

A portrait of Carolyn Abbate, a woman with long, wavy brown hair, wearing a blue short-sleeved top, a red and white polka-dot scarf, and a black skirt. She has her arms crossed and is looking directly at the camera. The background is a plain, light-colored wall with soft shadows.

*Christopher H. Browne Distinguished  
Professor of Music Carolyn Abbate is  
the author of In Search of Opera and  
Unsung Voices, and co-author of the  
forthcoming Opera: The Last Four  
Hundred Years.*

# SOUND & VISION

## OPERA SCHOLAR CAROLYN ABBATE CONSIDERS THE FUTURE OF OLD FORMS IN THE AGE OF NEW MEDIA

BY B. DAVIN STENGEL

PHOTO BY GREGORY BENSON

**Just by glancing at a bibliography of her published works, it's easy to surmise that Carolyn Abbate loves opera. What many wouldn't guess, though, is *how* she loves opera. "I often imagine that my ideal experience of an opera," she explains, "would be one where I've got my own box. There are curtains in front of it; I can have a little snack nearby, and if I get tired, I can go to sleep on a couch."**

From cartoons to car commercials, the perception of opera as an inscrutable object of interest for high-society caricatures is so deeply embedded in the psyche of popular culture that the uninitiated can be forgiven their wariness. Abbate understands why someone accustomed to rock concerts, for example, would be perplexed at the sight of a typical opera audience, with many operagoers appearing "shut down" or uninvolved. But this phenomenon is relatively new, she stresses, and it isn't necessarily desirable.

"The operas themselves were not calculated to bear the degree of attention that we're asked to bring upon them," says Abbate. "So people will say, 'Oh, god, opera is so boring.' Well, actually that's part of it. There are long stretches where it's more or less just keeping time, and that was OK because originally people knew to let their attention go in and out. And they were able to do that. Now we're forced to pay attention all the time, and the pieces themselves were not made to hold that weight."

A fixture on the Metropolitan Opera's *Live From the Met* radio broadcasts, Abbate is widely recognized as a transcendent critic, but she isn't content to remain on the sidelines. She's worked as an operatic dramaturge for productions at several major houses, and she explores interests in film and sound technology as a member of Saggiataria, a group of musicians, artists and writers working as directors, designers and producers to innovate multimedia stagings of classical music. Drawn to Penn last year by the strength of the School's music department, she's currently working on a new book while inspiring the next generation of music lovers and scholars.

**Q: You just finished teaching a freshman seminar on film music, for which being able to read musical scores was not a prerequisite. How do you approach teaching undergraduates with limited music backgrounds?**

**Abbate:** The first thing I do is demonstrate for students how to really pay attention to what they're hearing. You can do this by starting out with big forms. With opera, for example, you ask what does a recitative sound like—as opposed to an aria—and how do you hear where you go from one to the other? That's really easy; nobody can mistake that. So you gradually add these building blocks, directing students on what to listen for, and by the time the course is over they really are listening differently. One of the students in the film music seminar said at the last class, "Now I hear music in movies in a totally different way. I'm constantly thinking, 'Oh, that's what that is; that's how that's working.'"

**Q: Today's college students are arguably the first true "iPod generation," having grown up with computers and digital files largely supplanting home stereos and CDs. Are you noticing changes in the classroom related to this?**

**Abbate:** What's really different, I find, is that there used to be students who were classical music specialists, and that's all they knew. They didn't really go anywhere else. That's unheard of now. Today students have such an eclectic range of things that they listen to and that they can cite and hear in relation to. It's wonderful in certain ways, because they

can hear, for example, the crossovers between folk music, or exotic music, and imitation music in opera. I no longer have to tell them what kitschy exotic music sounds like. They've analyzed that for themselves.

But it is striking that students are completely accustomed to iPods and getting music online. CDs are a kind of foreign object to them, or, in a funny way, they prefer *not* to have the material object. They really want all of this stuff to be floating without weight. The problem, though, is the sound quality.

**“I THINK IT’S VERY GOOD FOR PEOPLE IN A CERTAIN FIELD TO PERIODICALLY HAVE THINGS CALLED INTO QUESTION. IT TURNS THE COMPLACENCY METER DOWN A BIT.”**

One thing that I and a lot of music professors do—which is like a revelation for many listeners—is we drag in some old, really high-quality Deutsche Grammophon LP, and we play it on the sound systems in the classrooms, which still have turntables. The students’ jaws drop because they’re not used to hearing the incredible, 100 percentness of analog sound. So that’s a good way to pop their eyes—to show them that, even with the best MP3 file, you’re missing 80 percent of what’s there.

**Q: How did you become interested in studying film music?**

**Abbate:** Music for film grows right out of opera, historically, and there’s a lot of early film music written by people who are channeling opera composers; so it’s a natural crossover. On the other hand, with some musics it’s very different because the technology is different as well as the assumptions about how present the music is supposed to be. It’s a lot more covert in certain ways.

