HER PERSPECTIVE

The Forgotten History of Opera

International Seminar About Operas Composed by Women.
The Royal Danish Opera, Den Andra Operan, Aalto Musiktheater Essen.

Copenhagen November 27-28th, 2025

DEN ANDRA OPERAN

DET KONGELIGE TEATER

THEATER UND PHILHARMONIE ESSEN

»... a way of delving into the magical, enchanting, and lustrous world of operas composed by women.«

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Welcome

Women compose. Women have always composed. This statement is not exactly revolutionary: for many years, we have known about certain female composers who lived three, four or five centuries ago. But I do not believe it is totally wide of the mark to say that these comparatively few names have been regarded as the curious exception.

Fortunately, in recent years there has been a huge development in the field of music research, and for the first time there has been a purposeful focus on rummaging through archives and libraries in the search for female composers. The fact that they exist should come as no surprise. Women compose; they always have done. Some even enjoyed huge success in their own lifetime; but then disappeared from the annals of history. Now they are beginning to reappear, and they include female composers of operas – names and works we never knew existed.

This research is important, not only for understanding the history of music, but also for those of us who present opera professionally. We happily perform *La Bohème*, *La Traviata* and *The Magic Flute*, but what other potential classics are hidden away in the archives? While history is being amended, it is both inspiring and exciting to find ourselves hovering between archaeological excavation and veritable treasure hunting.

So, I am both delighted and proud to be hosting this symposium, which involves some important pioneering, and for which we have brought together a number of people who are interested in this fascinating subject: women composers through the ages. Welcome!

Elisabeth Linton
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF
THE ROYAL DANISH OPERA

A New Perspective on Opera

Female composers are finally trendy; but, for all the new encyclopaedic books or well-meaning lists of these artists, few provide us with any deeper knowledge of their actual artistic work.

Their stories, countries of origin, family ties, and life spans are often told with only fragmented social and creative context. We get stuck in the "Look, I found her!" moment, as coined in an article on women artists by Eliza Goodpasture in *ArtReview* in 2022.

We end up talking more about these women's lives than about their works. And yes, they need to be recognised, and their working conditions established. But what I'm really longing for are modern editions of their scores, deep analysis of the themes of their operas, daring artistic interpretations – and thereby a revolution in the operatic repertoire!

With the *Her Perspective* initiative, we want to provide methods of thinking differently and creatively about opera – ways that are not limited merely to the study of women composers, but that focus on their creative work.

We already have positive examples throughout Europe: Palazzetto Bru Zane's extraordinary work on creating modern editions has brought the music of Clémence de Grandval and Louise Bertin back to the stage. Dr Merle Fahrholz's ongoing programming of operas by female composers, and the WOVEN project's research on women's roles in 18th-century European operatic culture, are further key examples.

With *Her Perspective*, an initiative between The Royal Danish Opera in Copenhagen (DK), Aalto Musiktheater Essen (DE), and Den Andra Operan (SE), we aim to move beyond the mere 'discovery' of women artists towards a reimagining of the operatic repertoire. We want to engage critically with both the women missing from the archive and those who are present, and bring the works of these artists into their full social and cultural contexts. Not only does this provide new ways of looking at the work of female composers; it also expands our understanding of opera.

Fritiofs saga – "a classic Viking saga told by women"; *La Montagne Noire* – "a Carmen from a female

Artistic Director Bente Rolandsdotter as guide in one of Den Andra Operan's *Unboxing* projects.

perspective"; *Le Dernier Sorcier* – "an eco-feminist opera from 1867"; *Talestri, Regina delle Amazzoni* (1760) that explores "the war between men and women": all reveal fresh perspectives on familiar operatic themes.

Her Perspective is a way of delving into the magical, enchanting, and lustrous world of operas composed by women. It provides us with new perspectives on a beloved art form and deepens our understanding of the human experience. Composers such as Francesca Caccini, Marie Clémence de Grandval, Elfrida Andrée, and Louise Alenius offer us a musical universe that establishes, highlights, and values the female experience.

Bente Rolandsdotter
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR
DEN ANDRA OPERAN
(ANOTHER OPERA)

Singers Lovisa Huledahl and Richard Sandblom in Den Andra Operan's *Caccini Revisited: Sea Monsters and Horse Ballets* at Confidencen, May 2024.

Bringing the Past to Life

Den Andra Operan's Journey from Research to Performance

The work of Den Andra Operan (AnOther Opera) to find, highlight, and disseminate historical operas composed by women has led the company to explore new forms of audience engagement. When Den Andra Operan (DAO) begins its search for these "forgotten" operas, there is often very little to go on – sometimes only a title and a year. Bente Rolandsdotter, Artistic Director of DAO, and Hanna Fritzson, Musical Director of DAO, explain that initially there may be many questions. *What is the opera about? How many roles are there? For what voices? Are there even any surviving scores? Is the music any good?*

To find out, they involve musicologists, translators, musicians, singers, dramaturgs, and others. Out of this process, two concepts have emerged that combine research and artistic expression with an open process shared with the audience: *Unboxing* and *Revisited*.

Unboxing and Revisited

Unboxing is a format in which the public presentation consists of an introduction to the work and the composer, together with musical excerpts performed by musicians and singers. The concert is preceded by a short period of study and rehearsal. *Unboxing* becomes an opportunity to consolidate what the research has uncovered, while allowing the audience to share in the process – including both joyful surprises and challenges.

Hanna emphasises the importance of hearing the works performed and sung, and how valuable it is for the piece to encounter both performers and audience at this early stage. Bente describes the nervous feeling before presenting something they themselves do not yet fully understand:

"It's unboxing in its purest form. The audience gets to be there as we open this package and look inside

– with a mix of fear and delight!"

Revisited is a more fully-staged format. Here, the preparatory work develops further toward interpretation and artistic realisation. Music and drama are explored through selected scenes, which are presented to an audience after a short rehearsal period. At this stage, costume and set design also become part of the process.

Revisited can take various forms. When working on Francesca Caccini's opera, Den Andra Operan approached the material more experimentally, knowing that it would eventually lead to a full production. In *Mazepa Revisited,* an early decision was made to create a staged interpretation of Clémence de Grandval's work adapted to available resources – meaning a reduced version of the opera. (Producing a full-scale version with full orchestra and large chorus was not considered realistic at the time.)

The Oldest Surviving Opera by a Woman

La liberazione di Ruggiero dall'isola d'Alcina, composed by Francesca Caccini for the visit of the Polish prince Władysław to Florence in 1625, is considered the oldest surviving opera by a woman. The libretto was written by Ferdinando Saracinelli, and the plot is drawn from Ludovico Ariosto's epic poem *Orlando furioso.*

Synopsis

During one of his adventures, the knight Ruggiero lands on the island of the sorceress Alcina; the two fall passionately in love. What Ruggiero does not know is that Alcina has a habit of tiring of her lovers and turning them into plants or stones. Meanwhile, Ruggiero is betrothed to Bradamante, who, upon hearing of the affair, sends the sorceress Melissa to bring him home. Melissa arrives on the island, and a fierce power struggle ensues between the two enchantresses. After a dramatic finale in which Alcina sails away on a monster-like ship, the spell is broken and the transformed plants return to human form as knights. The opera ends with a spectacular *horse ballet* in front of the palace – a celebration of freedom.

Caccini Revisited

The work of Den Andra Operan on Caccini's opera has so far reached audiences through three presentations between 2022 and 2023. They were also documented in a podcast.

The first part focused on theme, text, and context. The public conversation at the Royal Swedish Academy of Music in Stockholm touched on topics such as the opera's creation in the context of Florentine cultural life under the Medici family, the role of art in 17th-century politics, various interpretations of the role of witch, and the birth of opera itself.

The second part, the *Unboxing* concert, titled *The Raised Voice,* delved into the music. Two singers, Ann Hallenberg and Kristina Hammarström, performed excerpts from the work together with musicians under the direction of Mariangola Martello. The subsequent discussion explored both the dramaturgy of early opera and its musical theory and aesthetic aspects.

The third part, *Revisited: Sea Monsters and Horse Ballets*, was an experimental performance directed by Clara Svärd in collaboration with Bente Rolandsdotter, exploring the boundaries between stage and audience in a "choreographic tête-à-tête" at Ulriksdal Palace Theatre Confidencen. Inspired by the 1625 premiere festivities, the performance created an open space where the audience could move freely during the event.

With this extensive groundwork in place, a full-scale production of Caccini's opera, in collaboration with Confidencen, is now planned for the summer of 2026, under the title *La Liberazione.*

Changing the Historical Narrative

Since its founding in 2016, Den Andra Operan has aimed to reshape historical narratives and broaden the operatic repertoire. From the very dawn of opera, women have composed works of musical drama. Though not under the same conditions or in the same numbers as men, they have always been present, their works engaging in dialogue with the politics and culture of their time.

Yet, as Bente points out, for various reasons the contributions of women have been excluded from the historical record. Today, Den Andra Operan has built a network of recurring collaborators and contacts across Sweden and Europe who contribute information and expertise: about new recordings, productions, and other discoveries.

The musicologist and publisher Holger Schmitt-Hallenberg serves as the group's advisor and is often the first to delve into the labyrinths of archives in search of material. Hanna emphasises that, although the process of locating material can sometimes be complicated and challenging, it is above all tremendously joyful and rewarding. To sit with handwritten scores and suddenly feel in direct contact with a woman composer from the past is both dizzying and profound. The concepts of *Unboxing* and *Revisited* have become a vital bridge, connecting archive and stage.

