

Rock Opera: Defining a Genre

By: Russell Kahmann

MUS 627

April 2, 2009

One of the most crucial questions that must be asked of rock opera would also appear at first to be the most obvious: Is it actually opera? This simple question, however, raises another of even greater importance. In the twentieth century, during which nearly all common-practice norms were challenged, should one still judge an artwork (visual, physical, written, or musical) according to the standards of the past? Admittedly, one must possess a comprehensive understand of the past to fully comprehend the current state of affairs. Therefore, regarding the question of rock opera's authenticity of title, a comparison with past models and norms is beneficial in the progress toward a clear answer. In addition to past models, a comparison with concurrent trends in "art" music operas of the time is also necessary to obtain a holistic view of rock opera in the late twentieth century.

The present article will focus on the redefinition (or not) of opera in the late twentieth century through popular music, and will center on several self-described rock operas and non-traditional operas. The goal is to answer questions of authenticity regarding a historically rich genre and whether or not the term opera is applicable to these current works. The first approach is an attempt to probe the current definitions of opera and create some concrete, genre-defining lines whose edges do not blur into the many other dramatic vocal genres such as cantata, oratorio, musical, Lied, etc. This will then lead into a discussion of the first popular-music attempts at a continuous dramatic work of art: the concept album.

Through the concept album, several stylistic aims were set into motion by popular-music artists that drove their aspiration beyond the confining limits of the radio-friendly format of the 1950's and 60's. After definitions have been examined and the basis of rock opera has been illuminated, several case studies will be presented, in which questions will be raised regarding their operatic authenticity. The works under discussion are The Who's *Tommy*, Webber and Rice's *Jesus Christ Superstar*, John Moran's *The Manson Family: An Opera*, Genesis' *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway*, and Smith and Zdunich's *Repo: The Genetic Opera*. Before any conclusions can be decisively drawn, the case studies must be subjected to a proof; one that takes into account the definitions of opera in the Western art-

music tradition, the development of popular music toward more lofty, art-music goals, and the final products of these popular-music artists. The concise means to this end is through the employment of conceptual models, such as those of Lawrence Zbikowski in his text *Conceptualizing Music*. After subjecting multiple rock operas to the proof of the conceptual model, conclusions will be drawn as to the validity of a rock genre that defines itself as opera.

Compiling a Definition

Possibly the most challenging task regarding rock opera is that of categorization. There appears to be no definite consensus on what limiting factors might be employed in delineating the categories of rock oratorio, rock musical, rock opera, rock operetta, etc. It may be that the lines are too blurred between these after-the-fact categories into which humans find the necessity to relentlessly create. To create more solid lines, one must first investigate those factors which have been previously employed in the delineation of operatic genres in the Western art-music tradition.

The first question, and most pertinent to the present argument, is “What is opera?” Defining genres has been a long-standing quest of musicians and historians for centuries; however, a genre is typically defined long after its conception and rise to popularity. Now, at a reasonable temporal distance, the definition of opera should be more concise and easy to extract.

The *Oxford Dictionary of Music* states that the term opera is an abbreviation of *opera in musica*. Opera is a drama set to music to be sung with instrumental accompaniment by singers usually in costume. Recitative or spoken dialogue may separate the numbers, but the essence of opera is that the music is integral and is not incidental, as in a ‘musical’ or play with music.¹ The *Oxford Companion to Music* takes the *Dictionary’s* definition one step further toward reaching a conclusion that better informs the category of rock opera: A reasonable definition separating opera from other forms is that it

¹ *The Oxford Dictionary of Music*, 2nd ed. rev., s.v. “Opera,” <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/opr/t237/e7485> (accessed February 19, 2009).

is a work intended to be staged, in which singing plays a dominant part in portraying the actions and emotions of the characters.² The article goes on to say that:

The influence of Kagel in Germany and of Cage in the USA has encouraged composers to use all manner of resources—voices, instruments, electronics, visual displays of various kinds, miscellaneous objects, buildings, and natural features—in mixed-media shows, ‘happenings’, and other events which might take place in a theatre or might not. Here any continuing association with opera has quite disappeared, as it has also in the more structured music-theatre works produced by Stockhausen since the early 1970s.³

Why, exactly, has the “continuing association with opera quite disappeared?” The definitions thus far have not laid any concrete rules for defining opera (although dictionary and summary entries will rarely offer a set of rules). What can be assumed are the following guidelines in defining opera as a distinct genre: 1) Opera is a sung drama with instrumental accompaniment, 2) singing is an integral part in the dramatic portrayal, 3) the music is integral to the drama, not incidental, and 4) performance location is integral to defining the genre.

