollock, 2016, p. 16). This line of thinking, one could argue, helped to position opera as something of almost sacral status; something untouched by the whims of fashion and issues of society. However, it may also have contributed to the issues that have existed within opera and operatic works to remain unaddressed, simply being swept under the rug. The question is whether such notions still underlie modern discourse, or if there is a more critical understanding of the power of high art present within.

Research Questions

The overall aim of this thesis is to understand the position and role of highbrow culture in contemporary society, and further, in what way social media dynamics contribute to this and how alignment with social classes is shaped through it.

The objective lies in examining how ideas about status and cultural capital are expressed on social media, how highbrow culture is positioned, and discover potential classist implications therein. For this purpose, I propose the following research questions to guide this project:

RQ1: How are notions of highbrow culture and its legitimacy in the context of opera in Germany sustained or challenged by users on Instagram?

RQ2: How do users express their affinity or dislike towards opera on Instagram, and how do they negotiate their personal relation to it?

RQ3: How do social media logics shape conflictual discourse around opera on Instagram?

For this purpose, this thesis will commence with a roundup of previous literature on the role of high art and in particular opera in modern cultural landscapes and outline the theoretical framework this research draws on – notably Bourdieu’s works on distinction and cultural production and Jameson’s conceptualization of postmodern culture as well as perspectives on the impact of social media. After discussing the methodology that grounds this case study, it will be time for the analysis, which was carried out on Instagram comments made under posts by German opera institutions, before concluding with a critical discussion of the findings.

*“Il concetto vi dissi. Or ascoltate
Com’egli è svolto.”¹*

Literature Review

The subject of opera is supported by a vast body of scholarship that reflects its long history. Much of this research emerges from fields such as the humanities and musicology, while perspectives from media and communication studies take on a lesser role in comparison. To establish the foundation for this study, I will first outline key conceptualizations of opera itself before turning to the main tensions that shape discussions around it. As will become apparent, many of these tensions are closely tied to opera’s status as a form of high culture and the ongoing challenges of situating it within changing social, cultural, and media contexts.

¹ From Pagliacci, composed by Ruggero Leoncavallo: “I have told you the concept. Now listen to how it unfolds.”

What is opera?

In order to properly discuss opera, it first needs to be established what opera is – and what it is not. Opera can function both as a theoretical construct, as well as a mode of performance. In order to gain a clear idea of what can constitute opera in both of these cases, I will first elaborate on different scholarly views on opera, and then on distinctions that have been drawn between opera and similar musical practices.

There are many different lenses through which to view opera, and which lens one picks to examine it is highly dependent on the question one poses to opera. One such view is that of opera as a medium. When opera is viewed as a medium, the question turns to what it expresses and how it does so (Auden, 1951, p. 7); for example, how plot, melody, song and other components intertwine and form a complete piece (Ingólfsson, 2018, pp. 55). The media view finds further use when the use of digital tools in opera and its effects are discussed (Heyer, 2008, p. 593), leading to some scholars using the term ‘digital opera’ to highlight new forms of artistic and operatic expression made possible by technological advancements (Sheil & Vear, 2012, p. 6). While this suggests that the medial qualities of opera are emphasized more strongly when mass or digital media are discussed, it does not take away from the fact that, in its essence, opera can still be considered a medium in the sense that it conveys information to an audience, much like films or books. Additionally, Havelková (2021, p. 13) proposes the view of opera as a hypermedium, emphasizing the integration of multiple media elements in opera and foregrounding this as a constitutive part of its aesthetic and cultural relevance.

Conceptualizations of opera as a genre tend to emphasize the musical and dramaturgical elements and analysis thereof (Campana, 2012, p. 202). This has predominantly been an interest of opera scholarship for a significant time (Till, 2012, p. 2), until the so-called ‘performative turn’, changing the focus more towards elements of performance, which are more ephemeral in nature (Tunbridge, 2012, p. 290; Risi, 2019, p. 9). There is also an institutional component to opera, namely in the theaters, companies, and general industry that bring opera to the stage or screen. This view is typically used when examining commercial, economic and policy-related aspects in the opera context, such as opera houses capacities to create a coherent image to increase customer retention (Ernst, 2016, p. 380) or their struggle to legitimize the extent of their funding in the face of seemingly dwindling public interest (Fuchs, 2021, pp. 45; Stauss, 2021, p. 88).

Finally, opera can be conceptualized as an art form. More specifically, it is widely regarded as a form of *high* art, for some even “the very embodiment of ‘high culture’” (Storey, 2003, p. 5). Some historical studies stress its prestige over other forms of performing arts, such as theater or ballet (Walter, 1996, p. 71), while others mention its status as primarily entertainment – as opposed to art – at certain points in time (Storey, 2006, p. 436) and the audiences’ efforts they claim then elevated opera to its status of high culture (DiMaggio, 1982, pp. 34; Ronzani, 2015, pp. 5). This angle on opera is perhaps the angle that is least confined to a specific form of analysis, as certain aspects of it lend themselves to genre-rooted analyses, as well as marketing or audience studies.

While Morris (2017, p. 93) notes an ambiguity between genre and medium in opera, the other angles on opera are not as clearly distinguishable either, as these aspects are entangled to an extent: Most opera productions are affiliated with an institution of some kind, and as these operas are produced, they are mediated in one way or another while embodying genre-elements, and overall constitute the art form of opera. It is therefore important to keep these different approaches in mind, especially when it comes to tensions between the various standards each of them faces.

On top of these more theoretical views, opera can also be considered a specific practice of musical theater, alongside other practices termed operettas, musical, rock operas, and more that fit into a similar category. While there are musicological differences, a considerable part of what sets these branches of musical theater apart is the culture and discourse surrounding them. For instance, certain musicals are described as ‘operatic’ (Chandler, 2009, p. 154), which some argue to be an attempt to ‘elevate’ these musicals and appeal to a more intellectual crowd (Taylor & Symonds, 2014, p. 38). Another case is the operetta: Originally a more light-hearted and more accessible approach to musical theater (Sorba, 2006, p. 285) and sometimes considered lowbrow (McMillin, 2006, p. 13), its cultural status today is more nuanced, as Eicher & Kunißen (2016, p. 128) note. Furthermore, research highlights that enjoyers of highbrow culture regard operettas as ‘trivial music’, while enjoyers of popular culture tend to categorize them as ‘classical music’ (Reuband, 2017, p. 177). Contrary to that, musicals are considered to be more in line with popular culture (Reuband, 2017, pp. 180) and are especially prevalent and popular in Germany, which some connect to Germany’s long-standing opera culture (Döhl, 2019, pp. 427). While these different forms of musical theater have their own distinct characteristics, the most prolific differences regard the culture and expectations that audiences hold for them.

A tradition of tension

How such expectations of opera impact the debates around it is especially relevant when talking about the role of tradition and innovation, which is a key point in opera discourse. Here, resistance to change is often framed as cultural preservation, and innovation is embraced or rejected in ways that reaffirm existing hierarchies of taste and authority. Even during its inception, opera's claims to reviving Ancient Greek drama practices have been positioned as a countermeasure to the aesthetic disruption that opera presented at the time (Langford, 2025, pp. 1), framing it as a deliberate strategy to align with humanist ideals popular at the time (McClary, 1985, pp. 154). A similar tension has been noted in post-war Germany between institutions' desire to advance artistic expression and audiences' preference of established repertoire (Pollock, 2019, pp. 34). More recently, this has been discussed in relation to *Regietheater* (director's theater), a form of staging that emphasizes directorial interpretations rather than historical accuracy (Risi, 2019, p. 7): While some argue that this approach ensures that opera can draw from modern viewpoints and simultaneously uncover new connections to the works' origins (Clarke, 2023, pp. 161), research suggests that opera-goers tend to prefer stagings set in the period that a work originated in over those akin to *Regietheater* (Reuband, 2011, pp. 265). Furthermore, as Senici (2019, pp. 207) notes, judgments of interpretive faithfulness to a work vary, depending on whether priority is given to historical staging practices or to elements perceived as inherent in the musical score and such. These factors make it difficult to identify which staging practices can be considered the normative approach to opera today. Assuming historically leaning productions as the norm avoids acknowledging them as products of their time, thus reinforcing a backwards orientation in opera. At the same time, *Regietheater* has been practiced for several decades (Risi, 2019, p. 8) and can thus be considered an established approach to operatic production, despite its reputation as a modern development. As a result, making out characteristics of conventional and unconventional staging proves less clear-cut than it is often presented, and with it, distinctions based on taste and legitimacy are complicated.

Culture with a capitalist C

There exists another tension between economic demands and the presentation of opera as a cultural good that claims autonomy from market logics. How this tension is handled is relevant, as it shapes discourses around legitimacy and elitism – who opera is for and how it should be consumed. The extent to which public funds are used to finance opera institutions is a frequent topic of public and academic discourse (Fuchs, 2021, pp. 44; Stauss, 2021, p. 88),

especially as opera struggles to find a broad audience. Indeed, some go as far as to talk about a ‘crisis’ of the opera sector when assessing this dilemma (Zalfen, 2007, pp. 273). Radu-Giurgiu (2021, pp. 180) points to financial limitations underpinning the controversial Regietheater staging, which has often been criticized (Reuband, 2011, p. 257). While some take the position that opening up opera to the free market would be more democratic and incentivize institutions to engage with the audiences’ preferences, others fear that this would devalue the art form of opera, claiming that it would risk losing its inherent cultural value (Zahner, 2018, pp. 102). Adding to this, Ernst (2016, p. 380) argues that the inclusion of the German theater and orchestra landscape on the UNESCO Intangible World Heritage Lists 2014, has been pushed precisely to avoid a classification of performances as products to be sold, and to instead highlight their cultural value. Although opera is subsequently framed as a cultural valuable art form that transcends market logics, its institutional structures and modes of production remain closely dependent on economic considerations. The resulting conflict between artistic value and financial pressure continues to influence much discourse around opera.

While economic considerations have been vastly discussed on an institutional level, it becomes less clear when these considerations are examined on an individual level. While research by Reuband (2017, p. 167) and Rössel & Hoelscher (2017, p. 250) casts doubt upon the notion that the opera audience is especially educated or financially well-off, other surveys do suggest that a typical German opera patron possesses both above-average education and income (Statista Consumer Insights, 2025). A possible factor that influences attendance has been argued to be physical proximity to cultural institutions, which is typically higher in cities than in rural areas (Gerhards, 2008, p. 743; Falck et al., 2011, pp. 755; Brook, 2013, pp. 97). However, Albinsson (2023, p. 26) suggests that ticket prices influence decisions of attendance as well, and that cultural institutions’ pricing policies lead to a pattern of exclusion of patrons of lower economic status. Research that looks at economic capital, however, is less prevalent than research that examines cultural capital in the opera audience, which seems to point towards the assumption that economic class is not as relevant a factor when figuring out the opera audience, despite the aforementioned contradictions that remain.