Sophie Helsing
DRAMATURG

Mezzo-soprano Elisabeth Jansson in Den Andra Operan's *Caccini Revisited: Sea Monsters and Horse Ballets* at Confidencen, May 2024.

Tekla Griebel Wandall, 1896.

New Perspectives and Unheard Stories in Danish Opera

I vividly remember one of my first lectures in music history when I began as a student of musicology. Our lecturer introduced us to Walter Benjamin's essay in which he imagines history as an angel falling backwards into the future, while rubble from one catastrophe after another keeps piling up at its feet (Benjamin was inspired by Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus*). It is a rather melancholic view of historical process, but for me, the very idea that we fall backwards into the future, eyes fixed on the past, remains an evocative description of how we understand our present: by looking back and trying to make sense of the rubble we leave behind.

However, there are many things we do not see when we look back. The rubble we look back at has been organised and piled up by historians so that some stories tower above others, blocking our view of what lies behind. This is especially true of music history. For many, the very terms "music history" and "composer" connote a hierarchy of mostly Western men, some "greater" than others. Focusing specifically on women in music history, then, means uncovering what lies behind the well-known piles of rubble. It means looking closely at the towering histories that dominate the view, questioning them, and learning to move beyond the familiar paths of music historiography.

Rewriting the Danish Self: Tekla Griebel Wandall's *Kong Hroars Skjalde*

That is why I find it both important and challenging to study women in music history. And as a researcher doing just that, I realised long ago that there is far more hidden in the archives than I am aware of: one easily gets the feeling that every time you turn a stone, heaps of new materials appear. The first archives I delved into were those of Tekla Griebel Wandall (1866–1940). Letters, diaries, sheet music, memoirs, photos, scrap books and more from her are preserved in the Danish Music Museum and the Royal

Danish Library. Indeed, there was such an abundance of sources related to Griebel (I refer to her by her maiden name) that it became possible to gain an overview of her entire life and oeuvre and eventually write the first-ever biography of this fascinating composer.

Griebel composed three operas. Her first, *Don Juan de Maraña,* was never performed in full and has not been preserved, except for one aria. Her second, *Skøn Karen* (Fair Karen), premiered in Breslau in 1895 and was performed at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen in 1899. She began work on her third, *Kong Hroars Skjalde* (The Bards of King Hroar) in 1893. It was supposed to be her second opera; but it was only finished 32 years later, in 1925. Today, exactly one century later, this opera, undoubtedly Griebel's most ambitious work, seems as relevant as ever.

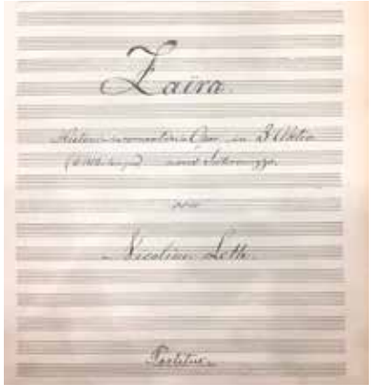
Kong Hroars Skjalde is based on Adam Oehlenschläger's novel *Hroars Saga* (The Saga of Hroar) and is set in a mythical Viking time around the Danish city of Roskilde and town of Lejre. In adapting this vast novel into an opera, Griebel focused especially on themes of gender and identity – in ways very different from well-known opera narratives. At the centre of the opera are two male protagonists: King Hroar and his bard, Hrane. Both men stand out from their surrounding society. They are sensitive and reflective – representatives of a dawning humanism opposed to the harsh Viking ethics of blood vengeance and heathen rituals. Hrane is repeatedly called "effeminate", and his songs are dismissed as "women's songs". However, the interesting aspect is Hrane's reaction to these accusations. With a shrug of his shoulders, he accepts them, asking: Can't women be heroic and brave, too? Even more interestingly, the opera links Hrane's 'feminine' character to a specifically Danish identity, contrasting it with the Norwegian and Swedish identities embodied by the stereotypically masculine, brawn-and-honour antagonist, Ragnvald. In many ways, this is an opera that reimagines the Danish self-narrative through a strikingly modern and gendered lens.

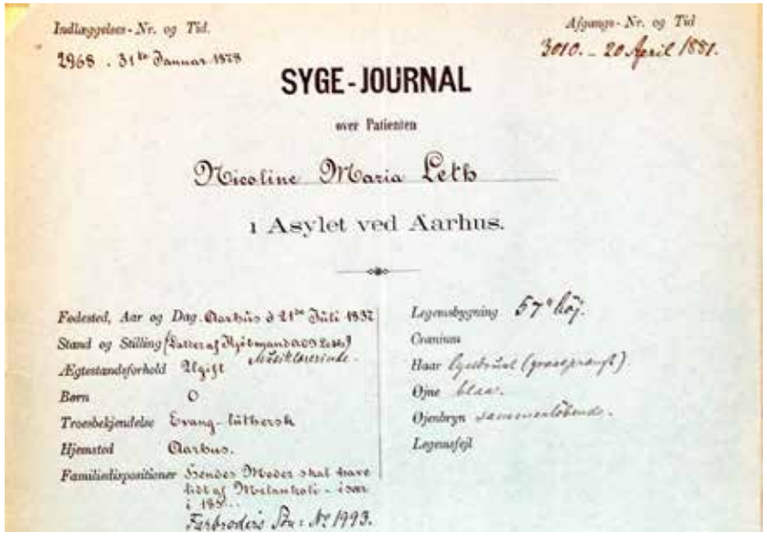
The music itself, composed for a large orchestra, is an original mixture of Late Romantic, chromatic harmony and more archaic features suited to the Viking setting – and exquisite arias that, in my view, strongly deserve wider recognition and a regular place on the stage. That is why I am collaborating with the music publisher Edition·S to finally bring Griebel's handwritten music into modern, practical, and scholarly editions. As part of the publication series Danish Classical Music, supported by the Augustinus Foundation, *Kong Hroars Skjalde* will soon be available for all.

Discovering Nicoline Leth

Between the premiere in Breslau and the performance in Copenhagen, Griebel decided to reorchestrate *Skøn Karen* entirely. According to Griebel's memoirs, this reorchestration became possible because one Nicoline Leth offered to pay for a prolonged stay in Dresden, where both Griebel and Leth could study privately with the composer Felix Draeseke; in these lessons Griebel chose to work on the opera's orchestration.

Now, when I read Nicoline Leth's name in Griebel's memoirs, I was forced to turn yet another stone. And as I turned the stone to find out




Indlæggelses-Nr. og Tid.
2968 . 31te Januar 1879
Afgangs-Nr. og Tid
3010. - 20 April 1881.

SYGE-JOURNAL
over Patienten
Nicoline Maria Leth
i Asylet ved Aarhus.

Fødested, Aar og Dag. Aarhus d 21te Juli 1857
Stand og Stilling (Datter af Hjulmandsenke)
Ægtestandsforhold Ugift
Børn 0
Troesbekjendelse Evang-luthersk
Hjemsted Aarhus.
Familieforholdene Hendes Moder skal have haft et Melankoli-Anfald i 189..
Forbrødres Fø: Nr 1993.

Legemsbygning 57" høj.
Cranium
Haar
Øjne blaa.
Øjenbryn
Legemsfejl

who this Nicoline Leth might be, an entirely new chapter in the history of Danish women in opera revealed itself.

Meet Nicoline Leth: a Danish composer who lived 1837–1910. Having inherited a considerable fortune from her merchant father, Leth was free to pursue her interests in music. She seems to have spent most of her life composing, while moving between Aarhus, Copenhagen, Dresden and Leipzig – and mental asylums. Leth was hospitalised at mental institutions several times in her life, suffering, in the language of her time, from 'melancholia'. So far, the asylum records of her treatment, together with Griebel's memoirs, remain some of the only sources through which we can get a glimpse of Leth's life.

Though Leth had only a few works published and performed, she composed songs, orchestral works, even a symphony – and yes, an opera – all preserved in the Royal Danish Library. *Zaïra,* in three acts plus intermezzo, is set during the fall of Constantinople in the 15th century and tells the story of a heartrending family drama in the midst of the war. According to Griebel, Leth worked on this opera since childhood and finished it around 1897 at the age of sixty.

Nicoline Leth was buried quite deep in the rubbles of history, and she is still only partly visible. She exemplifies the wide ramifications of pursuing new historiographical paths: had she not appeared as a side character in Griebel's life, she would probably have remained forgotten. Nicoline Leth is one of the main characters in a new, transdisciplinary research project on the arts and psychiatry in 19th-century Denmark supported by the Augustinus Foundation, and I wonder: What new paths and unheard stories might emerge when we begin studying those of Nicoline Leth?

