

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Glasgow (UofG)		
Unit of Assessment: 27 English Language and Literature		
Title of case study: Challenging conventions in opera to develop and sustain the artform		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2016–present		
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:
Louise Welsh	Professor of Creative Writing	2015–present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2016–31 st December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Operas <i>The Devil Inside</i> (2016) and <i>Anthropocene</i> (2019) – Louise Welsh (librettist) collaborating with Stuart MacRae (composer) – together mark a significant contribution to the artform, characterised by increasing complexity of voices, narrative and themes. These works attracted substantial investment from Scottish Opera, whose productions have demonstrated, through their scope and scale, the importance of Welsh’s contribution in modernising the genre. The significance of this is shown by a film of <i>Anthropocene</i> being streamed in 2019 and 2020 via OperaVision and attracting 8,000+ views and a re-staging of <i>Anthropocene – Anthropozän</i> – at the Salzburg Landestheater in May 2021 (delayed from 2020 due to Covid).</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>Since Louise Welsh’s award-winning debut novel, <i>The Cutting Room</i> (2002), her work has engaged with complex issues, focusing on the ways in which social structures can underpin or undermine the human experience. This creative practice research investigates how narratives can be employed to reflect and impact on civil society in various genres, including novels, public art, creative non-fiction, radio features and opera. Welsh’s critically acclaimed <i>Plague Times</i> trilogy [3.3, 3.4], located during a contemporary pandemic, explores a variety of human responses to the removal of established social norms and structures. Like her most recent opera <i>Anthropocene</i>, the trilogy explores fundamental moral questions such as the importance of individual survival set against the survival of the wider population.</p> <p>The opera <i>Anthropocene</i> was developed and written between 2015–2018, during which time the concept of the ‘Anthropocene’ has evolved from obscure scientific term to a recognised part of popular discourse. <i>The Devil Inside</i> and <i>Anthropocene</i> draw on gothic tropes and literature. In addition to science and modern themes such as climate change, <i>Anthropocene</i> draws on Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s images of Frankenstein’s creature abandoned on the ice, whilst <i>The Devil Inside</i> is inspired by Robert Louis Stevenson’s South Seas tale, <i>The Bottle Imp</i>. For <i>Anthropocene</i>, Welsh engaged with scientific literature and discourse on climate change, to better incorporate resonant contemporary themes into the genre.</p> <p>Welsh and MacRae have developed the artform of opera through breaking with some of its traditional conventions. Their singers often converse, rather than declaim. Female characters have agency within their operas – still a revolutionary act in a genre whose best-loved classics such as <i>Tosca</i>, <i>Rigoletto</i>, <i>La Traviata</i>, <i>Carmen</i>, and <i>La Bohème</i> culminate in the death of the heroine. In <i>Anthropocene</i> there is gender parity amongst the cast, and there are women as well as men in formal leadership roles (e.g. Professor Prentice, the expedition leader, is female), which means that female singers are asked to use their voices in ways that are non-traditional to the form. The powerful female duets and arias, and Welsh and MacRae’s choice of</p>		

contemporary themes and subject matter – a couple of elderly serial killers, PTSD, addiction, Anthropocene – present a challenge to critics and audiences that is refreshing to the form. Opera has a reputation in the UK for being ‘high-brow’ and inaccessible to new audiences, especially younger people. Expanding the canon and responding to contemporary global concerns that appeal to younger audiences are essential for opera to have relevancy, and to continue to develop and thrive as an artform. Welsh and MacRae’s ten-year practice and collaborative creative output, with its focus on contemporary themes and commitment to pushing form and content, has made a significant and distinctive contribution to contemporary opera.

3. References to the research

- 3.1 [The Devil Inside](#), 2016. Opera by Louise Welsh (writer) and Stuart Macrae (composer) [Submitted to REF2]
- 3.2 [Anthropocene](#), 2019. Opera by Louise Welsh (writer) and Stuart Macrae (composer) [Submitted to REF2]
- 3.3 [Death is a Welcome Guest](#), novel by Louise Welsh, 2015. Series: Plague times trilogy, 2. John Murray: London. ISBN 9781848546547 [Available from HEI]
- 3.4 [No Dominion](#), novel by Louise Welsh, 2017. Series: Plague times trilogy, 3. John Murray: London. ISBN 9781848546578 [Submitted to REF2]

Quality: as an indicator of scholarly recognition, see *Anthropocene* review by [The Opera Quarterly](#); the body of work as a whole is expected to meet or exceed the 2* threshold.

