

MULTISENSORY OPERA

Enhancing the Senses for and with Persons with Visual Disabilities

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Abstract – Opera has long been a significant part of Italy’s musical heritage, with its arias echoing around the globe for over two centuries. However, the availability of accessible operas for individuals with visual disabilities is a much more recent phenomenon, in Italy and Europe. Nonetheless, the response to these accessible performances has always been positive and the interest for them continues to grow. This article focuses initially on a shift in perspective in the concepts of disability, accessibility, and inclusion, as reflected in international legislation and directives, as well as in practical implementations of accessibility. The article then moves on to analyze experiences of inclusive design for accessible opera performances and related activities, where blind and sighted individuals collaborate for their mutual benefit. Central to this discussion are the notions of participation and inclusion, alongside theories of action research. In its final section, the article presents findings from surveys aimed at assessing the enhanced well-being and empowerment of individuals with visual disabilities who have actively engaged in the co-design and enjoyment of accessible operas.

Keywords: accessible opera; action research; creative AD writing; empowerment; inclusion.

1. Introduction

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, music is defined as a pattern of sounds, potentially coming from a variety of sources and combined creatively “to give pleasure to people”. Moreover, as Helen Minors recalls, music makes meaning across sign systems and “the interpreter (the audience) is always dynamic and active in producing meaning. [...] The audience is participatory in its interpretative role” (2020, p. 13).

Opera can be defined as a fully-fledged multimodal genre: music, singing, dancing, acting, to mention but its main features, all speak to audiences through an array of sub-codes playing simultaneously and reaching all our senses. As Burton states, in opera “words performed with music can express what language alone has exhausted, a combination that achieves an expressive and emotive intensity that neither words nor music can achieve alone (2005, p. 14). Moreover, although often considered an elitist, old-

fashioned genre, opera is extremely vibrant and relevant today, with more shows performed in Italy and throughout Europe in the past few years than a few decades ago.

An increasing focus on genre democratization and audience expansion across various countries and theaters has led to a proliferation of projects, further propelled by European directives, national legislation, and a gradual but consistent rise in funding opportunities. Among these initiatives, those aimed at individuals with disabilities have flourished, albeit unevenly, exhibiting significant diversity in terms of intentions, knowledge, funding, and overall awareness. Nevertheless, a noteworthy growth in these principles and parameters is being observed.

Turning to accessibility studies, the past decade has brought about a steady move away from the clinical concept of disability towards a social concept, whereby the latter (disability) is seen as a permanent or temporary condition that can affect us all, but also as a responsibility resting not with the individual, but with (a largely inaccessible) society. All of this has fostered a change in vision: disability is today no longer to be kept invisible, but rather the object of efforts to integrate persons affected by disabilities in as many cultural and recreational activities as possible. Thus, participation in relation to accessibility is today a buzzword, and a very positive one. However, a lot still needs to be done, and accessibility to entertainment, music and opera in particular, still have a long way to go in Italy and the world over.

This article analyses a series of methodological and empirical issues related to experiencing opera for persons with visual disabilities, through a series of strategies and practices that have developed over two decades. The result of a two-way approach that inevitably merges top-down and bottom-up processes, the action-research project presented in this article aims to inspire further multidisciplinary, multisensory developments in both research and practice.

2. From Accessibility to Inclusion, Participation and Empowerment

In recent years, especially after the adoption and dissemination of the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) at the end of the first decade of this century, a revolution has occurred in relation to the notion of disability and, as a consequence, that of accessibility. As anticipated in the introduction, a clinical perspective on disability has been slowly but steadily replaced by a socio-cultural one, whereby disability is no longer an issue concerning only a few, unfortunate people, but rather society/ies as a whole. And it is precisely the latter, i.e. society, that has so far generally been built with *able* people in mind (Nario Redmond 2019). The

acknowledgement of the so-called social model of disability (Oliver 2013) by the UNCRPD has brought about a revolution, with a move from traditional, or segregationist (Gossett *et al.* 2009) notions of accessibility, towards more universalistic, proactive concepts such as inclusion and inclusive design. The latter, defined by Waller and Clarkson (2009) has the great merit and value of placing the human being at its core: as a matter of fact, the first of the five principles defining inclusive design is precisely *people*, followed by diversity, choice, flexibility, and convenience. All four principles that follow *people* are undoubtedly referred to the first one.