Recent publications on popular music dramas fuel the ambiguity of genre definition. Are these recent productions musicals or operas? Even the titles of these publications argue with one another.

One can find the same productions in several of the following:

- Elizabeth Wollman’s *The Theater Will Rock: A History of the Rock Musical, from Hair to Hedwig*
- Stanley Richards’ *Great Rock Musicals*
- Ellis Nassour’s *Rock Opera*, and
- Martina Elicker’s article “Rock Opera – Opera on the Rocks?”

A concrete definition is further removed by the frequent inclusion of rock opera in quotation marks, as in the chapter on *Tommy* in *Great Rock Musicals*.⁴ It appears as if the author has the inclination to separate himself from concretely ascribing the term *rock opera* to this *musical*, as it is called under the heading of his text.

² *The Oxford Companion to Music*, s.v. “Opera,” <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/opr/t114/e4847> (accessed February 19, 2009).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Stanley Richards, *Great Rock Musicals* (New York: Stein and Day, 1979), 484.

Musicologist Martina Elicker recently examined the genre of rock opera in which she begins by attempting a definition. She mentions that there is a broad and a narrow definition:

The broad view places 'rock opera' within the field of the popular musical and sees it as a kind of extension of nineteenth-century operetta, the English ballad opera, vaudeville and music hall, revue, melodrama, minstrel, and of course opera. The more sophisticated mainstream [popular and rock musicals] confirmed from the start that the musical was quite a serious matter and culturally the modern equivalent of opera.

The narrow view of 'rock opera' considers rock opera as separate from the traditional musical. Hence, rock operas are seen as song cycles in the mold of popular music concepts albums, rather than as successors or sidekicks of traditional opera. Some rock operas are formally linked to oratorios and number operas.⁵

Even with this attempt at a focused scope in which to define rock opera, its inherent vagueness does not provide any more concrete limitations within which the genre might reside. It does, however, provide more fodder for discussion. The broad view appears to include nearly every influence to both opera in general and to rock opera specifically. It does not provide a clear boundary between opera and musical. The narrow view attempts to separate rock opera and rock musical, but convolutes the argument by mentioning rock opera's ties to the song-cycle (which is clearly separate from the operatic tradition through lack of staging). The comparison to oratorio lends little aid to a distinct line of separation. Also, the use of the limiter "some" illuminates another crux in the definition of the genre. The term rock opera, from this definition, can be used in a number of unqualified situations to describe a work that is either "like" rock opera, a "sort of " rock opera, or just "in the vein of" the solo vocal tradition, but with rock music influences. No clear definition is reached, but Elicker's reference to the concept album may illuminate more distinguishing factors that will clarify the definition's ambiguity.

The Concept Album

One possibility for why rock artists of the 1960-70's identified their music with the more widely accepted grandiose forms and style of Western art music is their drive to create larger forms than were

⁵ Martin Elicker, "Rock Opera: Opera on the Rocks?," in *Essays in Honor of Steven Paul Scher and on Cultural Identity and the Musical Stage*, ed. Steven Paul Scher, et. al. (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Rodopi, 2002), 299-300.

typical or accepted by the general popular-music audience. The audience's preference for short songs during this time period was most likely due to the interactions of the recording and broadcasting industries. Radio stations in the 1950-60's held stringent restrictions of the play time of any given piece of music to be broadcast. The average length of a composition during this period was 2-3 minutes. This practice is referred to today as "radio-friendly formatting." In an interview with Stephen Gallagher, Pete Townshend (the guitarist for The Who) expressed his early astonishment at the extended length of time when first hearing Bob Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone," a song of only four minutes in length.⁶ Therefore, in the mind of a popular-music artist, the creation of a song beyond these limitations was seen as a grandiose project more in line with the Western art-music tradition than that of contemporary popular music.

One clearly defined and widely accepted category of rock music is that of the concept album, an idea that functions as one crux of the present argument. The genesis of the concept album led many rock composers toward the belief that they should begin being taken seriously as classical composers.⁷ With the infusion of idiomatic classical traits and a growing eclecticism in rock music during the late 1960's, the opportunity was ripe for popular-music artists to expand beyond the genre's roots of short blues songs. On a concept album, the collection of musical compositions serves the purpose of one overriding story line or idea. This allows for the album to exhibit a greatly increased sense of cohesion throughout, one which was not previously possible in rock music. Some concept albums, such as Jethro Tull's *Thick as a Brick*, were not even grouped into separate tracks (or bands on the LP), further enhancing the musical and ideological cohesion.

