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# Producing the Norwegian Queer Opera Singer: A Diffractive Analysis of Queer Enactments and Regulations in Opera

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## ABSTRACT

The extent of queer inclusion in Norway and opera culture has been widely debated among scholars, with them vacillating between acknowledging marked aesthetic and social progress and the continuing discrimination and erasure of queer people in both contexts. These debates are exacerbated by the lack of scholarship on Norwegian queer opera singers. This study addresses these issues through its ethnographic investigation of Norwegian queer opera singers. Specifically, by adopting Karen Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007. Durham, NC: Duke University Press) agential realism and diffractive analysis, it examines the wide spectrum of materialities and discourses that impact the gender and sexuality enactments of said singers, such as the prevailing gender concepts and pedagogical materials that masculinise the male operatic voice. Ultimately, the study challenges the notion of Norway as a conclusively 'queer friendly' country by revealing the ongoing and potential constraints and tensions faced by Norwegian queer opera singers. In response to such negativity, this study demonstrates how different 'touches' (Barad, Karen. 2012. "On Touching—The Inhuman That Therefore I Am." *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 23 (3): 206–223) within Norwegian opera culture might produce new and self-affirming queer operatic lives.

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My issue with opera is not that you have to play differently from the body that you are born [with] or how you feel with your sexuality; the problem is that we don't perform more operas that are different. That's probably the issue—that the heteronormative body is what we perform because it's [in] the operas that are the most popular ... There is a lot of hype around queer identity right now, so there is a lot of drag in opera ... I feel that it is very much encouraged [of opera creators] to have a queer identity take on it. (Philip, interview transcript, 2023)

How can one make sense of this seemingly contradictory statement made by Philip, a Norwegian queer opera singer? It hints at the complexity of queer inclusion in Norway's opera culture and the array of competing factors that produce queer opera

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singers' realities. Indeed, opera's relationship to gender and sexuality has been a complicated one. For though the genre has been criticised for its representation of gender stereotypes (Jarman 2013), the abject representations of gender non-normative characters (Harper-Scott 2013) and its inertia to change traditional industry practices (Vincent 2023), opera has also been acknowledged for challenging binary understandings of gender and sexuality, be it within its history (André 2006), contemporary productions (Sutherland 2023) or in the affects experienced by audiences (Koestenbaum 1993). Analogously, the state of acceptance and the well-being of queer individuals in Norway seem to vacillate between the positive and the negative. Recent reports indicate that attitudes towards gender and sexuality regarding non-normative individuals in Norwegian society are generally positive (The Norwegian directorate for children, youth and family affairs 2020). However, there is also research that warns of the vulnerable realities of Norwegian trans individuals (Anderssen et al. 2020), and the operations of homotolerance<sup>1</sup> (Bang Svendsen, Stubberud, and Djupedal 2018) and hetero and homo normativity (Klatran 2019) in Norwegian society that are detrimental to the well-being of queer individuals. In light of these seemingly competing viewpoints, this article seeks to illustrate that, though Norway is a generally queer-friendly country and Norwegian queer opera singers do participate in opera culture, Norwegian queer opera singers continue to risk experiencing limitations and internal dissonance similar to those of other queer opera singers globally. Following this, what might be the opportunities and constraints faced by Norwegian queer opera singers? And what changes might offer new avenues of queer inclusion and participation in Norwegian opera culture that better queer singers' lives?

I seek to address these questions by adopting Karen Barad's (2007) agential realism within an ethnographic investigation of Norwegian queer opera singers. Specifically, I examine how various materials and discourses (might) entangle to produce Norwegian queer opera singers and their gender and sexuality enactments. In doing so, I investigate the many histories, materialities, discourses, peoples, socio-political structures and economic conditions that circulate in Norwegian society and in operatic pedagogical and production spaces. As such, I adopt a new-materialist perspective by 'track[ing] the complex circuits at work whereby discursive and material forms are inextricable yet irreducible and ... [recognising that] society is simultaneously materially real and socially constructed' (Coole and Frost 2010, 26–27). I, thus, extend the work of music scholars who have theorised how music's material and discursive dimensions continually entangle with us to co-constitute our very subjectivities and enactments, which encompass our genders and sexualities (DeNora 2004; Leppänen and Tiainen 2018; Tiainen 2008; Wilson 2021). It is precisely the propensity of music and music-making to allow 'that which is outside us and inside us [to] constantly pass into each other' (Tiainen 2008, 148) that challenges the boundaries between material/discourse, subject/object, human/non-human and renders opera culture as a rich site of investigation to consider how music's (im)material nature and our relationship with it renders us the lives we live (Wilson 2021, 43).

I contend that this investigation into Norwegian queer opera singers is vital and timely. Despite the fact that there is research on Norwegian opera singers and their personal and professional challenges (see Jenssen 2021; Strøm 2021), research specifically on a large pool of Norwegian queer opera singers, their lived experiences and conditions is entirely absent. Additionally, though there is research that adopts new materialist

perspectives to explore how opera singers are ontologically and aesthetically co-constituted in a performance space (Leppänen and Tiainen 2018; Tiainen 2008), research with a new materialist perspective attending to a variety of queer individuals and their lived realities beyond the stage is scarce. Thus, a wide range of factors that might shape the opera singer are left unexplored. Such scholarly absences might render Norwegian queer individuals vulnerable to society's dominant ways of doing and knowing due to its continuing ignorance of the needs and challenges faced by them. As such, this study seeks to bridge these scholarly gaps by foregrounding Norwegian queer singers' experiences and addressing the present and possible conditions of queer participation in contemporary Norwegian opera culture and their impacts on queer lives.

Methodologically, I employ diffractive analysis, as detailed below, alongside ethnographic tools not to merely surface Norwegian queer opera singers' past and present circumstances but also to theorise how these circumstances might have arisen and speculate on some of the many other possible happenings for the Norwegian queer opera singer. My adoption of a new materialist paradigm, therefore, enables me to not only critique the present negative consequences of Norway's opera and social milieus for Norwegian queer opera singers but also anticipate what other harms might arise for them and jumpstart the process of finding ways for queer participation in Norwegian opera culture and society, whatever that might be.

### Encounters with Differences

Barad's (2007, 210) agential realism is a theory that considers how multiple realities continually emerge in research as different materials, discourses and people constantly meet and entangle within and with the research field. The adoption of Barad's theory is essential for this study, as it enables me to acknowledge and respond to the illimitable and ever-fluid differences that I encounter. Though all my interlocutors are happy to adopt 'queer' as a term of self-expression and are all white Norwegians, they—Philip, Vanessa, Caleb, Margaret and Eden (here as pseudonyms)—avow different gender and sexual identities and are at different stages of their opera careers, from student singers to established professionals. A variety of experiences and perspectives, thus, arise among them. Crucially, as all of my participants continuously move between different spaces of opera instruction and production, they are in constant relations with an array of different and ever-changing materials, people and discourses. Concurrently, during and after my field encounters, I became aware of the various aspects of myself that are useful to the research—mainly, that of myself as a gay Singaporean cis man and opera singer. As such, sensitive to these differences—to the thickness of, yet continuously changing, material and discursive lives that my interlocutors and I inhabit—I adopt agential realism to harness how the multiplicity of differences that arise from the research (might) affect the lives of Norwegian queer opera singers.