Amidst such tensions between the financial and the cultural, opera institutions in Germany are argued to be in a position in which they have to legitimize their relevancy, and in turn, secure their funding (Stauss, 2021, p. 88; Larsen, 2016, p. 33). Legitimization work in opera rests on the idea that it – in one way or another – has some sort of cultural value that the public can benefit from. While ardent enjoyers of high culture might argue otherwise, there is no such

thing as inherent cultural value to any artistic work. Instead, ideas of cultural value are discursively constructed and as such subject to mechanisms of power (Belfiore, 2020, p. 384). Some of the views on opera include opera as a ‘common good’, something worth supporting (Balme, 2021, pp. 19), or an art form that can support national artistic identity (Wilson, 2025, pp. 230; Larsen, 2016, p. 45). Others point to opera’s adaptability to different cultural, social, and historical contexts making it a relevant form of expression (Kotnik, 2013, p. 309). There is also the heightened sense of artistry and emotion that one can draw from operatic performances (Pollock, 2019, p. 13). The difficulty of the balancing act between democratization, traditions of exclusivity, and contemporary relevance is almost omnipresent in discourse and research about opera’s status. Nyman (2025, p. 56) argues that opera’s power lies in the debates and tensions that surround it but also points out that the “perception of opera as elitist is reinforced the more democratic access to opera is advocated” (p. 56), as it positions its status as something that everybody *should* be able to as well as *want* to access. As a result, elitism, cultural relevance, and accessibility constitute central aspects in how cultural authority is continuously constructed and contested in public discourse.

Digitalization and opera

A factor that may contribute to questions of accessibility is digitalization. Digitalization has made it possible to access opera in ways that are less dependent on traditional venues and the individual-level costs associated with it, with research focusing on digital mediation, implementation of new technologies, and their impact on opera audiences. Examples of digitalized opera are live screenings at movie theaters or on-demand streaming, which are argued to open up more interactive and non-hierarchical (Nousiainen, 2012, pp. 93; Wandel-Brannigan & Matamala, 2024, p. 312), as well as generally new ways of experiencing the medium of opera (Sheil & Vear, 2012, p. 6), with some highlighting the emergence of “a new form of literacy, so that what was traditionally labelled as an elitist art form is transformed into one which belongs to mass culture” (Radigales & Villanueva-Benito, 2021, p. 133) in opera. However, as Nyman (2023b, pp. 797) notes, even when employing digital and theoretically more accessible ways of executing opera, producers are often caught in a struggle to balance increased availability with upholding opera’s ‘cultural value’. This points towards a sort of parallel structure: Digital opera formats and the ‘traditional’ staging of opera – meaning the performers and audience are located in the same physical space – exist alongside each other. Yet digital opera has often been seen as a means to an end that cannot compare to the way opera is ‘meant’ to be experienced. This is especially evident in discourses around physical theater

during the Covid-19 pandemic (Krol, 2025, p. 156; Waşık-Lindner, 2023, p. 249). Therefore, the assumption that digitalization would open up opera to the masses cannot hold up. Instead, research points to already prevalent ways of thinking being reproduced, rather than challenged, even with the emergence of new technology.

But digitalization is not the only pathway to a broader audience, and there have been considerable efforts to increase access to opera for minority groups specifically. Such efforts are not merely done out of altruism, however; institutions serve their own goals as well by presenting themselves as inclusive. To increase linguistic and sensorial barriers for disabled people, audio descriptions and transcriptions are in use in many opera houses (Orero et al., 2019, p. 250; Orero & Matamala, 2007, p. 264), as well as accessible digital resources meant to help ‘prepare’ for attending operas (Di Giovanni & Raffi, 2025, p. A91). Di Giovanni et al. (2022, pp. 84) suggest that this helps in fostering a feeling of social inclusion. To appeal to a younger demographic, many houses have set up educational or pedagogical programs in collaboration with schools (Maule, 2012, p. 182). While promoting diversity and inclusion is a commendable aim, it also matters *how* this is done: Kolbe (2021, p. 9) argues that in the case of diversity projects in German high-culture contexts, the inclusion of ethnic minorities does indeed signal openness, but it does so by relying on and reinforcing hierarchies and elitist narratives. One could then ask if these initiatives are not merely a manifestation of ‘diversity washing’; institutions superficially positioning themselves as open without actually questioning structures that sustain exclusion and hierarchies.

The audience

With opera struggling to attract bigger audiences, there is an ongoing narrative of a crisis within the cultural sector. Most discussion therefore centers around how to get more people engaged with the world of opera. Yet it is also necessary to examine how the still existing audience for opera engages with it, in order to understand which factors hold it up to this day.

While understandings of the highbrow audience have shifted over time, research still points to a sense of cultural hierarchy present. Academic positions towards the engagement with high culture have moved away from understanding the audience as exclusively interested in high culture and instead conceptualize cultural consumption of highbrow audiences as ‘omnivorous’ (Peterson & Kern, 1996, pp. 900). At the same time, Gerhards (2008, p. 742) argues that those who participate in high culture not only attend one form of it but instead engage with *multiple* forms of highbrow culture, positioning them as a culturally dominant class.

Similar patterns emerge when it comes to reviews: Journalists who write about the performing arts view their profession as exceptional within the broader field of journalism (Harries & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2006, p. 622). However, Schweiger (2018, pp. 235) argues that their impact on audience perception is limited and engagement with them is dwindling among younger audience members. In turn, cultural journalism has been trying to adapt by opening itself up to reporting on popular culture without disregarding high culture (Reus & Harden, 2018, p. 205). As such, the question is how opera and the actors connected to it can uphold their exceptionalist self-image while the general (popular) culture around it is shifting and seemingly pays less attention to art forms such as opera.

Opera's image as high culture has led to the idea that appreciation for it is something that needs to be learned, as opposed to popular culture which is simply meant to entertain. As mentioned, opera institutions support this by providing educational resources to (potential) visitors, and it is furthered by a considerable range of publications that explain to their readers how opera is best enjoyed (Storey, 2003, p. 13). Indeed, patrons' self-perceived level of expertise is connected to loyalty to opera institutions (Vigolo et al., 2019, p. 1287). However, research also shows a pattern of opera patrons perceiving their level of expertise to be rather low (ibid., p. 1282), tending to relate themselves to other patrons who they perceive to be more knowledgeable (Benzecry, 2009, pp. 137). Rössel & Hoelscher (2017, p. 256) identified opera's normative distinction and social acknowledgement by (high-)culturally inclined people in one's own social circle among the factors leading to a visit at the opera, further highlighting the role of intellectualism in reasons for engaging with opera.

While the idea of classical music and opera as something meant to edify persists, listeners thereof tend to seek out emotional rather than cognitive engagement (Reuband, 2011, p. 265; Rössel, 2011, p. 94; O'Neill et al., 2016, p. 45). As such, the modes of engaging with classical music and opera are much more diverse than merely attending live performances (Hennion, 2001, pp. 11; Storey, 2003, pp. 15). Yet the idea that live performance is superior to any other way of enjoying opera persists (Nyman, 2025, p. 54), pointing towards a cultural hierarchy; the real opera experience is also the most cost-intensive experience.

While the audience plays a considerable part in upholding opera in all its facets, research examining the extent of their engagement and impact is limited. Whether audiences should be understood as passive recipients of meaning or as active participants in the production thereof has been a topic of research and such questions have gained even more relevance with the

emergence of social media. Contemporary research on opera audiences tends to employ a unilateral angle, focusing on how opera is impacting the audience, but not often on how the opera audience transforms or challenges the genre. Davis et al. (2015, pp. 230) claim that audiences have become more passive, stating that exclamations to voice discontent – such as booing – are not as commonly practiced as they have been previously, although such practices have been noted to fluctuate over the course of history (Butsch, 2008, pp. 61). Perhaps social media platforms, whose functionalities could facilitate more accessible forms of engagement, can alleviate factors of audience passivity?

Contrary to the logic of high culture, the logic on which most social media platforms operate tends to emphasize popularity (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013, pp. 6) as well as to quantify and audiences, engagement and, in a way, reduce it to data which can be handled by the platform mechanisms (ibid., p. 9). The adoption of these logics has been observed in journalism on social media (Haim et al., 2021, p. 417). Hermida & Mellado (2020, pp. 869) highlight, for example, that there is more emphasis on rhetoric, providing a sense of personal proximity, or aesthetic appeal for such cases.

While research on the application of social media logics in the realm of high culture remains somewhat limited, Nyman (2023a, p. 104) highlights how opera institutions aim to increase audience participation via social media but often treat participation as a quantifiable metric while neglecting motivations that drive audiences to engage in the first place. This is reproduced in research, where commercial interests are seen as the main reason for increasing audience interactions (Baldin et al., 2024, p. 217), or where the need for dialogue between audience and institution is stressed but motivated through commercial aspects as well (Nairn & Bhargava, 2025, p. 11). Additionally, Tepe & Vanhuyse (2014, pp. 268) detail how political actors use the funding of opera institutions as a tool to secure votes from upper class voters, further stressing the general top-down approach to opera audiences.

Research gap

As this literature review has outlined, existing research has strongly highlighted opera's longstanding association with cultural prestige and intellectualism and is generally appropriating an outlook on audiences as passive recipients within the operatic experience. At the same time, the rise of digital platforms and social media appears to challenge these dynamics by enabling new forms of interaction between cultural institutions and their audiences. However, much of the existing research on opera and digital media has primarily focused on issues such

as marketing, outreach, or audience development. Less attention has been paid to how everyday interactions on social media may reflect, reproduce, or challenge the cultural hierarchies historically associated with opera. This study therefore seeks to address this gap by examining how audiences of opera-affiliated content engage with it on social media, with particular attention to how cultural authority and the legitimacy of highbrow culture are negotiated within these interactions.

Theoretical framework

As this research gap is connected to the realm of social media, it proposes a rather modern problem. Even so, it can be useful to revisit the classics. Most notably, Bourdieu's works are one of the main sources that help understand how social class is not only tied to economic means, but can be exhibited through other ways, too.

At the core of this is his concept of *symbolic capital*, which encapsulates “culturally significant attributes such as prestige, status and authority” (Harker et al., 1990, p. 1), a form of capital that is “lacking concrete, material effect” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 118), but can nonetheless lead to economic profits in the long term (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 75). The accumulation of symbolic capital is essentially the aim of high art production (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 142). The term of *cultural capital* ties into this as well. In Bourdieu's conceptualization, it is passed down in families (Bourdieu, 1990, pp. 124; Bourdieu, 2010, p. 5), and it relates to individuals' dispositions to certain cultural works and displays of taste; a person with high cultural capital would be inclined to engage with high culture, for example. However, it can be argued that the accumulation of cultural capital in specific is not as straightforward nowadays: While the immediate social circle of an individual undoubtedly still plays a role, the degree to which culture – both high and popular – is mediated is considerably higher now than it was in the 1960s in which most of Bourdieu's data is situated, and is often enacted in a way that is far less dependent on physical and social positioning. At the same time, access to the means that enable such mediations of culture may still very well be dependent on inherited (economic) capital. It is necessary to keep this aspect of the theory in mind when applying it to the current situation. However, for this case study, the exact way in which cultural capital is gained is not the main focus. Applied to this project, the concepts of symbolic and cultural capital can rather help to understand certain behavior that is exhibited by actors and hint at their motivation; what moves them to publicly engage in discourse around opera. While its accumulation is seen as

aspirational, symbolic capital is not necessarily a universally recognized ‘currency’. Instead, its value is usually confined to a specific area – what Bourdieu calls *field*.

Bourdieu (1993) understands a field to be “a separate social universe having its own laws of functioning independent of those of politics and the economy” (p. 162). This does not mean a field is completely removed from economic considerations (Bourdieu, 1996, pp. 121), but rather that it has its own system of attributing value to the works that are located in it. Building on the previous discussion about opera, it can be conceived of as one such field, given that it and its actors strongly rely on symbolic capital for their legitimacy. Using this concept to understand opera is further useful in that it highlights the discursive struggles that happen in a field; meaning and value is not fixed, but constantly negotiated between actors, which is necessary to understand the dynamics that characterize opera’s position in the contemporary cultural landscape.