While the concept album is a continuous musical depiction of a preconceived story line or idea, it remains that a majority are just that: a *musical* depiction. Only later, almost as an afterthought, is the

⁶ Stephen Gallagher, "Interview with Pete Townshend," in *British Youth and Popular Culture* (December 12, 1996) http://www.thewho.net/articles/townshen/pt_96.htm (accessed 2/19/09).

⁷ Jim DeRogatis and Carmel Carrillo eds., *Kill your Idols: a New Generation of Rock Writers Reconsiders the Classics* (Fort Lee, NJ: Barricade, 2004), 36.

staging created. Additionally, there are instances where the staging never comes to fruition, or a film is later created which then becomes the visual realization of a director and not specifically the composer him/herself.

The differentiation between musical and visual presentation raises another question which adds to the blurring of distinct genre-defining lines. Which came first, the visual concepts or the music itself? Many times, the question is unanswerable, especially if the composer/musician does not directly comment on this stage of the work's conception. In an age where popular music is frequently released on an album before it is performed publicly, the listener is confronted with a non-visual representation prior to a visual one (unless the album artwork prepares the listener for assuming the future role of visual spectator).⁸ While it is true that a nineteenth-century Parisian could hear piano reductions of popular Rossini and Verdi arias outside of the opera house itself, the impact was inconsequential compared to that of the current mass consumption of music. It is now possible to experience the full orchestration (timbre, instrumentation, dynamic nuance, etc.) and narration of the music and text well in advance of ever experiencing it live.

Another distinction that could only occur in an age of recording and mass consumption is what will be termed here loosely as the "Urvoice." In Western art music, there were specific performers who were identified as creating a character through the act of being the first person to perform the part. In advance, a composer might write the music for a specific role based on the performer at their disposal. Additionally, at any given performance, the composer might have to rewrite an aria to appease the vocal range and qualities (and many times the egos) of the performer at a different venue from which the piece was originally composed. As Elicker points out, with regards to rock music and rock opera more

⁸ Album artwork played a greater contributing role to the reception of the album as a whole when released as an LP. The role was diminished with the eventual creation of cassette tapes and compact discs, and is virtually non-existent now in the age of the digital download.

specifically, the composition is predominantly performed by the ensemble itself,⁹ and no other. Therefore, the composer, librettist, and performer are one entity (whether it be a specific band member or the ensemble as a whole).

Case Studies

Tommy

One major issue in the reception of popular idioms in the academic world is the overemphasis of the 'classical' borrowings to elevate the music to an equal standing with some of the most cherished art-music compositions. Many times, these statements seem completely unqualified and have damaged the entry of popular music into the classrooms and journals of academia. In regards to *Tommy*, a prime example of this type of exaggeration is a statement from *Newsweek's* Herbert Saal: "From the rich Purcell-like overture, [the Who's] rock beat is as pliant as a trampoline and they somersault around at will, visiting the minuet, the waltz, and a march."¹⁰ Unqualified comments such as this fail to further investigate the extent to which these borrowings occur.

Another non-academic publication reveals more insight in to the public reception of this seemingly new style of musical drama. In 1969, *The New Yorker* referred to Pete Townshend as "librettist and composer," bestowing on him a role with strong ties to art-music operatic composers. This article also touches on one important aspect of rock opera when it mentions that "properly speaking, [*Tommy*] is not an opera but an oratorio."¹¹ The concept of defining rock opera as oratorio has already been mentioned in the broad category proposed by Martina Elicker.

A central issue in considering *Tommy* as a rock opera is that of its continual re-envisioning by Pete Townshend. *Tommy* began as a musical representation of the dramatic story about the mental and spiritual journey of a boy who witnessed a murder, which finally ends in a spiritual awakening. The

⁹ Martin Elicker, "Rock Opera: Opera on the Rocks," 300.

¹⁰ Jim DeRogatis and Carmèl Carrillo eds., *Kill your Idols*, 37.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 36-37.

decisive factor here is that it was first envisioned as a purely musical representation. Only later did the stage show, movie, and Broadway musical come into existence. In these later undertakings, the storyline was altered and songs were either added or deleted in order to better portray and propel the plot and enhance the dramatic quality of the musico-dramatic interactions. In its early stages, *Tommy* is best categorized as a concept album or oratorio, only later to be elevated nearer the status of opera.

Steve Knopper discussed the failure of specific songs that were added to inform the plot and propel the storyline, but did not appear to work on the album. Tracks such as “It’s a Boy,” “The Hawker,” “There’s a Doctor,” “1921,” and “Miracle Cure,” were added more for the staged performances of *Tommy*, but were also included on the album. Knopper states that “These songs are intended to function onstage as narration explaining what has transpired, but on the album, they just take up space.”¹² What confounds the argument even more is the decision of which incarnation of *Tommy* should be taken to function as a rock opera. Even Elicker confuses the multiple versions. In her case study of *Tommy*, she mentions the release of the album in 1969, the first performance at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York in 1970, and other interpretations as ballet, musical, movie, and instrumental programming by the London Philharmonic.