In the wake of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), several official documents released in recent years have reaffirmed and further emphasized the importance of placing the individual—along with their diverse abilities—at the center of any activities that pertain to them. This approach underscores the necessity of incorporating this perspective from the design stage onward, making it an essential element of the process. Recently, the first ever G7 summit on Disability and Inclusion held in October 2024 in Solfagnano, Italy, led to the signing of an important and inspiring document named the Charter of Solfagnano.¹ This document lays emphasis on the participation of people with disabilities in all aspects of life from its very onset (the word is used 15 times over 21 pages) and it relates this notion to the “enhancement of talents”, i.e., the empowerment of persons with disabilities through real involvement and commitment. For the makers of the Charter, participation means granting the right to take part in decision-making processes at all levels and certainly to enjoy culture and experience beauty through all available senses. Participation and involvement are also central to the European Accessibility Act, which came into force in June 2025 throughout the European Union.

Thus, participation is indeed a key factor in designing and implementing what we will refer to as *inclusive access*, i.e. access to events and services that are designed, tested and enjoyed with people with different abilities, considering their needs and competencies and aiming to enhance their sensorial perceptions. Elsewhere defined as CMA, or collaborative media accessibility (Di Giovanni *et al.* 2023), this expanding area of research and practice is nowadays widely recognized by scholars in audiovisual translation and media accessibility, as well as in disability and cultural studies. Incidentally, one of the first occurrences of the notion of participation in conjunction with that of accessibility, in these fields of study, was inspired precisely by a hands-on experience in participation of children with and without visual disabilities in multisensory workshops connected to opera

¹ <https://www.g7disabilityinclusion.it/la-carta-di-solfagnano/> (03.02.2025).

performances (Di Giovanni 2018) that will be recalled in one of the following sections.

As already pointed out, participation as we have defined it here very often leads to empowerment. For Lorenza Dallago (2012), for instance, participation means granting opportunities to poor or marginalized people to be involved in decision-making processes and projects, so that social rules and habits can be revised and spaces for new, inclusive debates can be opened. Still for Dallago, empowerment is explicitly based on participation (*ibid.*, p. 79), however difficult—the author says—it may be to achieve it.

Offering a largely philosophical approach to empowerment for people with disabilities, Charlton arrives at a multifarious definition of the concept by first referring to the notion of “raised consciousness” (2000, p. 119): by working with others, people with disabilities “begin to recognize a level of universality” in what they do, or can do, that may have been obscured previously. Thus, the “nothing without us, for us” motto recalled in Charlton’s book title clearly takes shape, and empowerment is further entangled with notions of independence and integration. By recurrently referring to empowerment for people with disabilities as a human right, Charlton states, quite simply, that empowerment implies conquering some power, and by reporting on experiences in inclusive access to opera as well as on feedback collection carried out on several occasions, we will try to demonstrate that empowerment happens and increases people’s confidence and wellbeing.

But before embarking on more empirical considerations, a section on opera, music and access from a synchronic and diachronic perspective is needed.

3. Music, Opera and Accessibility: An Overview

In opera, music is enhanced and enriched by concurrent auditory stimuli: the singers and chorus’ voices, the sounds coming from the props and settings, as well as a host of other effects that the creative team may design. Yet, opera is also extremely visual: since the early 19th century, and intending to appeal to as many people as possible, opera has been employing rich and creative settings, precious and innovative costumes, suggestive lighting effects and more. Today, in order to make the opera experience more engaging, captivating, and thorough, singers and chorus members are increasingly expected to be effective actors on stage while singing.

As Giulio Gazzi Casazza observed over eighty years ago in his many times reprinted autobiography *Memories of the Opera* (2022, p. 246), the success of operas has historically been due to the composers and librettists’ great imagination and creativity, matched by powerful, creative new readings

by directors and designers. Opera represents a multifaceted form of entertainment that engages audiences through various modes of communication. As noted by Helen Minors (2020, p. 14), “opera projects its sense via different modes of communication,” prompting spectators to explore a rich tapestry of cultural symbols, intertextual references, and trans-textual inspirations. Furthermore, Minors and numerous scholars, both within the realms of music and translation studies and beyond, have advocated for the application of multimodal analytical frameworks in the study of opera. This approach, while increasingly pervasive in media research, remains significantly underutilized in relation to opera.

