



# The Singer's Library: *Queer Opera*

BY BRIAN MANTERNACH

Australian author Andrew Sutherland reexamines opera—both modern and historical—through a queer perspective.

As described in the new book *Queer Opera* by Andrew Sutherland (Rowman & Littlefield Publishing, 2023), Professor Teresa de Lauretis of the University of California–Santa Cruz is credited with coining the term “queer theory” in 1991. An intentionally provocative term at the time, given the derogatory history of the word “queer,” de Lauretis sought both to challenge the way in which gay and lesbian issues were being addressed and to celebrate the diversity of experience as it existed in reality.

According to Sutherland, queer theory encourages a reexamining of historical art works, providing new understanding and deeper insights to traditional interpretations. This informs the basis of the scholarship that is presented in the nearly 300-page *Queer Opera*. In the book, Sutherland summarizes, examines, and contextualizes more than 40 operas through a queer lens, rethinking characters, motifs, and motivations.

In the following interview, Sutherland discusses how he determined which operas to include in the book and speculates as to what conversations it may inspire in both musicology and operatic studies.

**Given the struggles for acceptance that those in the LGBTQIA+ community have faced throughout history, some readers may expect that *Queer Opera* will focus only on recently composed works that directly explore queer themes, like Nico Muhly's *Two Boys* and Charles Wuorinin's *Brokeback Mountain*. But you also highlight operas that are more than four centuries old, performed when queer themes may not have been immediately recognized or identified by audiences. What criteria do you use in determining what makes an opera queer?**

Queerness means different things to different people. For some, it is a loaded term that conjures visceral responses to painful experiences, and for others, it is a celebration of diversity and provides powerful feelings of validation.

When considering operas, I considered queerness to be manifest when someone's sexuality made them feel “other.” The impact of “othering” on the characters in these works is incredibly diverse. Not all are portrayed as persecuted victims of a homophobic society and, as our society changes, the representation of queerness is becoming more nuanced.



Andrew Sutherland

You state that opera has always portrayed queerness, but it wasn't until about 2010 that opera seemingly turned a corner and composers and librettists could be less ambiguous in representation of queer characters and themes. What are some of the most important ways you feel that turning point has impacted the landscape of opera today?

When the floodgates opened in 2010, we saw a wellspring of talent exploring queer themes that coincided with a movement celebrating small, local opera groups. Without the need for corporate funding, and often comprising groups of friends, queer opera began to grow from a grassroots process. Composers and librettists started to explore interests that were personal to them, rather than considering what might work commercially or be tolerated by a larger audience.

Queerness was becoming totally unashamed and celebrated in opera—and in doing so, reclaiming the operatic space by the people who have loved and supported it in the shadows for so long.

You recognize in the book that gay communities are becoming more visible and enjoying greater public acceptance throughout the world than ever before. Therefore, as you say, “the arts may not be needed to serve the same function as it did before queer liberation.” Given those realities, how can

an in-depth exploration of queer opera, such as you provide, play a part in moving our arts communities toward continued progress?

My hope is that *Queer Opera* chronicles the journey that has been taken and encourages conversations about identity and community. I also think it is important that many of these operas are taken up by opera companies outside of the place where the premiere took place.


I would love for pride festivals around the world to consider the power of opera, and to celebrate queerness through the performance of these remarkable works alongside the visibility of parades and film festivals. Queerness still requires large parts of our society to understand it. Being visible is an important step, but deeper understanding comes from connection with characters, and persuasive narratives are so important in this.

In the Introduction, you acknowledge the range of diverse opinions that may surface when categorizing operas as queer, and you state, “Any discourse generated by this book is welcomed.” In the broader fields of musicological, operatic, and vocal studies—in which queer themes have not always been openly discussed—what overall discourse do you hope *Queer Opera* might generate?