Elicker, however, fails to address which specific version she is examining when she mentions that *Tommy* is set in England from the 1940’s to the 1960’s and that Tommy’s father had been missing in World War II.¹³ The plot of the original concept album takes place just after World War I, as demonstrated by the song “1921,” which was later changed to “1951” in both the stage and film adaptations. Therefore, Elicker appears to be utilizing a combination of multiple versions to project her argument in favor of *Tommy* as an opera, and not just an oratorio, cantata, or concept album. Arguments such as these illuminate again the blurred lines between genre distinctions in the current age or growing eclecticism. In the present case of *Tommy*, it might be best to relegate the multiple

¹² Ibid., 39.

¹³ Martin Elicker, “Rock Opera: Opera on the Rocks,” 305.

manifestations into separate categories: the concept album to that of cantata or oratorio, the movie to that of musical or opera, and the Broadway production concretely to that of the musical. The others, such as the ballet and the symphonic instrumental rendition, easily classify themselves into their respective categories.

Jesus Christ Superstar

In 1973, Nassour and Broderick published a musicological study titled *Rock Opera: the Creation of Jesus Christ Superstar from Record Album to Broadway Show and Motion Picture*.¹⁴ Several issues can be addressed regarding the title alone. The first is that in 1973, there must have been some consensus that *Jesus Christ Superstar* was a rock opera. The second is that, once again, the creation and release of the music to the public occurred in advance of any staging. Finally, the music was then used for staging as a “Broadway Show” and was eventually adapted into a movie. A closer examination of comments made by both the authors of this book and by the composers of the music and libretto themselves reveals intriguing insights into the creation and titling of this work.

Jesus Christ Superstar was written by the now-famous team of Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber. In hindsight, any connection between these two composers and the term opera is to be blurred by their success in writing Broadway musicals. Although the line between rock opera and musical might be hard to distinguish, it must be examined in greater detail. Adding to the confusion of defining the rock-opera genre, it is of note that Nassour and Broderick refer to an earlier Webber/Rice production *Joseph and His Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* as a rock cantata,¹⁵ although it is now commonly referred to as simply a musical.

Jesus Christ Superstar was released in the United States by the same record company, Decca, that released The Who’s *Tommy*. This could have some influence in the public reception of *Superstar* as

¹⁴ Ellis Nassour, *Rock Opera; the Creation of Jesus Christ Superstar, from Record Album to Broadway Show and Motion Picture* (New York: Hawthorne, 1973).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

a rock opera. *Tommy* also had an apparent influence on Rice and Webber, as discovered through a quote by Tim Rice:

We knew we would have to be different to be interesting and exciting. We naturally considered rock with my background and opera with Andrew's knowledge of the classics. Then we had this idea. 'Why not combine the two?' The Who had caused quite a bit of stir by calling their *Tommy* a rock opera. That's how it all came about.¹⁶

Rice's comment raises yet another issue. Should the composer's definition of genre in which their work resides be taken as fact, or is it up to academia and/or the mass-consumption populace to decide for themselves. This issue will be taken up again in the next section.

The Manson Family: An Opera

John Moran's minimalist production *The Manson Family: An Opera* is another self-defined opera. Although it is not presented as a rock opera, its inclusion in this article is meant to illustrate the redefinition of opera in the twentieth century through works outside of the mainstream operatic tradition. It evokes the same type of drama and dark undertones as an opera such as *Wozzeck*, but does it fit into the category of opera? Or does it fit into the category of musical, cantata, or oratorio? At its heart, *The Manson Family* is a minimalist pastiche of scenes. It is a drama set to music and ambient sounds that, while producing a cohesive story line, does not fit into the tradition of opera. First, there is an abundance of spoken dialogue which is neither set to music nor does it function in the same manner as recitative or *Sprechstimme*.

One might argue that these long stretches of dialogue set to ambient noise are a twentieth-century form of recitative. This argument strikes at the heart of the definition of music, one that began to be challenged by minimalists and aleatoric composers in the twentieth century. Although this specific argument is out of the scope of the present article, it is one that remains a continuing source of dialogue between performers, composers, and researchers to this day. For the present argument, the definition of opera must defer to the issue of music as being integral, not incidental. After repeated listening, the

¹⁶ Ibid., 21.

present author perceives the ambient noises as incidental, not integral. As with *Tommy*, the next section will further address the composer's claims to his work as an opera.