Thomas Husted Kirkegaard
PHD, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF MUSICOLOGY, AARHUS UNIVERSITY

A Danish Sensation Hilda Sehested and her opera *Agnete og Havmanden*

In 1914, the Royal Danish Theatre's acceptance of Hilda Sehested's opera *Agnete og Havmanden* (Agnete and the Merman) was considered a sensation. In her home in the Østerbro district of Copenhagen she was approached by several journalists, all wanting interviews. The first time a journalist contacted her, she thought it was a mistake. However, as the days went by, she also discovered that more of them were interested in her noble background than in her music. The *Politiken* newspaper was particularly personal, considering it relevant to tell its readers that, despite her age (56) and her grey hair, the composer still appeared youthful; another paper, *Vort Land* got her to talk about her inspiration for writing the music: she described how she had grown up in an environment in which Denmark's nature, history and popular superstition were closely interwoven. She had grown up at Broholm Manor on the in eastern Funen. On the nearby meadows and in the moat she experienced strange natural phenomena: for example, 'the bog woman brewing' (a term for mysterious fog); 'the elf girl's dance'; and 'will-o'-the-wisps'. All of these, along with birdsong and the rustle of trees in the wind, stimulated her musical imagination. Several years later, they were still etched in her memory, and therefore she felt the urge to express them in a theatrical work. The result was *Agnete og Havmanden*, an opera based on an old Danish folk song.

The song, in which Agnete leaves her earthly element to live with the merman at the bottom of the sea, only later to leave him, has been part of Nordic tradition since the 18th century; it exists in a number of different versions. Typically, what varies is the number of children to which Agnete gives birth or the number of years she spends at the bottom of the sea. But what all the versions have in common is the reversal of traditional gender roles. Agnete is not a humble

Agnete og Havmanden. Vilhelm Kyhn, Oil painting (circa 1862).

wife and mother who lives to take care of the needs of her husband and children: she is a self-aware woman who defies her parents to live out her desire with the merman, whom she later leaves; he is left alone with the entire herd of children. However, when she is once again back on earth and enters the church to greet her mother, who is attending a service, she drops down dead.

Agnete og Havmanden is a one-act opera in three scenes, depicting Agnete respectively in her earthly and her submarine element. The playing time is around 55 minutes.

Hilda Sehested never got to see her opera staged. Shortly after the theatre had accepted it, the conductor Frederik Rung, who had approved it, died; his successor does not seem to have cared for the music. After several inquiries to the theatre and more than seven years of waiting, Hilda Sehested gave up hope that *Agnete og Havmanden* would ever be performed. She asked the theatre to return her score. There is no indication that she attempted to get other theatres to produce the opera.

So, it took exactly 100 years from the opera's genesis to its premiere in a concert performance at Odense Concert Hall on 5 October 2014. It has subsequently been performed in Sønderborg, Lyngby and Copenhagen.

Lisbeth Ahlgren Jensen
MUSICOLOGIST

The score and vocal parts can be downloaded at: https://imslp.org/wiki/Agnete_og_Havmanden_(Sehested%2C_Hilda).

Women and Music in the Baroque era
Paths to creativity and recognition

During the Renaissance and Baroque periods, intellectual circles had far fewer problems acknowledging the works of talented women than in the centuries that followed. Educated women across Europe were active participants in cultural life, joining literary and musical societies and engaging in debates side by side with men. Alongside the many art-loving female rulers, figures such as Teresa of Ávila, Elena Cornaro Piscopia, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Madeleine de Scudéry, and Anne Conway were important voices in philosophy, theology, and literature. Even in Northern Europe, women were deeply involved in artistic and intellectual debates: for example, Birgitte Thott and Dorothe Engelbretsdatter in the Kingdom of Denmark; Ebba Brahe, Sophia Elisabet Brenner or Beata Rosenhane in Sweden; and – most famously – Queen Christina of Sweden, who became one of the foremost patrons of music in 17th-century Rome.

Still, they were relatively few, and their participation did not mean that women were equal. But intellectuals always acknowledged the powerful women of mythology, religion and history as role models and references for their own times. In Baroque opera, for example, librettists and composers generally focused much more on strong, steadfast women than on heroic men. Even kings and knights are depicted mostly as fickle weaklings, humbled and corrected by dominant, morally superior women. And as a performer on the operatic stage, the prima donna reigned supreme as a revered sex object and celebrated artist. Perhaps the strongest expressions of female agency during the Baroque era are found in this aspect of their artistry.

Thorough musical training was an important part of the education of girls from aristocratic and wealthy upper-middle-class families, whose main goal was to attract a suitable husband. Therefore, the problem for

women composers was not their musical training, but the virtual impossibility of finding work or securing commissions, since honourable women could not have a job or paid work. Their domain was the home, and when it came to artistic expression, their salons had to suffice.

That we today, despite of all this, can still listen to large compositions by women (both in length and orchestral forces) from the 17th and 18th centuries shows that there were ways to overcome these problems. One of the keys lay in the balance of power between church and aristocracy.

Monasteries and convents were not only religious institutions but also centres for education. They were filled with young aristocratic and upper-class people. In this protected environment, novice girls were often allowed musical and literary studies. Today, we have a large amount of church music composed by women; almost all of it was written by nuns: for example, Isabella Leonarda, Chiara Margherita Cozzolani, Rosa Badalla, Maria von Gall etc.

The Roman composer Camilla de Rossi probably also lived in a convent, either as a nun or as a canoness. Little is known about her life, but between 1707 and 1710, at the request of Emperor Joseph I, she composed four Italian oratorios and a secular cantata for the Habsburg court in Vienna – an exceptionally large orchestral output for a woman composer of her time. Around the same period, three other women wrote oratorios for the Viennese court: Margherita Grimani, Caterina Benedetta Grazianini, and Maria Anna de Raschenau (whose only known oratorio is lost). Yet, both in quantity and in quality, Camilla de Rossi's work stands out. Considering that Francesca Manzoni Giusti wrote at least four oratorio libretti around 1730 – all on distinctly female subjects – the Viennese court appears to have been unusually open to creative women.

Even outside monasteries and convents, opportunities could open for girls from aristocratic and wealthy upper-middle-class families to pursue composition on a professional – if unpaid – level. If their fathers were open-minded enough to support and invest in their daughters' talent (as in the cases of Antonia Bembo, Marianne Martinez, Maria Teresa Agnesi, whose father was a rich Milanese merchant, or Rosa Coccia who was born into an apothecary family), they could become such skilled pianists and singers that they performed both others' and their own music in public. From there, it was only a small step to writing larger theatrical works, which (in the case of princesses such as Maria Walpurgis or Wilhelmine of Bayreuth) could be performed in their own court theatres or (like Agnesi's Ciro in Armenia) under the

Court Singer and mezzo-soprano Ann Hallenberg gives voice to operas composed by women in the concert *Facciamo Opera!* at the Eric Ericson Hall in Stockholm, November 2024.

patronage of wealthy benefactors.

It was not until the early 19th century that upper-class girls could become professional opera singers – no matter how beautifully they sang. The profession carried far too low a social status and was generally regarded as immoral. For that reason, professional female singers were almost always born into families of musicians or composers. And it is not surprising that some daughters in this environment began writing music themselves – thereby forming a third path to the life of a female composer. This was how, for example, Francesca Caccini, Barbara Strozzi, Élisabeth-Claude Jacquet de La Guerre, Julie Pinel and, in the late 18th century, Anna Bon, Lucile Grétry or Florine Dezède entered the profession.

With the collapse of absolutism after the French Revolution and the declining influence of the Church over secular affairs, many of these artistic opportunities for women vanished. Unfortunately, the Revolution's famous slogan – liberté, égalité, fraternité – did not extend to women. On the contrary, the first 'democratic' parliaments deliberately excluded women, and their role in public discourse was often even more restricted than before. Even though the resurgent conservatism after the Napoleonic Wars restored aristocratic power in politics, much of the rural nobility was now too impoverished to sustain the cultural life of earlier centuries and simply could not afford orchestras and singers. Opera seria and its virtuosic excesses were now associated with an antiquated absolutist worldview and fell completely out of fashion. Most importantly, societal views of women shifted: in the repressive era of the Restoration and Biedermeier, the private home became the middle-class refuge, and a woman's sphere was largely confined to household and salon. It is, therefore, unsurprising that women's compositional output turned overwhelmingly towards piano music and light, entertaining songs, while the number of operatic and symphonic works declined dramatically.

Holger Schmitt-Hallenberg,
MUSICOLOGIST

Strong Women among the Vikings Elfrida Andrée's *Fritiofs saga* to be staged for the very first time

Love, conflict, and magic: *Fritiofs saga* (The Fritjof Saga) has every–thing a good story needs. That is why the composer Elfrida Andrée, born in Visby, Sweden in 1841, set this Old Norse saga to music in her only opera. Andrée was no stranger in Sweden, having attracted attention not only for her work as a composer, especially of piano and organ compositions, but also for her activities that strengthened the role of women. She trained, for example, as both an organist and a telegraph operator, in the 1860s prompting two changes in the law that enabled women to work in these professions.

Given her strong feminist activism, it is not surprising that Andrée's opera composition recounts a Viking saga in which women play the leading roles. The libretto for the opera was written by the Swedish author Selma Lagerlöf, known, among other works, for her children's book *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils Holgersson with the Wild Geese.* Andrée had proposed a collaboration with Lagerlöf in 1894 on the occasion of a composition competition for the opening of the new Royal Opera House in Stockholm. Lagerlöf, who was 17 years younger than Andrée, had recently published her debut novel, *The Saga of Gösta Berling,* and her career would develop impressively in the years that followed; in 1909, she became the first woman to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature.

For Andrée, the decision to enter the competition was driven not only by the prize money but also by something more tragic. Because the entries were submitted anonymously, she finally had a chance to be judged fairly – without prejudice against her gender. "My anonymity is my only support. You may not realize that

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female composers are a despised group," Andrée remarked on another occasion.

