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From “Management Divas” to “Crown Jewel”: Discursive Representations of Finnish National Opera During the Management Crisis of 2007–2009

In the Finnish cultural field, the National Opera is in a league of its own when it comes to the scale of its operations. Up until 2022, it was the only opera company in Finland receiving funds from the system of central government transfers to cultural institutions¹ and, from 2023, instead of the discretionary central government transfer subsidy, the National Opera is funded through a statutory government grant reserved for national arts institutions. In 2022, the central government transfer subsidy received by the National Opera amounted to about 32% of the total sum of national subsidies given out to all the 71 performing arts institutions² entitled to governmental support – almost three times as much as all the municipal theatres received together (TINFO 2023). However, the status of the national opera house and its premises is regularly discussed – and questioned – in the Finnish media; the institution has just under 300 000 yearly visitors and receives a disproportionately high amount of government funding. In public debates, opera is spoken of in ornate metaphors, such as the “divas of the opera management” or the “crown jewel of Finnish culture”. Tensions emerge between different groups and stakeholders, and it is not always clear that all parties are discussing the same cultural phenomenon. Thus, at stake is the cultural meaning of opera in Finnish society.

Because the national opera house is the major actor in the Finnish opera field, its role in the process through which representations of opera in Finnish culture are negotiated cannot be overlooked. However, whereas earlier opera research in Finland has mainly focussed on operatic practices and, to some extent, their connections to

1 Apart from the system of central government transfers (in Finnish “valtionosuusjärjestelmä”, often abbreviated as VOS), Finnish opera organisations can receive government support in the form of a general subsidy for national and international art and cultural festivals (MEC 2018) or in the form of grants and subsidies from the national Arts Promotion Centre Finland (Taike 2023). However, neither of these systems guarantees long-term funding as the system of central government transfers does.

2 In Theatre Info Finland’s performing arts statistics, “performing arts” are understood as theatre, dance, circus, and opera, whereas orchestras and other forms of concert music are excluded.

national identity (see, for example, Hautsalo 2018 & 2015; Koivisto 2011; Heiniö 1999; Savolainen 1999; Lampila 1997), research on the cultural meaning of the national opera institution, and of the art form, is missing. Similarly, such an approach is underrepresented in international opera studies, although the connections between opera and society have recently attracted some interest, especially with a focus on historical periods (see, for example, Wilson 2019; Senici 2015; Lindenberger 2010; Johnson et al. 2007; Wilson 2007). Attending this gap in research, this paper examines the socially constructed representations of a national opera institution in a contemporary Nordic welfare society.

In this article, I ask what kinds of discursive understandings of the Finnish National Opera are construed in a public debate from 2007–2009. By analysing press material from the period of one of the Finnish National Opera's recent management crises, I aim to investigate how a national opera institution is represented in public debates and how this, in turn, relates to wider perceptions of national cultural institutions and opera as an art form. For this purpose, I have collected material from Finnish print media from the period 1 January 2007–30 June 2009, when the Finnish National Opera went through a management crisis that led to extensive organisational changes. During these events, the institution and its management, governmental funding, and national importance experienced a lively discussion in the media, making this public debate – just before the rise of social media and subsequent changes in the media field – a representational and interesting object of study. While not analysing managerial practices nor historical change, I regard the 2007–2009 management crisis as a "keyhole" through which I can access wider discursive perceptions of institutionalised forms of culture in contemporary society.

Theoretically, this study leans on social constructionist epistemology (cf. Young 1981) and discourse analysis. I assume that texts are made meaningful in processes where they interconnect with other texts, draw on different discourses, and are produced, disseminated, and consumed, thus not only reflecting social reality but also contributing to its constitution (cf. Fairclough 1992: 3; Phillips & Hardy 2002: 4). Consequently, to be able to say something about the meaning of opera as a cultural phenomenon, I have analysed discourses and orders of discourse. In my understanding, these direct the way we speak about and understand our surroundings, while at the same time constituting the social reality around us (cf. Foucault 1981; Foucault 2002; Fairclough 1992: 63–64).

In the following, I will first describe the material and the theoretical context of this study, providing a brief presentation on the Finnish National Opera and the events of the research period. I will then move on to describe the four discursive ideas I have identified – business, arts, elitism, and democracy, arranging them in two orders of discourse. First, I will present the order of discourse where the FNO is looked at

from the perspective of opera production, analysing the discursive ideas and then discussing them in a wider cultural context. The second order of discourse, where the focus lies on the general public's reception of the FNO, is likewise presented and then discussed on an ideological level. Finally, I will discuss the complex cultural meaning around opera as constructed in the public debate.

The Finnish National Opera, the media, and discourses

The Finnish National Opera was founded under the name *Kotimainen ooppera – Inhemiska operan* (Domestic Opera in both Finnish and Swedish, the two national languages of Finland) in 1911, six years before Finnish independence from the Russian Empire. In 1956, the organisation was restructured as the Finnish National Opera Foundation was founded. Thus, the name of the institution was changed to the Finnish National Opera (*Suomen Kansallisooppera – Finlands Nationalopera*; Lampila 1997). In 2015 the name of the foundation was changed to the Foundation of the Finnish National Opera and Ballet³. However, because the name during the research period was the Finnish National Opera, in this article, I refer to the institution with the abbreviation FNO.