Though differences in the world, including specific objects, happenings and subjectivities, might seem immutable and pre-established, Barad (2007) reminds us that they only emerge as distinct and established entities that bear impact through the mutual relations contingently made between them (33)—a process referred to by Barad as intra-action. Since the world and its knowledges are now understood to be dynamic, ever surfacing anew as they evoke and relate with other people, materials and discourses (58), I

cannot and do not offer findings predicated on the notion that what I have noted of the world is pre-existing and stable information. Consequently, I cannot produce a textual report of the world that provides clear, unmediated and unadulterated understandings of it. Indeed, the new-materialist qualitative researcher Alecia Jackson (2009, 168) reminds me that it is through the nature of the meetings between researchers and their interlocutors (including the questions posed during interviews) that interlocutors gather in memories to surface, create and express specific knowledge, including their subject positions, values and experiences (172). The process in which my participants' knowledge emerges, thus, implies a plasticity of such knowledge as further encounters with other people, materials and discourses will change these knowledge systems through and for my participants. Likewise, the happenings in the world are understood from a new-materialist perspective as

endless cascade of events comprising the material effects of both nature and culture that together produce the world. [And] [e]xploring the relational character of these events and their physical, biological and expressive composition becomes the means for [researchers] to explain the continuities, fluxes and 'becomings' that produce the world around us. (Fox and Alldred 2017, 7)

This implies that I must attune to how the entanglements of materials and discourses, including those that stem from my role and presence as a researcher, have rendered the events observed and can ever render new events.

It is precisely because Barad's theory facilitates the understanding of my interlocutors' testimonies and the world's happenings as contingent phenomena that can ever change with the world that I am able to intermix them with each other and with other datasets to continuously produce new knowledge on the Norwegian queer opera singer. By doing so, I not only inadvertently create new perspectives on my interlocutors' experiences/narratives but also reshape them into new phenomena by injecting new materials and concepts (Barad 2007, 57). It is from this operation that I continually produce Norwegian queer opera singers as new realities, including those that did not occur or have not happened. Thus, this research acknowledges how the researched field and the apparatus of research (the researcher's lived experiences, theories, tools and angles of observation) are intimately linked, always affecting each other to evoke data from the world and to generate new realities. Correspondingly, agential realism enables me to intertwine my autoethnographic narratives with ethnographic data, transforming my 'outing' of my sexuality from that of an exercise of cathartic self-disclosure of past pain to a productive force that co-creates vital knowledge/realities of and for Norwegian queer singers. Ultimately, by producing Norwegian queer opera singers as many created realities (mainly in linguistic form) via the research process, I open up multiple avenues of investigation, including the pedagogical, economic, physiological, phenomenological and geopolitical. In this way, agential realism enables me to offer new insight into the lives and conditions of Norwegian queer opera singers, enriched by multiple research contexts or frames of reference. Moreover, I am able to go beyond the present knowledge of my interlocutors and the definite reasons for the past happenings within the Norwegian opera community. I contend that such contextual and temporal broadenings are vital for achieving my research's goals since Norwegian queer opera singers continue to become different in their continuous intra-actions with the world (Barad 2007, 151). The deep attention to

the many possibilities stemming from their rich material and discursive milieus is, therefore, crucial in anticipating what opportunities and limitations might exist for them as their individual conditions and lives develop.

As part of this study's deep attention, I dwell on some material-discursive factors that are ubiquitous in opera practice and that might remain in the background as 'materialis[ed] unseen, normative assumptions' (Wilson 2021, 51). Factors such as the 'thing-power' of non-human materialities, that is, objects that are 'operator[s] ... by virtue of [their] particular location in an assemblage ... [that become] the decisive force cataly[s]ing an event' (Bennett 2010, 9). And as factors might emerge differently and bear divergent impact across the variety of Norwegian queer opera singers, it is by carefully examining how a factor emerges to uniquely shape a particular Norwegian queer opera singer's reality that I account for how different Norwegian queer opera singer realities (might) surface, even from the same individual.

### **Diffraction Analysis as Methodology**

In seeking to build understandings of Norway's queer and opera milieus, I spent time with and conducted semi-structured interviews with the five singers and concurrently observed the pedagogical spaces of a Norwegian higher music vocal department for six months in 2023. All five singers are either studying at, have studied in this department, or have had lessons with a faculty member. Ethical approval was sought and granted by Sikt (The Norwegian agency for shared services in education and research). The five singers were recruited via an open call and through word-of-mouth, and written consent for participation, data sharing and publication was sought from and has been provided by all of them. Member checking of interview-transcripts was conducted, and a copy of this text has been shared with all participants. They were also informed that data generated will be shared and published as part of the study and that identifiable will be kept confidential. Guided by the approaches adopted in other new-materialist ethnographic work (Leuschner 2021; Taguchi and Palmer 2013), I took photographs and generated fieldnotes of various activities, venues and materials within and around the said spaces, paying particular attention to various background objects and their relations to other objects and activities. For the interviews, as all my participants are English speakers, they were conducted in English. The interview questions inquired into the singers' experiences as queer individuals and as opera singers in Norway, how they prepared for operatic roles, and how they viewed opera culture and practice.

As researching the world and its people entails encountering and engaging with multiple, ever-changing differences, 'diffractive analysis can be understood as an enactment of flows of differences, where differences get made in the process of reading data into each other, and identifying what diffractive patterns emerge in these readings' (Taguchi and Palmer 2013, 676). As such, diffractive analysis requires me to actively connect various data with each other, engendering new and different knowledge sets to form plural understandings of the world. To begin my diffractive approach, I first engaged with my transcriptions, fieldnotes and photographs by studying them multiple times as individual units of data. After which, I shuffled all the data multiple times, as one does with a deck of cards, to repeatedly read the data with, through and against each other. Concurrently, as I engaged with the data, previous research on opera, queer living and queer

Norway began to emerge. Other co-agents that emerged were my experiences as a gay man that surfaced as memories and somatic sensations. As such, I entangled with the sea of differences, responding affectively and cognitively as I folded within phenomena. Following this, multiple contingent Norwegian queer opera singer realities emerged as various datasets gathered together to form specific material and conceptual arrangements (Barad 2007, 142). Here, I travelled across and explored multiple realities by intermixing into a reality information from another phenomena, thereby recreating it as another reality, regardless of whether it has occurred. Diffraction, thus, results as the meeting and overlapping of different data engendered a variety of possible realities to flourish between and among them (77). By doing so, I am deeply investigating how Norwegian queer singers' lives (might) have been and can be affected and changed.

In creating realities, I am mindful that some of them cut provisional boundaries that settle along gender, sexuality, racial and national lines, creating locations of productive meaning-making that bring attention to the historical and material specificities that these lines draw and, thus, cannot hold claim to a universal experience of all Norwegian queer opera singers. Additionally, due to the intimate nature between the researcher and the researched in this research's knowledge creation, I strive to make my research choices salient so as to be 'accountable for ... [the] specific materiali[s]ations in their differential mattering' (Barad 2007, 195). In this way, the created realities highlight and respect the perspectives and experiences that my interlocutors surface, whilst carefully elucidating and delineating how these perspectives and experiences are productive in leading us into other knowledge on the Norwegian queer opera singer.