Lagerlöf, who had grown up with the epic poem by the Swedish poet and Lutheran bishop, Esaias Tegnér (1782–1846), was very keen to use the Fritjof story as the subject for an opera. At the time the opera was written, the epic poem cycle from 1825 was more famous than almost any other literary work and had been translated into many languages. However, Lagerlöf felt that the material needed to be significantly adapted for the stage. Andrée was not immediately convinced: "How can I deal with such a passive female character as Ingeborg?" But Lagerlöf prevailed and focused on selected moments in the plot, designing the character of the Norwegian princess Ingeborg as a stronger female figure than Tegnér had intended. In Lagerlöf's and Andrée's version, Ingeborg is active, makes wise, thoughtful decisions, and comes across as almost statesmanlike. Lagerlöf also gave women more weight in the story by adding another female protagonist: the Finnish outsider Guatemi, King Helge's wife. Alongside Ingeborg, she is the leading female character in the play; her actions drive the plot forward. In contrast, the central male characters such as King Helge, King Ring, and the supposed titular hero Fritjof appear rather weak. Either they follow the will of the women, given little opportunity for character development by the librettist and composer, or they are characterised by music that is more humorous than heroic.

The women of the opera, on the other hand, are given powerful musical passages and dramatic scenes. Right from the start, it is clear who is at the centre of this saga. After Ingeborg's wistful aria, which follows the overture, a female collective – a group of women fleeing the war – continues the action in a dramatic, gripping scene. The title character, Fritjof, does not appear until the second act.

The shift in emphasis in the text and music towards female destinies reflects the latter half of the 19th century, when the social role of women became an increasingly important topic – and not only in literature. The period between 1845, when equal inheritance rights for men and women were adopted, and the introduction of women's suffrage in 1921 is considered the first era of emancipation in Sweden. Lagerlöf and Andrée also contributed to this development with their *Fritiofs saga*.

The score of the opera was ready in 1895, and was submitted for the competition. However, none of the submitted works won the prize. To date, there has been no publicly staged performance of *Fritiofs saga*. It is regrettable that the opera was not performed during Andrée's lifetime, as it would have enriched

the music world. The composition reveals the hand of an experienced musician and opera practitioner, who in the Romantic tradition makes multifaceted use of all the instruments of the orchestra. Andrée's composition shares with Wagner and Grieg the nuanced depiction of nature and human conflicts through colourful, opulent orchestral sounds. Similarly, the music contains songs and dances that, like those of Weber, Verdi, or Bizet, sensitively trace individual and collective emotions. Furthermore, Andrée's opera was intended to show that in her role as a professional composer and musician, "female ethnicity" was in no way inferior to "male ethnicity".

In 2019, the Gothenburg Opera House performed *Fritiofs saga* in Swedish for the first time in concert, in its entirety and with a large cast. At the Aalto Musiktheater Essen, the opera will have its first staged premiere in a German-language version created especially for this production by Bettina Bartz. The artistic team led by director Anika Rutkofsky, winner of the prestigious Ring Award, will intensify the unusual, feminine narrative style of an archaic Viking story that features courageous female characters and astonishingly modern perspectives. The rediscovery will be performed in Essen under the musical direction of first principal conductor Wolfram-Maria Märtig.

There are countless good reasons to perform and get to know *Fritiofs saga*, because opera needs new narratives and atypical perspectives. Or, in the words of Selma Lagerlöf: "It would be a good move not only for female composers, but for the entire female arts (...). Men have already celebrated enough triumphs".

Patricia Knebel
DRAMATURG,
AALTO MUSIKTHEATER ESSEN

Synopsis can be found on page 52

Staged World premiere
Die Fritjof Saga

Opera in three acts by Elfrida Andrée. Libretto by Selma Lagerlöf based on the epic poem by Esaias Tegnér. Under the patronage of the Swedish Ambassador to the Federal Republic of Germany, Ms. Veronika Wand-Danielsson.

From February 7th 2026, at the Aalto Musiktheater in Essen, Germany.

»What is considered the canon only represents a fraction of the opera literature.«

Women, Opera and the Public Stage in Eighteenth-Century Venice (WOVEN)

»It is both timely and essential to expand the lens through which eighteenth-century opera is understood. While the growing attention to operas written by women marks a vital shift, we believe it is equally important to challenge the long-standing composer-centric narrative. Opera of this period was a collaborative art form, shaped by a multitude of creative voices – not solely that of the composer. Through our work we seek to illuminate the influential role of female patrons, networks and performers, whose interpretive and modelling contributions positioned them as true co-creators in the operatic process. Their artistry deserves recognition not only as acts of mediation between composer and audience but as a form of authorship in its own right.«

Dr Melania Bucciarelli
PROFESSOR OF MUSICOLOGY
DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC
NORWEGIAN UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY– NTNU

About the WOVEN project
What was the place of women in eighteenth-century European operatic culture? What was their role in constructing models for women in the eighteenth century? Did opera, and its opportunities for autonomy and social mobility, advance the process of women's emancipation?

The interdisciplinary project 'Women, Opera and the Public Stage in Eighteenth-Century Venice' brings together a research team committed to answering these and related questions, rethinking the links between women and European operatic culture in the eighteenth century.

Why Venice?
The eighteenth century was a time of change for women across Europe. Women gained greater access to universities and to many different professions. Questions about their education and role in society gained a central place in public discourse. The 'women question' was discussed within academies, universities and salons, as well as in novels, magazines and on the stage. Venice, with its history of cultural discourse by and about women, was a major hub for these debates and an important international operatic centre. Through its public theatres and the medium of opera, these debates reached a wide audience. The Italian opera produced in Venice spread throughout Europe, from Madrid to St. Petersburg, from Dresden to Copenhagen, thereby contributing to the formation of cultural identities in Europe in the eighteenth century.

WOVEN research focus
The group explores four interconnected areas:
1. Women's Roles and Images of Femininity on the Venetian Stage;
2. Celebrity culture and the Performance of Celebrity
3. Audiences, Patrons and Women's Participation in the Opera Business;
4. Performing Eighteenth-Century Operatic Women: A Practice-Based Approach.

What WOVEN does
Within these related subtopics, the team's individual projects examine the role of operatic women in the construction, representation, and reception of models for women in the eighteenth century. We contextualize the activities of female performers, composers, authors, theatre managers, patrons, and audience members within wider contemporary critical discourses about women's creativity, education and place in society. Trans-disciplinary methodologies that combine historical and musical analysis with approaches from performance studies, gender studies and celebrity studies, allow

The team of WOVEN. From left: B. Sisk, M. Butler, M. Bucciarelli, B. Kägler, C. Jeanneret, E. Schreiner, T. Korneeva, D. Colonna.

us to explore key themes such as the use of voice and body to stage gender, agency and celebrity culture. We study audiences and the networks that supported women active in the opera business, and relate opera-going practices with the greater visibility acquired by women in eighteenth-century culture and society.

Sources and Resources

Newly identified musical and archival sources allow us to reconstruct in greater detail the career, and the professional and public profile of a number of prominent female singers of international standing such as Faustina Bordoni, Caterina Gabrielli, Luigia Todi, Anna Maria Strada, Vittoria Tesi and several others, and acquire a deeper understanding of the practice of cross-gender casting.

A database with information about musical, documentary and iconographic sources related to female singers in Venice is under construction.

We collaborate with colleagues at the Fondazione Ugo & Olga Levi (Venice); the Istituto Italiano Antonio Vivaldi at the Fondazione Cini (Venice); TSO Barokkensemble (Trondheim); Barokkfest (Trondheim); Centro Tedesco di Studi Veneziani (Venice); University of Venice 'Ca Foscari'; Conservatorio 'Santa Cecilia' (Rome); Conservatorio 'A. Vivaldi' (Alessandria); Den Andra Operan – DAO (Stockholm).

More information about the project:

IN ENGLISH: Women on Stage in Eighteenth-Century Venice: A New Research Collaborative (pdf) by M. Bucciarelli and M. Butler. *Society for Eighteenth-Century Music. Newsletter* vol. 38 (2021)

IN NORWEGIAN: Kvinner, opera og den offentlege scena i Venezia på 1700-talet (pdf) by M. Bucciarelli. *Musikk & Historie* (2021).

Singers Hanna Fritzson, Tessan-Maria Lehmussaari and Lovisa Huledal in *Le dernier sorcier* by Pauline Viardot (1867), performed by Den Andra Operan at The Hallwyl Museum in Stockholm 2023 and 2024.

A New Dawn for Operas by Women Composers?

In just a few decades, gender equality in the music industry has in many respects taken major strides forward. For instance, at the turn of the millennium, hardly any works by women composers appeared in the programmes and repertoires of the world's most prestigious and well-resourced concert halls and opera houses. Many institutions have since become aware of the wealth of musical works waiting to be revived. Engaging with the cultural heritage, on the one hand, while continuing to commission new works, on the other, has unlocked virtually endless possibilities.

As an increasing number of women have been able to sustain careers as composers, and as institutions have acted more decisively to advance gender equality, the supply and demand for operas by women composers have increased dramatically. Given an ongoing, industry-wide transformation, the outcomes of which remain to be fully gauged, one is tempted to think that the future looks bright. At least today, in every Nordic country, we find women composers who have devoted a significant part of their creative endeavours to opera.