While the FNO, in the course of its history, has witnessed several management crises⁴, the timespan of this article includes the crisis between 2007 and 2009 when disagreements between the artistic and the administrative management of the opera house grew intense. In the spring of 2006, the FNO announced a restructuring programme, which would reduce its staff by forty, and in the summer of 2007, would put the entire staff on compulsory leave. The management drama began in February 2007 when Chief Conductor Mikko Franck announced that he would resign unless the internal disagreements between the artistic and the administrative management were resolved. The artistic personnel of the house took Franck's side and threatened to go on strike. However, after negotiations, the strike was cancelled and Franck resigned. In April 2007, the Finnish National Opera Foundation received a new Board of Trustees, and Sirkka Hämäläinen, an economics expert, was elected chairman. In June 2007, General Director Erkki Korhonen resigned, and in August, the Foundation's Board of Trustees made amendments to the regulations regarding the number of managers and the responsibilities of the management team of the house. An

³ The Finnish National Ballet was founded in 1922 as part of the Domestic Opera.

⁴ Among the institution's famous leadership scandals are the resignation of Aino Ackté, one of the two founders of the *Domestic Opera*, only a year after its start; the public demand for the resignation of Alfons Almi in 1969; the notice of Kaj Kauhanen in 1972; and the resignation of Leif Segerstam in 1974 (Koivisto & Järventaus 2007; Lampila 1997).

organisational reform was conducted and the responsibilities of the general director and the artistic director were separated. In autumn of 2007, Päivi Kärkkäinen, with a background in the Finnish Broadcasting Company, was elected the new general director, and Mikko Franck returned to the house as a newly appointed artistic director and chief conductor. A few months later, in February 2008, Chief Administration Officer Pekka Kauranen resigned. In December 2008, it was leaked that Mikko Franck had offered a redundancy pay for several soloists of the permanent staff that, according to his artistic planning, would be left without significant roles for at least the three following seasons, and again, the management of the house was debated publicly. None of the soloists took the offer, and in the spring of 2009, the Finnish National Opera announced their next season, featuring the soloists in question in several roles.

These events attracted a large amount of media attention in 2007, 2008, and the spring of 2009, triggering a lively debate not only about the specific management circumstances but also about the role of the National Opera on a general level. Viewing the media as key actors in cultural production (Lash & Urry 1994) and media texts – both those produced by media and those circulated through it – as characterised by a dialectical relationship to culture and society (Fairclough 1995), I have therefore chosen media text analysis for my research aim. The material in this study thus consists of 171 articles from Finnish print media between 1 January 2007 and 30 June 2009. I gathered the material from the FNO press archive, where all mentions of the FNO in all the daily, weekly and monthly newspapers and magazines as well as TV and radio channels in Finland were collected and delivered to the FNO (during the research period) by the information service company Oy Observer Finland Ab. After acquainting myself with the extensive material in the FNO press archives, I decided to limit the research material to editorials, letters to the editor, columns and news analyses published in newspapers and magazines⁵. Thus, the media texts analysed in this study all operate in the same journalistic area, are widely distributed and are produced in reaction to a particular event (cf. Phillips & Hardy 2002: 73). The majority of the analysed texts were published in newspapers, either as columns, letters to the editor, or editorials, whereas texts in magazines and evening papers are less frequent.

5 At an early stage of the material collection, I decided to leave out reviews of the staged works at the FNO. While fully aware of the impact of reviews on the public opinion of an arts institution, I concluded that the journalistic aim of such reviews differs crucially from that of other newspaper and magazine articles, focussing, essentially, on the aesthetic experience. Since the analysis of the aesthetic, as well as the discursive ideas surrounding aesthetic expression, fall outside of the scope of this study, I have found it justified not to include reviews in the research material. I have also left out paid advertisements.

While over two-thirds of this material dates from 2007, I decided to include 2008 and the first six months of 2009 in the material as well. This is partly because I wanted to tone down the dominance of management aspects in the material and examine what sorts of topics emerge when the management crisis is no longer topical news. Besides, in the winter of 2008–2009, the issue of the redundancy payment for seven soloists came up, causing a new wave of active debate. However, later in 2009, the topic of the new Music House in Helsinki arose, representing, in my view, the beginning of a new debate.

Another reason to limit the research period to 1 January 2007–30 June 2009 is the nature of print media and the structural changes in society. It is worth pointing out that no online sources are included in the research material, although the events at the FNO were discussed on online forums during the research period. Yet to include online texts would have increased the amount of material substantially, while also involving new methodological and research ethical questions. However, more importantly, the years 2007–2009 marked an interesting change in the field of Finnish journalism. As digital convergence has increased, so too have interactive possibilities, especially the moderated and unmoderated spaces for comments after news articles online allowing for opinions that would not appear in the print versions (Lentin & Titley 2011: 151). Increasingly, these comments are circulated through social media platforms, providing more politicised formats. Whereas in 2007 online commenting still was a proportionately marginal phenomenon in Finnish journalism, in the spring of 2009, it had become widespread, as had the social media platforms. This change in the media landscape contributed to my decision to end the research period on 30 June 2009. Thus, I regard this particular research period as a kind of “end of an era,” the last crisis at the FNO where the discussion was led on the old premises of print media.