Despite its long-standing reputation for exclusivity, opera is today perhaps more than ever aiming to appeal to crossover audiences, and not because the genre is suffering from scarce attention, as some may argue: worldwide-known venues such as Teatro alla Scala in Milan, the Opéra in Paris, the Grand Teatre del Liceu in Barcelona, to mention but a few, have been scoring great numbers for attendance in the past years. By way of example, in 2023 Teatro alla Scala hosted over 450,000 spectators, filling its 2,100 seats by an average 90% for every performance and pushing beyond the 10,000 annual subscriptions. Its *prima diffusa*, i.e. the screening of its season première on 7 December 2023, had 11,000 viewers in the squares of the city of Milan, outside and around the venue. For its 2022/2023 season, the Grand Teatre del Liceu managed to secure revenues for 52.4 million euros, with a positive balance—expenses excluded—of over 2.8 million euros.

But besides recalling the success of opera today, it may be worth looking back at the genre origins, its initial intentions and audiences. Although many music historians trace these origins in the plays of Greek dramatists such as Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, who often combined poetic drama and music, the first instances of opera as we know it today are normally found in late 16th-century Italy, especially in the generous efforts made by the Medici family as patrons of the first Italian opera composers. At the beginning of the 17th century, the genre took shape and was soon marked by the works of great composers such as Claudio Monteverdi, still widely performed and appreciated today. Also, as is known, the first operas were composed for, and performed within noble palaces, but their true success came as they reached out to larger audiences and were performed in theatres, where people brought their own chairs or purchased boxes to be able to host friends and lovers, to consume food and drinks, etc. From the 18th century onwards, in an endeavor to make opera in line with the taste of ever wider audiences and to ensure its commercial success, the genre has witnessed the recourse to grand settings, costumes that reflect the fashion of the day, references to contemporary facts and political issues. And since the 19th

century, especially towards its end, opera has committed to reflecting real life issues to touch people's hearts more fully². Such a tendency reached a climax with the Verismo movement and with great authors such as Mascagni, Leoncavallo and Giordano, whose work paved the way for many contemporary experiments.

If we relate opera more specifically with the notion of accessibility, here still intended in its broad meaning—i.e. the quality and possibility of being reached easily³—we come across a long history of attempts at appealing to audiences across the age and social status spectrum. A particularly noteworthy effort was made by the above-mentioned Giulio Gatti Casazza, who was general manager of Teatro alla Scala from 1898 to 1908 and then moved to New York to become the general manager of the Metropolitan Opera (the Met), a post he held for 27 years. Amongst his many merits, which included the establishment of compulsory Italian language courses for workers at the American opera house, Gatti Casazza initiated the practice of live radio broadcasts of operas precisely from the Met stage, with the aim to reach out to as many people as possible, beyond the theatre doors and in their daily lives. The first radio broadcast happened in 1931, on Christmas Eve, with *Hansel und Gretel* by Engelbert Humperdinck. This experiment was a such great success that it has continued over the decades, anticipating the now common practice of streaming opera performances from the most prominent international theatres, or showing them in cinemas worldwide. With specific reference to access for persons with visual disabilities, the pivotal work carried out by Margaret Pfanstiehl, an enlightened blind American, shares with Gatti Casazza's endeavour the recourse to the radio as a channel to disseminate the audio descriptions for many events, including operas. In 1974, Pfanstiehl founded an outstanding non-profit organization, the Metropolitan Washington Ear,⁴ who is still active today and has been providing audio descriptions for operas and other theatrical performances since 1981, leading the way worldwide and functioning as an example for many. Incidentally, the use of radio channels to broadcast audio described performances has spread the world over and has also been used by many non-blind individuals.

