

Institution: University of Salford		
Unit of Assessment: 33		
Title of case study: Unheard voices: redressing the lack of diversity in English language opera through accent in the classical singing voice		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: March 2014 – November 2017		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Prof. Alan Williams	Professor of Collaborative Composition	September 1995 – Present
Phillip Tipton	Lecturer in Linguistics and English Language	September 2013 – Present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: October 2017 – December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact <p>Opera's exclusive use of Received Pronunciation (RP) in sung English means that it is often accused of being an 'elitist' artform. Salford researchers developed singing techniques using the accents of English speakers not normally heard or seen in classical music and this resulted in the world's first opera ever written in a Yorkshire accent (The Arsonists, 2017, with librettist Ian McMillan). The opera generated awareness in audiences new to opera via media coverage, challenging attitudes to both Yorkshire accents and opera itself. A project in 2020 trained emerging composers in these singing techniques and this generated five new works in Mancunian and Nigerian accents for Psappha, a professional contemporary classical music ensemble, as well as a commission for Ian McMillan to translate Rossini's Barber of Seville into Yorkshire dialect for the annual Bradford Festival.</p>		
2. Underpinning research <p>The context for the underpinning research was that, at a time of economic austerity, opera's substantial public funding and conspicuous expenditure had led to accusations of elitism. Calls had emerged for public subsidy to be transferred away from opera. Northern Voices was an Arts Council England funded research and development project which addressed a significant contributing factor to these accusations - that opera singers are trained to use an accent when singing in English that connotes privilege.</p> <p>Through a combination of workshops and a full-length opera production, Salford researchers sought to address the following research questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What techniques are necessary for other accents in English to be perceived by opera audiences in the sung parts? • What techniques are best for singers who are not speakers of the accent in question to learn a specific accent and pronunciation? • How true is the commonly stated objection to singing in an accent other than Received Pronunciation (RP), that it will not be possible to project over the ensemble? • What aspects of the spoken language can, and what aspects must the composer reflect in the rhythms and stresses of musical material to achieve an audible Yorkshire accent? 		

Phase One of the project consisted of a series of five workshops, involving singer Omar Ibrahim, who premiered the role of the 'Northern Shepherd' in Harrison Birtwistle's 1986 chamber opera *Yan Tan Tethera*; Conrad Nelson, Director of Northern Broadsides Theatre Company; singers Zoe Milton Brown, Richard Strivens, Nick Sales, Tom Eaglen, and Sarah Helsby Hughes, poet Ian McMillan and sociolinguist Phillip Tipton. The project was funded by Arts Council England and took place between July 2014 and March 2015. In Phase Two a full-length opera in a Yorkshire accent was rehearsed and performed between October and November 2017 [3.1].

The techniques we developed can be summarised as follows:

Performing techniques:

- Diphthongs - whereas in conventional training the second part of the diphthong comes very late in the sung vowel, we brought it forward
- Voiced Consonants - unlike conventional training we lengthened the voiced consonant to allow for a short vowel on a long note
- Vowel Modification – this technique facilitates control in high notes, particularly in soprano voices. It obscures the specific quality of vowels in Yorkshire accented English, so we abandoned it, even where this resulted in an 'ugly' tone.

Composing techniques:

- The rhythm of the spoken voice, in particular short and long vowels, were reflected precisely in text setting, based on an audio recording of the poet's speaking voice, as in Hungarian and Finnish settings
- Setting material lower in range for the key vowels which identify the accent gave the singer more control over their accuracy.

In interview with the BBC's Arts Correspondent David Sillito, soprano Sarah Helsby Hughes commented on vowel length:

DS: *So all the sounds are...[i.e. in words like 'productivity'] ...really short ends – is that difficult for singing?*

SHH: *No, it's better because there's not so much of a diphthong on the end. In that way it's closer to Italian.*

Our findings were that:

- It is possible to project the operatic voice over a large ensemble in a Yorkshire accent
- Yorkshire is easier to sing than RP
- Accents in English are so distinct that they need to be localised to the speaking voice of the librettist
- The use of International Phonetic Alphabet transcription, combined with recordings of the poet's own voice, and accent coaching enabled accents to be heard
- Relative length of vowel is as important as particular vowel quality
- It is the composer's task as much as the performer's to create the vocal impression of a particular accent in spoken and sung English.