I started to analyse the material by looking for discourses as defined by Michel Foucault as “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault 2002: 54). In other words, I identified how different texts form the FNO, or *bring it into being*, based on the premise that this process is constituted in social practices that in turn shape the social reality. Then, following Foucault’s principles of analysis, I examined the functions of exclusion (the “critical” section) as well as those of formation and appearance (the “genealogical” section) (Foucault 1981: 70–73). Because my aim has not been to analyse the Finnish media field, I did not code the material depending on, for example, regional or political media liaisons. On the contrary, following the discursive principles of limitation and exclusion (Foucault 1981: 52–64; Young 1981: 49), I rather focussed on the discourses’ ability to restrict access to versus open certain regions of discourse for any speaking subject. I thus outlined four discursive ideas: the business discourse, the arts discourse, the elitism

discourse and the democracy discourse. Additionally, I noticed that the discursive ideas formed two pairs, focussing on different aspects of the opera house. I then applied the term "order of discourse", introduced by Michel Foucault and defined as a "social space where different discourses partly cover the same terrain which they compete to fill with meaning each in their own particular way" (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002: 56). Thus, I divided the discursive ideas into those focussing on the *production* of opera – business and arts – and those that in turn emphasise the *reception* of opera – elitism and democracy. Within each order of discourse, the discourses are aware of each other, arguing against and forming each other.

The business of art production

Within the first order of discourse, the two discursive ideas, business discourse and arts discourse, present competing understandings of the Finnish National Opera. Within both of these discourses, the FNO is construed in its own way. However, both perceptions define the FNO from the perspective of the activities it is engaged in – the production of opera – and are formed by and aware of each other.

Within the business discourse, the FNO is compared with other businesses and organisations. It is deemed important that the FNO's economy is balanced and that the management has expertise in financial administration and leadership. By maintaining that artistic ambitions must not be pursued at the expense of economic conditions, the business discourse places itself opposite to the arts discourse. In other words, according to the business discourse, the FNO is defined through its duty – to produce art within clear financial frames. Economic considerations must override artistic ones.

Examples of the FNO treated as a business are when the ticket sales of the FNO are analysed in the recurring section about conjunctions within different branches (*Taloussanommat* 3 March 2007), when Päivi Kärkkäinen, the new General Director, is noticed as one of the "names of the year", along with representatives of big exchange-listed companies (*Talouselämä* 2008), or when Päivi Kärkkäinen is asked to give investment tips as a part of an article, published in the economy section, reporting the good financial results of 2008 (*HS* 2 March 2009). Consequently, the FNO is requested to regard businesses as role models, which is illustrated in formulations such as "were the National Opera an enterprise, it would have gone into liquidation a long time ago" (*Länsi-Suomi* 16 February 2007). Within the business discourse, thus, business life is perceived as something rational, positive, and in possession of knowledge that could solve the FNO's crisis: phrases such as "again, it is time to

try whether the expertise from the business life can help the opera” (*HS* 19 January 2007) suggest that the FNO should copy management practices from the business world.

Here, however, lies an internal tension within the business discourse. While the FNO is compared to businesses and treated as such in the media, there is talk of a “business world” that the FNO should learn from – a business world that the FNO still is not a part of. In other words, within the business discourse, two ideas of the business world emerge: one that the FNO belongs to, and one that it should belong to. Common to these ideas is that they are seen as positive models for the FNO.

When constantly comparing the FNO to enterprises, the business discourse restricts the potential discussion topics to those aspects of the activities that can be discussed in business terms. It cannot accommodate repertory and soloist choices and artistic ambitions, because it simply lacks the terminology for that discussion. The word “art” is used within the business discourse but with no importance attached to defining it, whereas the definition of art has a central role within the arts discourse. An illustration of the role of art within the business discourse is provided in an editorial commenting on the choice of Sirkka Hämäläinen as the new chair of the FNO board:

The financial determination of this previous central bank professional is undisputed, and she has a documented interest in what she now will apply it to: in *Who’s Who*, she mentions music and theatre as her special interests, and her son is a professional musician. (*HBL* 9 March 2007.)

According to this editorial, it is of the greatest importance that the FNO board chair is an expert in financial administration, while interest in theatre and music is regarded as a bonus. Indeed, a leading idea within the business discourse is that artists are bad managers, expressed in phrases such as “it would be essential to see to that the divas of the arts institution had leading roles on the stage, not in the management” (*TS* 16 February 2007) and “big gestures belong to the opera – both to the management and the stage” (*Karjalainen* 16 February 2007). Furthermore, the eligibility of the FNO trustees is questioned when it is asked why the opera foundation’s Board of Trustees consists of opera fans instead of business administration professionals (*Taloussanommat* 20 January 2007). The use of the term “opera fans” is interesting in the context. By calling the trustees “opera fans”, a distinction is made between opera leaders and other leaders, ascribing the “opera fans” group an outsider role.

Typical for the business discourse is to constantly oppose economics and the arts, describing them as each other’s opposites. The artistic is regarded as bad for the financial:

In Korhonen's era, art was made, but no money. The artistic, restive and rebellious personnel bolted and accused their boss of the economic difficulties. [...] The goal is to produce quality art as inexpensively as possible – as Sirkka Hämäläinen has crystallised the matter aloud. (*Apu* 39/2007.)