A Nordic Outlook

The Icelandic composer Karólína Eiríksdóttir (b. 1951) wrote the opera *I Have Seen Someone* (libretto: Marie Louise Ramnefalk), which premiered in Vadstena, Sweden in 1988. *Maður lifandi,* based on the medieval Everyman story, was performed in Reykjavik in 1999; *Skuggaleikur* (libretto: Sjón) in the same city in 2006. On the Åland islands between Finland and Sweden, the queer opera *Magnus-Maria* premiered in 2014: each of seven female soloists took their turn at playing the lead role of the fiddler and parish clerk Maria Johansdotter (aka. Magnus Johansson). In 2021, another opera by Eiríksdóttir, *Lisbeta,* about the witch hunts of the 17th century, premiered on Åland.

The Norwegian composer Cecilie Ore (b. 1954) has written three operas, all experimental by nature, two of which can be seen as directly critical of society. In *Dead Beat Escapement* (2008), she explored the death penalty, rejecting a conventional orchestra in favour of human sounds – coughing, hawking, slurping, gulping, breathing and heartbeats – played through eight speakers. In *Adam & Eve – A Divine Comedy* (2015), Ore examined the ongoing, reiterated violence against women that has been passed down across centuries, manifested and taught in the sacred texts of patriarchal world religions.

The Swedish composer Andrea Tarrodi (b. 1981) was long known for her instrumental music, but entered the domain of opera in 2020, since then she has composed a steady stream of operatic works. *Sigrid H,* an opera lasting for 20 minutes, was created as part of the Royal Swedish Opera's short-stories initiative. Tarrodi subsequently wrote the children's opera *Vilse* and the chamber operas *Sylvia* and *The Long Century,* the latter about the obstacles on the long road to gender equality since women's suffrage was introduced in Sweden in 1921. *Homo Oeconomicus* (libretto: playwright Helena Röhr) will be premiered at Staatsoper Hannover in April 2026; another work, *Jag är Ulla Winblad* (I am Ulla Winblad – a reference to a nymph in the work of the 18th-century Swedish songwriter Carl Michael Bellman) is expected to premiere at Folkoperan in Stockholm in the 2026–2027 season.

The Danish composer Louise Alenius (b. 1978) is known above all for two operas with striking themes: *Silent Zone* (2017), about incest and sexual abuse; and *Manualen* (2021), about euthanasia and the Danish physician Svend Lings' manual for committing suicide.

The Finnish composer Outi Tarkiainen's (b. 1985) opera, based on Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own,* premiered at Theater Hagen in Germany in 2022. She is currently working on her next opera, *Day of Night,* based on the novel *Halla Helle* by the Sámi activist Niillas Holmberg. It is expected to premiere at the Aalto Musiktheater in Essen in February 2027, and at the Finnish National Opera in Helsinki in October of the same year.

An Upward Spiral

The list could be much longer, and several more works deserve mention. At the time of writing, for instance, Britta Byström's family opera *Eatnama váibmu* (The Heart of the Earth), crafted in close collaboration with the Norwegian-Sámi author Rawdna Carita Eira, is expected to premiere at the Royal Swedish Opera in Stockholm in mid-November. Nevertheless, the examples above serve to illustrate how changes in the cultural-political climate have paved the way for the emergence of

From upper left: Andrea Tarrodi, Cecilie Ore, Kaija Saariaho, Louise Alenius, Karólína Eiríksdóttir and Outi Tarkiainen.

new artistic expressions. Moreover, the process has a few recurring features: an initiative is taken, a work is commissioned, funding is sought and granted, tickets are sold, performances are reviewed, someone hears about the work through word of mouth (or social media) and sees it, a new initiative is taken and a new cycle begins.

The availability of high-quality research and new editions of musical scores, the work of devoted activists and enthusiasts, and the flourishing interest in historical repertoire have further kindled interest in music by women composers in general. At the time of writing, we await new productions of operas by two 19th-Century composers: Elfrida Andrée's *Fritiofs saga* at the Aalto Musiktheater in Essen in February 2026; and Ida Moberg's *Asiens ljus* (Light of Asia), produced by Opera Box in Helsinki in January 2027.

The Importance of Role Models

Ultimately, while changes in structures, moods and mentalities can be seen as explanatory factors for the upswing we are seeing, much depends on the choices, ambitions, efforts and even chance of the individual artists. Without the success following the premiere of *L'amour de loin* in Salzburg in 2000, Kaija Saariaho would hardly have begun writing operas for the remainder of her life. What is more, the mere existence of a role model such as Saariaho was of great importance for Outi Tarkiainen's development as a composer. It was only when she showed her scores to Saariaho that she realised it was the first time she had witnessed a distinguished woman leaf through them; until that moment all the professors had been men. Similar experiences can be both formative and transformative.

Sometimes the path to becoming an opera composer is neither straightforward nor simple. Louise Alenius's career as a composer for classical ensembles began in 2008, when she wrote a second act for August Bournonville's ballet *Napoli* (1842). She made her first attempt at writing an opera with *Elephant Man* in 2013, but encountered severe difficulties in terms of allowing the characters to express themselves through singing. As the characters remained in physical form, she turned the work into a ballet. She was only able to realise her opera ambitions when she found a compelling subject – and a solution. In *Silent Zone* (2017), a traumatised protagonist expresses her pain through the percussion section. Initially, Outi Tarkiainen's work on *A Room of One's Own* (2022) was likewise beset by minor setbacks. Struck by the idea of writing an opera based on Woolf's book as soon as she had finished reading it in Berlin in 2015, she encountered troubles writing the libretto on

her own. She turned to a respected author in search of a libretto, but ultimately rejected the text as the tone did not feel right. The decisive moment was the contact with Theater Hagen's intendant Francis Hüsers, who had seen the premiere of Tarkiainen's *Midnight Variations* at the BBC Proms in 2019: he offered to write the libretto.

The Debate on Gender Equality

Kaija Saariaho died in 2023. In her final years, the debate on gender equality, which had varied in intensity throughout her life, only intensified. Although she was portrayed in the press, especially early in her career, as an anomaly – for simply being a woman – she long expressed the view that her gender had not negatively affected her career. Towards the end, however, she stated that she had come to realise that just because her gender had not been a disadvantage for her, it did not mean that other women had not experienced things differently. Several other women composers have since expressed similar views.

The continued debate on gender equality, including the ambiguity that surrounds that very term, has been of great importance in broadening our understanding of how gender equality work should proceed. In addition, actors in the industry testify to a change in the cultural climate. Reportedly, the urgency to debate gender equality has had a positive effect on working in the industry, and the development of recent decades has shown the industry itself that attitudes can actually change. Moreover, the works that have emerged seem to have moved the art form in a more compassionate direction: many of them seem rooted in empathy and solidarity with the weak and vulnerable, rather than in traditional scenic portrayals of "great men". At least, through new collaborative initiatives with people of the Sámi indigenous population, an attempt at reconciliation and bridge-building has been instigated.

At the same time, it is worth noting how issues today are in many respects more complex than before: more attention should still be paid to gender and sexual minorities; there is still a lack of understanding for what it means to live with disabilities; immigrant artists struggle to gain foothold in the industry; and social class continues to hamper access to education. Eurocentrism, which seems to be an almost inseparable part of the Western art music tradition, continues to have a mark on an unresolved conflict. The process of democratising the arts and abolishing old privileges is moving very slowly.

While I wish to believe that the world of art and music is prepared to meet these challenges and at least debate the issues, one may ask what this challenge is worth at a time when clouds of worry are accumulating on the horizon. In a very short time, the tide has shifted dramatically. Major achievements in advancing human rights including gender equality are constantly being questioned even by democratically elected leaders. Likewise, we are seeing how the rules-based world order is repeatedly questioned; how strength is worshipped; how democratic institutions are dismantled; how funding for culture and research is being cut; and how new 'kings' wish to expand their palaces and place themselves at the head of art institutions, while the rest of the world remains silent because other interests seem more pressing. Setting cynicism aside, though, it seems perhaps more important than ever to defend gender equality. Just because the world of art is being reshaped, it is not time to abandon the work that has been done so far to improve equal opportunities and promote fundamental human rights within the arts.

Wilhelm Kvist

MUSIC JOURNALIST

Based in Helsinki, the author is a staff music journalist working for the Swedish-language newspaper *Hufvudstadsbladet*. He is also a doctoral researcher at the University of Helsinki, preparing a thesis on gender equality in orchestral concert programming.

THURSDAY 27 NOVEMBER

Opera's Unheard Stories – New Narratives & Perspectives

Den Andra Operan (DAO) presents the theme of the seminar: New Narratives, Perspectives & Unheard Stories. For 10 years DAO has been delving into the forgotten operas composed by women. In this talk they share the patterns, common denominators and fascinating stories they have unearthed.

With: Bente Rolandsdotter and Hanna Fritzson (Artistic and Musical Directors, DAO).

How to Revolutionise an Opera Repertoire – as a Commissioner/Opera House

Dr Merle Fahrholz shares her experiences of staging operas composed by women – both historical and contemporary – at the opera house of Essen and previously at the opera house of Dortmund. A talk about challenges, successes, the future, and practical aspects such as funding and collaborations.

With: Dr. Merle Fahrholz (Artistic Director, Aalto Musiktheater and Essener Philharmoniker), Patricia Knebel (Dramaturg, Aalto Musiktheater, Essener Philharmoniker & Aalto Ballett) and Elisabeth Linton (Artistic Director, Royal Danish Opera).