The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway

The recent publication of *Genesis and The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* by Kevin Holm-Hudson has once again brought an academic viewpoint to a popular, progressive rock composition. This work is not entitled as an opera; however, Holm-Hudson's discussion can serve to illuminate several of the key issues at work in present rock-opera discussions. First, the music is unquestionably rock influenced and comes from one of the more popular and influential progressive rock bands. Second, progressive rock musicians, more so than other popular music artists, favored an image of themselves as increasingly highbrow, as compared to the blue-collar music of the typical rock band. This led to extravagant stage shows, more cohesive and extended dramatic musical situations as discussed in relation to the concept album, and the progressive rock musician's exploration of academic studies into the musical traditions of the past and of other, non-Western art forms.¹⁷

The term that Holm-Hudson uses to refer to the staged performance of *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* is rock theatre.¹⁸ This hearkens back to Wollman's book title *The Theater Will Rock*. The use of the term 'rock theatre' is one that falls into Elicker's broad definition. Holm-Hudson addresses the idea as an emerging style in rock music beginning in the 1950's with performances of Sha Na Na, following through the grand spectacle of Alice Cooper, and includes the "sci-fi transgenderism of David Bowie."¹⁹ Each of these artists contributed to the extended dramatic functions that would result in the rock operas presently under examination, but are not considered as operatic by the composers or academic researchers. Therefore, is rock opera an extension of rock theatre, both of which have ties to

¹⁷ For a closer look at the development of progressive rock, see the works of Bill Martin and Edward Macan listed in the bibliography.

¹⁸ Kevin Holm-Hudson, *Genesis and The lamb Lies Down on Broadway* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2008), 29.

¹⁹ Ibid.

the musical, which in turn has strong ties to the operettas of Offenbach and his peers? This brings the argument one step closer into focus and begins to draw sharper lines around the genre of rock opera.

One final aspect of Holm-Hudson's investigation involves the fourth guideline established earlier: performance location is integral to defining the genre (of opera). Progressive rock musicians increasingly found themselves performing in large arenas and concert halls, as opposed to the smaller venues such as clubs and bars in which many rock musicians typically performed. This larger venue allowed for what Holm-Hudson terms *totalist* theatre, in which the "theatrics direct one's attention to the total performance space by providing a 'larger-than-life' theatrical spectacle ... which invariably serves to distract one's attention from the performers themselves."²⁰ Here, although not in reference to rock opera, the author presents a link between dramatic and visual presentation in rock music to one of the defining characteristics of opera: a sizeable performance venue that allows for the staging to be fully realized.²¹

Repo: The Genetic Opera

The final rock opera to be examined as a case study comes from the twenty-first century. *Repo: The Genetic Opera* was initially conceived as a ten-minute rock opera entitled *The Necromancer's Debt*²² by co-creators Darren Smith and Terrance Zdunich, who composed many short rock opera's for use in their live performances. Although only ten minutes in length, the composers also functioned as performers as the opera was staged. Another tie to operatic traditions was that the composers envisioned the ten minutes as being broken into three songs, which they refer to as the three acts of the opera. What is important in the case of *Repo* is that it was originally conceived as a staged production, in which the music was tied to and informed the sung dramatic dialogue, and it told a complete story.

²⁰ Ibid., 32.

²¹ Tony Banks, the keyboardist of Genesis, detracts from the bands apparent attachment to staging with his comment that "the most important thing to us in the songs, then the playing, and only then the presentation." Ibid., 33.

²² "From Stage to Screen," *Repo: The Genetic Opera*, DVD, directed by Darren Lynn Bousman (Santa Monica, CA: Lionsgate Studios, 2008). The first live performance was at a club called CIA in Los Angeles, California in 2001.

Co-creator and composer Darren Smith is quoted as saying that one should “look at it as a twenty-first century Wagnerian opera. We wanted to mix *Bladerunner* with *Rocky Horror Picture Show*.”²³ Although this quotation can easily be taken as an overstatement, it does illuminate the composers’ intent to create a large-scale drama in the vein of the Western art-music tradition, and more specifically to that of the extended musical and visual creations of Wagner. Even if the grandeur and level of artistic proficiency do not match that of Wagner, the tie to a previous operatic tradition is being engaged by the composers of *Repo: The Genetic Opera*. Smith’s statement also readdressed the ties between rock opera and musical (here, *Rocky Horror Picture Show*).