Here, the dichotomy between art and economics is clearly described. Furthermore, the quote illustrates another feature of the business discourse, namely, describing artists as "restive and rebellious". This idea of artists as impossible employees constitutes part of the discourse's view of art as something irrational, dramatic and rebellious that cannot be reasoned with – whereas economics is seen as the epitome of reason.

Similarly, the dichotomy between art and economics is constituted within the arts discourse, but in the opposite direction. Within the arts discourse, too, the FNO is defined through its duty, but whereas this duty within the business discourse is to produce art within clear financial frames, within the arts discourse it is to produce art of high quality. A leading idea within the discourse is that the emphasis on economics harms the artistic quality. The economic is to give precedence to the artistic:

Why does there so often seem to be a paradox between artistic ambition and economy? Shouldn't the equation rather go in such a way that high-quality contents sell and are more profitable than half-made? [...] In an arts institution, overemphasizing financial thinking might cramp the production of ideas: the energy goes to pinching pennies. (*Rondo* 11/2007.)

The idea that the emphasis on the economy is an obstacle to high artistic quality is clear here. Consequently, the idea within the discourse is that this emphasis leads to a popularisation of the repertory, arguing that the fact that something sells well cannot be applied when measuring quality: "the worst case is that the so-called economic realities, what sells and what doesn't, get to dictate the quality criteria" (*HBL* 21 January 2009). Here, it is insinuated that quality is the opposite of "what sells".

One way in which the arts discourse argues against the business discourse is to apply the term *high culture*, illustrated in the comment, "What would this country become if high culture was missing and nothing but the easy-selling low-cost culture churned?" (*HS* 28 August 2007). In this manner, "high culture" is ascribed value in itself, while a dichotomy is created between this valuable high culture and culture produced within financial restrictions. Essentially, "high culture" is used to represent what the artistic productions at the FNO are supposed to be.

Within the arts discourse, the artistic competence and expertise of the management are emphasised. While management experience was called for in the business discourse, here the idea is the opposite: “Apparently, the planned General Director is a professional manager with no insights into opera. The manager should possess opera knowledge and artistic vision, as well as administrative skills” (*HS* 28 August 2007). This is a direct answer to the idea within the business discourse about artists as bad leaders. In the same way that art within the arts discourse is seen as superior to economics, likewise the idea is that the manager of the FNO should have an artistic vision. In fact, the view of artists as bad managers is defended within the arts discourse: “But the opera is first and foremost an artistic institution. The artistic leaders must be given free rein. The lively and downright rebellious image is and must be a part of their image” (*HBL* 21 September 2007). Here, the artists are defended as leaders, described within the business discourse as overly dramatic. The stance is justified by the leading thought that art is what matters most. Moreover, when defending the artists as managers, the criticism uttered by the business discourse on the reasons for the FNO’s crisis being rooted in bad financial management is likewise affronted: “One of Erkki Korhonen’s problems was artistic credibility. He is a renowned *répétiteur*, that is, a rehearsal pianist, and has led a world-known opera school, but he is not a great artist. His authority was not watertight” (*Itä-Savo* 19 December 2007). This is an example of how, within the arts discourse, art is defended and the discussion is deliberately conducted to be about art instead of financial administration.

A great part of the discussion within the arts discourse focuses on the repertory, categorising it into groups such as “standard repertory”, “risks”, and “entertainment”. The repertory is defined, for example, as “bold” “despite the financial difficulties”, whereas another season witnesses “much less risk-taking” (*HS* 30 March 2007). This is something of a paradox within the arts discourse. While constantly stressing the independence of arts from the economy, the financial questions are persistently present in categorisations such as “risks” and “bold choices”. Likewise, the distinction between “art” and “entertainment”, much discussed within the arts discourse, has an economic dimension to it, as is illustrated in an article entitled “Opera goes popular”: “The finances are now under careful examination, and the upcoming season is all about a popular line: enter *Carmen* and *The Merry Widow*” (*Rondo* 4/2007). To define certain works as “entertainment”, “popular” or “standard repertory” is common within the arts discourse, and these categories are used to define quality within the discourse. The definition of high quality, however, is given less attention – indeed, to question the term “high quality” would undermine the central arguments within the arts discourse.

The debate of arts against the economy

Within the order of discourse of opera production, the tension between the two competing discursive ideas is based on a dichotomy between a market-oriented ideology and an ideology appreciating the autonomy of the arts, commonly known as "art for art's sake". Essentially, this debate – central in current aesthetic debates and equally visible in research output titles such as *Unmanageable Opera?*⁶ (Auvinen 2000) and *Big Opera, Small Money*⁶ (Wetterström 2001) – is about a fundamental dichotomy between the instrumental and the intrinsic value of the arts, and its theoretical references can be traced back to the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries and Kantian thought (Belfiore & Bennett 2008: 176–177, 189–190). Explaining this dichotomy, the philosopher Noël Carroll identifies "autonomism" as one of the leading objections to what he calls the ethical criticism of art – that is, the traditional notion that art can and should be criticised ethically (Carroll 2000: 351). According to him, the autonomism argument concludes that "art and ethics are autonomous realms of value and, thus, criteria from the ethical realm should not be imported to evaluate the aesthetic realm. Artworks [...] are valuable for their own sake, not because of their service to ulterior purposes [...]" (Carroll 2000: 351). The idea of the purpose of an opera house being to produce art of high quality, not bound by financial restrictions, is perfectly in line with this philosophical trace.