## Producing the Non-Queer Operatic Body

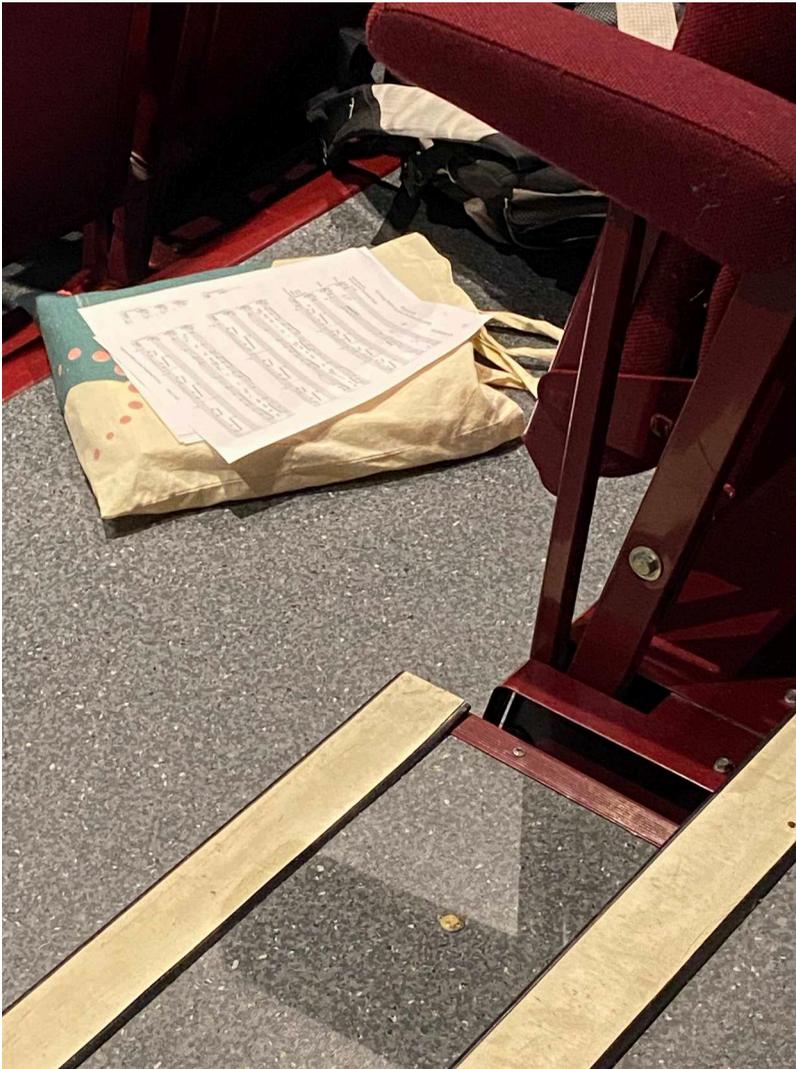
To what extent do you feel pressured to act more masculine or feminine in this profession?  
(Daniel)

I think there is pressure [to act masculine], but I think the pressure is not necessary from my peers or people. I think it's from the repertoire ... that they have this ideal, this expectation [for me] to sing like Fritz Wunderlich or like Peter Schreier [famous 20th century opera singers] ... I think the pressure to be more masculine is very much in the roles ... I've been met by people who say, 'it's ok that you're gay, its ok that you're feminine but in this song, you have to be this person here, you have to act this way'. (Caleb, interview transcript, 2023)

My conversation with Caleb, a self-identified gay cis-male tenor, surfaces operatic repertoire as a particular factor that is agential in delineating Caleb's actions as an opera singer. Here, repertoire, as music canon, operates as immaterial imaginaries—the memories and imaginations of operatic icons. Such imaginaries are supported by these icons' audio and visual recordings, recordings in which 'a synecdoche of the player's own body is displaced into a technological sphere of reproduction' (Wilson 2021, 27). The visuals and sounds of such recordings entangle with the spectator/listener by penetrating the corporeal boundaries of the spectator/listener. A meeting of bodies occurs as the presence of the icon's body, as images and sounds, surfaces in the spectator/listener's somatic registers and psychological imaginations (Wilson 2021, 29). It is from this very embodiment of (im)material operatic icons by the spectator/listener that the icons' vocal and visual histories, their gender enactments and body morphologies are sedimented into the

spectator/listener and from which expectations of a similar aesthetic and affective experience are produced (Risi 2022, 61–63). Such expectations can then act to produce singers as simulacra of these icons (see for example Ewans 2016). Thus, Caleb’s mentions of Fritz Wunderlich and Peter Schreier are not flippant remarks. Rather, they reveal the material and immaterial, historical yet present components that are agential in co-producing his singer’s gendered enactments.

A photograph taken during one of my field observations of song lectures (see [Figure 1](#)) entangles with Caleb’s story, enabling me to investigate another material dimension of repertoire—that of scores. During my field observations, my experience as an opera singer immediately sensitised me to the way scores continuously travel alongside singers as they traverse across various educational and performance spaces. In doing



**Figure 1.** Student repertoire in a lecture hall. Photograph by Daniel Fong.

so, I became attuned to how scores constantly tie singers, cognitively and physically, with the power relations that occur between the singer, the score and gatekeepers. For example, during the song lectures, singing students were repeatedly instructed to meticulously pay attention to and execute score markings by their professors to effectively communicate what these professors deemed as the music's appropriate affects. Such instructions are in line with Floris Schuiling's (2020) observation of the tendency within classical music practice to consider and render the score's information as the most important and active co-agent in the production of the singer's performance, whilst drawing less from the singer's own potentialities. Additionally, operating intensely in the formation of the singer's performance might be a conventional opera score's musical structures that communicate binary masculine/feminine affective expressions and concepts (Ford 2016; McClary 1991). As Susan McClary (1991) argues, these structures, expressions and concepts are not in essence gendered but have become gendered as 'elements that structure his or her [or their] musical (and social) world ... [that are] usually reproduced and transmitted without conscious intervention ... [as] the habits of cultural thought ... remain[ing] largely invisible and apparently immutable [to those who compose, practice and receive music]' (16). They also buttress a conventional opera's typical heterosexual and binary gender narrative that is largely predicated on eighteenth–nineteenth century understandings of gender and sexuality (Jarman 2013).

The score's immanent information is also coupled with teachers who often employ it to communicate their own pedagogical, socio-political and aesthetic views and approaches to students (Allsup 2016). For example, my observations of a series of vocal lessons, guided by my particular attention to issues of gender-sex-sexuality in vocal pedagogy, marked out an occasion in which a vocal professor demonstrated the 'Habanera' (an aria from George Bizet's nineteenth century opera, *Carmen*, and sung by the titular character who is conventionally considered as a 'gypsy' woman that seduces the dutiful soldier Don José) to a cis-female student by singing the quick semi-quaver triplets that are peppered throughout the score with bashful facial expressions and flowing movements of the hands to signify feminine flirtation. The student, consequently, took pains to mimic the teacher's demonstration. When reading this event with McClary's (1991, 57) insight that Carmen's unbridled sensual femininity and the nineteenth century discourse of the exotic feminine Other are coded within, expressed and readily read and felt through the aria's rhythms to such an extent that these rhythms can incite feelings of sensuality and sensual bodily movements in both the performer and listener, the event demonstrates how gendered and sexual operatic characters and their expressions materialise on the bodies of singers through the complex relationship between the immanent materiality of the score, the authoritative and gendered (unconscious and conscious) interpretations and pedagogical instructions and enactments of gatekeepers and the singer's materiality. Such a relationship maps and orientates the singer's bodily choreographies and preconscious and conscious gender and sexuality expressions towards specific heterosexual and cis-gendered enactments, producing singers with 'appropriate' masculine and feminine behaviours and presentations (DeNora 2004, 26). This process and its outcomes have been noted by other scholars here in Norway (see Jenssen 2021; Strøm 2021) and abroad (see Manovski 2014; Sauerland 2018).