Originally, Bourdieu saw fields as somewhat autonomous and independent of each other. Whether that still is the case currently can be debated, as the increased presence of media can soften up and blur the once hard lines between different fields. In the past, to make a remark about opera, one most likely had to be able to visit it in the first place and then find a group of people willing to hear about the subject. These physical constraints would have complicated such an endeavor for individuals not usually involved with opera. But nowadays, a search on the internet or social media can provide enough insight and options to make one’s opinion be seen if only one possesses the skill to write. This can bring into question whether the assumptions that define a field in the Bourdieuan sense still apply today.

With this in mind, it can be useful to link Bourdieu with Jameson’s account of postmodernism: Jameson challenges the idea that cultural fields can sustain clear boundaries nowadays and instead claims that capitalist logics permeate all areas of culture, blurring the lines between high and low culture (Jameson, 1991, p. x). He builds on the theory of the culture industry (ibid., p. 68), which saw cultural goods becoming part of the capitalist system and utilized to occupy the minds of the public with trivial entertainment (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997, pp. 117). Working from this assumption of blurred boundaries, Bourdieu’s concept of fields may be seen less as having stable structures and rules, and instead more fluid and subject to negotiations of meaning. Rather conceiving of a field as autonomous from economic pressures or not, the question is instead how economic pressures are dealt with or framed within the field, and what sort of other capital is mobilized within these efforts. While Jame-

son's approach is not rooted in empirical material the way Bourdieu's theories are, it does present a line of reasoning to understand why applying Bourdieu to contemporary cases may not be as straightforward anymore.

However, both Bourdieu and Jameson's work predate the advent of social media. Much how in-person media follow a different logic than mass media, social media also comes with its own set of rules. Understanding social media not purely as channels of transmission, but as entities that also influence the social world (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 15), is crucial for examining the impact of those rules. In theory, social media can contribute to leveling the playing field of public discourse by allowing individuals to produce their own content which can then be easily shared (*ibid.*, p. 94). without going through the same processes of gatekeeping as traditional media. But this also means that there is a lesser degree of quality control. As touched upon briefly, concepts such as visibility, popularity, and datafication are central to the logics of social media (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013, pp. 6). In liaison with lower qualitative standards, a lot of content on social media leans into polarizing ways of communicating in order to boost engagement (Germano et al., 2026, p. 3), which feeds into algorithms and increases visibility. This line of thinking is not only present in the main forms of content on social media, but also in reactions to it. The sheer amount of information available to users at all times makes it difficult to approach everything with nuance, which may contribute to a sense of polarization. However, reducing the emergence of such developments solely to the effects of social media risks neglecting social or economic factors present in the contexts that social media are embedded in. In respect to the discussion of highbrow culture, it can be tempting to position social media as an 'equalizing force' that can lower barriers to accessibility, but in reality, institutions and hierarchies continue to exist. Using concepts such as media-tization therefore possess more explanatory power when combined with other frameworks that account for these non-medial factors.

Essentially, as this project is carried out on a social media platform, it is necessary to be aware of these underlying logics. Bourdieu's theories provide a perspective on the internal processes within a specific cultural niche – the field – that is also present on these platforms, while Jameson's considerations complement an exterior view on this field, and how it is situated in the greater contemporary cultural context.

Methodology & Methods

As this project seeks to understand issues that concern the distribution and discursive exercise of symbolic power in the context of high culture, it requires a method that allows for the examination of how that power is negotiated, reproduced, and contested within situated social practices and institutional contexts. For this reason, this research is designed as a case study. According to Flyvbjerg (2001, pp. 84), case studies can provide profound insight into specific contexts, especially when it comes to examining how power operates in such situations. The question of power is especially relevant for phronetic research, as Flyvbjerg proposes (*ibid.*, pp. 131). While opera in Germany is a case that – in practice – may only be of interest to a few, it still constitutes a strong entry point into the matter at hand: Following Flyvbjerg’s notion of critical cases which possess “strategic importance in relation to the general problem” (2001, p. 78), opera can be understood as a domain where the themes of cultural and institutional legitimacy and symbolic capital are especially pronounced. Thus, patterns in relation to taste, class, and cultural hierarchy that emerge in this context may also operate across different contexts.

Moreover, opera is often positioned as the epitome of highbrow culture, more so than other manifestations thereof, like literature or visual arts. Perhaps this is due to the fact that opera as an artistic medium relies more on physical proximity; books and paintings, for example, as visual mediums are more easily transferred, while opera derives a lot of its value from the in-person experience, which in turn also poses more barriers to accessibility. This makes it excluding for large numbers of people and thereby exclusive, which serves to elevate its symbolic status. In Germany in particular, opera is deeply embedded in institutional structures due to tight networks of publicly funded cultural institutions and additionally takes on a role that has historically contributed to national and cultural identity formation. This means that the tension between opera’s traditional role and its recent position among other, popular cultural offerings, can be especially pronounced in this context. Positioning this project in relation to social media provides further relevance: The nature of social media platforms allows for interaction between institutions, performers, critics, and the general audience, providing more equal footing between these actors than traditional arenas of cultural discourse like journals or newspapers. The question of how established hierarchies of taste and legitimacy are reproduced can therefore also draw from the audience directly and does not have to solely rely on actors that profit the most out of these hierarchies. In this way, components of standpoint the-

ory (Harding, 2008, p. 70) are included in this project's design, opening up the possibility of examining and questioning hegemonic narratives.

Research design

The initial analysis is focused on three opera houses in Germany, namely the *Bayerische Staatsoper* (BSO) in Munich, the *Semperoper* in Dresden, and the *Komische Oper* in Berlin, as they represent the opera houses with the highest occupancy rates for the season 2023/24 in Germany (Theaterstatistik, 2026), which can be interpreted as a sign that the way these institutions approach opera are especially remarkable or resonant with people. In this sense, they may serve as examples for other institutions regarding their organization and conceptualization of audience relations, which then may have implications for the way these aspects are approached in the German opera sphere in general. Focusing on these houses and how their audiences are cultivated can therefore give way to useful insights.

Initially, the idea for this project was to have a stronger focus on the communication by the institutions themselves, and this was the prerogative at the beginning of the data collection. However, shortly after the collection began, an instance of Hollywood actor Timothée Chalamet criticizing opera and ballet went viral and took hold of the opera world. Seeing how this incident inspired a more explicit showcase of the values attached to high culture and would provide an information-rich sample (Flyvbjerg, 2001, pp. 78), this project's focus was adapted to accommodate this development more presently. In turn, the institutional data component was reduced, with 12 posts from each opera house, meaning 36 posts overall as well as the comments posted in reply, being sampled in the end. All of them were originally posted between February 1 and March 4, 2026. The reason for choosing this specific timeframe was motivated by the aim to gain insights rooted in recent contexts within opera, while also trying to avoid discursive shifts that may have occurred in the aftermath of the aforementioned viral incident, which was to be covered in its own dedicated analytical chapter. This 'first' sample would then help embed the incident in the broader context of opera discourse on social media. The final posts for the sample were selected on their thematic proximity to opera itself. This meant, for example, that posts that were about events that simply used the opera house as a venue, like the hosting of the "Friedenspreis" award ceremony in Dresden, were excluded. This was motivated by the aim to display typical opera proceeding in the artistic, medial, and institutional sense, less so the physical space of the opera house itself. However, it should be acknowledged that boundaries between those dimensions are not entirely distinguishable from

one another, as mentioned previously. So, this decision may impact aspects regarding the cultural positioning of the institutions themselves and the broadness of their offering but was ultimately taken in order to keep the analytical focus on individual and institutional engagement with opera itself. While the posts themselves are discussed later in this chapter, the comment sample went into the first, introductory part of the analysis. It consisted of 236 comments (159 BSO; 59 Komische Oper; 18 Semperoper).

Additionally, two of the three opera house accounts made posts about the previously mentioned viral incident, namely the BSO and Semperoper accounts. The comment sections thereof provide the foundation for the bigger part of the analysis. The original BSO post accumulated 1856 comments, of which 1790 could be collected. This dataset was then manually reviewed and cleaned up. The final BSO sample consisted of 1713 comments, including those written in German, English, French, Spanish, as well as emoji-only responses, and excluding gif-only comments, as they could not be properly processed. The post made by Semperoper consisted of 37 comments, all of which were included as they all fit the previously mentioned language criteria. Thereby, the final overall sample was composed of 1740 comments. It should be noted at this point that the general sample numerically favors comments made on the BSO account. On a qualitative level, however, the comments made on the different accounts did not display drastic stylistic or substantial differences, so that the findings of the analysis are still somewhat indicative of broader patterns.

The main method of analysis was textual discourse analysis, carried out over three stages. The discursive angle was chosen for this project as it understands the comments as embedded in their cultural and social contexts, and as such, constitute representation (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p. 39) and contribute to the formation of identity attached to the discourse they initially refer to (ibid., 2001, p. 40). Essentially, this angle allows not only for the development of analytical themes, but for linking those themes to broader implications for the field in which they are situated. This mode of analysis also contributes to evaluating the impact that such practices have outside of the purely discursive sphere (Jørgensen & Winter, 2002, pp. 90). Such an angle helped to move beyond the pure identification of themes found within the comment section and added the dimension of being able to trace how these themes operated across different comments and how their discursive content relates to wider cultural and social developments.

At first, inductive open coding was carried out on the comments (Hermes & Kopitz, 2023, p. 45). The codes assigned at this stage often directly derived from the comments' wording in order to stick as close to the original meaning as possible without delving into interpretative approaches too soon. Examples of this where codes such as "people don't care about his [Chalamet's] movies", "opera has a bigger future than movies", or "he is too stupid to understand opera". Then, these individual codes were consolidated where applicable and organized into broader categories to develop bigger themes that emerged, which were then developed into a codebook (see Appendix A), with the categories relating to reception of the actor, opinions about opera, the clash between high and popular culture, institutional issues in opera, as well as stances about the discourse itself. The main purpose of this step was not to produce these units for the sake of analyzing the units thematically, but more so to establish an analytical frame that would then be used as a sort of guide and organizing tool. The analytical focus was on to the comments in particular, using the established categories to examine in detail how the commenters express opinions and stances *on* these specific themes to develop general patterns of dominant discursive practices, from which the main analytical insights derived from. In general, the idea applied to the data was to 'allow' it to speak for itself first, instead of making it fit into a preconceived approach. This in turn means that the research questions especially were adapted after the analysis to accurately portray what the data could analytically provide.

Ethical considerations

All data that was used for the analysis is semi-public: As Instagram restricts access to captions and comments, these were accessed with a regular Instagram account. No invitation or request to the originators of the data was needed in order to access it.

The handling of the data that originated from the opera houses demands less effort to maintain their privacy or anonymity. On the contrary, as institutions that do not represent a particular individual and that are, moreover, funded with public subsidiaries, a certain degree of transparency is necessary for this research to allow for a critical perspective on the power dynamics that emerge from the discourse. As such, instances in which the opera houses' accounts were active were specifically highlighted. Furthermore, the names of specific artists, directors, or other creatives in the opera sphere were not redacted. This was done for analytical clarity and justified through the circumstance that they are public figures within this context.

The handling of the data provided by individual users came with more ethical considerations, as their formal consent to use their comments for research purposes was not obtained due to the scale of the data used. To maintain anonymity for individual users, usernames were excluded from the comments themselves and in the case of users being tagged. While verbatim comments were included in the analysis, these were selected carefully and presented without details that could enable identification, and only when necessary to support the interpretation in order to balance data minimization with analytical transparency.