Traditionally, strategies that have been employed to make opera accessible for persons with visual disabilities have focused mainly on audio description (AD), a form of intersemiotic transfer that turns images into “vivid narration” (Matamala and Orero 2007, p. 329). Today, AD has evolved in many ways, most notably in terms of textual structure and authorial approach. As for the latter, authorial or poetic audio descriptions

² <https://www.albertozedda.com/lopera-lirica-e-il-suo-pubblico> (03.02.2025).

³ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/accessibility> (03.02.2025).

⁴ <https://washear.org/about-us/> (03.02.2025).

seem to be increasingly common today, with some theatres and opera houses experimenting with, or favoring, a creative act that does not involve a trained audio describer as the primary agent (Romero Fresco 2021). Such an approach is as noteworthy as potentially misleading: a professional audio describer knows how to use her/his sources, when to consult with authors, directors, set and costume designers, conductors, etc., but s/he also knows how to integrate their views in a well-structured AD. Indeed, a professional describer knows how to make sure that the basic tenets of AD writing are always kept in sight, to guarantee that a clear, coherent, and smooth verbal representation of the most salient and relevant visual elements is provided. As for the recourse to different textual structures, some theatres have opted for introductory notes rather than full-fledged ADs, to avoid recruiting live describers or operators engaged during the actual performances. Introductory notes are not synchronized with performances and can be enjoyed before or after it. Moreover, some theatres have experimented with what is sometimes referred to as audio narration (Kruger, Orero 2010), i.e. a rather lengthy, narrative text that occupies more space than an AD would normally hold and becomes more than an accompaniment to a live performance, but rather a sub-performance in itself.

All in all, experiments prove the vitality and growing relevance of audio description for live events, opera in particular. As we will see more in detail in the following section, the enhanced sensory experience of opera is, today, not limited to the provision of audio description during performances: tactile reproductions of set designs, braille librettos, touch tours, and olfactory-based workshops are amongst the many activities that transform and enrich this live experience, some of which will be analyzed below.

4. Inclusive Access to Opera

This section focuses on inclusive access to opera for people with visual disabilities, in theoretical, methodological, and practical terms. As anticipated in the introduction, all examples of inclusive, multisensory access that will be analyzed in the following paragraphs were experimented with first-hand, as a natural outcome of my research activity but also as part of on-site experimentation at opera houses and festivals, i.e. as learning-from-doing activities. This twofold approach, which comprises both top-down and bottom-up processes, is intrinsic to my 20 years of experience in the design and provision of accessibility to live entertainment, operas in particular, an experience that has been progressing in parallel with academic research and training. Irregular though this approach might appear, it finds its roots and its methodological *raison d'être* in action research theory, as I shall try to clarify below.

Although it is most frequently paired with studies on education and pedagogy, action research theory has been widely applied to many other areas of inquiry, providing inspiration and methodological strength for researchers whose activities are not limited to theoretical speculations, but are always grounded in practice (Mertler 2019). As William Pasmore recalls in the *Handbook of Action Research*, one of the first, documented uses of the expression is found in the work of John Collier, “a commissioner of American Indian affairs from 1933 to 1945, [who] applied the term to his work in improving race relations between whites and native Americans” (2006, p. 39). More recently, and for a few decades now, action research has been employed in the healthcare sector, for example in the practice of cooperative inquiry that puts healthcare professionals together to reflect on their experiences, occasionally joined by patients too, so as to comprehensively redesign procedures and attitudes (Heron and Reason 2006, p. 146). As Heron and Reason recall, action research is, in itself, collaborative by definition. And this collaboration involves reflection and action, leading to further reflections and actions in a potentially continuous process that alternates the two not necessarily in a systematic way. Also, as the authors further clarify, action research is “research with, rather than on people” (ibid.), which applies perfectly to the activities and reflections discussed here.

Furthermore, action research has been often defined as *participatory* and it has, amongst its main objectives, that of “seeking to strengthen community ties and to heighten transformative potential” (Park 2006, p. 84). Essentially, in participatory action research, people use their insider knowledge and generate new knowledge by experimenting with, analyzing, systematizing the life of a community, a group of people. To use different words, action research is defined by many scholars as a powerful tool for “systemic change” (Calhoun 2019, p. 415), where change is generated through experience, experience is subsequently the object of analysis and reflection, and it feeds back onto the theory itself. Moreover, action is often synonymous with *social action*, stimulating critical thinking over established, hard-to-question sets of ideas, stereotypes and limitations. Thus, action research theory seems to provide just the perfect backdrop for this study and match the approach spelled out at the very onset: access has to be participatory in nature, a shared, joint effort for the benefit of all.