4. Details of the impact

The ground-breaking opera *The Devil Inside*, co-produced by Scottish Opera and Music Theatre Wales, toured widely in 2016, reaching a range of audiences in the UK [5.1]. *The Devil Inside* attracted audiences of 1,194 at Glasgow’s Theatre Royal, 963 at Edinburgh’s King’s Theatre and 262 at London’s Hackney Empire, totalling 2,419. Its tour also attracted audiences of 1,088 across an additional eight Welsh and English venues, with the strongest sales being in Scotland partly attributed by the Director of Scottish Opera to the ‘prominence of the two Scottish creatives’, i.e. the growing reputation of Welsh and MacRae in Scotland at the time [5.2].



Figure 1: Promotional image from Welsh & MacRae opera [The Devil Inside](#) (Scottish Opera)

Unusually for a contemporary opera, *The Devil Inside* was universally well-received (4 or 5 stars) by critics. For example, the [Glasgow Herald](#) noted that ‘*Welsh's bold stroke is to update the tale to the present with all the obsessions and vices of contemporary society*’. [The Observer](#) described it as ‘*intimate, intense and unsettling*’. [The Herald](#) commented that ‘*this operatic translation of Stevenson's Faustian tale feels like a work that was waiting to be written*’. [The Telegraph](#) found it ‘*refreshing to find a new opera that trusts in traditional story-telling and doesn't attempt to sell itself by spurious gimmickry*.’ The opera was performed in Canada with performances with Tapestry Opera, Toronto at Harbourfront Theatre, and was broadcast on BBC radio 3 which attracts a weekly [audience of ~2m](#). It was shortlisted for several awards [5.3]:

- Sunday Herald Culture Awards (musical artist category, 2016)
- Scottish New Music Award Finalist (Large Scale Work, 2017)
- UK Theatre Award in Achievement (opera category, 2016)
- Scottish Cultural Award (2016)

Scottish Opera is Scotland's national opera company, one of only five in the UK, and enjoys international renown. Scottish Opera's director explained that ‘*the success of [The Devil Inside] led us to finally commission Anthropocene with full orchestra and 8 principal singers*’. [5.4]

Anthropocene was in fact the first new full-length opera to be commissioned by Scottish Opera in 17 years [5.4]. The Director noted that this subsequent collaboration brought ‘*a more substantial timeframe, larger creative ambitions (e.g. scale, more characters, larger orchestra) and more complex interactions at a musical and a narrative level*’. The budget of an opera company to commission new work is limited, so Scottish Opera's investment in Welsh and MacRae for increasingly larger-scale operas shows their confidence in the duo's success in pushing the boundaries of the artform, as well as their critical and popular reception. The Scottish Opera Director [5.4] commented: ‘*our significant investment in the Welsh/MacRae creative partnership ... illustrates our commitment to creating and presenting new work in order to keep our artform vibrant, healthy and relevant*’, adding that each new opera ‘*strengthens the sector by building an appetite for new work amongst audiences and developing opera as a contemporary artform*.’



Figure 2: Promotional image from Welsh & MacRae opera [Anthropocene](#) (Scottish Opera)

Anthropocene premiered in January 2019, and because of its larger scale, its potential for touring was more limited than *The Devil Inside*. However, it attracted even higher numbers than *The Devil Inside*: 1,851 at Glasgow's Theatre Royal; 1,646 at Edinburgh's King's Theatre; and 1,329 at London's Hackney Empire, totalling 4,826 [5.2]. Theatre Royal performances sold out, audiences in Edinburgh and Hackney came close to selling out, and the Kings Theatre opened the gods to accommodate overspill. The Director of Scottish Opera also remarked [5.4] that 'under 26s made up 13% of our audience – higher than the 8.1% average for that season'. The strong numbers attending the Hackney Empire, which does not normally host contemporary opera, also suggest diversity of audiences.

Anthropocene was also critically well-received; for example, [Opera Now](#) described it as 'tense and riveting ... embodies the spirit of good 21st-century opera', [The Times](#) as 'gripping music theatre', and [Sunday Herald](#) as 'worthy of Euripides or Aeschylus'. [TLS](#) (The Times Literary Supplement) also noted that: 'Welsh's thriller-writing experience is evident in the way fault lines in each character ... are carefully delineated and employed in driving the drama...' [5.5]. Audiences also [responded](#) extremely positively, for example describing it as intriguing, gripping, shocking and enjoyable.