Interestingly, Carroll links the rise of the autonomism argument to certain social developments, partly assessing it as an art world manoeuvre against censorship, partly linking it to the emergence, in the nineteenth century, of the bourgeois culture and its tendency to "reduce all value to instrumental and/or commercial value" (2000: 351–352). Similarly, cultural policy researchers Eleonora Belfiore and Oliver Bennett describe how Kant, whose *Critique of Judgement* is often portrayed as the origin of the art for art's sake ideology, was misinterpreted and diffused in the nineteenth century. According to Belfiore and Bennett, Kant did assert that works of art have no purpose outside of themselves, but that the total separation of art from morality and didactic function was rather a feature of nineteenth-century aestheticism, rejecting Christian morality and substituting it with the cult of beauty (Belfiore & Bennett 2008: 178–182). This, along with the idea of artists as bohemians, emerged as industrialisation brought about changes in aesthetic production and the cultural market. As a consequence, artists found themselves in a marginal position which they, by adapting the art for art's sake ideology, turned into what Belfiore and Bennett call a "badge of honour" and a "trademark", lifting them onto a higher ethical ground (2008: 183).

⁶ Orig. *Stor opera, små pengar*.

Similar changes in society can be regarded as a backdrop for current tensions between the business and the arts discourses. On one hand, postmodern theorists such as Scott Lash and John Urry talk about increasing culturisation of economic life, referring to the aesthetic reflexivity that, entailed by the development of information technologies, takes place in production and consumption in the culture industries (Lash & Urry 1994; Sevänen 1998). On the other hand, the implementation of neoliberal ideologies at every level of government, including cultural policy, has been an increasing trend in the Western world, Finland not excluded. Indeed, political scientist Heikki Patomäki talks about Finland's neoliberal era that he regards as having started in the 1980s, linking it to the introduction of New Public Management practices (Patomäki 2007). Thus, in 1998, when analysing cultural institutions in Finland, the art sociologist Erkki Sevänen wrote the following:

As operational systems, arts institutions today resemble businesses more than before. These institutions are managed the same way as businesses, their profitability is assessed from the perspective of immediate economic profit, they are expected to be monetary wise profitable institutions, and they are urged to participate in image construction and tourism promotion processes on the state, city and municipal level. (Sevänen 1998: 226.)

Sevänen's analysis is a very accurate description of the business discourse's perception of the FNO. Indeed, Sevänen continues that although arts and economies have grown closer to each other, as suggested by Lash and Urry, the phenomenon is not about a confluence. Rather, he suggests that the codes used within cultural institutions – or systems – have become richer, meaning that the traditional judgements of aesthetic expression are now accompanied by judgements of profitability borrowed from economic systems (Sevänen 1998: 226). In other words, within this order of discourse, the tension between the discursive perceptions of the FNO emerges from the collision of these two code systems, based on the art for art's sake ideology on one side and neoliberalism on the other. The power balance within the order of discourse is linked to changes in consumption and production practices in society. Just like artists in the nineteenth century, the arts discourse today finds itself in a marginal position, arguing for art for art's sake against the neoliberal ideologies dominating the field of cultural production.

Opera for all, opera for the selected few

The second order of discourse outlined in the material is formed by the elitism and democracy discourses that focus on the role and status of the FNO in Finnish

society. These two discourses share certain common principles and can therefore be considered to belong to the same order of discourse, but their understandings of the FNO are different, essentially divided by the question of who the recipient of opera is. In what I call the elitism discourse, opera is considered a pastime for a small social elite, while what I call the democracy discourse emphasises that the role of the FNO is to produce opera for the whole of Finland, regardless of class or place of residence.

Within the elitism discourse, the FNO is constituted as an institution affecting a small, distinguished social group – an elite. The word “elitism” and its derivatives recur frequently in the material, demonstrating the strength of the discourse. Being especially tangible in personal accounts, the elitism discourse is subjective in the sense that it is construed through the idea “the FNO doesn’t concern me”. Thus, the elite within the elitism discourse are constantly construed as “the Others”: a social group to which the author does not belong and which is ascribed the status of the elite.

The division between the elite and “the people” is the basis of the elitism discourse. In the descriptive comment “As if opera was high culture for a small elite. Why, the whole of Finland is constantly talking about it!” (*IL Viikonvaihte* 17 February 2007), a clear line is drawn between the “small elite” and “the whole of Finland”. Moreover, a sarcastic, even provocative style is applied here, frequently used within the elitism discourse. Furthermore, a common assumption within the elitism discourse is that the Others, the elite, support the FNO against the people’s will:

When the entire opera lives on social security coughed up by the lottery people, one would assume that the singers, players, dancers and set designers were at least trying to conceal their profound contempt for the common people paying for this luxury. A strike at the opera is like a strike among the unemployed. (*IL* 24 February 2007.)