4.1. Audio Description and Beyond: Co-design, Co-creation, Enhanced Reception

As anticipated, the increasing proliferation of audio description (AD) for theatre and opera performances that has been observed in Italy and across Europe over the past 15 years has prompted the development of new

strategies for its creation and delivery. For the sake of brevity, this discussion will focus on two specific instances: 1) the co-design and co-creation of AD, and 2) the enhancement of multisensory materials and activities to support AD reception.

In the context of co-design, one of the most significant and frequently employed empirical strategies for creating effective and seamlessly integrated ADs is the collaborative writing and cueing process. This approach involves one or more blind individuals working alongside the audio describer. By fostering this inclusive collaboration at as many stages of the creation as possible, the aim is to ensure that the information conveyed in the AD is clear, relevant, coherent, well-structured, and minimally intrusive with respect to the performance on stage. As a matter of fact, this collaborative methodology has been utilized globally for a few decades, particularly in relation to television broadcasting (Benecke 2004). Since 2009, it has also been applied in Italy to enhance the accessibility of opera, starting with the Macerata Opera Festival and spreading through theatres across Italy. On average, in these co-creative processes one or two blind individuals actively engage in co-writing or revising audio description scripts together with non-blind operators, ensuring that the diverse needs of those who are blind or have low vision are fully taken into account. In practical terms, the workflow is generally organized as follows: a professional audio describer prepares a draft AD, based on the well-known strategies that involve collecting information about an opera performance, its history and structure, the nature of the production on stage, its creative team, set and costume design, etc. The same operator watches the performance more than once and drafts her/his descriptive text. A video or audio recording of the performance is shared with the blind person/s, as well as any available information about the production. Subsequently, this AD team meets up and goes through the AD text, discussing and revising lexical and syntactic choices, the length of introductory AD sections and in-show inserts, the overall coherence, clarity and effectiveness of the AD text in relation to the opera performance it describes.

To bring this shared, creative process one step forward, since early 2018 a team led by researchers at the University of Macerata has been experimenting with creative AD writing with blind and non-blind children (Di Giovanni 2018). Considering the age range of the people involved (6 to 14 years), this was initially carried out as part of a workshop aiming to bring opera closer to children and teenagers with low vision, complete blindness but also no visual disability, the workshop comprising manual and musical activities besides the AD co-creation. On that occasion, a draft AD text was pre-prepared by a professional describer, with introductory sections focusing on the opera plot, characters, settings and costumes. Within the context of the very first experiment carried out in 2018, the opera to be described was a

shortened version of the well-known *Carmen* by Georges Bizet, with changes to the original settings and story to appeal to children and young teenagers. A recording of this 75-minute performance was shared with the participants before and during the creative AD session, to discuss and revise with them all lexical, syntactic and semantic choices. As reported elsewhere (ibid.), changes requested by the blind and non-blind children cooperating in the AD revision often concerned the use of color references but also qualifying adjectives, elements that are frequently deemed delicate and particularly complex when drafting AD scripts. This inclusive experience, repeated several times since the first 2018 experiment, was soon expanded by having children and teenagers with and without visual disabilities record the AD clips with their own voices, to subsequently attend the audio described performance with family and friends and follow through their voices. Such a creative, playful activity was so successful that it has grown to become a regular offer at several Italian opera houses; it has also contributed to opening a career path as audio description speakers for two blind, young women (aged 16 and 17 on the occasion of the first experiment).