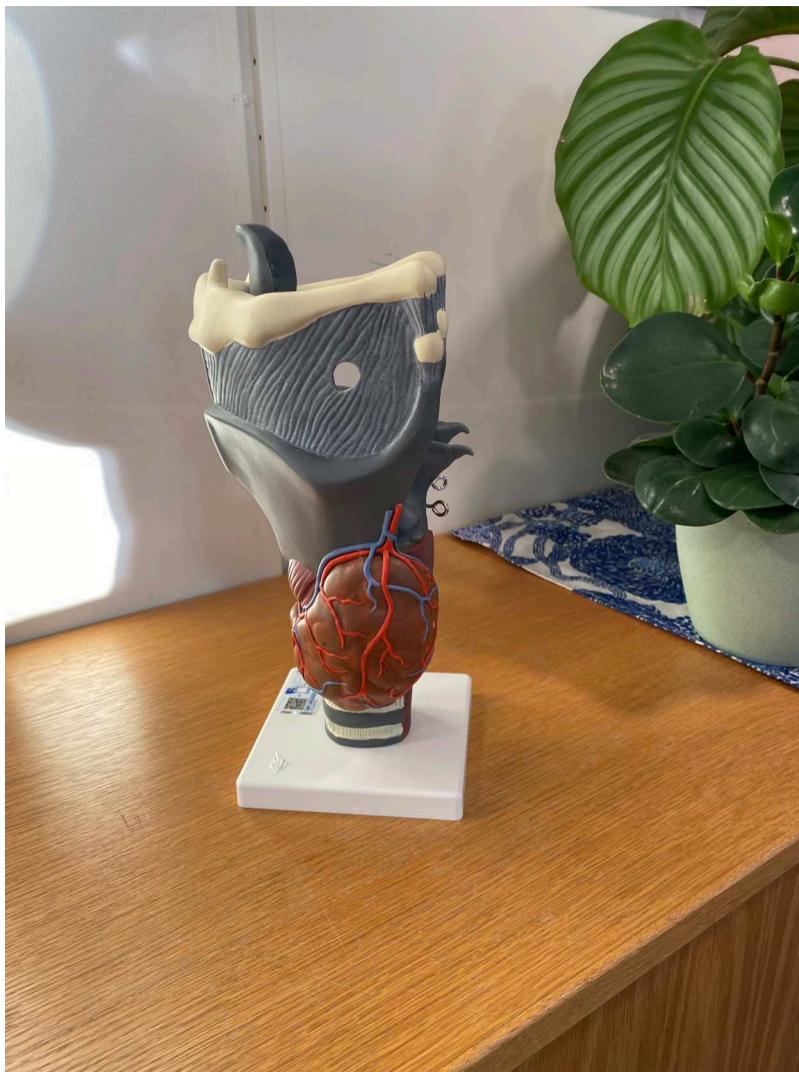
These analyses offer insight into operatic repertoire as intensely charged material-discursive arrangements that act as powerful co-agents in the configuration of the opera singer as regulated and disciplined matter. Repertoire is tied with recordings, past singers, spectators'/listeners' expectations, visual and sonic ideals, a score's immanent materialities and histories (including its iterative gender history), and gatekeepers, their knowledge and interpretive and value systems to sediment history into the singer's body. When this knowledge is related back to Caleb's account, his remarks that 'the pressure to be more masculine is very much in the roles' could possibly express the intensity with which operatic repertoire's material-discursive arrangements act to produce him as a gendered body bearing aesthetic, pedagogical and material inheritance. Such an intensity sets the confines in which Caleb can move his body and from which his corporeal feminine self-expressions recede from operatic spaces. And whilst many opera singers, including queer opera singers, do find pleasure in becoming different personalities via opera (a reality which I will illustrate later), opera repertoire and opera's prevailing push for a singer to become particular gendered and sexual characters create specific pressure points for Caleb.

### Producing the Non-Queer Operatic Voice

Caleb also surfaces his experience of identity dissonance that is tied to his voice:

I think there is a barrier [to] actually learning classical singing technique as a male singer because I hate the ... over lowering [of the] larynx ... and I think [that] I always [have] been more in love with the soprano voice aesthetic, a light soprano, so for me it's been difficult because I know my instrument requires me to develop a more masculine sound ... but I find that if I could choose, I would like to sing like Mimi, or [other] more feminine roles, because those are more in tune with my musicality or like my musical identity. (Caleb, interview transcript, 2023)

I read Caleb's remarks on the movement of his larynx into a photograph of a larynx model taken from inside a voice professor's vocal studio ([Figure 2](#)). The model stood between an anatomy chart of the pharynx and larynx and shelves of music scores. The model and its place in the vocal studio is a materialisation of the historical entanglement between vocal technique and vocal science that has been sedimented into opera culture and pedagogy. According to musicologist and vocal pedagogist James Stark (2008, 38–41), the increasing anatomical inquiries into the vocal tract by both vocal pedagogues and scientists during the nineteenth century paved the way to entrench what were once more speculative voice theories, such as the lowered larynx during operatic singing, as classical singing physiology best practice. These inquiries gained further momentum with the advent of anatomical observation instruments to develop knowledge systems of the anatomical schematics and operations of the vocal apparatus which bridged the gap between traditional vocal practice and scientific knowledge (Stark 2008, xxii–xxiii). As such, not only does the larynx model index a whole series of scientific and classical singing knowledge systems that act to shape the singer's voice, the very making of the larynx model and its presence in the vocal studio is the material outcome of the historical marriage between scientific observations, instruments and vocal singing discursive practices.



**Figure 2.** A larynx model in a vocal studio. Photograph by Daniel Fong.

Certainly, the larynx model can be taken apart to demonstrate the tilting of the thyroid cartilage—a tilt that ensures the vocalisation of the chest voice, a resonant and full-bodied tone in the upper register predicated on a positioned lowered larynx (Stark 2008, 84). As these physiological movements cannot be seen by a singer's naked eye, the model provides an external image of internal movements, not only orientating the voice teacher and student towards certain mental imageries, physiological choreographies and sonic products, but also towards scientific know-how, histories and discourses of vocal practice and their relationships with biological material. Such a material-discursive entanglement might render a pedagogical practice guided by the perception that the operatic voice is the outcome of the bodily choreographies naturally available in the human body, whose inner workings and passage to emergence have been laid bare by in-depth scientific research and anatomical knowledge. The operatic voice is, thus, understood by voice

teachers and students to reveal itself from the depths of the human body. It is by following this notion that the voice renders for many the illusion that it can divulge the 'true' self (Jarman 2011, 27). And as opera and voice scholar Nina Eidsheim (2019, 45) argues, once the voice is perceived by others as revealing the 'true' self, it not only seems able to disclose one's gender-sex but also one's bodily health and ethnic background, however illusory these suppositions are.