I learned so much about the diversity of queerness when researching *Queer Opera*. However, I certainly don't have all

**Singers • Actors • Cantors • Public Speakers**

**PROTECT & ENHANCE YOUR VOICE**



**Vita Vocal HEALTH**

**THROAT & VOICE ENHANCER**

- Strengthens Voice
- Vocal Clarity
- Soothes Throat
- Minimizes Dryness
- Helps Prevent Vocal Chord Inflammation

RESULTS IN THE FOLLOWING:  
• Strengthens Voice • Vocal Clarity  
• Soothes Throat • Minimizes Dryness  
• Helps Prevent Vocal Chord Inflammation

120 Vegetarian Capsules

MADE IN THE USA

GLUTEN FREE

FOR WHOLESALE CALL 718.514.0773

**www.VitaVocalHealth.com**

**RCC College Audition Coaching Program**

Offering an online package to assist Junior and Senior High School students and their parents. Program encompasses how to navigate the competitive college audition process for the musical theater, theater, vocal performance and musical theater emphasis college degrees and acceptance into these college programs.




Packages include individual vocal coachings, monologue coachings, prescreen preparation, repertoire suggestions, vocal prep, unified audition preparation, individual parent Q and A sessions; and college application and various website navigation assistance for those platforms.

Please email for semester and yearly rates.  
Completely online program!

[robinofmusic@gmail.com](mailto:robinofmusic@gmail.com)

**Robyn Cotton-Cobb** [robincottoncobb.com](http://robincottoncobb.com)

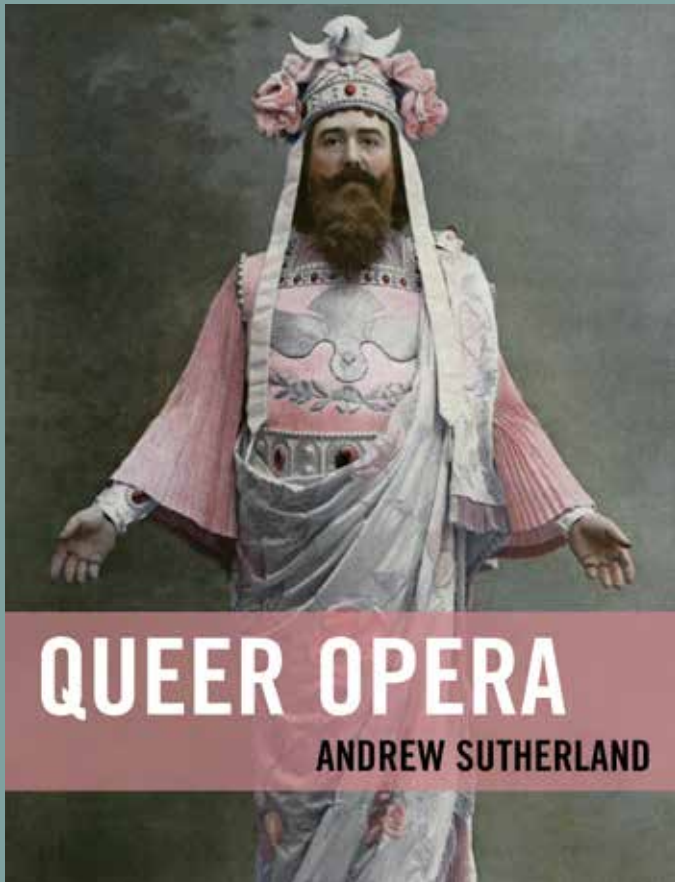


## REVIEW

Author Andrew Sutherland wastes no time addressing the primary question at the center of his book, *Queer Opera*, providing a subheading on page three that reads: "What makes an opera queer?" As he outlines his chosen criteria, some of which is discussed in the previous interview, he acknowledges that such categorization is "fraught with difficulties" and he makes no claims that his decisions will be universally accepted. A necessary caveat, it in no way diminishes the importance of the engaging material that follows.

Sutherland groups the operas he discusses into chapters based on theme, as opposed to presenting them chronologically or geographically. He feels this approach prevents minimizing the universality of queer identities and does not allow the compositions to overshadow the phenomenology of the queer experience. These themes include chapters titled "Antiquity," "Passing and Coding," "The Closet," "Hegemony," "Assimilation," "Killing Queers," and "Homeroetic Awakening."

Throughout the book, the term "queer" is used as a general term for all who fall under the LGBTQIA+ umbrella, although more specific identities (for instance, lesbian, trans-mezzo, etc.) are provided when applicable. As mentioned earlier, Sutherland credits Teresa de Lauretis with coining the term "queer theory," which seeks to



## THE ACTING SINGER

with  
*Karen Huffstodt*

Projecting Your Most Powerful and Authentic Self  
From Audition to Performance

Anchored in the philosophy of Boris Goldovsky, inspired by the direction of Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, and supported by an international career gracing the stages of the world's most important opera houses, Karen Huffstodt is committed to giving singers the tools they need to transition from "studio to stage".