After the initial success of this specific opera, the composers decided to expand the length and scope of the drama and music into a roughly 45 minute show with eight performers, however, still with only two musicians.²⁴ This particular rock opera was then taken as the most viable for a larger-scale recreation. The show was then produced by Darren Lynn Bousman, the director of the recent Hollywood horror blockbuster *Saw*, and was released on video in 2008. What keeps this production in the category of opera and not the musical is that there are alternating sections of sung recitative to propel the story line and aria during which the characters reflect on their actions and position in the drama. In all, there is less than 60 seconds of unaccompanied spoken dialogue in the entire 97 minute film.²⁵ In keeping with operatic traditions, creative control was retained by Smith and Zdunich during the production of the film and their continual input was taken into account throughout. Of all the works addressed thus far, *Repo* functions most closely within the traditional genre of opera.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ One feature that detracts from the lofty ambitions of the composers is their obsessive reliance on the popular tradition of rhyming couplets. In many instances of both recitative and aria, the continuing rhyme scheme both distracts and detracts from the visual performance, as well as the musical accompaniment and plot progression.

Coming to Terms with Rock Opera

Now that opera in the Western art-music tradition has been defined, the roots of rock opera have been identified, and several rock and non-traditional operas have been examined, the path to a definition of rock opera is made clearer. At this juncture, the creation of a conceptual model will serve to create clearly defined boundaries between opera and the multitude of other accompanied vocal genres. The previous conclusions regarding opera in the traditional sense must first be mapped, then applied to the findings of the works in the previous section, and finally a new cognitive model of rock opera may be generated.

For the creation of cognitive models, this article will follow the ideas and methods of Lawrence Zbikowski as proposed in his text *Conceptualizing Music*. Several ideas from his text will now be laid out in order to better comprehend the workings of the conceptual models:

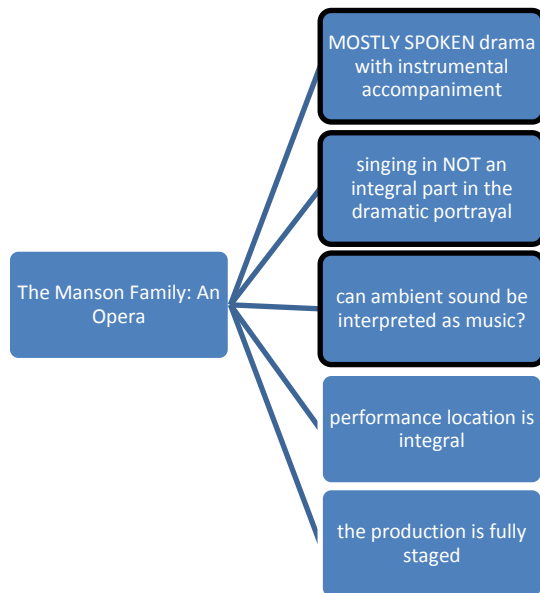
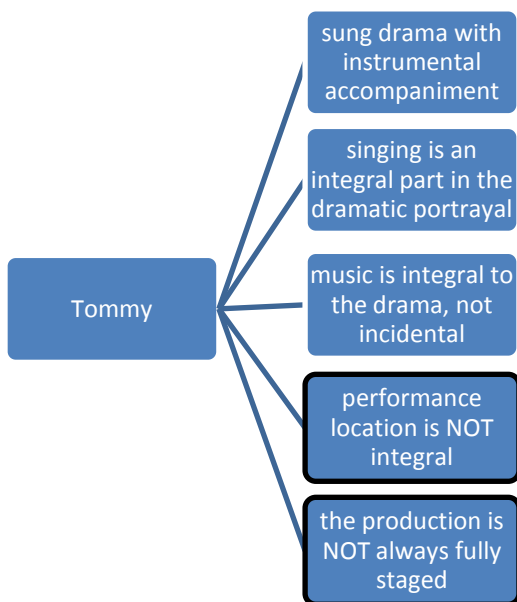
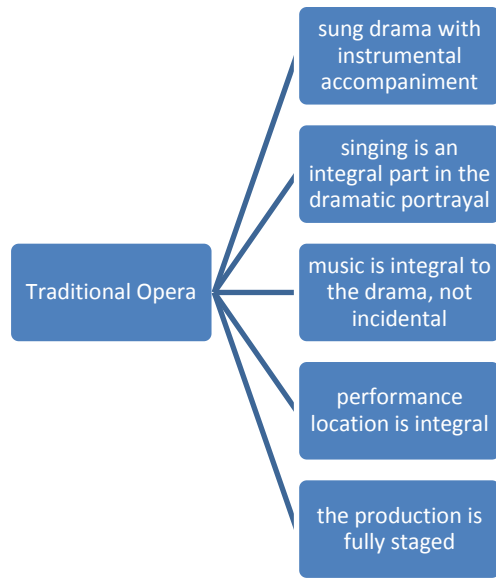
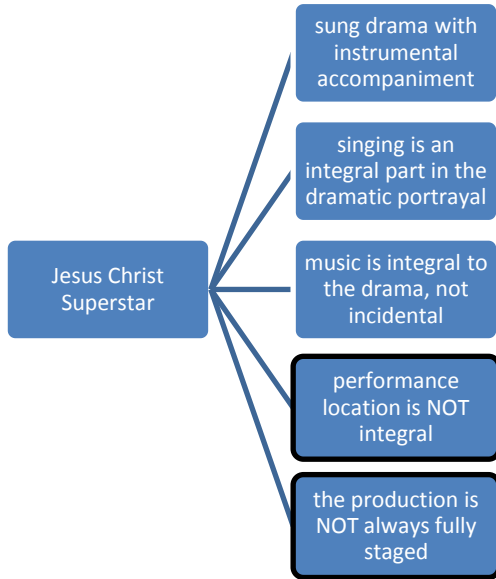
1. A conceptual model consists of concepts in specified relationships.
2. Conceptual models [are drawn] from culture, especially as it is represented by the people around us. Conceptual models are thus part of the shared body of knowledge that constitutes cultures.
3. Conceptual models are abstractions from experience – they do not replicate the outside world in all its details but model aspects of it as to guide understanding.
4. Conceptual models are a response to, not a simple reflection of, the outside world. They deal with only a small portion of that world and represent its structure in ways that have more to do with cognitive efficiency than with accuracy.²⁶