In relation to increased empowerment and wellbeing as a consequence of participation in the making of inclusive opera access, in 2022 the two blind, young women were asked to complete a brief questionnaire on three different moments in the planning, creation and enjoyment of audio description and one multisensory workshop for a new staging of Giacomo Puccini's *Tosca* at the Macerata Opera Festival, Italy. The questionnaire was administered in the form of the so-called wellbeing umbrellas,⁵ designed in colors and printed in tactile format for this occasion. Selected for being particularly clear and practical, the wellbeing umbrellas aim to rate selected emotions on a 1-to-5 Likert scale; they are inspired by the well-known PANAS scales designed in 1988 by Watson et al. and many times tested, adapted, modified to fit specific circumstances.

The two tables below offer an overview of the results obtained for both participants, namely N.V. and V.A., and they clearly point to an increase in overall values from the first to the third moment. In the case of N.V., a progressive increase is recorded for “enthusiastic”, but also “happy” and “inspired” score a steady increase from 4 to 5. Results obtained from V.A. show a progressive increase in values for “active”, interestingly pointing to a growing sense of participation and involvement, corroborated by higher values for happiness and inspiration, most commonly used to test levels of wellbeing. The overall high values scored on all three moments for both

⁵ https://www.ucl.ac.uk/culture/sites/culture/files/ucl_museum_wellbeing_measures_toolkit_sept2013.pdf (03.02.2025).

participants should also be related to the two young women having been involved in similar activities for more than three years (Di Giovanni 2022).

<i>Meeting to plan accessibility</i> 10/07/2022	<i>Writing audio description, organizing multisensory workshops</i> 25/07/2022	<i>Participating in workshops (as co-leader) and audio described performances</i> 31/07/2022
Active 5 Alert 4 Enthusiastic 3 Excited 5 Happy 4 Inspired 4	Active 5 Alert 4 Enthusiastic 4 Excited 5 Happy 5 Inspired 5	Active 5 Alert 4 Enthusiastic 5 Excited 5 Happy 5 Inspired 5
4.16	4.66	4.83

Table 1
Results obtained from N.V.

<i>Meeting to plan accessibility</i> 10/07/2022	<i>Writing audio description, organizing multisensory workshops</i> 25/07/2022	<i>Participating in workshops (as co-leader) and audio described performances</i> 31/07/2022
Active 3 Alert 5 Enthusiastic 3 Excited 4 Happy 4 Inspired 4	Active 4 Alert 5 Enthusiastic 3 Excited 4 Happy 5 Inspired 4	Active 5 Alert 5 Enthusiastic 4 Excited 4 Happy 5 Inspired 5
3.83	4.16	4.66

Table 2
Results obtained from V.A.

Moving onto the second element quoted at the beginning of this section, i.e. the creation and use of enhanced multisensory materials in support of AD reception, one experimental activity is here worth mentioning that was the result of a brainstorming session among people with and without visual disabilities. Upon planning accessible tools and strategies for two performances of *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* at Teatro alla Scala in Milan, in early 2024, the issue of multiple verbal languages that would merge in an audio described performance appeared as a priority to be tackled. This *singspiel*, composed by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart in 1782 with a German libretto by Johann Gottlieb Stephanie, is often performed in its original version, and this was also the case for the staging at Teatro alla Scala, where the AD was nonetheless created and delivered in Italian. Therefore, after discussing possible solutions to the issue of linguistic inaccessibility of the

libretto with two blind people, a decision was made to experiment with the creation of a paratext, i.e. a voice recording of the Italian translation of Mozart's work published by Teatro alla Scala in its official opera book. To this end, an Italian professional voice talent, guided by an audio describer, an assistant to the stage director, and a blind opera lover, recorded the text following a series of ad hoc decisions. First of all, the voice talent would not employ the traditional neutral tone that is applied to audio description recordings; she would rather follow the rhythm of the plot and the music, so that listeners could engage with it more easily. Secondly, the recording of selected passages of the translated libretto was paired with the corresponding music excerpts, with the aim to facilitate understanding and recognition of those passages when attending the audio described performance. This recording, divided in chapters following the acts and scenes, was made available two weeks prior to the accessible show on the theatre website, for blind and non-blind people to use free of charge.⁶ The feedback collection carried out after the audio described performances revealed that the recourse to this experimental tool merging interlingual translation, music and acting, was reported to be both useful and extremely pleasant by blind and non-blind participants.