Here, a reference to the central government transfer subsidy, half of which is financed from the profits of the government-owned betting agency, is made, while an unmistakable distinction is created between those who work at the FNO and those who play the lotto.

The elite within the elitism discourse can refer to different social groups and can thus be defined in different ways, as long as the elite within the discursive understanding means the Others. One common way to define the elite is to refer to those who live in the greater Helsinki area, thus emphasizing the geographically small size of the elite and supporting the discursive idea that the FNO only concerns a tiny part of the society. Likewise, the geographically uneven distribution of the benefits of the FNO is pointed out:

When assessing the state of the opera, the usual refrain goes that every civilised state must have an opera. Why on earth? One can still understand a National Museum and an Olympic Stadium. Measured in visitor rates, a national trotting track would be as justified a project. After all, the costs are covered by all the people from Hanko to Petsamo. (*Satakunnan Kanssa* 30 September 2007.)

Interestingly, the claim that is central to the democracy discourse, that every civilised state must have an opera, is acknowledged here. Being part of the same order of discourse, the awareness of the democracy discourse within the elitism discourse is clear, and “the usual refrain” of an opera institution being an essential part of a civilised country is questioned.

An underlying assumption within both the elitism and the democracy discourses is that it is expensive to run the FNO. However, while the democracy discourse highlights the benefits of the taxpayers’ investment, the elitism discourse sees this as something indisputably bad, claiming that opera is exorbitant for the individual visitor as well. Simultaneously, it is assumed within the elitism discourse that those who do visit the opera have the means to pay more for their tickets, without the taxpayers funding the FNO. Thus, the elitism discourse is partly based on an experienced injustice of money being transferred from those who have less to those who have more. This is illustrated in comments such as “furious taxpayer” (*HS* 28 August 2007) and “let the gentlemen’s club that visits that place pay for that” (*Vantaan Sanomat* 28 November 2007). At the same time, a common feature within the elitism discourse is to compare the FNO to social activities that within the discourse are understood to concern all people, such as sports, healthcare, geriatrics or war veteran care. Although these arguments are mainly based on subjective experiences in which the author distances themselves from the elite Other, an exception is made when the argument that “tax money should be spent on social security and healthcare instead of culture” (*HS* 30 November 2008) is based on scientific research in economic resuscitation.

While tax funding of the FNO is seen as something bad within the elitism discourse, the democracy discourse, sharing the elitism discourse’s focus on the FNO’s role and funding in the society, argues that every taxpayer must benefit from the national opera house. Within the democracy discourse, the FNO’s status as a national institution is emphasised, and the idea is that the house must produce opera for the whole of Finland, not only a small elite. Simultaneously, and consequently, the relevance and accessibility of the FNO outside of the metropolitan area are seen as important. While the elitism discourse is based on the fundamental division between the people and the elite, such distinctions do not appear in the democracy discourse. Instead,

the focus lies on discussing how the FNO could be more open and accessible to the whole nation, and thus no discursive space is left for distinctions within the nation.

Central for the democracy discourse is arguing for state funding of the FNO. While the discourse does not provide an unambiguous answer to why the FNO should be funded with common means, the importance of providing several alternatives and discussing the different arguments is emphasised. However, a central assumption within the democracy discourse is that an opera house is essential for Finland as a civilised state: "It belongs to the principles of a civilised state to have at least one opera house. Our principle has been that the ticket price is drawn down so that the threshold for all people to enjoy opera is as low as possible" (*Vantaan Sanomat* 25 March 2007). The idea that Finland is a civilised state is never questioned within the democracy discourse, and here the practical question of ticket prices is linked to that assumption. Similarly, the FNO is linked closely to Finnish values and national cultural heritage, describing it, for example, as a "crown jewel" that all the Finnish citizens should be proud of (*ESS* 22 February 2007), or otherwise discussing opera and Finnishness:

It has always been an advantage for the Finnish opera culture that our whole cultural life and creative art of music are so young. Thus, a stigma of conservative elite art has never been created, not even for opera. [...] In Finland, opera could be art for all people. This is possible but requires brave, countrywide cultural and political will. Long live Finnish opera! (*HS* 23 December 2007.)

Here, the elitism discourse is both acknowledged and ignored, showing how the two discourses within the same order of discourse are aware of each other. The focus of the debate is discursively shifted from discussing elite art to discussing opera and Finnishness.

However, a part of the logic of the order of discourse is that by acknowledging the elitism discourse, the democracy discourse paradoxically reinforces it: "the more the Opera is understood as a secret club for the elite, the shakier is the support of its sponsors, that is, the taxpayers" (*HS* 25 August 2007). As illustrated here, in order to argue against the elitism discourse, the democracy discourse must acknowledge it, but it must do so by depicting the elitism discourse as a threat.

A similar reinforcing happens when it is argued that classical music is not so expensive: "Usually, opera is the first in line when somebody starts to talk about an elite culture that the 'ordinary people' cannot afford. Well, the tickets to the Finnish National Opera cost 50–60 euros, that is, the same as to an average ice stadium

concert” (*AL* 20 November 2008). Here, the idea of opera-going as expensive, figuring in the elitism discourse, is attacked. However, when “the average ice stadium concert” is used as a counterpart, the distinction between opera (elite) culture and other forms of (ordinary) culture, which is central in the elitism discourse, is reinforced. Thus, the democracy discourse ends up reconstructing the elitism discourse by acknowledging it.