"Karen Huffstodt has a special instinct and talent for inspiring 'stage ready' presence in all levels of singers. I highly recommend her ACTING SINGER Masterclasses as a rare opportunity for the young singer or emerging professional to work closely with someone of Karen's calibre and vast experience to 'fine hone' their 'unique and individual talent' - whether for an audition or performance setting."

-David Jones / Author /  
Vocal Pedagogue

For more details, upcoming online class dates, or private coachings, go to [KarenHuffstodt.com](http://KarenHuffstodt.com) or email [KarenHuffstodt@TheActingSinger.com](mailto:KarenHuffstodt@TheActingSinger.com).

Performers and Auditors Welcome



THE 1996 WINNER OF THE PRESTIGIOUS RICHARD TUCKER FOUNDATION AWARD, AMERICAN BARITONE DWAYNE CROFT HAS ESTABLISHED HIMSELF AS A LEADING ARTIST WITH PROMINENT OPERA THEATERS THROUGHOUT THE WORLD.



ACCLAIMED METROPOLITAN OPERA BARITONE

## DWAYNE CROFT

IS OPENING A VOICE STUDIO IN MANHATTAN.

VOICE LESSONS, VOCAL COACHING & MENTORING FOR SERIOUS CAREER - ORIENTED PEOPLE.

"ALLOW ME TO HELP YOU FIND THE NEXT LEVEL OF YOUR VOCAL & CAREER DEVELOPMENT!"

FOR MORE INFORMATION. EMAIL [DTCROFT@MAC.COM](mailto:DTCROFT@MAC.COM)

look beyond the heteronormative perspectives that have dominated so many academic fields—musicology included—for so long.

As Sutherland points out, composers often employed a necessary and clever “queer coding” in their operas. This allowed them to present queer characters with enough ambiguity so as not to subject themselves to the ire and censorship (or worse) of those in authority. Queer coding was more commonly associated with cinema, and Sutherland describes how it allowed actors to “leave breadcrumbs for queer audiences, often leaving the sanctioning bureaucrats blissfully unaware.”

The benefit of queer representation in opera is not to be underestimated—not only for those creating and performing opera, but for audience members as well. As Sutherland explains, such representation “provided countless queer consumers of opera with meaningful opportunities to recognize shared identity and to enter into a world that they could, in part, recognize as a reflection of their own struggles.”

Sutherland states his hope that *Queer Opera* will serve as a celebration of a section of queer history and culture. But he also warns that opera, as an art form, must continue to evolve, writing, “queers need to remain an active part of the narrative.” *Queer Opera* is a meaningful and necessary text, providing perspectives worthy of consideration by all who love opera and wish to see it thrive.

the answers. One of the topics that emerged was that of assimilation, a deeply divisive discourse that has many important philosophical questions.

In responding to whether the queer experience should be fully integrated and blended into the broader hegemony or provide a point of difference by celebrating what is uniquely queer, the very term “Queer Opera” must be considered. To answer it, we must ask for whom the work is intended, which in turn shapes the themes and emphasis of the works and certainly the production of them.

I am fascinated by the discourse and the unfolding of the changing application of queer theory in musicology, and would love to think that my book will form part of those discussions.

*Brian Manternach, DM (he/him), is an associate professor at the University of Utah Department of Theatre and a research associate at the Utah Center for Vocology, where he is on the faculty of the Summer Vocology Institute. He is an associate editor of the Journal of Singing, and his research, reviews, articles, and essays have appeared in numerous voice-related publications.*  
[brianmanternach.com](http://brianmanternach.com) / [drbrianmanternach.blogspot.com](http://drbrianmanternach.blogspot.com) / [bmantern@gmail.com](mailto:bmantern@gmail.com)



Brian Manternach

CSJ MUSIC



**Discover.  
Engage.  
Grow.**

Nurture your career in the arts at North Park.

**For more information, contact:**

Erin Matonte  
[ematonte@northpark.edu](mailto:ematonte@northpark.edu)  
(773) 244-4583  
[northpark.edu/SMAT](http://northpark.edu/SMAT)

**Scholarship audition day:**

February 24, 2024