Since this last, experimental instance of multisensory perception of opera was intended to be enjoyed before the performance, in the next section we shall explore other activities and strategies equally offered before accessible opera performances, to enrich the experience and enhance enjoyment and participation.

4.2. Multisensory Before: Getting Closer to Operas Through the Senses

In a book devoted to the discovery of touch and its importance in relation to art enjoyment, Grassini et al. state that languages are, in fact, artificial codes whose structure and intended functions are the result of human conventions, and therefore can be questioned, upturned, and certainly replaced by other conventions. After recalling the 1921 Futurist Manifesto on Tactilism, a groundbreaking contribution by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti that has not been duly appreciated, in history and the arts, Grassini et al. move on to state that accessibility to the arts is a social need (2018, p. 21), perfectly in line with the need for equity stated in Article 27 of the 1948 International Declaration of Human Rights. Theatre, the authors go on to argue, offers a global experience that engages the person as a whole, therefore not having to limit its perception to one or two senses only (ibid.). Touch is universally

⁶ The recording is still available at: <https://www.teatroallascala.org/it/stagione/biglietteria/la-scala-pertutti/accessibilita/materiali.html> (03.02.2025).

acknowledged as being essential for blind people to experience life (and art) more thoroughly: in 1969, another great Manifesto was issued by artist Paul Neagu, whose title, *Palpable Art*, speaks out in favor of the recourse to touch in experiencing art beyond the no longer exclusive, or primary, visual perception (ibid., p. 61). And this attitude has been gaining momentum up to the present day.

Inspired by these approaches and by academic reports on tactile experiences in conjunction with live events, in 2012 I started designing and offering tactile tours at several venues. Conceived to enhance the opera experience for blind and partially sighted people, tactile experiences very soon appeared to please all participants, with increasing requests for attendance from people without disabilities. Touching settings, props, costumes, wigs, but also backstage tools to make the opera performance alive on stage has, since those early days, proven extremely successful and a great complement to any accessible live show. In the years that followed, experiments have been carried out to enhance the multisensory experience preceding a show, often upon suggestions coming directly from people with disabilities: touching the musical instruments as they are played, or the singers' shoulders when they sing, were added to pre-opera workshops at several venues throughout Italy from 2015, and they were opened not only to blind but also to deaf patrons, people with intellectual disabilities and all their accompanying persons. Feedback collection performed upon several occasions and reported in various articles (see, for instance, Di Giovanni 2022) generally confirm the positive impact of these experiences, most of which were designed precisely with people with disabilities. Along these lines, further experimentation has been recently carried out: on the occasion of a ballet performance, or an opera performance featuring dancers, pre-show workshops have been organized, to have blind and visually impaired patrons try out some moves and steps, with the help of dancers and choreographers. This was the case, for instance, at Teatro Pavarotti Freni in Modena in January 2025, where participants with and without disabilities proved enthusiastic and confirmed this datum in the questionnaires administered after the workshop.

5. Conclusion

The experiments briefly discussed in the final sections of this article have helped clarify how music and opera can reach and please all senses, regardless of each person's abilities, or rather encompassing potentially all of these abilities and engaging them in multiple ways. The past thirty years have been animated by what we could term the *for-all movement*, whereby culture has come to be seen as increasingly and necessarily open to as many people

as possible. This, as was stated at the beginning, is also the result of stimuli coming from international documents and directives such as the United Nations' Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Charter of Solfagnano, where the word disability is progressively being replaced by diversity and its valorization through participation. As Greco and Dubini (2024) observe, if cultural events have to be for all, this does not entail that they shall be denatured or trivialized; on the contrary, the two scholars state that culture is in a process of constant transformation and that the multitude of encounters amongst different forms of expressions increases the opportunities to merge languages, where “the point of arrival in one artistic or aesthetic research becomes the point of departure for what comes next” (2024, p. 113, my translation). These reflections take us back to the previously discussed, twofold approach that merges top-down and bottom-up processes in an ongoing experimentation aiming to enhance inclusive access to opera and to live performances in general. And if participatory action research provides a powerful framework for better understanding and strengthening such an approach, participation must remain central at all levels, from research to practice, so as to ensure that all voices are heard and potentially all people are empowered.

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