A debate arises after the publication of the abovementioned article where research in economic resuscitation builds on the elitism discourse:

In Finland, the society supports elitist arts so that they would not belong to the elite only. Here we have thought that everyone, regardless of wealth, must have the opportunity to study and go to the opera. [...] If Finland was to realise the resuscitation package suggested by Tervala and move the art subsidiaries to “profitable investments”, our random example of a newly-become PhD would never have the chance to enjoy Wagner. Nobody would have the means to produce Wagner operas, and even if they had, our doctor would not afford an entrance ticket. [...] The positive effect the arts have on health and well-being has been proved in many ways also in Finnish research. However, the media is not interested in such research in the way it is interested in one doctoral dissertation in national economics. To question art makes better headlines than to elevate it. Because you see, all the blather defending the arts is elitist. (*Vihreä Lanka* 16 January 2009.)

This quote illustrates the paradoxical approach the democracy discourse has towards the term “elitism” and “elitist art”. On one hand, it is interpreted within the democracy discourse as a synonym for “high art” or “high-quality art”, thus accepted as the “crown jewel” of Finnish culture and in line with the central idea of opera belonging to a civilised state. In this interpretation, the distinction-making meaning of “elitism” is ignored. On the other hand, however, the democracy discourse cannot fully ignore the fact that distinction is created within the elitism discourse, since it constantly argues against the elitism discourse. Thus, in the quote above, “elitist art not belonging to the elite only” comprises both of these meanings for the word “elite” created within the democracy discourse.

Given the assumption within the democracy discourse that the FNO concerns all of Finland, it follows that everyone must have the right to comment on the repertoire and management of the opera. Openness and accessibility are called for, as are popular pieces – “the audience wants romantic, easy-to-digest entertainment as well” (*Länsi-Uusimaa* 26 February 2007). However, the democracy discourse has a contradictory approach to the artistic practices at the FNO. While supporting opera

music and associating it with valuable culture, the discourse also defines it as “crying and howling” (*ESS* 11 March 2007) and calls for a more popular repertory and entertainment. Again, it is important to discuss the repertory and include all of Finland in the discussion, and thus the diversity of opinions is accepted.

When it comes to regional accessibility, tours and future technologies are highlighted as a means to avoid the metropolitanism of the FNO. Co-operation with the Finnish Broadcasting Company and other modern, technological solutions are called for, with the motivation that “given that these institutions are financed with common tax money, it would be fair that all over Finland, everyone willing to do so could see these performances” (*MT* 20 October 2008). This illustrates how the idea of opera as an important symbol for a civilised state naturally leads to requirements of democratic accessibility.

Democracy and elite culture

In this second order of discourse, the main difference between the competing discursive understandings – FNO benefitting a distinguished part of the society, or the whole society democratically – relates to the question of opera’s status as high culture. Indeed, as long as opera as an art form has existed, it has been depicted as either a symbol for power brokers or just another form of popular entertainment. When opera was born, in Renaissance Italy, composers presented opera as a revival of antique art to please the regents of the time, although the musical style was based on contemporary popular music practices (McClary 1985). Similarly, many scholars have argued that opera enjoyed popular success until it was deliberately made into elite art (Storey 2002; Levine 1988; McConachie 1988). In a study on New York opera-going between 1825 and 1850, theatre scholar Bruce McConachie ascribes to historical pressures the elaboration of new social rituals that turned opera into elite art. According to him, those pressures arose as power passed from the public view “into the hands of men sitting behind closed doors”, thus lessening the necessity of public rituals involving all social classes (McConachie 1988: 190). While historical changes led to the conceptualisation of opera as elite or high culture in the USA, at the same time in Europe, nationalism became a central ideology. In the nationalist wake, the previous court operas were turned into national opera houses and opera started to represent the nation (Kotnik 2013). It is this historical debate that is reflected in the competing discursive ideas of the Finnish National Opera in the twenty-first century.

In the Finnish context, the relationship between the “national” and the “democratic” becomes particularly interesting. As discussed by the Finnish opera researcher Liisamajja Hautsalo, the history of Finnish opera is short, and the birth of the FNO is linked to nationalist ideologies. However, the opera boom that has taken place in Finland since 2000 is unique in international comparison: between 2000 and 2017, 350 new Finnish operas were premiered (Hautsalo 2018) – the major portion of them outside the FNO as project-based ventures. Moreover, the new Finnish operas vary greatly in both topic and musical style, ranging from local operas to celebrations of national events, everyday happenings such as pipe and drain renovations, and children’s operas (Hautsalo 2018). In this pluralist Finnish opera scene, the perception of the FNO, the national opera house, as a democratically accessible national institution reflects partly the activity of the opera scene and partly emerging political demands for the democratisation of culture, further spurred by the technological development that makes it possible to distribute opera through broadcasting and digital channels.