Positionality

At this point, it is also necessary to briefly situate this analysis within my own positionality as the researcher, as my background may shape both interpretation and emphasis of certain analytical aspects. This study emerged from my personal interest in opera, and while my interest is rooted in the appreciation of its musical and dramatical elements, the research process for this project has in fact prompted critical self-reflection on my part. As such, I have had to recognize that my attachment to opera is not entirely separable from its symbolic associations with status and intellectualism either. Therefore, I do not claim exemption from the dynamics that this thesis examines. At the same time, this background also allows me to comprehend certain elements within the discourse as well as its context on a deeper level.

The question of the ‘audience’

Building on the points raised in the literature review that regard questions of access, or what are considered ‘proper’ ways of enjoying opera, as well as the fact that it is a live medium, the distinction between the audience that goes to the opera and the audience that interacts with opera in different ways needs to be addressed briefly. In the context of this project, it is difficult to determine whether a commenter on social media is also part of the ‘embodied’ opera audience, part of the more general audience, or simply engaging with the content without a deeper interest in opera itself. This distinction becomes even harder to make in the case of viral posts, whose reach often extends far beyond the typical audience of opera-related social media content, and one of which presents a considerable empirical foundation for this case study. For the purposes of the analysis, the term ‘audience’ therefore mainly refers to the audience of opera house content on Instagram. As the boundaries between actual opera attendees and casual social media participants are somewhat blurred in digital spaces, it is not only difficult to discern who belongs to the ‘actual’ opera audience as a researcher, but also for the average social media user. In practice then, commenters engaging with opera-related content

may still be perceived as representative of the embodied audience, thereby shaping broader impressions of opera audiences and their discursive practices among less familiar observers. For those reasons, it shall be the audience of opera content on social media that matters most for this project. Nonetheless, tensions between these different kinds of audiences will be discussed where applicable.

Opera houses on Instagram

As mentioned, the opera houses that serve as the point of departure for the analysis were chosen due to their high occupancy rates. Before heading on to the analysis, it can be useful to briefly outline the digital context in which it is situated in; namely by paying attention to the different opera house accounts on Instagram and their posting behavior.

	<i>Follower count</i>	<i>No. of posts for Feb 2026</i>
<i>Bayerische Staatsoper</i>	~91,000	37 (17)
<i>Komische Oper Berlin</i>	~34,000	13 (1)
<i>Semperoper Dresden</i>	~27,000	25 (15)

Table 1: Follower and post count. The number in parentheses indicates the number of collaboration posts for which the respective opera accounts were not the primary poster.

Bayerische Staatsoper München

To summarize the content found on the BSO account, one might describe it as ‘polished’ or ‘professional’: The majority of their posts are made up of professional photography or videography of their productions. A few posts are in German language only, but most of them feature both an English and a German description. The content is strongly aligned with the actual performances the house hosts, with weekly reviews being posted, and insights into performances or ongoings behind the scenes being posted frequently as well. In this sense, their presence on Instagram could also be described as very saturated. Productions are often described in terms of their plot, as well as in relation to the themes they address and their interpretation, for example “passion, desire and the dark price of obsession”. Explaining both the plot and themes may help to provide an analytical entryway for the audience; telling them what they can expect so that their understanding of both work and production while attending a performance can be managed. This could tie in with the circumstance that modern opera productions are more abstract in the way they portray roles and settings, which makes explaining the original plot necessary for new visitors to properly understand what is happening on stage.

Many of the videos (or ‘reels’) posted by the account are snippets for full-length videos that can be accessed via the opera’s own streaming platform. The BSO account often replies to the comments under such snippets, mostly for further (unprompted) advertising of the streaming platform to individual users, highlighting the economic incentives for engaging with the audience on social media. Occasionally, the account features more humorous content, such as actors reacting to certain comical prompts in character. This kind of content also shows a certain production value, showing that a considerable degree of planning went into it. Another angle of more humorous or approachable content can be seen in their collaborations with a young opera influencer, who either interviews the audience at premieres or invites performers to opera-themed quizzes. Such content could help to reach groups that are perhaps intimidated by stereotypical conceptions of opera, as it displays these aspects in a more lighthearted way.

Komische Oper Berlin

The Instagram posts by the Komische Oper are characterized by a more informal and accessible tone. This is notable in direct forms of addressing the reader, the use of informal pronouns (e.g. “*ihr*” instead of “*Ihnen*”), as well as humorous remarks that are included in quite a few posts. This serves to position the institution as ‘close’ to its audience, invoking a sense of shared community. While the account’s visual content also showcases a high production value, such as reels that show snippets of different performances, it displays a stronger focus on the people ‘behind the scenes’: Posts frequently include well-wishes for the cast and crew involved in different productions, often without highlighting any specific performer. This act of personalization and emphasis of the ‘craft’ behind opera performances opens the door for a more profound sense of artistic and cultural appreciation by acknowledging the actual process and labor that is needed to successfully execute performances of such scale. At the same time, these posts also function as promotional tools: They garner visibility for the opera’s productions and include information on performance dates and how to secure tickets. Foregrounding individual performers thus fosters emotional connection to the opera while reinforcing the institution’s cultural value. This practice of combining a more approachable style with typical marketing objectives becomes particularly clear when discussing traditional markers of cultural legitimacy, as the opera house regularly emphasizes achievements such as award nominations, sold-out performances, and makes dedicated posts to highlight positive critical reception from various publications. Additionally, among the productions that are highlighted or referenced in the posts, are not only classical concerts or opera productions, but also musicals, showcasing that the Komische Oper is not only relying on traditional operatic productions,

but branching out as well. The way in which productions are discussed is not as heavily reliant on plot or themes as it is for the BSO account; the emphasis here lies more in providing vivid descriptions of what is happening on stage, detailing for example “dancing trees, mysterious forest creatures and a living witch's house”. Without delving too much into explanation or interpretation, the possibility for the audience to feel a sense of curiosity is heightened, perhaps incentivizing people to pay a visit to the opera in order to find out more.

Semperoper Dresden

The posts by the Semperoper bear more resemblance to the style employed by the BSO at first glance, as they are quite professional in tone. Their content tends to showcase a variety of different projects. While most of them are positioned in the traditional highbrow sphere, they are not limited to opera or ballet but also include jazz performances or children's theater workshops. Posts made by the Semperoper's opera account are in German language only, while collaborations with the institution's ballet account also provide an additional English caption. When an opera production is in focus, the captions tend to detail specific themes present within the production. Posts usually include practical information on performance dates, ways to obtain tickets, and occasional disclaimers about possible high demand, which puts into focus the economic dimension of opera attendance. Yet, the account often extends congratulations or well wishes for the people who contribute to the productions, stressing the individual commitment needed to put on a production and showing appreciation for the craft therein.

In summary, there is more that unites these opera houses than what sets apart their individual posting behavior: While appreciation for the artistry and craft is present for all of them, so are traditional markers of highbrow culture and economic considerations. This is not surprising, as the typical incentive for such institutions to be active on social media is rooted in increasing their visibility and reach in the hopes of increasing sales. There are, however, nuances in between these different houses and the way in which they try to appeal to their audience. But how do those appeals actually shape engagement? It is now on to the analysis to examine the role of the audience more closely.

Analysis

This analysis aims to critically examine the ways in which an online audience interacts and engages with opera content on Instagram through their comments. It is specifically aimed at interpreting the relations and patterns present within the general discourse in order to address

questions of hierarchy, elitism and legitimacy of highbrow cultural goods therein. For this purpose, the analysis will first focus on the typical proceedings of opera content on Instagram and user interaction with it, before moving to a case of heightened tension within the field. Through this, questions relating to how high art and the cultural capital and prestige associated with it are discursively constructed among the audience, and in contrast to popular culture, will be addressed.

A post at the opera

Under typical circumstances, the comment sections for opera house accounts are rather slow-paced and quiet places, usually occupied by a handful of people voicing their appreciation through brief exclamations like “Looks great!” or the use of applause- or heart-emojis. However, there are certain aspects that are discussed in greater detail, notably the topics of critical engagement with opera and accessibility. What discursive practices emerge from the usual proceedings in those comment sections?

Critique & appreciation

Audiences’ opinions on opera are expressed through both positive and negative reactions. Engagement is not limited to praise, and critique is positioned as a valid investment in the art form. Through these evaluative practices, users implicitly position themselves in relation to opera, making their affiliation visible without explicitly defining themselves. As most posts made by the opera houses are focused on specific productions, they provide a space in which these productions or elements can be discussed – as such, the digital space was often connected with the actual practice of going to the opera and detailing one’s experience and impressions.

“This production is once again a milestone of the Komische Oper and the solo performers, who embody the artistic concept along with Barry Kosky and the musical direction, the orchestra and everyone involved!!!” (transl.)

“My favorite director, Warlikowski. 👍” (transl.)

“For me, Jonathan is the best Faust ever!! 🎭💖 The premiere, all the singers, the choir, the orchestra, the entire production were wonderful.

👏👏👏👏💖”

Positive remarks were thus largely aimed at specific people. This establishes a personal connection with the general field of opera; it highlights the dedication and skill of individual performers and elements and appreciates their contribution to the ‘big picture’. This helps to hu-

manize the institution that stands behind the productions to a certain extent and to create a sense of personal proximity between audience member and performers. In a way, such reactions are quite reminiscent of fandom in popular culture, but the commenters here avoid a self-classification as ‘fans’. Instead, their identity is indirectly expressed through voicing their appreciation, as seen above, or through detailing their attendance and anticipation for future performances:

“I was at the performance last week. It was magical ✨🎭👑” (transl.)

*“I’ve been looking forward to this for soooo long! See you on Sunday!
🔥🔥🔥” (transl.)*

These interactions can be understood as extensions of the live experience into a digital context, in which audience members articulate and reaffirm their impressions as something to be shared and perhaps to have them socially validated. Going further, the apparent overlap between the digital and physical audience, indicates that social media may not broaden access to an otherwise restricted art, but instead builds on pre-existing modes of engagement. The platform thus functions less as an entry point for new audiences and more as a space in which established spectators continue their engagement beyond the physical space.

While positive comments were in fact more common, critical discourse could also be observed within the operas’ comment sections:

“I was disappointed. No backdrops, no costumes, no production. Only the voice of beautiful Glinda. That’s all. Everything is exaggerated. My biggest disappointment at the opera.” (transl.)

“Truly good singers. But the conductor was a bad choice. Even though we’ve heard Rigoletto quite often up until now, you were partially left wondering what this person was conducting there... ? Abysmal.” (transl.)

“Tenor Tetelman is already very handsome, no need make up. But his costume look like 🤪 Egypt mummy. I always hate that modern productions, you are torturing to opera lovers [sic]”

“You could also call it an opera about colonialism, exploitation, and misogyny – but love and the power of hope (??) is just so heartwarming and harmless, fitting for this completely antiquated production” (transl.)

Critical remarks were much less personalized; instead of setting their focus on individual people and naming them in the way comments do when they voice their appreciation, here,

they mostly refer to vague terms like the “production” or refer to individuals by their role, rather than their name which is more closely tied to an identity. In a way, this serves to separate individual actors or components from others that commenters may feel a different sense of affection towards, which helps to establish a sense of nuance and critical distance in the way opera is discussed.

Additionally, this illustrates how the act of criticizing a performance or elements thereof has little impact on an individual’s affinity towards opera as a whole. Instead, it reinforces traditional notions of engagement with high culture, which are marked by intellectual, nuanced and at times quite critical remarks. Building on Bourdieu (2000), who claimed that “the production of discourse ... about the work of art is one of the conditions of production of the work” (p. 35), even critical remarks serve to solidify the conception of a cultural good as art and are a part of the cycle of cultural production and consumption. Further, “[to] undertake to discuss arguments, one has to believe that they merit discussion and to believe, in any case, in the merits of the dispute” (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 102), meaning that discourse in high art is implicitly built on the belief that there is something to be gained by engaging in it, there exists the underlying notion that discussing negative sentiments could lead to something productive with regards to the work of art itself or the field in which it is situated. In other words, critical practices do not intend to devalue opera performances – instead the very act of critique serves to *elevate* them as artworks.

