Traction
Opera co-creation
for a social
transformation

TRACTION

Abstract: Opera uses all the visual and performing arts to create extraordinary worlds of passion and sensibility. It is rightly recognised as a great achievement of European culture. And yet a form that once inspired social and artistic revolutions is often seen as the staid preserve of the elite. With rising inequality and social exclusion, many see opera—if they think of it at all—as symbolic of what is wrong in Europe today. TRACTION aims to change that using opera as a path for social and cultural inclusion, making it once again a force for radical transformation.

We do not want to make opera palatable to those who don't attend. We want to define new forms of artistic creation through which the most marginalised groups (migrants, the rural poor, young offenders and others) can work with artists to tell the stories that matter now. By combining best practice in participatory art with digital technology's innovations of language, form and process, we will define new approaches to co-creation and innovate in three fields: a) Opera creation and production; b) Immersive and interactive digital media; and c) Social integration and community development.

Experimental projects in inner-city Barcelona (ES), a youth prison in Leiria (PT) and rural communities in Ireland will test and share new ideas. Bridging the social and cultural divides involved will challenge many existing beliefs, structures and habits. The exceptional resources of the TRACTION partnership will help us meet that challenge through mutual support. The immediate outcomes will be new routes for social and economic integration for the people involved, better relationships between opera producers and society, and cutting-edge technological development. But the long-term prize is the definition of new processes that renew the art's potential to build cohesive societies and imagine a revitalised, common culture in which everyone can feel that they belong.

1   Motivation

Inequality is the defining issue of our time, as politicians from Barack Obama[1] to Jean-Claude Juncker[2] have recognised. It constrains the lives and chances of millions of European citizens, and makes it harder to address existential threats like global warming. Because inequality is visible and experienced in daily life, it also makes the easy promises of populists seem attractive. The distance that most people feel from elite culture might not seem the most urgent of social inequalities, but its symbolism is powerful. Europe is a cultural space or it is nothing. Unless its citizens share, and feel common ownership of, the culture that expresses what are lightly called '**European values**', there is a real threat to the most successful peace-building project we have known.

Opera is the unavoidable heart of this challenge. A cornerstone of European cultural heritage, opera has always spoken to both elites and people, expressed both authority and revolution. Its colour, passion, beauty and drama have inspired generations. But in recent decades, this art has too often lost sight of its popular roots and radical edge. European Opera may be economically and artistically valuable, with a **turnover of €5 billion**, a permanent workforce of 50,000 and over 15,000 performances each year[3]. It may be the total art that includes every aspect of practice, the theatre of emotion that aspires to transcendent and universal artistic experience. It is certainly the form that gets most public subsidy for music, and the one that reaches least beyond the wealthy sections of society. Research shows that today's typical spectator is a 54-year-old woman with higher education, who travels by car and spends an average of €159 on her evening of culture[4].

Opera is in danger of becoming a symbol of European inequality but – crucially – it also has the capacity to rewrite that story, to include those left behind in wider prosperity, to **renew itself** and so find the energy, the resonance and the heart to be once again **the root of living culture**. Achieving that means working on three things at once.

First, it means using new ideas of **co-creation and participatory art** to involve citizens in the creative process – and to prioritise those who are currently marginalised or ignored by opera: the poor, migrants, people living outside dominant cities or in institutions, disabled people, those of non-white heritage, in short, the majority of our fellow citizens. This means going much further than making opera accessible, though that is always important. It means **empowering people and communities** to become creators in their own right, to tell the stories that reflect their lives and resonate with their neighbours, to express their version of European values, to become active citizens, with agency and a meaningful right to be heard in the national cultural conversation.

Secondly, it means releasing the form, language and aesthetics of opera from the stuffy museum in which it has too often become trapped, not through glossy and surface changes (which are common enough as it struggles to be 'contemporary') but through **brave experiments with music**, performance and art. Unless opera learns to speak a language

---

[1] The Guardian (2013): https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/04/obama-income-inequality-minimum-wage-live

[2] State of the Union Address 2016: Towards a better Europe (2016): http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-16-3043_en.htm

[3] Opera Europe (Antony Feeny, economist) http://www.opera-europa.org/en/benchmarking-exercise/mapping-exercise

[4] Opera, a European worth. Deloitte 2013.

that excites people again – without imitating those easy promises of populism – it is destined for a future of irrelevance.