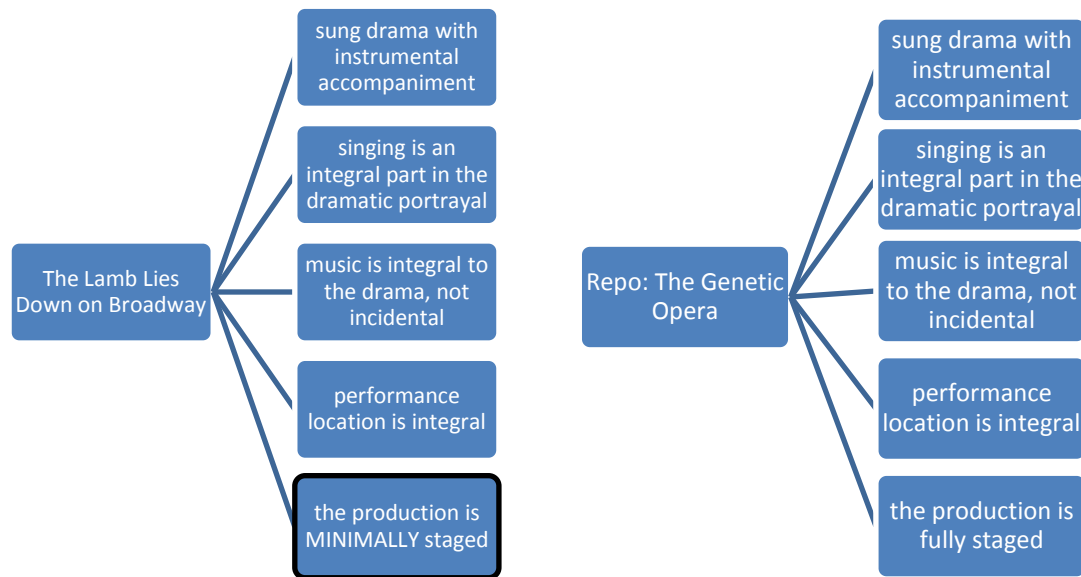
Musical genres and categories are defined by culture, the definitions of which are typically generated after the fact, as part of a “shared body of knowledge” of the culture in which the genre is created and propagated. Due to this after-the-fact definition, a musical category or genre is in response to, and not a simple reflection of, the world. Therefore, Zbikowski’s conceptual models are a prime vehicle for understanding musical genres and for examining any fluctuations in what features defines them.

The following conceptual models have been created as a proof against which rock operas may be tested. The first is that of the traditional, Western art opera. One genre-defining category has been

²⁶ Lawrence Zbikowski, *Conceptualizing Music: Cognitive Structure, Theory, and Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 109-112.

added to the four essential features condensed on p. 3; the production is fully staged. If not fully staged, the drama could easily be interpreted as cantata, oratorio, or Lied. In each of the following models, a bold outline is added to any characteristic that does not align with those of the proof (traditional opera).