Taken together, both positive and critical remarks point to a form of engagement that is governed by conventions around opera. While praise emphasizes affective attachment, critical remarks reflect a learned disposition on how opera is to be evaluated. In this sense, audience engagement on Instagram can be seen as a hybrid form that may take on shapes akin to engagement with popular culture, but simultaneously operates within the logic of high art.

Framing accessibility

Since opera as an artistic medium is confined to a physical space – an opera house that provides the necessary space and technical equipment for performances – it is quite the opposite of a mass medium, as it can only host a very limited number of patrons. Yet, with the emergence of digital technologies, it can approach mass media-territory, so to say: Opera content on social media is able to bridge physical distance, so that people who otherwise lack access to opera, or even just a specific house and its productions, are able to engage and interact with said content. As such, the topic of access was brought up quite frequently:

“I wish I could see (and hear!) it, would love to attend but alas I live in The Netherlands. Hoping for one day a concert in our beautiful Concertgebouw in Amsterdam 🙏”

“I want to see it again... But tickets are sold out 😞😞 In any case, it was a great dress rehearsal 🔥

“- [In direct response] I envy that you could see, and even better: hear the dress rehearsal. It’s too far away for me ❤️” (transl.)

“I would sell my soul for good social media content by the Bayerische Staatsoper. And cheap U30 tickets, but I wonder if the devil can do something about that... ?”

“- [BSO, in direct response]: 🙄”

Concerns around accessibility are mainly grounded in distance between commenters’ locations and that of opera houses, as well as the limited availability of tickets and their prices, especially with regards to young opera visitors. Despite being a prevalent issue, commenters tend to frame these concerns as individual worries instead of structural ones. On top of that, humor was used to voice these concerns: Jokes about selling one’s soul for cheap tickets not only reference the content of the opera that was subject of the initial post – thereby actively displaying the commenter’s operatic ‘expertise’ – but allow to point to economic barriers without a confrontational tone. Notably, the opera house’s account directly responded to the comment which, in a way, blurs the boundary between complaint and interaction, turning accessibility debates into a fun interaction rather than a critical topic.

This illustrates how this discursive practice of ‘softening the blow’ through humor or highlighting personal circumstances helps to defuse grievances and make them seem less radical, but, at the same time, risks them not being taken as seriously as they perhaps should be. Because, importantly, these comments still signal strong engagement: Barriers to accessibility do not reduce interest in attending the opera but rather seem to reinforce it. This begs the question as to whether such comments are perhaps complicit in upholding precisely these barriers, as upholding them seems to serve opera and the air of exclusivity that surrounds it.

In summary, both evaluative and accessibility-related comments point to a form of engagement that is defined by ongoing investment in opera as a cultural field. As such, appreciation and critique coexist with accessibility grievances, while all these facets function to indicate

attachment and reinforce notions of opera as something worth discussing, and aspiring to access.

The Chalamet Incident

On February 24, 2026, a talk between Hollywood actors Matthew McConaughey and Timothée Chalamet was uploaded to the YouTube channel Variety. It was a statement by Chalamet that would stir the pot in the world of opera, saying: "I don't want to be working in ballet, or opera, or things where it's like, 'Hey, keep this thing alive, even though like no one cares about this anymore.'" (Variety, 2026), and seconds after added: "All respect to all the ballet and opera people out there. I just lost 14 cents in viewership. I just took shots for no reason." (ibid.)

Opera houses, people working in opera, as well as fellow figures from popular culture in turn voiced their discontent with the actor's statement (MacKintosh, 2026). While the way in which Chalamet expressed himself was perhaps unfortunate, it is not necessarily untrue: Opera houses no longer have the cultural monopoly they once had, and a lot of institutions struggle with financing. Both the Semperoper and the BSO to the actor's statement through Instagram posts, of which the BSO post especially gained a high amount of traction compared to the opera's usual engagement levels, signaling that this struck a chord with the social media audience. In particular, the reactions found within the comment section shed light on how the digital audience use such controversy to strengthen their positioning in the field of opera – also in relation to other individuals – and how they distinguish high art from other kinds of (popular) culture. Eventually, this culminates in the question: How do actors react when the essence of the field they consider themselves part of is threatened by outside actors?

Caring for opera

When confronted with the claim that 'nobody cares about opera', many commenters took on a defensive stance, expressing that they do in fact care about opera. Most often, this was done by outright stating their claim without necessarily providing any elaborate explanation for it, for example through the exclusive use of emojis or comments such as the following:

"Opera and Ballet will always and forever be alive"

"We care, a lot"

"We love opera an [sic] ballet"

These responses rarely develop into extended justifications or substantive engagement with the critique. This pattern could be understood as a form of performative alignment, in which users signal their position without further elaboration. At the same time, such responses reflect the dynamics of affective expression typically present on social media platforms, where evaluation and belonging are communicated through concise, emotionally charged signals rather than argumentation. In this sense, the defense of opera operates less through discourse and more through the performance of alignment, reinforcing its status as high art while at the same time drawing symbolic boundaries between those who ‘care’ and those who do not. This absence of justification may itself function as a marker of legitimate taste: cultural preferences that are socially recognized as legitimate do not require explanation but can be expressed as self-evident (Bourdieu, 2010, pp. 4).

Operatic connoisseurship

Some commenters drew from their knowledge of the field of opera and ballet in their responses, to varying degrees. Most commonly found were references to works and composers that are well-known, even beyond their original field of opera or ballet:

“Everyone will remember “Swan Lake” after 200 years... and no one will know about this actor”

“Funny, because I am sure unlike Wagner, Tchaikovsky and Puccini, nobody will care about him in about 30-40 years”

“[...] the works of Mozart, Tchaikovsky, Rossini, Prokofiev, Wagner (and more) will still be performed and admired on stages all over the world [...]”

“We will all die one day Thimothée [sic] BUT Tchaikovskys Giuseppe Verdi Mozart Pavarotti Callas..... will live forever”

Commenters demonstrate a basic sense of familiarity with the field of opera by referencing some of its ‘main players’, like Mozart, Tchaikovsky, or singers like Luciano Pavarotti or Maria Callas. As these names are also widely recognized beyond the field itself, such responses also illustrate the broader influence of high art on general Western cultural awareness. In doing so, they position opera and ballet as superior to film, for example by drawing from its cultural prestige as well as by emphasizing its endurance in contrast to the fleeting nature of life itself (“we will all die one day”). Here, this contrast serves to frame popular culture – with a contextually-grounded focus on Chalamet and his works – as momentary and rooted in trends,

while high art is constructed as something steadfast, implying the possession of qualities that make it resonant over hundreds of years.

Drawing on Bourdieu, however, these references may also be understood as a rather ‘low’ form of engagement with high art. In a sense, references of such kind are safe; they draw on works firmly established within the international operatic repertoire, meaning that these works are broadly recognized and thereby legitimized by institutions, and by extension, the audiences – they would hardly be performed in such frequency if there were not a demand for them. Bourdieu (2010, p. 56) notes that those with lower cultural inheritance tend to make references of such kind more often than those with a larger cultural inheritance, precisely because they lack the rooting in and familiarity with the field to feel competent enough to pass judgments over meaning less canonized works. They tend to remain within the boundaries of what is already widely established and thereby, culturally secure. In contrast to that, some commenters moved on to make more specific references:

“[...] once [Chalamet] sees Svetlana Gileva on stage or experiences Tomislav Mužek live, surely he will never again call ballet and opera boring!”

“You could've superimposed that clip of that video over the framed photo Ber-tarido (portrayed by @michaelchancecountertenor) holds during his aria "Confusa si miri" in the archived video of your 2003 production of Handel's Rodelinda!”

When commenters move beyond the ‘canon’ and instead reference lesser-known performers, they display a more profound familiarity with the field by showing that they are able to draw from discourses that are more niche and less stabilized in a sense. Instead of relying on broadly recognizable markers of legitimacy, such responses position their authors as involved participants of the field, capable of navigating ongoing developments therein. Further, they function as expressions of taste. This form of engagement with opera can be understood as a mobilization of cultural capital that points towards the individuals being ‘legitimate’ actors in the field. As Bourdieu (2010, pp. 267) argues, distinction is often achieved through the ability to move beyond the already consecrated and to engage with less familiar or emerging forms. By mentioning actors in the field that are relatively obscure to those outside of said field, commenters distance themselves from the ‘safe’ and widely legible cultural consumption. Such references come with a higher risk, as they are not guaranteed to be understood or valued by other commenters – exposing the individual behind the statement to misjudgment of the field. Yet, if such references are understood by other actors in the field, they may prompt dynamics

of distinction and thereby exclusion. The degree of specificity that is necessary to showcase connoisseurship also impacts accessibility for those with less expertise and may reinforce boundaries between those who ‘get it’ and those who do not.

Engagement with the field is not limited to mere references, and in the case of social media, individuals are able to display more proactive forms of cultural appreciation that go beyond the interaction with the works of others and instead move into the realm of production itself. Notably, one commenter was moved to the extent of writing a 53-line poem that stressed the importance and emotional resonance of opera:

*“They say these arts persist
as though someone insisted on keeping alive
an old flame.
That time has passed over them,
that the world now runs in another direction.
But it takes only a moment.
A silence in the hall.
A body breathing before it moves.
A voice not yet born
already trembling in the air [...]”*

Such exuberant expressions, along with field-specific references, can be understood as a way of invoking inalienable culture – something the agents of a field inhibit, for example skills or knowledge, which cannot be as easily transferred as economic capital and are therefore of a higher symbolic value (Webb et al., 2002, pp. 28). In the case of highly specific references, commenters display their cultural literacy within the field, further marking them as a legitimate voice within the discourse and implicitly showing their level of engagement with the subject at hand. On top of that, the act of conceiving of poetry demonstrates not only a profound sense of appreciation but also displays the ability to produce responses that align with the values of high art itself. While such responses might seem strange to the uninitiated, they can be interpreted as ways of reinforcing shared norms of how legitimate engagement with opera should look like.

Institutional aspects

As shown so far, most comments have referenced opera as an artistic form and medium first and foremost. But, as established previously, there are more dimensions to the term ‘opera’. Indeed, many of the comments that position opera as a spectacle, romanticize it as ‘real art’ or gain some sense of intellectual fulfillment from it, tend to neglect the circumstance that opera

in Europe is heavily institutionalized. A portion of the comments, however, did address that dimension. How then were the institutions that are actually the driving force keeping “this thing alive” positioned here?

For one, some comments voiced their support for the opera houses by directly addressing and crediting them for continuing to cultivate high art, as well as commending their artistic quality:

“Semperoper and Ballet, you are absolutely brilliant! I travel several times a year to Dresden just to see your shows. Your repertoire is rich and exciting! Bravo! Weiter so!”