Thirdly, it must **embrace new technology** both for the new possibilities it is rapidly creating all around us, and as a means to achieving the first two goals. What can digital technology, immersivity, virtual reality, the internet, social media, robotics and miniaturisation bring to the process of co-creation? What can they bring to the artistic language of opera and the ways in which artists connect with audiences? It is fair to say that other opera houses and other partnerships have done good work in relation to the first two objectives, but we do not know of any attempt to harness the potential of new technology in that process on the scale proposed by TRACTION.

It is not TRACTION's ambition to solve the challenges outlined here: it would be naïve not to recognise their scale and complexity. But we do aim to make an **important step** in the right direction. Our project is experimental, as it must be: we need new ideas if we are going to make an impact here. Not everything we try to do will work, but everything will bring new knowledge, and we are committed to sharing what we learn as widely as possible so that others can build on it in other cities and with different communities. We want to show that opera, and art more generally, is a powerful resource in reducing the effects of inequality on the people it touches and a meaningful way of challenging the values that have allowed it to become so widespread in recent decades. Many will feel that is an unrealistic ambition. But we are artists and scientists, and we know that nothing is real until we create it.

TRACTION will **provide a bridge** between opera professionals and specific communities at risk of exclusion based on three trials, understood as experimental attempts, to foster an **effective community dialogue** between diverse individuals and collectives on each one of the nodes: community opera with **migrants** (around LICEU at Barcelona), opera co-creation with **young inmates in prison** (driven by SAMP in Leiria) and bringing a novel digital opera to **rural and depopulated areas** (led by INO in Ireland). Moreover, TRACTION will address also **cross-fertilisation** activities between these trial-nodes and new ones that will join the network during its lifetime (Expert Advisory Board members and supporters, early adopters, facilitators, other communities, etc.).

The project will enable community dialogue through two simultaneous processes. On the one hand, TRACTION will research, design and develop a **collaborative and participatory production toolset**, establishing a novel workflow for the co-creation and co-design of operas. It will include a front-end that provides conversational support for community dialogue, tools for user-generated rich media capture, such as immersive audiovisual and 360-degree content, smart media editing mechanisms, narrative engines and interactive adaptive media distribution technologies, that will produce interactive audiovisual content to support traditional opera formats, and **explore novel audiovisual operatic and art representation formats**.

At the same time, TRACTION will define and implement a **community-centred methodology** to conduct an effective dialogue with, within and between heterogeneous communities. This will be based on clear ethical principles, drawn from international experience and reflecting the best values of European culture to create an approach to co-

creation that always defends respect for human rights, dignity and autonomy. Thus, the methodology will guide not only what is done, but how and why it is done. These principles will equally be integral to the workflow defined by the TRACTION toolset. The toolset-driven procedure will guarantee the accomplishment of the workflow defined by the methodology, ensuring a community dialogue that will be **sustainable, capable of evaluation** and **replicable** for other art disciplines and communities.

The **outcomes** of TRACTION will be **multi-dimensional**. The areas of most confidence relate to the **social outcomes for community participants**: new skills, capacity and confidence, enhanced social networks and integration; better access to education and employment; increase in well-being, mental health and quality of life; stronger NGOs and community organisations. There will be similarly **profound change for the opera artists** and other professionals, who will develop a range of new ideas, resources and methods in relation to working with the community and co-creation. There will be a significant impact on opera creation methods and the language of the form itself, that will have a lasting influence on the future work of the organisations involved. Finally, there will be an important **impact on the relationship between opera and digital technology**, as new tools and technologies are developed, piloted and enhanced. This will certainly create valuable new knowledge and it has the potential to enrich market opportunities in different fields.