However, concepts of the 'true' self neglect how gender discourses have historically intertwined with singers to render their 'natural' uses of the vocal apparatus and their subsequent 'natural' vocal behaviours and expressions (Eidsheim 2019; Jarman 2011; Koestenbaum 1993). Indeed, several scholars (Fong 2024; Koestenbaum 1993; Sauerland 2018; Stark 2008) have noted how sex has been inscribed to the vocal apparatus from the seventeenth century to contemporary times by designating the chest voice in the upper register via a lowered larynx as the most 'natural' function of the male body. Here, the binary gender discourses held by previous voice pedagogues and scientists and their instruments of observation entangle with the vocal apparatus's material ability to produce different vocal timbres in different physiological arrangements to produce the chest voice as the natural vocal product of the male body and the lowered larynx as the 'natural' supporting function. Eidsheim (2019, 46–47) illustrates a parallel practice in the context of vocal pedagogy and race where she notes how the reductive discourse of non-white-presenting singers' bodies and voices as 'naturally' more 'visceral' as compared to their white-presenting counterparts directly impacts how their voices, and particularly vocal timbres, are stereotypically shaped and perceived by vocal pedagogues. Thus, opera pedagogy actively co-constructs a singer's identity, including his/her/their gender and race, materialising them as and through the singer's voice and reinforcing them by determining how their vocal timbres are treated and received within opera practice and culture. What happens, then, if a singer is not gender normative and white-presenting? What interconnecting gender and race-related tensions and limitations might the singer experience in terms of his/her/their voice? These questions leave open realities to be explored, especially within a Norwegian context, perhaps when a number of non-white presenting Norwegian opera singers participate in similar research in the future.

So strong are the effects of discourses in vocal pedagogy that, in the context of gender-sex, when the 'natural' male chest voice is abandoned by singers either by falsetto or by a thin and less resonant and weighted voice in the upper register, anxieties over the voice's and, thus, body's 'unnaturalness' and their propensity to slip into other 'unnatural' gender and sexual behaviours surface among vocal pedagogues and opera audiences (Fong 2024; Koestenbaum 1993). Indeed, my field observations surfaced the 'natural' relationship between the chest voice and appropriate masculine and heterosexual behaviours in the vocal studio. For when a cis-male student was taught 'Non siate ritrosi' (an aria from Mozart's opera *Così fan tutte* in which the male character, Guglielmo, attempts to seduce and flirt with the lady Fiordeligi), his vocal professor not only demonstrated certain bodily gestures that connoted machismo masculinity but also guided him to lower his larynx further, maximising the darker timbre of the student's chest voice. These interventions were meant to work together to enable the student to convincingly perform the traditional version of the character.

Reading these analyses back into Caleb's reality, I can theorise that Caleb's vocal approach and qualities are co-produced by agential physiological and anatomical

knowledge systems, essentialist discourses on sex, gender and sexuality, and pedagogical materials which are themselves material-discursive phenomena (such as the larynx model). Such an arrangement accords the male sex to Caleb's vocal apparatus, naturalising the link between his larynx and a voice that connotes manhood. Thus, this might explain why Caleb remarked that '[his] instrument requires [him] to develop a more masculine sound' as he is produced as a singer with a specific laryngeal choreography and gendered vocal aesthetic, both of which he has deemed as implicitly natural functions of his male vocal apparatus. Caleb, however, evokes mental images of soprano singers and roles, their lighter-weighted voices, and his penchant for feminine vocal expressions. It is from these conflicting positions that Caleb is produced as a queer opera singer who experiences vocal identity tensions. Limited by his sense of sex, his laryngeal choreography and the vocal qualities he intones, Caleb feels unable to participate in a vocal aesthetic that he desires, contributing to his sense of dissonance between his self-avowed musical identity and the professional identity he was taught to inhabit.

### Producing the (A)political Opera Singer

Caleb's inability to express his queer personhood as an opera singer resonates with another queer opera singer's account. Here, Eden, a non-binary, queer, and professional opera singer and activist, shares:

There's an expectation that you should not discuss this problematic text or people [that] we still engage with when we sing—various composers or operas with very racist [and/or] sexist text and characters. And you're just expected to smooth it over and not speak about it ... I [have] received feedback that I was not hired because I was, in Norwegian, 'engaged'. Being 'engaged' is caring about human rights ... Almost like those civil war re-enactors in the USA, that's how I started feeling about it [it referring to opera practitioners]. Because it was like any re-interpretation they didn't like ... [they will say] 'That's not what we do here. You just have not understood' ... I'm like, 'maybe we can change the text?' ... and they say, 'oh we can't do that because it is legacy' ... I started to divide myself into an 'in school' and 'after school' identity. To the point where I completely dressed differently from 5pm. I did not socialise with opera singers, and I didn't have the interest for it. I didn't introduce my partners to my colleagues because I wanted to protect them. I basically had two different identities. (Eden, interview transcript, 2023)

I read Eden's story with prominent musicologist Richard Taruskin's insight that music is regarded by many as 'art [that] is without utilitarian purpose ... [serving] as the symbolic embodiment of human freedom and the vehicle of transcendental metaphysical experiences. This is the most asocial definition of artistic value ever promulgated. Artists [are] responsible to themselves alone [to] provide a model of human selfreali[s]ation' (2009, 339). Read in this light, it is possible to understand how Eden's opera gatekeepers deemed them as exhibiting unmusical and unprofessional behaviours since being 'engaged' and 'caring about human rights' were understood as unproductive and superfluous activities vis-à-vis the professional requirements of the Norwegian opera singer.

Additionally, Eden's mentioning of 'civil war re-enactors in the USA' leads me into Rebecca Schneider's (2011, 139) ethnographic research into precisely that community. Schneider reveals that the investment in melding, as authentically, the past with the present and the intensity of an affective experience of the 'real' past for re-enactors

was supported by material props. These props' substantial presences indexed the many past and present contexts and applications of the actual objects that they simulate to offer re-enactors a sense of authenticity. Reading Schneider's insights back into Eden's account reveals how materials like libretti (opera texts) can be crucial in sustaining the sense of contact with the past for many opera practitioners—hence, the imperative to abide with a libretto's original language to sustain a legacy. As such, the continuing presence of opera's historical cultural materials, the discourse of music as apolitical art and the related expectation of an apolitical opera singer might be intensive co-agents in Eden's reality. Such an arrangement intertwines with Eden's political consciousness to produce a psychological disjuncture between Eden's singer identity and their personal-political identity. These identities become further materially demarcated by Eden's strategic clothing changes after 5pm and their choice of not intermixing their social circles. Thus, during their time in opera training, Eden began to (re)produce daily different material-discursive realities that contained different sets of psychological, political, human and non-human material components to negotiate their sense of personhood.

My candid interactions with Eden rendered another painful account that detailed an incident that occurred after an opera performance that they were involved in, and which addressed and expressed issues surrounding queer ways-of-living:

... in the audience ... one of them ... [said] 'I don't care what you do if you're gay, I don't care what you do in your own bed, I don't care what you do at home. But I don't really see the need for all this. What is the point because we are playing characters'. And I had quite a visceral reaction to this question, and I was very confrontational. I said, 'that is [the] exact same thing as saying—as long as you keep your sexuality behind closed doors, I accept you ... this is one of the most common homophobic comments that is used'. (Eden, interview transcript, 2023)

Eden's account pulls me into Liora Gvion's (2020) ethnographic investigation into professional gay cis-male opera singers in North America and Israel that details how these singers were required by gatekeepers, including gay gatekeepers, to conceal their sexual identities and conform to hegemonic masculine gender performances to gain professional acceptance. Such impositions are chiefly due to said gatekeeper's narrow valorisation of heterosexual and binary cisgender expressions. Furthermore, I read the account into Norwegian research that reveals hetero- and cis-normativity as the unreflective *modus operandi* in Norwegian society (Hellesund 2021; Røthing and Bang Svendsen 2010). Consequently, when a non-normative individual does stand out, such an occasion is viewed as less favourable vis-à-vis hetero-cis-normativity and considered an irregular crossing of the private sphere into the public one on the part of the individual rather than the consequence of society's normativity (Hellesund 2021). When all these data and Eden's account entangle, the heated exchange reconfigures to be understood as a synthesis of Norway's and opera culture's dominant and privileged hetero and cis-normative practices, the opera performance, and the queer singers. And as these factors come together, a sense of impropriety and illegitimacy for 'private' sexuality and gender acts to unfold out of the Norwegian public space and a sense of judgement that self-identity-expressing singers are unprofessional for the speaking audience member emerges. Correspondingly, Eden's encounter with these perspectives and the audience member evokes their bodily reaction, sense of indignation and verbal retort. Ergo, Eden's

account highlights how gender and sexuality—and, by extension, gender and sexual politics—on the opera stage are circumscribed by long-held, unreflective operatic and social practices, subjecting queer opera singers to criticism and even calls for censure.