From Archive to Stage

Mazeppa by Marie Clémence de Grandval (1892)

In August 2025 Den Andra Operan revived Grandval's opera *Mazeppa* in a semi-staged performance in Stockholm. This talk looks at the process of staging excerpts from *Mazeppa*. What was interesting about the piece? What new perspectives on an existing myth did they find? And what do you do when, due to present events, a historical opera suddenly turns out to be highly topical and potentially controversial?

With: Mårten Forslund (Stage director), Sophie Helsing (Dramaturg), Bente Rolandsdotter (Artistic director, DAO).
Moderator: Jørgen Hansen (Dramaturg, Royal Danish Opera).

From Archive to Stage

Making Forgotten Operas Available

Examples of operas rediscovered and awakened by Palazetto Bru Zane, such as: *Fausto* by Louise Bertin, *Mazeppa* by Clémence de Grandval.
With: Alexandre Dratwicki (Artistic Leader, Palazetto Bru Zane) and Patricia Knebel (Dramaturg, Aalto Musiktheater, Essener Philharmoniker & Aalto Ballett).

A New Dawn? The Next Generation of Female Composers

The music journalist Wilhelm Kvist explores the current landscape of opera on Nordic stages, focusing on works composed by women. Are female composers represented? If so, do their operas offer new or different perspectives and stories from those written by their male counterparts? Following the presentation, the composer Louise Alenius, in conversation with Wilhelm Kvist, discusses her approach to choosing subjects and themes. Louise Alenius has written the operas *Silent Zone* (Copenhagen Opera Festival and Malmö Opera) and *Manualen* (The Royal Danish Opera).

With: Wilhelm Kvist (Music Journalist, *Hufvudstadsbladet*) and Louise Alenius (Composer).

Denmark in focus

Danish Operas Composed by Women

An overview of Danish operas composed by women, with a special focus on Hilda Sehested's *Agnete og Havmanden* (Agnete and the Merman) (1914).

With: Lisbeth Ahlgren Jensen (Musicologist).

Keynote: New Perspectives and Unheard Stories in Danish Opera

The musicologist Thomas Husted Kirkegaard is well known in Denmark for his research on and expertise in the works of Tekla Griebel Wandall, especially *Kong Hroars Skjalde* (The Bards of King Hroar) – an opera that was stowed away in the archives of the Royal Danish Theatre for 100 years, but had never been staged. Kirkegaard also reveals a recent and sensational discovery: an opera by Nicoline Leth (c. 1897).

With: Thomas Husted Kirkegaard (Musicologist).

Each morning on Thursday and Friday, before the official programme starts:

300 Years in 30 minutes
Den Andra Operan offers a crash course in operatic works composed by women throughout history. The company's artistic and musical directors, Bente Rolandsdotter and Hanna Fritzson provide a quick overview of and a glimpse into the rich treasure trove of operas composed by women. According to current research, there are more than 500 of them, the earliest known dating back to 1607.

FRIDAY 28 NOVEMBER

From Archive to Stage

Fritiofs saga

In February 2026 Aalto Musiktheater Essen presents the staged world premiere of the opera *Fritiofs saga* (The Fritjof Saga) (1898) by Elfrida Andrée, with libretto by Selma Lagerlöf. This talk presents insights into the process of staging an opera from its discovery to its world premiere.

With: Patricia Knebel (Dramaturg, Aalto Musiktheater, Essener Philharmoniker & Aalto Ballett) and Henrik Schaefer (Conductor & Music Director, Folkoperan).

Panel discussion

What are the Specific Challenges when Staging (Unknown) Operas by Women Composers?

Are operas by women about something different? Is the perspective different than that of male composers? If that is the case, when staging them in modern times, is it especially important to stay true to the original piece and not change them or add layers of interpretation? A panel will discuss the degree of artistic freedom one can take when reviving operas that have been unheard in modern times. The discussion stems from criticism Den Andra Operan have experienced throughout their years of staging historical operas by women.

With: Wilhelm Kvist (Music journalist), Mårten Forslund (Stage director), Deda Cristina Colonna, (Stage director and Choreographer), Elisabeth Linton (Artistic Director, Royal Danish Opera).

Moderator: Sophie Helsing (Dramaturg)

Relationship between the Audience & the Operas

What strategies can we use to restore the forgotten operas by women their proper place and nimbus? A PechaKucha from the perspective of sales, communication and marketing.

With: Annica Sand (Operational Manager, DAO).

Disguised Opera – Composed by Nuns

Hanna Fritzson and Holger Schmitt-Hallenberg introduce 'Disguised Opera Composed by Nuns', an in-depth study of two oratorios and a cantata by the 18th-century composer Camilla de Rossi. The project investigates whether the composer's oratorios and her cantata were in fact 'operas in disguise'. The project is part of the Bernadotte Scholarship Programme at the Royal Swedish Academy of Music.

With: Hanna Fritzson (Musical Director DAO, soprano) and Holger Schmitt-Hallenberg (Musicologist).

International Outlook

The WOVEN project

The centrality of women in 18th-century opera. Melania Bucciarelli, Professor of Musicology and initiator of the five-year research project WOVEN (Women, Opera and the Public Stage in Eighteenth-Century Venice) at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) in Trondheim, shares insights gained from the project.

With: Melania Bucciarelli (Professor of Musicology at NTNU), Deda Cristina Colonna (Stage director and Choreographer); Stefano Aresi, (Musicologist and Director of 'Stile Galante'); Silvano Arnoldo (Costume, Fashion and Accessories designer) and Brad Carlton Sisk (Musicologist, Theatre Director and PhD Fellow at NTNU). All members of the WOVEN Research Team.

Summary & Future

Conclusion including an interactive programme item, in which we aim at a solution-oriented future vision. Formalisation of a network for operas composed by women.

With: Annica Sand (Operational Manager, DAO) and guests.

CONCERT PROGRAMME

Excerpts from Elfrida Andrée's *Fritiofs saga* (1898)
with libretto by Selma Lagerlöf, Tekla Griebel Wandall's
Kong Hroars Skjalde (1925) with libretto by the composer
and Louise Bertin's *Fausto* (1831) with
libretto by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.
Synopsis on pages 48–53.

Louise Bertin (1805-1877)
Fausto
Terzetto No. 2. Vezzosa giovinetta
– Gisela Stille, Elisabeth Jansson, Simon Duus
Cavatina No. 7. Chi sarà mai quel vago – Elisabeth Jansson

Elfrida Andrée (1841-1929)
Fritiofs saga
ACT 1, SCENE 4.
Gick jag ej som barn i hemmet – Gisela Stille, Johanne Bock
ACT 1, SCENE 5.
Du vredgas, Solgud – Johanne Bock, Simon Duus

Tekla Griebel Wandall (1866-1940)
Kong Hroars Skjalde
Hrane's drapa – Niels Jørgen Riis
Ragnvald's drapa – Simon Duus
Svafa's song – Johanne Bock
Duetto. Yrsa and Hrane – Gisela Stille, Niels Jørgen Riis

WITH PERFORMERS FROM THE ROYAL DANISH OPERA:
Gisela Stille, SOPRANO, Elisabeth Jansson, MEZZO-SOPRANO
Johanne Bock, MEZZO-SOPRANO, Niels Jørgen Riis, TENOR
Simon Duus, BASS-BARITONE, Louise Schrøder, PIANO

DURATION APPROXIMATELY 45 MINUTES

INTERVAL

GUEST PERFORMANCE

MAZEPA REVISITED
Guest Performance by Den Andra Operan

EXCERPTS FROM
Mazeppa (1892)
Opera by Marie Clémence de Grandval.
Libretto by Charles Grandmougin and Georges Hartmann.

Mazepa (1927)
Drama by Ljudmyla Starytska-Tjernjachivska

WITH
Emilia Utter, SOPRANO, as *Matréna*
David Risberg, BARITONE, as *Mazepa*

CONDUCTOR AND MUSICAL ARRANGEMENT Henrik Schaefer
ENSEMBLE: Axel Drougge, VIOLIN, Lisa Herlitz, OBOE,
Gloria Floresti, VIOLA, Blanca Eliasson, FRENCH HORN
Eric Drougge, CELLO, Margreet Houtman, CLARINET
RECORDED VOICES: *Matréna* – Olena Jansson
Mazepa – Zakhar Pryshlivskyy

STAGE DIRECTOR Mårten Forslund
SET AND COSTUME DESIGN Bente Rolandsdotter
LIGHT DESIGN Susanna Hedin
DRAMATURG Sophie Helsing
COSTUME ASSISTANT Molly Skorpen Andersson
LIGHT TECHNICAN Julia Pettersson
PROJECT MANAGER Agnes Rosenberg
MUSICAL RESEARCH Hanna Fritzson,
David Björkman and Henrik Schaefer

FILM ON STAGE FROM *Mazeppa, der Volksheld der Ukraine* (1918)
(Eye Filmmuseum collection), directed by Martin Berger and Lupu Pick.