“What is civilization, really? A stage, a dancer, a voice that breaks your heart open. Opera. Ballet. That's the whole answer. @bayerischestaatsoper @bayerischesstaatsballett thank you for keeping it well and alive”

The notion of opera as an almost sacred cultural good is once again evident in these comments, and a sense of personal connection is established through emotive language and references to personal commitment. At the same time, however, opera houses are now also positioned as custodians of cultural legacy: On top of being physical venues for operatic productions, institutions are additionally seen as being responsible for protecting the cultural goods that make up high art. This serves to discursively shift power; rather than audiences actively taking part in negotiating the meaning and value of opera, they take on a more affirming and compliant stance towards institutional authority. At the same time, this positioning is quite firmly rooted in its context. As suggested earlier, questions of accessibility and artistic vision in opera are frequently discussed within its field and remain open-ended. The relative absence of such tensions on an institutional level in these particular comments may therefore be indicative of a situationally dependent alignment. In contexts marked by external critique, internal disagreements within the field may be temporarily suspended. This produces the impression of a cohesive front within the community, in which institutions and audiences are discursively aligned against the ‘other’. By foregrounding unity, commenters reinforce the authority of opera institutions and affirm their cultural mission as artistically valuable and also socially necessary, for example by equating them with civilization itself. In this sense, they do not only express admiration, but participate in the symbolic reproduction of institutional legitimacy, positioning opera houses as indispensable actors in the preservation of a broader civilizational and cultural order.

Despite this, however, it must be noted that most commenters referencing the institutions actually opposed the view of opera being a force of its own that was prevalent in the larger discourse, and instead contrasted that with the financial issues that are prevalent for most institutions of high art:

*“The Bayerische Staatsoper makes a loss of 80 million euros every year”
(transl.)*

“Almost all major opera houses and state theaters receive public funding, as they are considered cultural institutions that cannot finance themselves solely through ticket sales. In Germany alone, 91% of the revenue of publicly funded theaters is covered by public funds.”

“But just imagine the amazing discount codes that can be published everywhere now so that struggling opera houses can get rid of their tickets” (transl.)

Contrary to the comments that put the institutions in a favorable position, these comments largely refrain from establishing a personal connection towards opera. As such, it remains unclear whether their authors would locate themselves as actors within the field of opera, or if they see themselves as external, removed from the discourses that are usually prevalent in the field. Yet, these comments challenge the notion of opera as a ‘disinterested’ form of cultural production in that they position public subsidies – and thereby the public that indirectly finances them – as stakeholders. While it is acknowledged that the financial support received rests on the assumption that these cultural goods should be removed from capitalist logics, that they should be supported even if such support is not economically reasonable, this aspect does not go by unquestioned. In turn, such comments also question whether or not it is legitimate to provide as much financial support to an art form and its institutions that are “struggling”.

Previously, the status of highbrow art and thereby its institutions were much less disputed as it is today. Indeed, if a person were to openly criticize opera, their opinion may likely have been disregarded as simply uneducated. Times, however, have changed, and as Jameson (1991, p. 16) argues, the idea of a dominant cultural ruling class has lost its impact in the era of post-modernism: Boundaries between cultural fields blur and their respective actors are not as confined to them as was previously the case. This is further aggravated by social media especially, which allows to transcend boundaries of space and time – the BSO post specifically, despite originating from an institution located in Germany, attracted commenters from several parts of the world. This dilution of cultural fields also means that engaging in high art no

longer guarantees automatic prestige for those who affiliate with it; just as most cultural elements, it too is continuously contested (Jameson, 1991, p. 1). It also means that high art, previously removed from capitalist logic – and, as shown, still argued to be removed from it by its proponents – now has to justify its existence under the conditions of supply and demand, and as such, economic and institutional struggles can no longer be hidden. Even in a moment of seeming triumph – the institutions firing back at an ‘aggressor’ and being backed by a large amount of people – these underlying factors are brought to the front, refuting the initial claim made by the institutions themselves; they are no longer cultural cornerstones, but subjects of capitalism.

Contrasting these reactions that foreground institutional fragility with those that express support for opera institutions reveals a stark asymmetry in how these entities are perceived and discussed. While critical comments draw attention to structural issues, supportive responses tend to neglect these concerns altogether. This selective engagement may give the impression that proponents of opera institutions are unwilling to confront the material dimensions underpinning the continued existence of the art form in the face of controversy, or, in other words, they aim to demonstrate strength instead of laying bare the issues that are usually eagerly discussed amongst themselves. As such, statements in favor of opera appear to operate within a discursive frame that primarily values opera as an archetype of artistic excellence and prestige. Acknowledging factors such as institutional fragility or financial instability could be perceived as undermining the very values being defended. Consequently, these tensions are disregarded in favor of producing a more affirmative narrative.

For the broader discussion, this suggests that debates about opera are rooted in different interpretive frameworks. On one hand, a critical perspective situates opera within its socio-economic and institutional constraints, contrasting seemingly low demand (or perhaps more adequately: capacity) with the high costs associated with it. On the other hand, a more supportive perspective elevates opera beyond these constraints, by framing it as a necessary and enduring cultural good whose value transcends material conditions. The coexistence of these perspectives points to a stark tension within the field: Opera is simultaneously constructed as both essential and precariously situated. This could indicate that efforts to democratize or reassess opera institutions may encounter resistance on practical grounds, but also on symbolic ones: If opera is perceived as a cultural necessity, then critique itself risks being perceived as a threat. In this way, supportive discourse does not merely defend institutions, but it actively

contributes to stabilizing their legitimacy by limiting the terms under which they can be questioned.

Exceptionality and exclusivity

Within the general discourse about this incident, one key dimension was the distinction between opera and ballet on the one hand, and movies on the other. A specialized aspect in which this manifested was the construction of opera as something exceptional, and attending it is seen as something special:

“In Vienna, people wait years and pay thousands for tickets to the Vienna Philharmonic. Classical music is thriving. Not sure the same can be said about movie tickets. 🧐🧐”

“I last went to a movie theater in December 2024. Since then I’ve been to the opera four times: the Royal Opera, the Met, and Philadelphia. Take that Timmie.”

“I stayed in Munich for two nights in a Germany-Switzerland trip just to attend an opera and I almost extended my trip for 7 days just to see Tristan [and Isolde] in Berlin. WE CARE! ❤️”

“I go to see ballet or Opera about 20 Times a Year and I never saw any film with that Guy no one cares about 🤔”

Such responses highlighted one thing in particular: Opera’s status as something special derives from the resources that are required to engage with it in the way that is regarded as the ‘correct’ way, as bringing up those resources on a regular basis would not be feasible for most individuals. Through this, opera is removed out of the ordinary, while movies – due to their higher rate of accessibility – remain in the sphere of the ordinary. Here, the lack of accessibility in opera is constructed as an advantage; commenters mention their willingness to spend high amounts of money on tickets, or even to travel across countries to see specific productions. While it these are very resource-demanding ways of engaging – resources that not everyone has at their disposal – this argument is not used to discuss the high threshold of accessibility to opera, and it is instead used to highlight one’s own dedication to the field of opera, positioning oneself above those who are not willing (or: unable) to put in the ‘effort’. Some commenters took on a more explicit personal positioning:

“Meanwhile, here I am, a Brooklyn Afro-Latina woman, recently retired (age 56), and first thing on my bucket list is "Tourandot" [sic] at THE MET! Would

rather spend \$200 there than \$20 bucks on Amazon Prime to see Marty Supreme.”

While a certain focus remains on the resources required for attending the opera, there is also a stronger focus on the commenter’s identity, suggesting that this comment does not only serve to show support for the opera, but also functions as a means of self-presentation. In some cases, this is more evident, whereas it may be done more implicitly in other instances. This distinction becomes clearer when one realizes that appeals in which comments attempt to mobilize others to support the opera were hardly present within the comment sections. Notably, most appeals of that sort were directed at Chalamet himself:

“@tchalamet I Like your Movies, but here you talk comlete [sic] bullshit. Ballet, opera and theatre is the best. Try it, you will feel the magic.”

“So ignorant! Someone teach this ignorant entitled fool a lesson and take him to a ballet or the opera! How can he consider himself an artist when he believes only he’s [sic] art of choice is the one you should care about!”

This is quite interesting as Chalamet’s original accusation is that ‘no one cares’ about opera, and the issue of opera failing to sway the masses should be something that ardent opera patrons would be aware of. But instead of making use of the increased media attention on opera by trying to invite other people to further engage with opera, the commenters’ tone was often reprimanding and dismissive. Comments that did highlight the benefits of this momentum for opera tended to frame increased engagement as an almost automatic outcome. Rather than emphasizing individual choices to engage with opera, such responses often portrayed the phenomenon as a collective shift, with the ‘masses’ being drawn to opera as a seemingly natural result of this controversy:

“We’re so quick to criticize. In the past 72 hours, Chalamet has brought more attention to a struggling community than it has seen in many years. Supporters are emerging from all corners to rally behind them. Sure, it was a poorly worded comment—but wow, he just made Opera and Ballet popular again. That’s a huge win for the community!”

This line of thinking is not only problematic because it overlooks individual motivations for engaging with opera, but also with regard to social dynamics within the field of opera: If those who identify as part of the opera community align with elitist values and construct participation in opera as something exclusive, resource-intense, and as something that one can only take part in when one displays an adequate amount of knowledge and appreciation for it, this may nip genuine interest in the artform in the bud instead of actually fostering it. Instead,

such practices of gatekeeping may primarily draw in individuals who are more interested in leveraging opera as a means of enhancing their own social status, aligning themselves with the prestige and values traditionally associated with high art. Something similar can also be noticed in some comments that explicitly accuse others of performative engagement with opera or virtue signaling; suggesting most of the concern for opera stems less out of genuine interest and more as a way to position themselves as morally superior to others:

“[...] Most people are commenting as if they actually buy tickets and fill the venues, but the reality is that most performing artists live with the uncertainty of whether or not they'll sell tickets to put some money in their pockets. [...] So instead of complaining here, go to the theater. Now that would be real support!” (transl.)

“[...] let's be HONEST: 75% of people don't actually care about opera or ballet; they're just commenting to get their 15 minutes of fame. I bet everyone ranting right now is Googling information about opera and ballet—something they've never done before. [...] How many of you have actually gone to see an opera or a ballet? How many of you own a ballet movie or an opera DVD? [...]”

While these comments have a point in that it is hard to discern who genuinely cares about opera in this particular case, that may be beside the point: Within this specific instance of discourse, even feigned interest can serve to increase the visibility of opera. Perhaps the issue at the core is more that such ‘free riders’ reduce the sense of exclusivity and cultural capital traditionally held by those who sincerely engage with opera making their position as part of a knowledgeable, select audience less pronounced. At the same time, however, there is also truth to the fact that actual and practical engagement with opera matters, as such actions directly contribute to keeping the institutions alive and thereby the art forms that they house.

The highs and lows of high and low culture

However, the distinction between opera and movies was not only drawn on the micro-level. As opera is considered to be one of the prime manifestations of high art, it was used alongside ballet to make a case for the larger implications of high and popular culture, for which Chalamet discursively served as a stand-in. Given the context of a Hollywood actor criticizing opera and ballet, the distinction between high and commercial culture was the frequent subject of comments:

“Repulsive comments and an equally repulsive attitude from someone who most likely calls himself an “artist.” [...] He should simply stick to his com-

mercial Hollywood business and leave European culture to Europeans. [...] An actor openly goes against the arts. Ignorant clueless American Hollywood boy."

"Hot tip - McDonald's is the world's most popular restaurant. You're someone who pretends to be other people, dating someone whose family empire is built on a sex tape and reality tv show. Kind of not shocked you're not into opera and ballet. Thankfully you're not writing and directing the films you're in."

"The grossest part about what he said for me was his comment about losing "14 cents in viewership" he's showing us something we need to understand, we don't exist to these people, we are dollar signs to them, every time you engage with them they get money, and he's just letting us know how small and irrelevant we are. It's just so ugly."