The idea of the democratisation of culture is discussed from a historical perspective by the cultural sociologist Laurent Fleury. He argues that the question can be traced back two thousand years and to the quest to “transform an infinite diversity of individual desires and interests into a civic and political unity, translated, with the advent of the nation-state, into a national cultural identity” (Fleury 2014: 50; see also Evrard 1997). Further, he links the democratisation of culture to the state’s project to invent the nation and create its culture, viewing it as the production of symbols instituting a social order (Fleury 2014: 51). Applying this view of the democratisation of culture to the Finnish context, one can conclude that the democracy discourse’s idea of the FNO relates to a wider mission of creating and maintaining Finnish culture (cf. Nyman 2023; Hautsalo 2021).

However, it can also be argued that opera houses are useful to states and thus supported by them and that the reasons for this are other than cultural. In the book *The Operatic State*, cultural policy researcher Ruth Bereson explores the relationship between the power brokers and the opera through historical examples, demonstrating that state opera houses serve to legitimise the power of the state (Bereson 2002). In a Beresonian reading, thus, the competition between the elitism and the democracy discourses appears as a discursive struggle mirroring, and directed by, governmental power balances. Indeed, Bereson shows that arguments stressing the importance of the national institution, linking this requirement to national pride and national identity, have not evolved during the history of opera, from the times of Louis XIV to contemporary statements supporting state funding. Furthermore, she argues that

[l]anguage is designed with the intention of making the public believe that “accessibility”, “accountability” and “excellence” are the criteria for support of such institutions, but these terms also serve another purpose; they denote the changing language of the new powerful élites who derive their sense of power from a mix of “democratic principles” and the waft of new money. (Bereson 2002: 8.)

Thus, in the critical view suggested by Bereson, not only the democracy discourse’s perception of the FNO but the entire order of discourse can be understood as a sort of discursive theatre, played out by the real power holders to conceal acts of power.

Conclusions

In the media texts from the time of the FNO management crisis of 2007–2009, four discursive understandings of the opera house are construed. According to the business discourse, the FNO should be managed the same way business enterprises are managed, and the artistic is described as something negative for the management of the house. However, within the discourse, the FNO still never fully becomes a part of the business world, which results in a discursive paradox where the FNO both is and is not a business. Competing against this business-oriented view is the arts discourse where the emphasis is put on the artistic duties of the house. Within the arts discourse, artistic quality is an essential theme. However, high quality as such is never questioned within the discourse, because it would undermine the whole discursive idea. Within the elitism discourse, opera is construed as something indisputably negative: expensive, futile, and uninteresting. Nevertheless, the elitism discourse is rather prevalent in the material, which makes it relevant to ask why opera is discussed at all if it is perceived as such an unnecessary activity. Evidently, within the elitism discourse, opera has some importance after all. Finally, the democracy discourse construes the FNO as an important national cultural institution, thus claiming that everyone in Finland is entitled to democratic access to opera. Yet, a paradoxical approach to the notion of “elitist arts” emerges, as elitist is understood simultaneously as a value and as a burden.

However, what thus might seem like an abundance of understandings of a national opera house is, in fact, a scarcity. The national opera institution in Finland is debated in terms of business, art, elitism and democracy, and no room is left for other ways of understanding the opera house. Moreover, given the dominant role of the Finnish National Opera in the Finnish opera scene and the cultural sector on a larger scale, the study implies that this discursive, restrictive process of understanding applies to

the cultural meaning of opera as an art form and national cultural institutions more broadly. Whenever we encounter opera, we are discursively forced to understand it in terms of business, art, elitism or democracy, and since opera participates in broader cultural discourses, the discursive representations underlined here are relevant for the cultural sector in whole. Indeed, as discussed above, the ideas connected to the discursive understandings of the Finnish National Opera can be traced to larger ideological and historic-philosophical debates about the autonomy of the art, the nation-state, cultural hierarchies, and neoliberalism. While the discourses might be differently emphasised in debates that focus on other art forms or institutions, these discursive representations have bearing on all kinds of state-funded forms of culture.

Therefore, increasing the material by adding further breakpoints from the history of the Finnish National Opera would be unlikely to provide significant new results for assessing the meaning of national opera institutions in contemporary society. However, more research on the cultural meaning of opera, or “operatic mentalities” (cf. Wilson 2019: 14), in different historical and cultural settings is called for if we want to gain a better understanding of the relationship between opera and society, how it has evolved through history, and how it is affected by wider cultural and societal trends. For example, as changes in technology in recent decades have greatly affected our communication practices, an important line of study when assessing the role of opera in contemporary society would be to look at the ways in which opera is discussed in digital media surroundings.

Since 2009, the Finnish National Opera, the Finnish media field, and Finnish society have of course faced new debates and changes. Looking back, one can see how the neoliberal management ideas discussed in the context of the 2007–2009 management crisis have become more prominent in the Finnish cultural field, still opposed by those who advocate art for art’s sake. Likewise, the system of the state funding of culture in Finland has been remodelled, but still the debates concern the autonomy of the arts, democratic access, national importance, the institutions’ financial impact, and cultural hierarchies. Thus, these discursive representations are constantly reconstructed and reaffirmed. Indeed, through looking at one lively public debate, provoked by a period of events in one national opera institution, we can better understand the discursive powers dictating the tone of contemporary cultural policies in the Nordic context with a strong tradition of state-funded culture.

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All quotes are translated by the author.

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