DURATION APPROXIMATELY 55 MINUTES

Mazepa Revisited is an encounter with the hero, legend, icon and man Ivan Mazepa, the mythical 18th-century Cossack leader. The production consists of selected scenes from Marie Clémence de Grandval's opera *Mazeppa* (1892), arranged for a small ensemble. Focusing on the relationship between the characters Mazeppa and Matréna, the selected scenes are framed by a narrative structure that allows for reflection on the many versions of Ivan Mazepa – as a historical figure, a myth, a political pawn and an exotic fantastical figure in art. The performance also includes dialogue from *Ivan Mazepa*, a play by Liudmyla Starytska-Cherniakhivska (1927).

Mazepa Revisited is a music-dramatic performance born out of DAO's mission to revive forgotten and overlooked operatic works by women to music history and to the current operatic repertoire. It premiered in Stockholm on 14 August 2025 and was a great success with both audiences and critics. *Mazepa Revisited* is produced with support from Swedish Art Council, Signatur Foundation, Swedish Arts Grants Committee, the Nils-Göran Olve's Foundation, the Region Stockholm and the City of Stockholm.

David Risberg as Mazepa and Emilia Utter as Matréna in *Mazepa Revisited*, Den Andra Operan at Ö2, Stockholm, August 2025.

Emilia Utter as Matréna in *Mazepa Revisited*, Den Andra Operan at Ö2, Stockholm August 2025.

Synopsis

Kong Hroars Skjalde

(The Bards of King Hroar) (1925)
Tekla Griebel Wandall, libretto based on Adam Oehlenschläger's novel *Hroars Saga*.

King Hroar offers a gold ring to the bard who can sing the best memorial poem for the late King Helge. The bard Ragnvald performs a bombastic heroic song, praising Helge for his masculine virtues. Afterwards, the bard Hrane – the opera's main character – sings a tender song about grief and memories of the deceased. The audience thinks it sounds like a woman's song. King Hroar is deeply moved, but he gives the gold ring to Ragnvald so as not to lose face. In secret, King Hroar later gives another gold ring to Hrane.

Hrane has feelings for Yrsa, the widow of King Helge. But in a painful aria, Yrsa reveals that Helge was in fact also her father. She is interrupted by a mysterious woman, Skulde, who is said to be the result of an affair between Helge and a mermaid – making her Yrsa's half-sister. Skulde tries to seduce Hrane and in doing so tricks him into admitting that he is in love with the recently widowed Yrsa. Yrsa explains to Hrane that they can only be friends: it would look improper if they were to come together so soon after Helge's death.

Rumours about Hrane and Yrsa's relationship spread – most probably started by Skulde – and King Hroar asks Hrane to go into exile to protect him. Hrane cannot bear the thought of never seeing Yrsa again, so he sneaks into a prison tower and swaps clothes with the Swedish King Skalk, who is to be sacrificed to the gods the following day.

At the sacrificial festival, great turmoil arises when it is suddenly apparent that it is Hrane, not Skalk, who is being led to the scaffold. King Hroar is relieved, as he now has an excuse to cancel the bloody pagan ritual, and to everyone's displeasure he celebrates Hrane's self-sacrificing act by appointing him chieftain. Skulde thinks that Hroar and Hrane embody a soft-hearted foolishness that is spreading through the land. She therefore convinces Ragnvald that Hrane has been boasting about the gold ring he secretly received from King Hroar.

Ragnvald confronts Hrane in his parents' hut, and a heated argument breaks out between them. Ragnvald calls Hrane effeminate; but Hrane shrugs: can women not also show heroism? That is too much for Ragnvald, who kills Hrane. In the final scene, Yrsa and Hrane's parents gather around the dying man, and realise that his gentle, feminine form of heroism also has a rightful place in the world.

Synopsis

Mazeppa

Mazeppa (1892)
Marie Clémence de Grandval, libretto Charles Grandmougin and Georges Hartmann.

Mazeppa wakes up naked beside his dead horse on the vast Ukrainian steppe. Matréna, daughter of a Ukrainian Cossack leader, finds him and saves his life. Mazeppa tells her that he was bound to his horse and driven into the wilderness from the Polish court as punishment for a love affair.

For the Ukrainian Cossacks, Poland is an enemy, and they interpret Mazeppa's sudden appearance as an omen. Matréna's father appoints him as his successor, and the Ukrainian people celebrate their new leader. Meanwhile, a love begins to grow between Mazeppa and Matréna.

But not everyone is convinced of the newcomer's greatness. Iskra, who is unhappily in love with Matréna, suspects Mazeppa of being a traitor. In the battles that follow, Mazeppa allies himself with the King of Sweden against the Russian Tsar, Peter the Great. Matréna's father then sends Iskra to the Tsar to expose the betrayal and ask for help. Matréna and Mazeppa overhear the conversation and decide to flee together, even though it means Matréna must abandon her family.

Time passes. Mazeppa and Matréna are living in luxury in the city. During a feast, funeral music is suddenly heard: Mazeppa has sentenced Matréna's father to death for treason. Matréna pleads for his pardon, but her father refuses and instead curses his daughter. Iskra appears and manages to stop the execution. The people are swayed by Iskra and turn against Mazeppa, who is driven away.

In the final act, Mazeppa once again finds himself alone on the steppe. Matréna arrives, but at first does not recognise him. When she realises who he is, she curses him, and then dies. Mazeppa remains alone.

Synopsis

Fausto

Fausto (1831)
Louise Bertin, libretto Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

ACT ONE: TEMPTATION

The old doctor Fausto, tormented by dissatisfaction with his life, wishes to put an end to his misfortunes. As he raises a poisoned cup to his lips, a chorus singing sacred music seems to address him and prompts him to abandon his intention. Margarita asks him to heal Catarina, who is in danger of dying. Fausto falls in love with the young girl and, in order to regain his youthful charms, calls on the Devil to come to his aid. Mefistofele agrees to help him on condition that Fausto gives him his soul in return. The scene changes, revealing the lair of a witch, whom the demon introduces to his protégé. Thanks to an evil potion, the old doctor is granted his wish.

ACT TWO: HAPPINESS

Margarita spins at her wheel while singing with her companions. Fausto arrives, followed by Mefistofele, and declares his love for her. To ensure she will yield completely, Mefistofele asks Catarina for permission to introduce Margarita to the dashing doctor officially. Following a stroll in the garden by all four protagonists, the two women are finally conquered, one of them falling irrevocably in love with the rejuvenated Fausto, the other infatuated with the fawning demon.

ACT THREE: CRIME

Overcome with remorse, Margarita goes to church to pray, but is mocked by ill-intentioned neighbours who condemn her affair. Valentino, her brother, returns from the army. Mefistofele tells him that Catarina is dead and that his sister has entered into a shameful union with Fausto. No sooner has Valentino entered Margarita's house than the infernal counsellor invites the doctor to sing a romance under his mistress's window. The soldier runs out of the house in a rage; Mefistofele deceives Fausto, telling him Valentino is a rival suitor. Fausto seizes a sword and attacks the young man; the demon deflects Valentino's sword and he falls mortally wounded. Before breathing his last, he names his sister, and Fausto realises the full horror of his crime.

ACT FOUR: PUNISHMENT

Fausto has returned to his laboratory. Mefistofele informs him of the danger that threatens Margarita: the young girl, having lost her wits, went down to the river to drown herself and her child. The people saved her at the last moment, but the baby did not survive. Accused of infanticide, Margarita is dying in prison. Fausto curses the fatal aid he received from the demon, and, after some hesitation, decides to tear up the abominable pact they have signed. But, just then, the town crier proclaims that Margarita has been sentenced to death. She must be freed, and Mefistofele is the only one capable of snatching her from the hands of the executioner. They rush to the prison. Half-crazed, and soon close to death, Margarita refuses the doctor's proposal to help her escape. Fausto is condemned to the torments of Hell, while a chorus of angels announces that Margarita has been granted divine pardon.

Fausto synopsis text by Palazetto Bru Zane. CD-Book *Fausto* (Louise Bertin). Italian libretto translated in French by Laurent Cantagrel; and in English by Charles Johnston.

Fausto **at Aalto Musiktheater, 2024: Fausto (Mirko Roschkowski), Mefistofele (Almas Svilpa), Margarita (Jessica Muirhead).**

Synopsis

Fritiofs saga

(The Fritjof Saga) (1898)
Elfrida Andrée, libretto Selma Lagerlöf.

The childhood sweethearts Ingeborg and Fritiof have met in secret, and Ingeborg has received a bracelet from Fritiof as a symbol of their eternal love.

When Ingeborg's brother, King Helge learns of Ingeborg and Fritiof's secret meetings, he sends Fritiof on a mission to bring back treasures to make him worthy of winning Ingeborg. King Helge himself marries a daughter from Finnmarken: Gautemi.

ACT ONE

War is raging. Women escape into a temple dedicated to the god Balder. They drag Gautemi with them: they accuse her of causing Balder's wrath. Ingeborg saves her sister-in-law. The hostile King Ring defeats King Helge in the battle, and agrees to peace; but on the condition that Ingeborg will be his wife. In an attempt to save her, Gautemi reveals Ingeborg's love for Fritiof. King Ring marries her anyway. King Helge takes the bracelet that Ingeborg earlier received from Fritiof.

ACT TWO

Gautemi's isolation gets worse. She persuades Helge to worship Jumala, the god of Finnmark. Together they disguise a wooden idol of Jumala as Balder and place Ingeborg's bracelet on it.

Fritiof returns and realises that Ingeborg has been married off. He challenges Helge to a duel, but upon seeing Ingeborg's bracelet on the wooden idol, he tries to reclaim it. The idol topples, the temple catches fire, and Fritiof, believing he has destroyed the temple and the idol of Balder, flees.