At the core of this is a conflict between the different claims to legitimacy that opera and movies lay: As evidenced by Chalamet, the currency in which popular culture deals are reach and profit. What is deemed 'valuable' is determined by the masses in the most collective sense – the opinion of an individual matters little in the grand scheme of things. Opera, as a form of highbrow culture, operates on a different logic, and is typically more dependent on the opinion of 'experts' located within the field who deem something to be of merit (Bourdieu, 1993, pp. 115). Furthermore, by removing opera from the underlying logics of commercialism that seemingly dominate popular culture, such comments explicitly construct opera and ballet as a form of 'art for art's sake', which Bourdieu also calls 'disinterested' instances of cultural production (ibid., pp. 39). Such cultural products do not aim to fulfill economic interests or to satisfy investors and other stakeholders, which provides them with a more authentic claim to truth inherent to them, something divorced from commercial logics that make it necessary to adjust expression in order to please as many people as possible in order to persuade them to 'invest', for example by buying tickets to the movies or buying merchandise. Thus, a distinction between high and commercial culture is established, in which opera is constructed as embodying a sort of intrinsic value while film is associated with market-driven production.

Additionally, commenters were stressing the human element within opera and high art, which was noted to gain more importance in the age of artificial intelligence. Some prognosed a bigger future for opera than for movies, pointing to the ability of AI to replace actors in digital mediums such as movies, something in-person experiences like opera or ballet would be less endangered by:

“Have fun with AI Timothée Chalamet. Ballet and Opera will live on IN PERSON.”

“In his shoes, I'd be worried about being replaced by AI as a mere screen actor. The experience of being in the theater, whether it's a play, opera, or ballet, cannot be replaced by AI. Here's to real life and art that breathes!”

While these comments frame opera's resilience against AI in terms of its in-person nature, they also point toward a more profound investment. This becomes especially clear in remarks that shift from defending the 'live experience' to emphasizing the sense of emotional resonance it evokes:

“So sad... a bit ignorant, perhaps to much in love with himself... not everybody is watching movies either... he might not know that theatres in Europe [sic] are packed, often sold out.. that dance and opera and literature and all arts are healing tools.. perhaps he just lacks education..”

*“Timothée is nor an artist he's product from Hollywood that's it
We actors need opera , ballet , literature, music ! To fill the souls of our characters !”*

“@tchalamet isn't an artist! He works in entertainment making money for dodgy people and keeping Americans detracted from how awful the country they live in is. I bet you can find a clip of him saying he's a story teller and his important that is. Actors are proper lols”

“Calling opera and ballet irrelevant is simply ignorant. These art forms have moved hearts for centuries and will continue to do so.”

Overall, these comments aim to put opera in a superior position as compared to movies: Hollywood is situated in a commercial sphere, the goods it produces are seen as commercial, implied to lack soul and intelligence. In relation to this, there were certain anti-American sentiments underlying in such comments, that framed (US) Americans as lacking culture or education. Contrary to that, European culture in general was said to speak to a higher sense of enjoyment, something almost spiritual.

Bourdieu argues that high art possesses a certain “sacred character” (2010, p. 26), and Webb et al. (2002) suggest that “the fields of art, religion and magic ... all depend on a combination of imagination and belief ... for culture, there is a belief in the sleight of hand which turns an ordinary ‘thing’ into an ‘Artwork’” (p. 151). These comments rely on this belief for their argumentation: The emotional impact they detail extends beyond simply finding opera appealing or touching – what they describe is a resonance of almost spiritual character, ‘art that

breathes’, that ‘moves hearts’ and ‘fills souls’. This does not only play into reinforcing the conventional way in which high art is thought of – something intellectually engaging and edifying – but it further moves the general discussion away from ‘rational’ arguments and instead relies on the impact of feelings that are so individual that they cannot possibly be refuted by others. This positions the commenters as true enjoyers of high art, and additionally gives them the discursive upper hand.

The practice of distinction between high and commercial culture becomes especially visible in the ways contextual knowledge is mobilized. Information that might enable a more nuanced engagement with critique, such as the fact that Chalamet’s grandmother, mother, and sister were active ballet dancers at one point, is instead selectively used to undermine credibility and insinuate personal motives for his statement:

“Timmy airing some personal family issues. Perhaps talk to a therapist instead?”

“I speak as a former professional ballet dancer married to a classical composer and conductor: Kylie Jenner's little dildo is CLUELESS about the ballet and opera worlds!”

At the same time, associations with entities emblematic of popular culture – such as Chalamet’s relationship with reality tv personality Kylie Jenner – are positioned to outweigh any perceived right of his to speak on the issue; any validity to his statement is being denied by commenters, placing more importance on displaying what they think to be the ‘correct’ stance with regards to opera. What emerges is a logic in which legitimacy is less about the content of an argument and more about who is recognized as entitled to speak. Chalamet is constructed to be an outsider, and thus, his stances on the matter are considered invalid, yet, at the same time, vehemently defended against. Such a strong reaction is quite peculiar when keeping in mind the number of comments that declare opera’s status to be as stable, successful and relevant as ever, and point to a contradiction: Would his statement not simply be dismissed if it carried no discursive weight?

Shattered illusio

Instead, the responses analyzed here suggest that moments of contestation can trigger defensive strategies aimed at preserving symbolic hierarchies, which point towards an underlying fragility in the field’s symbolic status. In this way, such reactions may be understood as a way of defending ‘legitimate’ culture that not only affirms its value but also actively devalues

those who challenge it. Critique here is not engaged with on an argumentative level but instead leads to a need to reassert hierarchical distinctions between ‘legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate’ cultural actors. In this sense, the vehemence of the responses can be interpreted as a sign of the struggles that opera is facing while trying to assert its legitimacy in contemporary society and the discourses located within it. Bourdieu (2000, p. 11) argues that every field is surrounded by what he calls *illusio*; the belief that any investment in the field and its stakes matters. This belief, as it is fundamental to a field’s existence, is a rather subconscious assumption: “*Illusio* does not belong to the order of explicit principles, theses that are out forward and defended” (ibid., p. 102). Yet, the statement that lies at the core of this discourse proves this notion wrong: Chalamet explicitly goes against the idea that opera and ballet hold value or meaning in contemporary society, cognitive or emotional investments in these fields are therefore positioned as null and void. This exhausts Bourdieu’s own conceptualization, as the questioning of *illusio* is mainly framed as a hypothetical, simply stating it would “threaten the very existence of the field” (ibid., p. 102).

While the findings presented here do not suffice on their own to answer this question, they do hint at possibilities. Namely, it seems as though reactions in such cases where *illusio* is threatened, that actors try to mobilize and make explicit all sorts of capital that a field prides itself in, even if the way in which it is mobilized actively goes against the principles that the field and its *doxa* are rooted in. In this case, it can be observed that even though people argue for opera’s emotional depth, intellectual appeal, and cultural nuance, their own responses are considerably lacking in these aspects, with many being unwilling to engage with the critical remarks at the core of this dispute on a substantial or argumentative level. This becomes quite curious when contrasted with the general sense of composure that opera discourse exhibits under regular circumstances. Moreover, the audience explicitly rejects cultural omnivorousness, which has been argued to be the ‘new’ marker of cultural prestige, and devalues popular forms of culture, mainly in an attempt to invalidate the field in which their discursive adversary Chalamet is mainly situated. This begs the question of how stable the field can be considered to be, if a personage that is not even established within it can provoke such stark reactions.

Conclusion

In *The Field of Cultural Production*, Bourdieu (1993) claims: “The work of art is an object which exists as such only by virtue of the (collective) belief which knows and acknowledges

it as art.” (p. 35), and further, that critics reinforce the status of a work of art by deeming it worthy of discourse (ibid.). Yet, in the case presented for this study, the field of opera as a whole sees itself confronted with an opinion that questions its entire legitimacy. This pushes the boundaries of Bourdieu’s theories as it moves the question of criticism to an entire field, rather than just works or agents located within it as he mostly conceptualized. In general, the stability of a field is a core component to the issue at hand, yet Bourdieu’s work cannot account for such dynamics, and while Jameson may help explain the general tendencies that led to such developments, the empirical foundation needed to understand the mechanisms by which this happens is weak as of now. However, this is something that this case study can contribute to. The answers to the research questions may help in furthering such understandings.

RQ1: How are notions of highbrow culture and its legitimacy in the context of opera in Germany sustained or challenged by users on Instagram?

As shown in the analysis, users on Instagram largely sustain the notion of opera and highbrow culture as legitimate and relevant in today’s day and age. Current societal developments are used to emphasize the value of opera, which is often framed as a counterpoint to popular culture and notions of automation, artificial intelligence, and the superficiality of mass media. In contrast to this, opera is constructed as a place for emotional and intellectual depth and human connection. Opera’s cultural value is thereby reaffirmed and positioned to gain even more relevance in nowadays in the face of claims that say otherwise. On an expressive level, this legitimacy is further reinforced through the adoption of an intellectual sense of language that aligns with established norms of highbrow cultural consumption: Knowledge about works or composers are shared, interpretations are discussed, and productions are critiqued. This reproduces expectations around opera and that engagement with it requires cultivated forms of engagement and expression, which contributes to opera’s position as something exclusive. Thus, traditional markers of cultural capital remain relevant. This aspect is not completely without tension, though: Questions of access, such as cost or availability, emerge occasionally. Being handled more discretely and indirect under regular circumstances, these issues are addressed more directly and with a stronger sense of grievance in times of controversy – perhaps brought forth by opponents of highbrow culture, rather than its enjoyers. Yet, this highlights the structural and economic conditions that opera operates in nowadays, as well as the issue that its current status is still intertwined with forms of exclusion that often remain unaddressed by the institutions.

RQ2: How do users express their affinity towards opera on Instagram, and how do they negotiate their personal relation to it?

As touched upon briefly, those who enjoy opera rarely call themselves ‘fans’ – over the complete sample, only two instances in which users described themselves as ‘opera fans’ could be observed. At the same time, the way in which they express their affinity mirrors ‘regular’ fan practices: Praising specific performers, having favorite sopranos or directors, regular attendance and even international travel. The difference here is in how the engagement is framed by its practitioners: Opera is not positioned as an object of fanaticism, it is as a site for edification, cultivation, and almost sacral resonance. In that sense, the practical rejection of the label ‘fan’ can be understood as managing one’s cultural identity: As the term ‘fan’ is usually associated with popular culture, the opera audience may reject it in an effort to align more closely with traditional notions of highbrow culture that emphasize intellect over pure affect, and where overt displays of fandom may be negatively impacting the perception of one’s symbolic capital. Yet, the financial and emotional investments made by audiences are positioned as markers of dedication to the craft and thereby legitimacy, rather than excess. Regular attendance or traveling for opera is implicitly normalized, pointing towards classist dimensions that underlie participation and reinforcing the circumstance that highbrow culture remains tied to the resources at one’s disposal. As such, highbrow culture continues to rely on displays of taste and status, even as they are mediated through platforms like Instagram that are typically associated with more popular forms of expression – even if the practical difference between how affinity for high and low culture is expressed is rather small.

RQ3: How do social media logics shape conflictual discourse around opera on Instagram?