### Producing the Queer Opera Singer

Philip, a white Norwegian, self-identified gay and cis-male professional singer, offers an account that interferes with concretising the notion of queer erasure in opera as it leads this research into another reality:

I guess my sexual identity does help inform me on stage, as if I am to play someone camp or queer, I have the references. Because I have been in it and I am queer, so it's always easier as it is more accessible to me. Whilst a straight person might find it offensive as they will be afraid to offend anyone by being in drag. It will be less problematic for me ... There is a lot of hype around queer identity right now, so there is a lot of drag in opera ... now they are doing *La traviata* in Norway in a district where they will have a queer take on it. (Philip, interview transcript, 2023)

Philip's reality is constituted by human co-agents who see value in engaging with queer discursive practices in opera. These human co-agents possibly emerge alongside the common discourse of Norway's generally positive attitude towards queer individuals (The Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs 2020) and, thus, arguably function within a 'post-gay world' (Ghaziani 2011) where queer culture and presence enter the mainstream and begin to occupy previously more heteronormative spaces with relative ease. Material manifestations of such an occupation can be observed in the numerous Pride flags that pepper the major Norwegian city where this study is situated (even after Norway's Pride month), ranging from outside fast-food restaurants to city museums (see Figure 3). Such material manifestations facilitate the public circulation of queer presences that buttress the perception of Norway as a queer-inclusive society. Additionally, Philip's story surfaces another intensive co-agent in the constitution of a Norwegian queer opera singer—that of camp and drag. Philip seemingly orientates himself towards discursive practices that obfuscate gender expressions and valorise artifice and spectacle (Babuscio 1999). Such practices have roots and continue to operate in queer communities and have been long-standing in Western arts and media and, thus, are familiar to many in the Global West and regions influenced by the West (Altman 2001, 91–92). For Philip, camp and drag, as discursive practices, are comfortable and easy for him to adopt since he views them as part of what it means for him to be queer and gay and as something that he has gained knowledge of by residing in queer socio-cultural spaces. As such, Norway's 'post-gay' attitude, its material manifestations and the queer discursive practices of camp and drag might be agential factors that entangle with queer-embracing opera gatekeepers to produce Philip's gender non-conforming expressions. In doing so, Philip experiences a sense of connection between his queer life and opera, and even a sense of career advantage as compared to his straight peers.

By reading Philip's account into institutional reports on Norwegian opera companies, I am able to speculate how other material and discursive factors might co-constitute changes to the singer's body—factors such as the Norwegian National Opera's standing policy to broaden its audience base (particularly towards children and youth) through



**Figure 3.** A pride poster displayed outside a Norwegian museum. Photograph by Daniel Fong.

embracing new aesthetic approaches (Røyseng, Fagerholt, and Lossius 2015). Such a goal is entangled with the institution's need to increase its non-state-subsidised income—an income crucial to the sustainability of an extremely cost-intensive art form that has already seen the institution adopting a number of cost-cutting measures (NRK 2023; Røyseng, Fagerholt, and Lossius 2015). Furthermore, a report by Berge et al. (2016) details how district and regional companies, too, are embracing new aesthetic approaches (as noted by Philip) to garner the interest of local audiences and sponsors, and increase self-generated income since the lion's share of government funding is filtered towards larger city institutions. As such, it is possible to conceptualise a reality in which Philip's onstage queer expressions are seen as crucial interventions needed to fulfil a Norwegian opera company's business imperatives. In such a reality, Philip not only gains a platform for queer expressions but he also becomes an asset person who demonstrates

the mutual dependency between a Norwegian opera company's sustainability and queer visibility in the mainstream. This reality, thus, signals the availability of performance opportunities that Norwegian queer opera singers might enjoy—opportunities in which they occupy central roles within Norwegian opera practice and culture.

However, a different but negative possible reality emerges when I read Philip's account into Røthing and Bang Svendsen's (2010) insight that Norwegian homotolerance is predicated on establishing non-heterosexualities as the marked Other onto which tolerance is conferred, and Wendy Peters's (2011) warning that queer representations in entertainment risk becoming mere titillations that entertainment companies readily offer to their hetero-cisnormative viewers, providing viewers with a sense of transgression stemming from the encounter with the Other, all whilst reinforcing the image of such companies as cutting edge and socially progressive. By entangling these perspectives with Philip's account, it is possible to constitute a reality in which though Philip gains residence within Norwegian opera culture and practice, how he is treated and received by the opera community might not be in the spirit of embracing his queer identity and expressions but rather circumscribed within Norwegian society's conceptions of the queer Other for the benefit of Norwegian opera companies and audiences. Philip's active participation on the opera stage also affords us another moment of reflection. I read Philip's account into Deniz Akin's (2018) research on LGBT refugees in Norway whose paths of recognition and acceptance as queer individuals are disrupted due to their non-white ethnicity, cultural backgrounds and seemingly alien gender and sexuality practices and expressions being incongruent with Norwegian immigration authority's and society's image of the contemporary and, by implication, socio-political progressive white queer citizen. When read together with Philip's drag, camp and white-presenting presence on the opera stage, it is possible to consider how his presence can unintentionally buttress the notion that conflates the contemporary queer subject with certain familiar queer practices and expressions (such as camp and drag) and the white-presenting body, fortifying the image of the archetypical queer white Norwegian citizen that might foreclose other ways of queer representation and participation on the stage not predicated on this dominant Norwegian social imagery. I offer this analysis not to undermine or single out Philip's personhood or career but to highlight how a particular way in which queer inclusion might emerge within Norwegian opera culture might benefit some queer singers whilst unwittingly engendering harm towards other queer singers and individuals.

## Producing Fluid Operatic Identities

Other stories lead me into realities that go beyond the difficulties and possibilities for the enactment and representation of self-identity and expression in opera for Norwegian queer opera singers. In these realities, opera provides an avenue for Norwegian queer opera singers to explore subject positions and expressions that are distant from their self-identities and expressions. As Vanessa, a cis-female student soprano who describes her sexuality as undetermined, reveals:

I think it's harder to be a gender in real life than on the stage. Because on stage everything is exaggerated, it's atypical. For example, me [*sic*], in a theatre last year, climbing on top of a bar and pulling my leg up in the air whilst singing a high A flat ... I need to have space between me and the characters I'm playing. Because I think that if two of them merge, I

think it will hurt me in the long run ... It's very important for me that this is another person that I'm playing ... [if not,] the moment someone criticises my way of interpreting [a] role, and perhaps, rightfully criticising it, it [will be] directly connected to my own trauma. And I don't think that's good. I'm trying to avoid that. (Vanessa, interview transcript, 2023)

Margaret, a lesbian, demisexual transwoman student baritone, also shares a similar sentiment:

When I perform onstage, I am an actress. I'm in costume and I use the name of the character to try to be as much as the character as I am supposed to be. I try to express the character of the story in a good way and not think too much about who I really am ... Dressing up as a male person on stage—that is just acting. Like every woman who is an opera singer has to do sometimes, like every mezzo has done. (Margaret, interview transcript, 2023)

In these realities, Vanessa and Margaret thrive on opera's extremity, its combination of 'the hysterici[s]ation of [the] voice ... the extremity of the situation in which ... the character finds himself[er]self/themselves] ... and also that extremity that comes from the paradoxical conjunction of artifice and naturalism in the genre itself' (Levin 2007, 194). Here, the performance space, the extended gendered and non-gendered choreographies of the body (including the vocal apparatus), the material presence of the operatic voice and the costumes entangle with the singer's imaginations of the character-to-be-portrayed to produce a physical, sonic, sensory and psychological being, a specific material-discursive arrangement, which the singers perceive as one that is different from quotidian life. Hence, Vanessa and Margaret are '[t]rying out new appendages ... producing and absorbing differences of every possible kind in a radical undoing of 'kind' as essential difference: [their] identities [are] the undoing of identity' (Barad 2015, 401). For Vanessa, such undoing of self-identity is crucial to her sense of well-being as it forestalls any traumas that might inadvertently surface whilst she operates as a singer. For Margaret, her plays with differences in opera are sojourns—sojourns that draw legitimacy from the historical gender plays of mezzo trouser roles (see André 2006), but which enable Margaret to create and envision herself anew.

## Producing Immobile Operatic Identities

As much as Margaret recognises her ability to be gender fluid on the opera stage, she shares that some gatekeepers in the opera community do not deem her so. Here, she also expresses how she feels unfairly disadvantaged as compared to her other queer peers, particularly those who only avow non-normative sexualities. Perhaps it was my presence as a gay cis-male baritone and my spending some time building a sense of trust and camaraderie between her and me that allowed Margaret to offer me her frank account:

For a homosexual or lesbian or bisexual person, it's easier for them because they don't need to tell people, 'Oh I'm gay!' but for me, as a woman who is a baritone, I always have to explain myself and that's really frustrating and some people won't hire people when they know they are LGBT ... I have been on hormones for a while, and my voice hasn't changed. We [as trans singers] still do baritone roles and do [them] great ... [my voice teacher] keeps telling me that 'people should not judge my personality or who I am, they should only judge what I'm doing on stage', because if they had only judged what I have been doing on stage, then most likely I would have passed the [music conservatoire] auditions. (Margaret, interview transcript, 2023)

Listening to, transcribing and reading Margaret's painful sharing evoked for me waves of bodily discomfort and unpleasant memories of my own attempts at passing and fraught identity disclosures. Memories such as the time that I had to switch out the wood-framed photographs of my ex-partner and me to those of my family in my London flat to ensure that my Singaporean and deeply Catholic relatives would not discover my sexuality when they came to visit. And the time when the disclosure of my sexuality to my relatives required lengthy explanations on my part, though it was made easier by my display of gay couple photographs. In any case, I did not stave off my relatives' rejection. Indeed, apart from the affective experiences of pain, the above memories remind me that the realities of (non)passing always involve material dimensions since the things that we interact with and the things we consume not only reflect our sex, gender and sexual identities, they are also agential in the production of the kinds of gender-sexuality-sex arrangements that we are and our sense of said arrangements (Graham 2004).

Nevertheless, despite how my unpleasant experiences might bear similarities to those of Margaret's, I am aware of the privilege of the ease of my (non)passings as compared to trans individuals like Margaret—a privilege that Margaret herself is all too aware that she currently does not benefit from and that she had openly expressed to me. In seeking to make sense of this privilege, I read my experiences into Gilles Deleuze's (1988, 125) insight that,

an animal, a thing is never separable from its relations with the world. The interior is only a selected exterior, and the exterior, a projected interior. The speed and slowness of metabolisms, perceptions, actions and reactions, link together to constitute a particular individual in the world.

From here, I can theorise the speed and ease with which I can pass as a straight man are predicated on the lightweightness of my wood-framed photographs, which allowed me to speedily take them down and replace them. This speed of change worked alongside my relatives' perception of the family photographs on the wall as marks of a heterosexual man to produce me as a quickly transformed straight-appearing gay man. Conversely, the physical ease with which I presented my gay couple photographs to my relatives during my coming-out process greatly facilitated me in quickly cementing my subject position as a gay man in my relatives' eyes. This subjectivity was also co-constituted by my relatives' religious beliefs that gay men do exist but live in 'sin' and, thus, I was ultimately produced as a 'sinful' gay man who was duly rejected by his family. Hence, the rate-of-(non)passing and the kinds-of-(non)passing depended on how and which types of material and discursive factors entangle.

For Margaret, her rate-of-(non)passing, the speed at which she might pass as a cis-male baritone or cis-female singer or establish herself as a transwoman baritone, might be predicated on essentialist and binary notions of genders, sexes, and sexualities. Such notions still operate in Norwegian society (Bang Svendsen, Stubberud, and Djupe-dal 2018; Klatran 2019) and prevent people from recognising the plurality of gender-sexuality assemblages that trans individuals might be (Serano 2017, 60–63). Furthermore, Jane Bennett (2010, 56–58) reminds me that humans tend to perceive each other and objects with reductive vision, viewing them as affixed and inert, which prevents us from fully appreciating the velocity of infinitesimal movements that occur within and between a person's or object's material-discursive components. Thus, by entangling the above views with Margaret's account, I evoke a reality in which the speed and

slowness of the various material-discursive components (including hormones and their knowledge systems) that constitute her as a transwoman are met with cis-hetero-normative notions and a reductive gaze. Such an entanglement slows down and makes immobile Margaret's 'dynamism of becoming' (Barad 2007, 142), bypassing her material-discursive journey and capabilities as a transwoman baritone, and that splits and portions out Margaret's corporeal and vocal material and expressive properties along binary gender-sex-sexuality lines. Margaret is, thus, produced as a singer that is too slow to change her morphology to connote a cis-male character or too slow to change her vocal apparatus and, thus, the sonic qualities of her voice, to connote a cis-female character. Margaret also becomes a singer who seems to bear incongruent material parts vis-à-vis opera's cis-hetero-normative artistic practice. In this way, Margaret cannot quickly establish herself as a legitimate singer who happens to be a transwoman baritone as she is rejected or even unrecognised by gatekeepers who deem her as having the 'wrong' or an 'incomprehensible' body-voice, thereby hindering her potential corporeal and vocal extensions into an operatic space. Consequently, Margaret's burden of 'always hav[ing] to explain [her]self' could be the outcome of her trying to navigate through her slow rate-of-passing as a conventional operatic and, thus, social character. This contrasts with my lack of need to explain myself when I passed as a straight man in London due to my fast rate-of-passing brought about by the kinds of materials and discourses that surrounded me. Furthermore, I only needed to explain myself as a gay man as and when I chose to reveal my material circumstances to others, employing materials (in my case, photographs) that can be easily and quickly hidden or revealed at will. Margaret seems not to be able to fully exercise this choice and ease of (non)disclosure due to her baritone voice's conspicuous nature when she sings. Therefore, she finds herself in frustrating scenarios in which she is constantly exposed as a gender non-normative individual and needing to justify her place as a transwoman baritone in opera culture in front of gatekeepers who seem unable to consider the role or even existence of gender non-normative singers within opera. Overall, Margaret's frustrating and disadvantageous reality could be explained as the outcome of how her body-voice buttresses against opera practice's dominant requirement for singers' bodies-voices to fit within cis-hetero-normative roles. In opposition to such a reality, when Margaret wishes that gatekeepers 'only judge [or witness] what [she] ha[s] been doing on stage', she points out the apparent trans-materialities (a trans-singer's body and voice) readily available for opera practice and culture to embrace. She also envisions a scenario where she does not need to justify herself as a transwoman in opera as gatekeepers come to fully appreciate what she has to offer by forgoing their rigid cis and heteronormative concepts.