In order to gather all the necessary background and expertise to achieve the objectives of the project, the Consortium is formed by three artistic organisations, each one leading a specific trial (**LICEU** Barcelona Opera House, **INO** Irish National Opera, and **SAMP** Arts School in Leiria), a prestigious international referent in community and participatory art (**François Matarasso**), a company that produces immersive 360-degree formats (**VRI**), two technology-driven research institutes (**VICOM** and **CWI**) and two universities (**DCU** providing technological and scientific contributions and **UAB** focusing on a human and community-centric approach). Moreover, the project will have a core Expert Advisory Board in close collaboration with the project partners, influencing the trials and the TRACTION toolset, with organisations like **Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation**, **Opera Birmingham Company**, **Ópera XXI** and **Fondazione Teatro Grande Brescia**. In addition, TRACTION has a large number of organisations that support the project and the different trials, such as the city hall of Barcelona, Generalitat de Catalunya, Spanish Ministry of Culture and Sports or Fundació Tot Raval in the case of Barcelona, the Leiria youth prison and city hall in the case of Portugal, or the democratic forum for the Irish-speaking community or the Civic Theatre in Ireland, or will promote cross-trial activities, such as **Opera Europa** or **OLA** (Ópera Latinoamérica).

2 Objectives and scope

TRACTION will create a bridge to promote a **community dialogue** between opera professionals and people at risk of exclusion through the co-creation of opera representations, delivering a web-based **collaborative and participatory production toolset**, which will be based on a **community-centric methodology**. This approach will ensure a sustainable and resilient transformation both in the diverse communities that participated in the co-creation and in the audience, and will make possible the replication of the methodology with other communities and art disciplines, through the deployment of the novel toolset.

Five specific objectives need to be addressed to demonstrate the feasibility of this novel approach:

O1: Promote, through their empowerment, a transformation of communities at risk of exclusion. The project will actively involve individuals and collectives that are currently not sufficiently integrated with cultural heritage experiences such as opera, whether because they do not know it, believe it does not represent them, or face economic barriers, to work together with opera professionals in a co-creation and co-design process. TRACTION will accompany those communities through social facilitators towards a learning by training approach in the diverse job profiles involved in an opera, fostering their integration in the job world and cultural heritage that will remain once the project finishes.

O2: Establish an effective collaborative and participatory production workflow for the co-creation and co-design of art representations. The project will research, design and provide a collaborative and participatory production toolset that will enable an effective community dialogue between opera professionals and other communities, covering the different stages of the co-creation of an opera. It will include a front-end that provides conversational support to invigorate the community dialogue; tools for user generated rich media capture, such as audiovisual content or immersive 360 videos; the integration of semi-automatic accessibility services and tagging mechanisms, such as automatically generated captions/subtitles or face/object/scene detection to add metadata; smart editing technologies; narrative engines and algorithms for content summarisation and for the definition of interaction workflows; and adaptive media distribution technologies.

O3: Lay down a community-centric methodology to conduct an efficient and measurable community dialogue that will last in time and be replicable. The project will define a methodology to conduct an effective conversation between communities, placing the collaborative production toolset in the middle as a facilitator to follow and implement the methodology. This will make possible the replication of the methodology with other communities and art disciplines, as well as guaranteeing that the life-cycle of the art representation will last in time, addressing the resilience of both the communities and the audience.

O4: Explore novel audiovisual formats based in European cultural heritage, such as opera. The project will investigate how to shift opera representations towards the recognition of multiple identities and voices that are at the moment not sufficiently integrated in cultural heritage experiences, through novel formats combining fully digital

immersive and interactive media experiences for HMD (Head-Mounted Displays) with digitally enriched on-site traditional representations. Those novel approaches will reach new spectators, further than traditional audience in opera houses, actively engaging the audience and bringing opera to depopulated areas, hospitals, prisons or schools. Therefore, TRACTION will foster the inclusiveness of opera overcoming economic, social and educational barriers through novel co-created opera representations and digital capsules.

O5: Maximise the social and market impact of the TRACTION results. The consortium will ensure that the project has a determining impact on the European and global opera houses and theatres, democratising the access to opera and reaching new audiences, as well as exploring the impact in other art representations, in the cultural and creative industries, or across other sectors. The project will also pursue a sustainable social impact, where the promoted transformation will last in time and be expandable to other ecosystems.