

Love at first aria

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A passion for opera starts with an initial explosive, emotional experience. This is followed by a gradual learning process over a number of years during which fans discover how to truly appreciate it fully. Through his observation of middle class opera fans who stand on the upper floors of the Colón Opera House in Buenos Aires, Claudio Benzecry from the University of Connecticut in the USA sheds light on what it takes to develop a true passion for opera. His findings are published online in Springer's journal *Qualitative Sociology*.

Throughout the 2002 to 2005 seasons, Professor Benzecry observed and interviewed fans attending the Colón [Opera](#) House in Buenos Aires on the upper, cheaper floors, especially those in the standing room. Fans were from diverse middle-class backgrounds and had not been brought up to enjoy opera. He studied how these fans learn to feel, believe, and behave in opera, which parts of the experience they highlight and how they invest themselves once the initial moment of discovery subsides.

Most of the interviewed fans described the intense attraction they felt the first time at the opera house as something explosive, which had intense and enduring physical effects, not dissimilar to love at first sight. Then the learning begins.

Professor Benzecry describes the three ways in which fans learn about opera. In all three cases, contact with other participants who already enjoy the experience is the cornerstone. Passionate fans learn to enjoy opera internally first, responding to parts of the music that demand an emotional reaction, and then externally by reacting publicly in the appropriate way.

Firstly, they learn informally in the surrounding, non-musical moments of the performance including ticket and door lines, intermissions and bus trips to other opera houses. Before a performance and during intervals, opera fans gather to wait, talk, compare and justify their impressions and experiences of opera.

Secondly, fans learn more formally from the 'maestros', by attending classes, lectures and conferences which make explicit what fans should be looking for in opera, what features of the experience they favor, and how they should act during a performance.

Lastly, fans learn at the opera house from more experienced, elder passionate fans, who transmit opera etiquette including when it is appropriate to boo, sit silently or clap.

Professor Benzecry's research shows that passionate opera fans enjoy opera not because they are moved by it in their ignorance, but rather because they believe that opera is something that needs to be learned in order to be properly appreciated.

He concludes that "fans get hooked when they are still outsiders, before having an active apparatus to interpret the experience, or are thoroughly socialized in what constitutes the enjoyment and how they should decode it....Learning through interaction happens not at the beginning, as expected, but as the logical continuation that helps to shape the initial attraction."

More information: Benzecry CE (2009). Becoming a fan: on the seductions of opera. *Qualitative Sociology* DOI 10.1007/s11133-009-9123-7

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