Anthropocene's influence has far outlasted its run. Between March–November 2019, the OperaVision website platformed films of four selected European contemporary operas. *Anthropocene* attracted over 44,000 views before it ended on 5th Jan 2020, the second highest viewing figures after *Frankenstein*, an adaptation from a well-known work, as well as over 88 likes and 292 shares [5.6]. At the end of its run, OperaVision asked to extend *Anthropocene's* showing into 2020 due to popular demand [5.7]. In May 2020, [The Guardian](#) included *Anthropocene* in its lockdown cultural highlights and in July, BBC Radio 3's [Sarah Walker](#) featured the opera in her arts round-up as one of five spotlighted cultural events.

Restagings and new productions of contemporary operas are extremely unusual, but relatively traditional Salzburg State Opera commissioned a [new production of *Anthropocene*](#) originally scheduled for 2020. Rescheduled due to Covid-19, it will now premiere in May 2021, a major step towards the opera's integration within an emerging international canon of contemporary opera. It is now available on [Amazon Prime USA](#). *Anthropocene* has also been shortlisted by the [International Opera Awards](#) in the World Premiere Category, alongside Deutsche Opera Berlin, Opera Australia, National Theatre Tokyo and others, and it won Large Scale New Work at the 2020 [Scottish Awards for New Music](#). Finally, further underlining the impact of these operas, from September 2020 Creative Scotland funded MacRae and Welsh to work towards developing a new opera [5.10], a mark of confidence in a sector profoundly affected by the pandemic.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- 5.1 Email from Press Officer, Scottish Opera [PDF], detailing feedback and audiences reached by *The Devil Inside* through collaboration between Welsh and Macrae with Scottish Opera's marketing team.
- 5.2 Emails from Director of Marketing and Communications and General Director at Scottish Opera [PDF], providing detailed breakdown of venues and sales figures for both *The Devil Inside* and *Anthropocene*.
- 5.3 Report for the five Scottish national performing companies: April 2016 to March 2018 Annex C [PDF, available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/annual-report-five-scottish-national-performing-companies-april-2016-march/pages/9/>], listing awards and nominations won by

- 5.4 Testimonial letter, General Director, Scottish Opera [PDF], corroborating the impact and influence of Welsh and MacRae as a duo, as well as the significance of original contemporary opera as an investment for Scottish Opera.
- 5.5 Examples of *Devil Inside* reviews [collated PDF provided]
- Five Star review in [The Guardian](#) 24th January 2016
 - Five Star review in [The Herald](#), 24th January 2016
 - Four star review in [The Scotsman](#), 25 January 2016
 - Four star review in [The Telegraph](#), 5th February 2016
 - Four star review in [The Observer](#), 31st January 2016
- See also: First night impressions of *the Devil Inside*, including some audience reaction [link](#)
- 5.6 Examples of *Anthropocene* Reviews [collated PDF provided]:
- Four star review in [The Guardian](#) 25th January 2019
 - Four Star review in [Opera Now](#) 28th January 2019
 - Four Star review in [The Telegraph](#) 25th January 2019
 - Four Star review in [The Herald](#) 27th January 2019
 - Four Star review in [The Times](#) 25th January 2019
 - Four Star review in [The Scotsman](#) 30th January 2019
 - Five Star review in [Sunday Herald](#) 3rd February 2019
 - Review in [TLS](#) (Times Literary Supplement) 1st February 2019
- 5.7 Email: *Anthropocene* online viewing figures from OperaVision [PDF]
- 5.8 Email from Director of Planning at Scottish Opera [PDF], dated 13th May 2020, corroborating OperaVision's request to extend the viewing period due to popular demand.
- 5.9 Media highlights of *Anthropocene* during lockdown [collated PDF]
- The Guardian, 29th Jul 2020: Lockdown listening: classical music and opera to stream at home
 - BBC webpage of programme which featured *Anthropocene* in Arts roundup
- 5.10 Email from Creative Scotland via Stuart Macrae [PDF], confirming application to the '[Open Fund: Sustaining Creative Development](#)' fund had been granted