Tommy and *Jesus Christ Superstar* do not truly conform to the characteristics of opera in that they were released as an album prior to their staged productions, and were available for mass consumption in multiple formats: live productions, recorded albums, and films. Therefore, these two works do not exhibit the characteristic that performance location is integral. The inclusion of *The Manson Family: An Opera* was to answer questions of the definition of opera through a non-traditional medium and to question the authenticity of the title “opera” if given by the composers themselves. In this case study, *The Manson Family* fails to conform to a majority of the characteristics presented in the proof model. A nearly complete lack of singing, the lack of singing as being integral to the portrayal of the drama, and the question of whether or not ambient noise is music (which is too large a subject for the present article) place serious doubt as to the work’s inclusion in the operatic tradition or genre. Therefore, it may be assumed that a composer’s designation of their work as opera does not always make that designation true.

Throughout this article, the most ambiguous question regarding rock opera is whether or not it should be truly classified as oratorio, cantata, or one of the other accompanied vocal genres. The final

defining characteristic added to the conceptual model, that of the production being fully staged, serves as the most integral characteristic to defining rock-influenced works as opera or not. Due to their release as purely music in advance of a stage production, *Tommy* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* cannot be shown to consistently conform to a production that is fully staged. Since only a portion of the productions adhere to the final characteristic, and in an attempt to create solid boundaries for the genre, *Tommy* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* cannot be viewed as true rock operas. *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* is only minimally staged, and the staging is not integral to the dramatic portrayal of the characters. While some staging ideas were conceived of prior to a live performance, this work also cannot be seen as a true rock opera.²⁷

Only *Repo: The Genetic Opera* meets all of the characteristic requirements contained in the proof model. There are several reasons for this. First, it was conceived as a staged production in which the music is integral to the drama and character development and is entirely sung. Secondly, the composers/performers sought to create an opera, even to the extent of studying the works of Wagner in an attempt to conform to certain traditional operatic elements.²⁸ This is in direct contradiction to the other works in which the rock artists were trying to expand the limited forms of rock music. Third, although there are several incarnations of the opera, they are all mere expansions of the musical and dramatic scope of the original opera. Finally, the high level of interaction between composers/musicians, performers, and director in the final film version demonstrates a creative cohesion much in line with that of traditional opera productions.

Conclusions

At a reasonable distance from the nearly 400 years of the operatic tradition of Western art music, a more concrete definition of that genre is able to be formulated. Through several

²⁷ The author admits that while *The Lamb* is not traditionally thought of as a rock opera, Genesis' inclination for the inclusion of operatic elements into a live rock show places it in the realm of others that are viewed as rock operas.

²⁸ From Stage to Screen," *Repo: The Genetic Opera*.

definitions of traditional opera found in widely accepted authoritative music publications, a conceptual model can be created. This conceptual model of traditional opera will then act as a proof against which any other musical work or production thereof may be tested, in order to define that work as being characteristic or uncharacteristic of the traditional operatic genre. In doing so, one is better able to redefine an uncharacteristic work as one of a number of other accompanied vocal genres.

Beginning in the late 1960's and continuing strongly into the 1970's, rock musicians extended the limits of the standard 2-3 minute popular rock-song. This expansion developed into the concept album, in which the music represents a unified idea or story line throughout an entire album (or even multiple albums). In this line of expansion, rock artists began to view themselves as being in the tradition of serious art music. With The Who's release of *Tommy* as a self-described opera, the path was cleared for future rock musicians to classify their extended musical dramas as opera. The validity of these works as opera, although highly controversial, was yet to be tested.

By examining the content, conception, and various releases and incarnations of several rock operas and extended musical dramas (and one non-traditional opera), conceptual models of these works were able to be generated and tested against the model of the traditional opera. The multiple incarnations and album releases of *Tommy* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* place it outside of the operatic genre. The controversial question of whether or not ambient noise is music and the nearly complete lack of singing keep *The Manson Family: An Opera* from being defined as an opera. The minimal staging of *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* creates a rift between Genesis' work and the traditional definition of opera. Of all the rock and non-traditional operas examined, only *Repo: The Genetic Opera* falls within the category of the traditionally accepted definition of opera. The conception, creation, and all of its incarnations

were purposefully created to align with the traditional art-music opera. Through the employment of conceptual models, this alignment has been proven true.

In this article, it has been shown that a composer's self-designation of their work as an opera cannot always be proven to be true. Additionally, rock opera is a title that has historically been misused. The reasons for this are an emulation of a previously designated rock opera (*Jesus Christ Superstar* emulating *Tommy*), the mislabeling of an accompanied vocal drama (which should be labeled as either cantata, oratorio, Lied, etc.), or the speculative assumption that by elevating a work to the highbrow status of Western art music the artist himself/herself will achieve higher acclaim. Regardless of the reason, the myth of the rock opera has now been proven true in the twenty-first century *Repo: The Genetic Opera*.