The findings of the study suggest that social media logics intensify conflictual discourse around opera by rewarding controversy with increased engagement and by amplifying polarizing forms of expression. The heightened attention that opera received in this case was often framed to be beneficial for the art form, even when those acting within the field of opera often did so in a rather unpleasant way. Moreover, the increased visibility operates alongside processes of boundary-negotiation, where proper forms of engagement with opera are highlighted in order to distinguish legitimate enjoyers from illegitimate or ‘wannabe’ participants, which can be especially detrimental when ‘proper’ engagement is still highly dependent on economic factors. Within the controversy, lack of appreciation was equated with lack of knowledge,

which indirectly frames limited knowledge as something harmful to the field. This in turn reinforces norms that advantage those who are already established in the field and may turn away new audiences. This indicates that while platform dynamics can temporarily increase the visibility of cultural forms that are disadvantaged by the current cultural mainstream, the audience may simultaneously reproduce or even intensify their exclusivity: Instead of becoming an inviting place for those that became aware of such cultural forms through the heightened medial attention, it rather becomes a site to signal one's status and perform the capital one possesses. Whether social media logics actually help to popularize highbrow culture remains unclear, but at least in the case of controversy, it rather emphasizes processes of distinction and, to a certain degree, inequality.

Returning to this thesis' aim – understanding what position highbrow culture takes up nowadays and how social media logics contribute to both this positioning and the construction of social class – what can be said about these questions?

Firstly, highbrow culture or high art is strongly positioned to be a counterweight to popular culture: Where popular culture is argued to be motivated by profit, high culture is pursuing artistry, something 'pure'. Yet, at the same time, assumptions of what proper engagement with high culture looks like are not questioned, and it just so happens that those proper forms are those that demand the most economic resources of individuals. In this sense, there is a shift in perceived responsibility: Popular culture is 'impure' because the industry that stands behind it is focused on money, whereas the consumer of high culture is expected to have the resources necessary to properly participate in it. If they do not possess the means or the willingness to spend it on highbrow experiences, it is seen as a sign of lack of interest in it which in turn signals lack of refinement and culture. In this sense, the audience of highbrow culture superficially rejects capitalist notions, claiming that true art is not defined by its profitability, while simultaneously aligning with neoliberalist notions that then frame engagement with high art as an individual choice that signals moral and cultural superiority and concealing socioeconomic causes that may deter certain groups from participating in the first place.

Secondly, social media logics indeed seem to contribute to how high art is talked about. Now, it may not be an especially surprising finding that audiences on social media tend to behave in a way that aligns with the norms of the platforms they are active on. I would argue, however, that the importance here lies in the fact that even a community that typically derives a lot of symbolic capital from its distance to mass or popular culture is not exempt from bowing to the

rules that dominate these cultural fields nowadays, shown by practices that build on fueling outrage, almost performative conflict, and a stress on visibility as a discursive value.

The aspect of outrage and emotional escalation is especially interesting, as it could be considered the opposite of stereotypical high class ‘behavior’, often portrayed as rather reserved and thoughtful. In a sense, this prominence of affectual communication suggests that such practices are not confined to popular culture and media but instead permeate several levels of public discourse. The arena of highbrow culture is not the only space in which this shift can be observed, as for example political communication also seems to be increasingly polarizing. In the larger societal context, traditional markers of sophistication have lost weight, as public figures with significant economic or political power lean into presenting ‘relatable’ to the average person while structurally remaining part of the elite.

High culture thus finds itself in an increasingly unstable position: Engaging with high art is no longer as strong of a source of social distinction as it once was, as the broader cultural hierarchy that sustained such distinction has weakened. What follows from this is a certain tension in the audiences that are invested in high culture: On one hand, they symbolically distance themselves from popular culture and its commercial and capitalist underlining. On the other hand, they – consciously or not – participate in modes of communication that derive from the logics of those very fields, dynamics that reward popularity, affect, and visibility. Consequently, there lies a contradiction within that, as audiences of highbrow culture verbally reject monetary aspects of popular culture but still implicitly reproduce boundaries that are held up by economic capital, and fall into similar modes of communication that mark popular culture.

Yet, it ultimately begs the question: Does it actually matter if there is a stable cultural elite? On the one hand, the *ideal* of cultural elite and high art – one that is detached from the approval of the masses – possess a greater ability to provoke with its output. While certain instances of popular culture are also able to provoke deeper thought, they generally have to do so in a way that is more palatable. A good example of that is excessive nudity, which is almost commonplace in certain works of high art, whereas often frowned upon in popular culture. There lies power in the ability to evoke discomfort and provoke. A strong cultural elite would therefore be able to present an alternative to an increase in media products that avoid provocation of any kind in order to be agreeable to as many people as possible.

On the other hand, it is important who is actually part of a cultural elite, or, in broader terms, who gets access to high art. While gatekeeping can be seen as necessary to uphold certain

standards and avoid ‘degradation’, it is also an inherently excluding practice that risks deterring people who are genuinely interested in participating in those art forms, which in turn would lead to the cultural elite alienating itself from the larger public. Arguably, this is a more accurate account of high art in today’s age.

Further, as high art is embedded in capitalist systems, the core criticism against it is also rooted in its logic. Cultural capital has significantly lost value over the past decades, while economic capital has profited off of that and has become more important: In certain spaces, billionaires have advanced to cultural icons with big followings, and their positioning as superficially relatable allows them to turn that following against other actors, including (but by far not limited to) the cultural sector. Perhaps then, the way in which high art is positioned in social media can be conceived of as a conscious attempt to play by the rules that other sectors are playing by. Perhaps this points to the unconscious acknowledgement by its enjoyers that highbrow culture no longer holds the power it once did, but also the inability to admit that to those that challenge it. But how far can high art adapt to contemporary settings without losing its unique position?

For now, it can be said that it seems social media does not contribute to broadening access to high art and does not significantly change the way class is constructed. Instead, the more structural issues that underlie these issues are neglected in times of controversy and raised media attention, and instead engage in scapegoating or dogpiling. In this sense, social media does transform the specific ways in which cultural distinction is performed, as audiences struggle to combine traditional forms of cultural authority with the logics of digital media. The tensions observed in this research thereby do not point to the disappearance of cultural hierarchy, but to its continuous renegotiation in digital settings.

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Appendix A: Codebook

			Examples
Chalamet Critique	Personal insults	Bad movie quality	<i>Nobody cares about you and your stupid movies</i>
		Insulting looks	<i>He looks like a human grasshopper.</i>
		Lacks talent in general	<i>Has he ever acted in live theatre? I don't mean student or amateur level, .</i>
		Lost fans	<i>Damn, what an idiot. I thought I loved him. 🤔</i>
		Self-important	<i>Success has clearly gone to his head.</i>
		Overrated	<i>Timothy Chalamet is an overrated average french boy... Trust me, I've lived in France, HE IS AVERAGE.</i>
	Topic-based	Not a true artist	<i>This is such a disappointment... A true artist would have never even thought of making this dismissive, poorly mannered , arrogant statement.</i>
		Lacks talent for opera/ballet	<i>Mais, qui t'a sonné, mec?? Tu n'as pas la compétence ou la culture pour travailler dans ces domaines là... Ne te souci pas, PERSONNE avait l'idée de t'appeler pour ça.</i>
		Kardashian Konnection	<i>You would not be able to hold a note or a pose. Now go back to your job as a Kardashian lapdog and keep panting. 🐕🐕🐕🐕</i>
		Ignorant/uncultured	<i>Clearly he simply does not have the intellect to appreciate ballet and opera</i>
pe ra su	General support		<i>We care about opera 🤍</i>

Pop vs high	Issues in high culture	Tradition	long history	<i>For several hundred years these forms of art have kept both the audience and the artists who practice them alive within themselves</i>
			tradition is more important nowadays	<i>In this era of exhibitionism and a fast-paced way of life, tradition reminds us of what we can be when we simply allow ourselves to be present in the moment, feeling, learning, and truly living art.</i>
			backbone of modern art forms	<i>No art of today would exist without ballet or opera. No Taylor Swift, no musical, no breakdance or hip hop.</i>
		Future	has survived this long, it will survive longer	<i>Opera and Ballet has outlived him and will outlive him still. It has existed longer than the entire movie industry.</i>
			live art less replacable by AI	<i>Ballet or Opera won't ever NEED to worry themselves with the repercussions of AI. What a stupid comment!</i>
		Exceptionalism	opera/ballet requires more talent	<i>An opera singer or a Ballet dancer could act in a movie, Timothée could not sing Opera or dance in a ballet.</i>
			special occasion	<i>I stayed in Munich for two nights in a Germany-Switzerland trip just to attend an opera and I almost extended my trip for 7 days just to see Tristan in Berlin. WE CARE! 🍷</i>
			emotional resonance	<i>Ballet & Opera performances have been entertaining audiences for 400 years. Watching & appreciating a live performance with the audience brings us all into an emotional & lasting experience. Unlike Mr. Chalamet's performances which will soon be forgotten...</i>
			opera is seen multiple times	<i>People go there to see the same piece over and over, can't say the same about today's movies.</i>
		pricing	dependent on subventions	<i>Ja schön auslassen, dass jeder Sitzplatz mit hundert von € bei jeder Vorstellung subventioniert werden muss. NO ONE CARES. Ich mags auch aber is halt so....</i>
			expensive tickets	<i>Opera and ballet performances all over the world are frequently sold out, even though ticket prices might be 10 times more than a movie ticket. Why do you think that is? Simply because people know it's worth it!</i>
		Elitism		<i>Un arte vivo y vigente (cine, teatro, novela, etc.) no siente la NECESIDAD de acallar opiniones adversas, pero uno elitista y fósil (dependiente en gran medida de ricos snob y subvenciones públicas) parece que sí 🍷</i>
	Money	shouldn't matter for value of art	<i>While film might make the most money, profit should never be an indicator for great art.</i>	

		dominates pop culture	<i>The grossest part about what he said for me was his comment about losing "14 cents in viewership" he's showing us something we need to understand, we don't exist to these people, we are dollar signs to them, every time you engage with them they get money, and he's just letting us know how small and irrelevant we are. It's just so ugly.</i>
	Hollywood	not art	<i>Proof that Hollywood is not a form of art, but an exploitation of art.</i>
		anti-American sentiments	<i>He works in entertainment making money for dodgy people and keeping Americans detracted from how awful the country they live in is. I bet you can find a clip of him saying he's a story teller and his important that is. Actors are proper lols</i>
	Artists	should hold together	<i>A true artist NEVER punches down, they embrace their artistic brothers and sisters and applaud their accomplishments and talents. We hold each other up because our world is vulnerable and glorious and important. We tell stories and have done for centuries. True artists nurture other true artists. You'd be wise to remember that going forward. 🙏❤️</i>
		should not discredit other forms of art	<i>„Stupid is who stupid does...“ ... shame if someone who thinks he's an artist speaks that disrespectful about other artists (who in my opinion are more artist than he could ever try to be!!!!) - BALLET & Opera: we ❤️❤️❤️ you!!!!!!</i>
	Meta discourse	Attention is beneficial for opera	<i>We're so quick to criticize. In the past 72 hours, Chalamet has brought more attention to a struggling community than it has seen in many years. Supporters are emerging from all corners to rally behind them. Sure, it was a poorly worded comment—but wow, he just made Opera and Ballet popular again. That's a huge win for the community!</i>
		Virtue signaling	<i>I bet everyone ranting right now is Googling information about opera and ballet—something they've never done before. They're a bunch of hypocrites with double standards!</i>
		uproar means that there is truth to comments	<i>Der derzeitige Sturm im Wasserglas erinnert mich an Hans Knappertsbusch, der, als er auf eine schlechte Kritik angesprochen wurde, antwortete: „Was kümmert es eine gotische Kathedrale, wenn ein Zwergpinscher an ihr das Bein hebt?“</i>
		appeal for better dialogue	<i>Just an opinion. Why everything should be a scandal now? If he feels that way is ok.</i>