### **Conclusion: A Lesson on Touching**

This study, through its adoption of agential realism and diffractive analysis, has explored how various material-discursive factors (might) constitute the realities of Norwegian queer opera singers and their gender and sexuality enactments. In this way, the study contributes to filling the epistemological gap attending to Norwegian queer opera singers by offering critical attention to current and possible tension points within Norwegian opera culture and practice for queer opera singers and highlighting the

limitations and opportunities afforded to them and their strategies of negotiation. Additionally, this study bypasses the seemingly competing positions of a post-queer or anti-queer Norwegian society and opera culture by elucidating how and which material-discursive factors render limitations for the Norwegian queer opera singer. The study, thus, reinforces what other scholars (Bang Svendsen, Stubberud, and Djupedal 2018) have pointed out—that power forces and frameworks of inequality and oppression are entangled with those that promote belonging and self-empowerment. Ergo, I contend that in the context of Norway’s seemingly queer-inclusive society, this study’s account underscores the fact that queer inclusion and acceptance cannot be taken for granted.

The produced Norwegian queer opera singers in this study offer us a lesson on ‘touching’. As Barad expounds,

the fact that materiality ‘itself’ is always already touched by and touching infinite configurations of possible others, other beings and times... *matter is condensations of response-ability. Touching is a matter of response. Each of ‘us’ is constituted in response-ability. Each of ‘us’ is constituted as responsible for the other, as the other.* (2012, 215, italics in original)

Thus, since we, as audiences, teachers, and directors, are always intrinsically ‘touching’ queer opera singers—that is, forming unconscious and conscious responses to them that co-shape their lives—we have a responsibility to their lives and must respond to their well-being. Indeed, this research has underscored how Norwegian queer opera singers’ sense of well-being and prospects of inclusion on the opera stage are made ever poorer by factors whose relational touch confines the queer singers’ material-discursive journeys within pre-established, cis-heteronormative constructs and practices. And though this study’s realities are set within a Norwegian context, I contend that the study’s findings and analyses do resonate internationally since scholars and activists globally (see Bull, Scharff, and Nooshin 2023) have urged Western music practitioners (including opera practitioners) to attend to their mechanisms of social exclusion. How, then, might we engage with singers in ways that do not readily discount or discard the personhoods and potentialities they bring to the fore?

Here, my interlocutors offer their suggestions. To begin with, Margaret suggests that teachers and music institutions make the effort to reform pedagogical and practice habits:

I think first of all [music institutions] need to have staff meetings where they make sure everyone one of the staff and in the institution are aware of what it means to be LGBTQ ... for [example,] transgender singers who can’t change their voices and for non-binary people who are not male or female ... [and] they need to be more aware of what they are saying as leaders, conductors and instructors because a soprano is not necessary a girl, an alto is not necessary a girl, a tenor is not necessary a boy, a bass is not necessary a boy. (Margaret, interview transcript, 2023)

Margaret suggests that music institutions must actively initiate staff development in which staff become aware of the day-to-day living, material circumstances and challenges of queer singers. Part of such staff development would also entail staff understanding that different gender-sex bodies do and can operate within opera’s seemingly single-gendered vocal categories, thereby necessitating the need to broaden their gender nomenclatures.

Caleb suggests that repertoire can be expanded beyond those commonly performed within opera practice to accommodate singers' individual artistic desires:

the curriculum could be ... more varied ... like doing unchartered repertoire ... I would ... like if they [the professors] said 'ok we are going to have a concert, a lied, an art song concert and you are in charge of everything, three songs ... by not so common composers and you can find something you like' to like stimulate your own individuality and that is something that I would want. (Caleb, interview transcript, 2023)

Perhaps by giving students the space and agency to explore repertoire not commonly done in opera practice, students, especially queer students, will be able to decide and shape their own artistic visions and expressions. This is especially so since students will operate without the burden of comparison to previous well-known versions—versions that, as I have illustrated earlier, might carry with them the memories and material histories of famous icons and events that bear considerable gender-sex-sexuality limitations for queer singers.

Philip suggests an intervention beyond those within vocal pedagogy when he states:

We are trying to produce opera ... the reality is, even though you [singers] have the talent and material, you might not get a main role at a big house, or even a small house. So, if they would build up the fringe opera scene and have more companies producing, the opera genre could grow, expand and improve ... and will become a more popular genre ... [as] we will be able to experiment more. Because in the companies in Norway, [they] do have to cater to a certain normality, because if you [an established company] have one production that cost three million to produce ... you can't [just] put on a risky show with a new composer and new cast ... [To counter-act this,] [w]e need more funding specifically aimed at opera produced by the performers themselves. (Philip, interview transcript, 2023)

For Philip, queer singers' self-expression and artistic autonomy can be developed through the mounting of their own performance productions—productions that he feels would be able to take on more aesthetics and hiring risks as compared to established Norwegian opera companies who, as I have detailed, are already facing financial pressures and, thus, might not wish to push the envelope too far on what the intersections between opera and queerness might be. And given that a large percentage of state funding already goes towards major Norwegian opera companies, Philip wishes that more state funding could be channelled towards building an ecosystem of small but diverse opera companies that would propagate and enrich the opera genre in Norway all whilst involving more singers, queer or otherwise, who might or have not been able to participate in Norway's opera industry fully.

Besides these suggestions, there are many other ways to engender queer participation and inclusion in opera practice. Barad (2012, 217) reminds us (as opera scholars, pedagogues and producers) to continually probe 'the possibilities of engaging the force of imagination in its materiality ... [to] puts us in touch with the possibilities for sensing the insensible, the indeterminate' (Barad 2012, 216). It is through attuning to and constantly thinking of how the queer singers we encounter in opera practice and production, alongside the many materialities, histories and ideas that they evoke, might engage with operatic materials that new and self-affirming queer operatic lives and opera aesthetics can emerge. Thus, I suggest that we can jumpstart these lives and aesthetics by constantly engaging with a series of 'what ifs': What if we actively work to detach musical inflections

from their conventional gender associations to see what they might alternatively express? What if the falsetto or a singer's unconventional timbre is purposely used to sing certain phrases? What if a conventional opera performance is driven by a singer's political intentions? Any of these thoughts might create actions that contribute to a positive sense of well-being for queer opera singers and increase their inclusion and participation in opera culture, and might, ultimately, change opera's aesthetics as a whole. We only have to dare to try.

## Note

1. Bang Svendsen, Stubberud, and Djupedal (2018) define homotolerance as a social phenomenon in which heterosexual relationships are most valued in society, whilst homosexual and other non-heterosexual relationships are treated as alternative but secondary relationships that are mainly tolerated (165).

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on Contributor

*Daniel X. Y. Fong* is a Doctoral Research Fellow at the Department of Musicology, University of Oslo. Through ethnography and post-qualitative methodologies, Daniel seeks to examine the complex relationship between queer individuals and opera culture to advocate for queer inclusion and participation within opera culture and practice.

## Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to their containing information regarding sexuality and gender that could compromise the privacy of research participants in accordance to Sikt (The Norwegian agency for shared services in education and research).

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