These findings were disseminated through a series of blog posts, videos and a paper at the 'Grim up North' conference at the University of Hull in September 2017 [3.2].

3. References to the research

3.1. Williams, Alan (2018): Northern Voices Opera Project. Figshare collection available at: <https://doi.org/10.17866/rd.salford.c.3804715.v2> (REF2)

The research and development phase of this project was funded by Arts Council England (Grants for the Arts, GFTA-26389018) totalling GBP14,710. The opera production costs were funded by the BBC Philharmonic, Salford City Council and University of Salford.

This multipart collection contains:

- a) *The Arsonists*, commissioned and performed by the BBC Philharmonic on behalf of Salford City Council, as part of the Red Brick Sessions and New Music Northwest (full score and recording)
- b) evidence of research and development in vocal and compositional methods.

3.2. Williams, A.E. and Phillip Tipton. Operatic voices from the North: culture, identity and linguistics at the crossroads. Conference paper at the Grim Up North: Northern Identities Network Conference, Hull (2017). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17866/rd.salford.14015237.v1>

4. Details of the impact

The Arsonists represent people from sections of society who are often not seen on the opera stage, using accents as close as possible to their speaking voices. This challenged conventional perceptions of opera as elitist. The opera, and the research and development phase that led to it [3.1, 3.2], did this by generating greater public awareness of opera, class and northern identity as well as addressing new audiences for the artform. This subsequently led to the training of composers, librettists and singers in the techniques developed from the research and resulted in the commissioning of new work using non-standard accents in contemporary classical music and the translating of existing opera texts into Yorkshire dialect.

4.1. Generating public awareness of opera, class and northern identity and addressing new audiences for the artform

The Arsonists garnered considerable media attention following its premiere in 2017, and brought the artform to new audiences, in particular younger demographics (for example, via extracts on [Buzzfeed](#) (200,000 followers)) and audiences beyond the traditional opera community, through appearances on [BBC Look North](#), the [Manchester Evening News](#) video site, and in the national [print media](#). [The Mirror](#), for example, released an article headlined '*It's Nessun t'Dorma! First Yorkshire opera to challenge posh image of art form by featuring thick Northern accents*' and described its purpose as '*removing the perception of opera being about posh people and for posh people*' [5.1].

Ian McMillan, poet and librettist, also known as the 'Bard of Barnsley', speaking to the [Manchester Evening News](#) in November 2017, stated '*It's been an absolute joy to experience my words being brought to life by Alan Williams's amazing music and this project has reinforced my idea that new writing and music can be at the heart of what a university does in the local and wider community. Here's to the next collaboration!*' [5.2].

Its impact even extended to a [BBC Yorkshire](#) broadcaster singing a report live on [Look North](#) in response to the Northern Opera idea [5.3]. While the execution, described by [The Sun](#) as a '*bizarre operatic sing-along live on air*', may have lacked professional finesse, the broadcaster's enthusiasm communicated itself to a broad audience (viewing figures approximately 900,000) [5.3]. Responses to this and other media coverage on Twitter showed that awareness of opera was being changed by the project, with one follower tweeting: '*Oh wow, this changes everything - Opera in a northern accent*' [5.4].

The research continues to resonate in popular and mainstream culture and was, for example, the subject of a question in BBC Radio 4's music quiz [Counterpoint](#) (27 August 2018). It was also discussed by popular science writer and Senior Editor at [New Scientist](#), Rowan Hooper, in his 2018 book '*Superhuman: Life at the Extremes of Mental and Physical Ability*' [5.5]. On

singing, Hooper stated that *'The short vowel sounds of the north of England are better (which is why the composer Alan Williams, from Salford University, has created an opera designed for the northern accent)'* [5.5].

Interest around the opera was also picked up by the tourism industry, with Welcome to Yorkshire using it as part of its cultural offer: its 2018 Guide made reference to homegrown poet Ian McMillan in a section on Yorkshire's literary history, stating that he *'recently wrote the libretto to The Arsonists, the world's first opera written in a South Yorkshire dialect'* [5.6].