When Ingeborg, now the queen of King Ring, returns, everything is lying in ashes. Fritiof tries to persuade her to flee with him. He promises eternal voyages and adventures, but Ingeborg refuses to be abducted. She wants them to atone for their sins; not run away. She withdraws, fearful of Fritiof's thirst for revenge. Fritiof, in despair and still vengeful, takes to the sea. Using witchcraft, Gautemi conjures up a storm to destroy Fritiof and his ship. Ingeborg prays for Fritiof's safe passage, and at last the sea calms.

ACT THREE – MISSING

This act was removed when Elfrida Andrée shortened the opera to make it more marketable, though a synopsis still exists. It follows Fritiof's destructive wanderings abroad, and his realisation that he is not meant for such a life.

Fritiofs saga **was performed in a concert version by the Gothenburg Opera Orchestra and Choir in Jönköping in March 2019.**

ACT FOUR

Years later, at the home of Ingeborg and King Ring. King Ring sings his 'death song'. Gautemi arrives and soon after, Fritiof appears in disguise. Ingeborg suspects his true identity.

That night, Gautemi urges Fritiof to take revenge, revealing that his exile was based on a misunderstanding: the idol of Balder never burned; it was Jumala. Despite this, Fritiof refuses vengeance. Overhearing their talk, Ingeborg realises he has changed and rediscovers her love for him. When Gautemi incites Fritiof's friend Björn to attack, Fritiof prevents it by rousing the household. Björn and Gautemi flee.

King Ring, dying, entrusts Ingeborg to Fritiof. At last, Fritiof and Ingeborg are reunited.

Fritiof finally realises that his suffering was not caused by his deeds, but by his vengeful heart. He chooses forgiveness and vows to rebuild the temple.

Her Perspective Partners

THE ROYAL DANISH OPERA

Artistic Director Elisabeth Linton

The Opera is home to the unique live experience of opera and symphonic music. We invite artists and ideas from all over the world while also exporting art created in Denmark to the rest of the world.

Elisabeth Linton is the Artistic Director at the Royal Danish Opera. She previously held the position of Head Dramaturg at Malmö Opera. She trained as a stage director at the Danish National School of Performing Arts and has worked as a director and dramaturg for the past 25 years across the Nordic countries and Europe, in opera, musical theatre, and drama.

For the Royal Danish Opera, Elisabeth has directed the play *The Three Musketeers* at Ulvedalene, and the operas *Under the Sky, Nabucco, Momo and the Time Thieves, La Bohème*, and *Matilda the Musical*.

Among her other productions are *Eugen Onegin* and *The Confessional* at the Danish National Opera, the latter received the Reumert Award for Best Opera in 2007; *Tristan and Isolde* at the Finnish National Opera; *Don Juan* at Stadttheater Bern; *Xerxes* at Den Ny Opera; *The Makropulos Affair* and *Orpheus in the Underworld* at Malmö Opera; *The Snow Queen* at Malmö and Stockholm Opera, *Evita* at Aalborg Theatre; and *Jesus Christ Superstar* at Aarhus Theatre.

www.kglteater.dk

AALTO MUSIKTHEATER ESSEN

Dr Merle Fahrholz

Since the beginning of the 2022/2023 season, Dr Merle Fahrholz has been Artistic Director of the Aalto Musiktheater Essen and the Essen Philharmonic, after working for three and a half years as chief dramaturge and Deputy Artistic Director at the Dortmund Opera until the end of 2021.

Previously she worked as a dramaturge for music theatre at Nationaltheater Mannheim, Theater und Orchester Heidelberg and Theater Biel Solothurn (Switzerland). She also gained experience with the Berlin Philharmonic, Semperoper Dresden and the Metropolitan Opera, New York. As a production dramaturge, she has overseen both repertoire works and rarely performed operas, premieres and development projects. These include: the world premieres of Bernhard Lang's operas *Der Golem* (2016) and *Der Hetzer* (2021); the music-theatre performance *Flowers of Carnage* (2015) by Annesley Black; and *Persona* by Thierry Tidrow (2021). She has worked with directors such as Peter Konwitschny, Lorenzo Fioroni, Tatjana Gürbaca, Roland Schwab, Dietrich Hilsdorf and Wolfram Mehring.

She is the founder of *her:voice*, a festival held for the first time in 2023. The festival focuses on operas composed by women and includes performances, discussions and lectures. She is regularly involved in programming women's works, both historical and newly composed.

www.theater-essen.de

DEN ANDRA OPERAN

Annica Sand, Operational Manager, Hanna Fritzson, Co-founder and Musical Director, Bente Rolandsdotter, Co-founder and Artistic Director.

Since 2016, Den Andra Operan (AnOther Opera) has challenged the norm by presenting works exclusively by female composers. Our research has uncovered a wealth of operas hidden away in archives – music of great intensity, librettos full of originality, and narratives that still feel fresh and urgent. While gender probably makes no difference when it comes to sound, the themes and perspectives in these works pave the way for new audience experiences. DAO is a non-profit association that collaborates with other opera houses and venues. DAO's opera productions include: *Les Surprises de l'enfer* by Isabelle Aboulker; *Talestri, regina delle Amazzoni* by Maria Antonia Walpurgis; *Argenore* by Wilhelmine of Bayreuth; Pauline Viardot's *Le dernier sorcier*. In 2026 DAO will stage Francesca Caccini's *La liberazione di Ruggiero dall'isola d'Alcina* in collaboration with Confidencen. In 2021, DAO, Vadstena-Akademien, Confidencen, Damkapellet and Åbo Akademi presented *The Whole Story*: a concert, a seminar, and a book and in 2024, the festival *Another Opera History, Another Opera Future*, featuring discussions, a concert, and a performance at the Hallwyl Museum in Stockholm. DAO also serves as repertoire consultants and regularly presents rediscovered works in their custom-made formats *Unboxing* and *Revisited*, and via lectures and workshops.

www.denandraoperan.se
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HER PERSPECTIVE

The Forgotten History of Opera, Copenhagen, November 27th-28th, 2025.

TEAM

Bente Rolandsdotter, Artistic Director, DAO
Hanna Fritzson, Musical Director, DAO
Annica Sand, Operational Manager, DAO
Lisa Nilsson, Project Manager
Elisabeth Linton, Artistic Director, The Royal Danish Opera
Jørgen Hansen, Dramaturg, The Royal Danish Opera
Carina Johansson, Administrative Director, The Royal Danish Opera
Liv Nørding Pedersen, Project coordinator, The Royal Danish Opera
Louise Pedersen, PR and Press Manager, The Royal Danish Opera
Dr. Merle Fahrholz, Artistic Director, Aalto Musiktheater
Patricia Knebel, Dramaturg, Aalto Musiktheater

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HER PERSPECTIVE HAS RECEIVED FUNDING FROM THE NORDIC COUNCIL OF MINISTERS' CULTURE AND ART PROGRAMME, THE NORDIC CULTURE FUND, THE SIGNATUR FOUNDATION, THE SWEDISH ARTS COUNCIL AND THE BARBRO OSHER PRO SUECIA FOUNDATION.

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The Story Behind the Painting

Timoclea Kills the Captain of Alexander the Great. Oil painting by Elisabetta Sirani,1659. The painting tells the dramatic story of Timoclea, a Theban noblewoman, taking vengeance after being violated by one of Alexander the Great's captains. After leading him to a well, she pushed him in and stoned him to death. Sirani's 1659 work highlights Timoclea's fierce determination and bravery, reflecting the Baroque era's fascination with intense emotional drama and moral courage.

Hidden Details: Sirani, known for her powerful female subjects, uses stark contrast in lighting and composition to enhance the drama. The moment of the captain's downfall is captured with dynamic energy. Timoclea's composed, yet resolute expression contrasts the captain's helplessness, symbolising female empowerment in an era when women were rarely depicted in such roles.

Why It Matters: This painting isn't just a depiction of a revenge tale; it reflects Sirani's feminist stance, showing women as strong, morally driven individuals. Sirani uses Timoclea to challenge traditional gender roles, making this artwork not only a gripping historical retelling, but also a statement on the role of women in art and society.

Where to See It: This powerful painting is currently housed at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. Text from *Stories Behind Art*.

HER PERSPECTIVE

Den Andra Operan, The Royal Danish Opera, and Aalto Musiktheater Essen have joined forces to present *Her Perspective – The Forgotten History of Opera*. The symposium shines a light on the overlooked part of opera's past – works composed by women. These operas, once celebrated but later forgotten, reveal stories, voices, and perspectives that have long been missing from our stages. By reviving them, we restore a more complete view of the operatic tradition, spanning from 1625 to today. Here professionals from the opera industry, researchers, students, and opera audiences are coming together for lectures, discussions, musical excerpts, networking opportunities and a concert featuring unique operatic excerpts from works by female composers. *Her Perspective* also include a guest performance of Den Andra Operan's *Mazepa Revisited*, featuring excerpts from *Mazeppa*, a 19th-century opera by Marie Clémence de Grandval. In this book you will find articles, information and knowledge shared by musicologists, dramaturgs, journalists and artistic directors. Enjoy!

*"*Her Perspective *is both a celebration and a call to action: to expand the canon, to reimagine what opera can be, and to embrace the full range of its history."*