I was actually one of the first people in the institution of musicology who started using film and the way music functions in film to think about meaning in music. I’ve been doing that since the 1980s, which is almost the prehistory of musicology in film music. Once you could rent videos, I just watched a lot of videos—a *lot* of videos. People always ask me questions like, “How did you find that movie where

Salome is being lip-synched in a transvestite nightclub?” And I say, “It’s Premiere Video; it’s Blockbuster.” You go there, and you pick something off the shelf. Of course nobody does that anymore, right? Video stores—talk about defunct. It’s not the same; it’s like not being able to go to the stacks in the library.

**Q: In 2004 you published an influential article entitled “Music—Drastic or Gnostic?” in which you questioned some popular assumptions of musical scholarship. Were you surprised by the intensity of the response?**

**Abbate:** No. For a large part of the later 20th century, the study of music has essentially involved saying, “So what is music a code for?” You know, if music has significance, it’s a kind of code, and our job is to decode it and tell people what it means. So it’s a very distancing thing. I wrote that article to put a bee in the bonnet and say, “Look, there are certain fallacies in the thinking that music is a code,” and I tried to point out what they were—certain slips in logic and irrational assumptions.

What’s hard to do is to actually talk about the experiential form. It’s something that academics tend to avoid, and that was really the point of the article. I think the article still tends to rub people the wrong way, both because what I’m asking them to do is so hard, and because what I’m unraveling about what everyone’s comfortable doing shows the flaws of the thinking. But it is interesting to see what happens when some fundamental assumptions get riled up. I think it’s very good for people in a certain field to periodically have things called into question. It turns the complacency meter down a bit.

**Q: Audiences for opera and classical music performance appear to be graying, and opera companies and symphony orchestras are under serious financial pressures. What do you think this could mean for the future of opera?**

**Abbate:** Is the audience for opera graying as much as the audience for symphony? Because my impression is that it’s not. This is entirely subjective. It’s based on just being at the opera and seeing who’s there—versus being at a symphonic concert—and I have the vague impression that the opera audience is not as gray. And if you go to the live simulcasts, the ones in movie theaters, it’s actually a completely mixed audience. There aren’t a whole lot of teenagers there, but it’s a pretty wide age spectrum, and I think it’s because opera is multimedia. As a theatrical format, it resembles film, and I

think that makes it more accessible for beginning audience members. In other words, it's an easier thing to do, if you don't know anything about it, to go to an opera and enjoy yourself.

Although opera houses will probably not do this, I think that one way to solve the graying of the audience problem—and this would go for symphonic concerts, too—is to make them less of a religious experience where you have to be quiet and stay put. That kind of attentive, completely transfixed experience is historically pretty new. Before about the 1870s, no one would go to an opera expecting this to be the situation. So I often wonder, if concerts and operas could be done today the way they were in the beginning of the 19th century—when audience members could go in and out, and when they could converse with friends in a moderate way—whether people wouldn't find it to be a more lively experience. The problem is that I don't think the artists would ever agree to something like that.

In terms of financial pressures, this has happened before, and obviously it's a typical pattern in times of economic uncertainty. In Europe in the 19th century, when crashes or dips came, the smaller urban opera theaters would shut up for a while, and usually they didn't come back in the same form once things were better. So there was always a kind of recycling of small

theaters. It's hard to say whether this will happen now, because in the 19th century opera was a current genre.

**Q: If opera is no longer a current genre, how would you describe it?**

**Abbate:** Opera isn't a living compositional form anymore, despite the fact that there are obviously big commissions for new operas. The most interesting of those tend not to really be operas but theater pieces with music that could be performed in other situations, not necessarily just for an opera audience. It's really rare to get new pieces performed, and they don't tend to have an enduring life. In many cases a new work will be performed in one season, but revivals are few and far between; so it's a very different situation from that of the entrenched great repertory.

The book that I'm writing now with my co-author, Roger Parker, takes on this question of what exactly does it mean for a genre to be contemporary, as opposed to a museum genre. Opera, like all museum genres, is more and more vulnerable as time goes by. But I have a lot of faith in technology. Despite the fact that small theaters may close, I think that more people will experience opera, because it's bound to become more of a technologically distributed phenomenon. ♦

## LOATHLY LADY LIVE

The Penn Humanities Forum celebrated the close of its 10th anniversary year with the world premiere of an original, sung-through comic opera inspired by Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale*. Librettist and Richard L. Fisher Professor of English Wendy Steiner describes *The Loathly Lady* as a “romp through 600 years of ‘the woman question’ as well as 600 years of music.” The partially staged April 1 performance in Irvine Auditorium, enhanced by image projections of original artwork by John Kindness, garnered a standing ovation.

Visit Steiner's website at [www.english.upenn.edu/loathlylady](http://www.english.upenn.edu/loathlylady) to view pilot animation of what she and Kindness hope will one day be a feature-length animated film.



ART BY JOHN KINDNESS