In 2019 and 2020 additional in-person and online screenings of *The Arsonists* were held as a further means of making the artform accessible to a new audience. Comments from audience members, many with little experience of opera, demonstrated the way in which this unique opera offering has transformed their views:

'It has made me realise that operas can be about people who I'll be able to relate to'

'I enjoyed that the characters seemed very "working class" as opposed to more traditional characters in opera, which made the narrative easier to follow'

'With the language and accent being personally relatable to me, I found that I was easily engaged'

'It definitely brought a new perception to me, and now what I think opera is/can be, instead of me having the stereotypical view that opera is just for the wealthier people within society and only touches on relatable subjects to them. However, I am more open to the idea that opera isn't necessarily just that' [5.7].

Two-thirds of respondents confirmed that viewing the opera had made it more likely that they would attend similar performances in the future [5.7].

4.2. Training professionals in new techniques and commissioning new works in non-standard English

Between March and June 2020, an Arts Council England funded project (GBP12,695) with leading UK contemporary music ensemble Psappha used the same techniques applied in *The Arsonists* with four emerging professional composers in five half-day workshops. The composers worked with two poets to set texts to be sung in the poets' own performing accents, this time in the context of contemporary classical music rather than chamber opera. Two new accents and one related language were set as part of this project: Nigerian accented English and Nigerian Pidgin (considered a discreet language); and the English poet's Mancunian accent [5.8].

A composer of contemporary classical music was one of those commissioned to write a piece of music set to the poetry. He found it an enlightening experience, commenting that: *'During the process I've learnt a huge amount about how to foreground language in my music and how to communicate a sense of 'place' to the listener'* [5.8].

The four songs commissioned by Psappha from these emerging composers are now programmed for their world-premiere performances in March 2021 and have reached their final form. One of the composers confirmed that he is *'confident that this research will spur an interest in others to further develop the artistic potential of setting regional accents to classical music'* [5.8].

Further to this, Bradford Festival and Freedom Studios commissioned Ian McMillan to write a new translation in Yorkshire dialect of Rossini's opera *The Barber of Seville*: two arias were performed from the work-in-progress in October 2019 and the final piece was due to be performed at the Festival in July 2020 but was postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic

[5.9]. In response to his commission, McMillan commented: '*I've often spoken about the ways that different accents are regarded in the UK and I think that this project shows that work like The Arsonists is starting to change attitudes*'. He added: '*This work wouldn't have been commissioned if it hadn't been for The Arsonists and the research led by Alan and his colleague Phillip Tipton*' [5.10].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

5.1. Media Headline: '*It's Nessun t'Dorma*', The Daily Mirror (20 October 2017), challenging the perception of opera as 'posh' (4.1)

5.2. Media Article: '*An opera sung entirely in Yorkshire accents is coming to Salford*', Manchester Evening News. Available at: <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/whats-on/arts-culture-news/yorkshire-opera-the-arsonists-tickets-13899873> (14 November 2017), with quote from the librettist involved in the project (4.1)

5.3. Media Articles: '*BBC newsman breaks into opera sing-a-long*', The Sun (headline screenshot) (20 October 2017) and '*I don't know what to say*', Mail Online. Available at: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4999214/BBC-Look-North-presenter-bursts-song-live-air.html> (20 October 2017), confirming exposure of the UK's first Northern opera (4.1)

5.4. Social Media: Twitter screenshot (23 October 2017), confirming exposure of the opera (4.1)

5.5. Extract: Rowan Hooper in *Superhumans: Life at the Extremes of Mental and Physical Ability* (London: Little, Brown 2018, p. 150), making direct reference to the opera (4.1)

5.6. Brochure: Welcome to Yorkshire cultural offer (2018), featuring column on Ian McMillan and referencing the opera (4.1)

5.7. Audience Survey: responses to *The Arsonists* screening (December 2020) (4.1)

5.8. E-mail Testimonial: Composer commissioned by Psappha (3 October 2020), on the techniques learned and inspiration for future work using accents (4.2)

5.9. Blog: Skipton Camerata (October 2019), confirming performance of two arias of Ian McMillan's translation of the Barber of Seville into Yorkshire dialect (4.2)

5.10. E-mail Testimonial: Poet and Librettist (1 October 2020), on commissioning of new work as a direct result of the opera and Salford's research (4.2)