

Intermédialités

Histoire et théorie des arts, des lettres et des techniques

Intermediality

History and Theory of the Arts, Literature and Technologies

Amazonia—Music Theatre in Three Parts: A Transcultural Operatic Experience?

Vítor Castelões Gama and Marcelo Velloso Garcia

Number 37-38, Spring–Fall 2021

résister
resisting

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1086259ar>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1086259ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Revue intermédialités

ISSN

1705-8546 (print)
1920-3136 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Castelões Gama, V. & Velloso Garcia, M. (2021). *Amazonia—Music Theatre in Three Parts: A Transcultural Operatic Experience?* *Intermédialités / Intermediality*, (37-38), 1–30. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1086259ar>

Article abstract

This article discusses *Amazonia—Music Theatre in Three Parts* ([AMT] 2010), a collaboration between the Yanomami, Brazilian and German producers as a transcultural form of resistance that touches on issues of transculturation and Indigenous peoples' culture and portrayal. We argue that AMT claimed legitimation as an opera and publicized the Yanomami's views about what extractivism is doing to our planet: devastation beyond tipping points. We first discuss how the Yanomami had been portrayed in art before this opera, and then turn to how the operatic form of AMT was perceived by its reviewers; finally, we offer a critique of the reviewers' arguments against labelling AMT as a transcultural opera, as we believe these arguments are mainly political. This article aims to demonstrate the fluidity of the boundaries between opera and *musiktheater*, and of what characterizes a transcultural experience.

Amazonia—Music Theatre in Three Parts : A Transcultural Operatic Experience?

VÍTOR CASTELÕES GAMA

MARCELO VELLOSO GARCIA

In 2010, *Amazonia: Music Theatre in Three Parts (AMT)*—a three-act opera made with the Yanomami of Watoriki, the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie (ZKM)—premiered in Germany, Brazil and Portugal with mixed reviews. The Yanomami cosmology is the basis for the theme and project of *AMT*, in which the Amazonian forest is the protagonist. According to the Yanomami, the Amazon is a living being that must be respected, as our future depends on finding a way to coexist with nature. *AMT* portrays how the Yanomami are not being heard: the Amazon's rate of deforestation is higher than ever and some say that it might have already surpassed its tipping point.¹ *AMT* dramatizes this situation, denouncing the

1. Thomas E. Lovejoy and Carlos Nobre, "Amazon Tipping Point: Last Chance for Action," *Science Advances*, vol. 5, no. 12, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6989302/> (accessed 24 November 2021).

aggressions towards Indigenous people and drawing sharp contrasts between the Yanomami worldview and that of capitalist extractivism.

Apart from being a significant work of art created by Indigenous peoples alongside other ethnicities, when it was first released, it was not considered an opera *per se*. Instead, it was put in a separate category. Even though we understand the reasons that distance *AMT* from traditional operas, such as electronic music, contemporary choreography, and throat singing, we do not agree with such categorization. Thus, we analyze *AMT* through the lens of transculturality, music theory, its making, and the reviews it has received in order to argue in favour of its placement as an opera. To do so, one has to understand the political dimension of the spectacle.

AMT consists of three acts: Act I, “TILT,” dramatizes a letter from Sir Walter Raleigh. Act II, “The Fall of the Sky,” represents the conflict of the Yanomami shaman with the *xawarari*. The *xawara* is a destructive agent composed of epidemics and smoke; it reflects the pollution and diseases brought by Western invaders; the *xawarari* are cannibal evil beings, one of the forms of the *xawara*,² which, in *AMT*, are performed by the scientist, the missionary, and the politician, three characters who embody capitalist extractivist greed. Act II ends with the death of the Yanomami shaman, caused by the *xawara* and, consequently, the fall of the sky. Act III, “Amazonas Conference—in Expectation of the Efficiency of a Rational Method for a Solution to the Problem of Climate Change,” is divided into three movements: “Paradise,” “Conference,” and “Entropy.” “Paradise” represents the life that permeates the Amazonian ecosystem, its biological diversity, and at the same time, the beginning of its destruction. “Conference” takes place in a multisensorial round-table set with the purpose of stopping Amazon’s ruin, and concludes with the reckoning that it was too late. In the final movement, “Entropy,” the stage elements start crumbling to dust, as if to show the end of the world. In the video below (see Fig. 1) we may see parts of *AMT*’s three acts.

2. Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert, *Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman* [2010], trans. Nicholas Elliott and Alison Dundy, Cambridge, Massachusetts, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013, p. 506.



Fig. 1. Screenshot from *Amazonas, Musiktheater in drei Teilen*, 8'54, excerpted from Projektdokumentation, <https://zkm.de/en/media/video/amazonas-musiktheater-in-drei-teilen> (accessed 2 February 2022).³

While *AMT* captivated part of the audience, some questioned whether the Yanomami had been exoticized⁴ and, if that were indeed the case, whether its political message had been undermined. For instance, “musical critics were intrigued by the presence of a so-called traditional people in an opera, a European musical genre par excellence; and they wanted to know what role the Indigenous people had in a contemporary project, especially one with experimental ambitions.”⁵ The audience

3. We are grateful for ZKM granting permission to include this video in our paper. *Amazonas. Musiktheater in drei Teilen*, documentary of artworks, ZKM, Karlsruhe, 2010. Concept, text, and mise-en-scène: Peter Weibel, ZKM. CEO Music and sound: Ludger Brümmer, ZKM/Institute for Music und Acoustics. Visuals: Bernd Lintermann, ZKM/Institute for Visual Media.

4. Enzo Wetzal, “Interkulturalität und interkultureller Dialog am Goethe-Institut,” Alois Moosmüller and Jana Möller-Kiero (eds.), *Interkulturalität und kulturelle Diversität*, Münster, Germany, Waxmann Verlag, 2014, p. 343.

5. “Críticos musicais, eles estavam intrigados com a presença de uma população dita tradicional numa ópera, gênero musical europeu por excelência; e queriam saber que participação coube aos índios num projeto contemporâneo e, ainda por cima, com ambições experimentais.” Stella Senra, “Povo Yanomami põe a Amazônia na ópera,” Stella Senra, May 2010, para. 2; 19, <https://www.stellassenra.com.br/povo-yanomami-poe-a-amazonia-na-opera/> (accessed 24 November 2021, our translation).

expected “that the shamans would go up on stage and represent themselves,” which, according to Laymert Garcia dos Santos, one of *AMT*’s creators, placed a burden on it, since “no musical work that deals seriously with the culture of the shamans can put the shamans themselves on stage,”—it is a representation after all. Furthermore, the mistaken assumption “that the Yanomami culture is not a contemporary culture, but an archaic one, whose integration and juxtaposition within a contemporary, avant-garde musical project must fail in aesthetic criteria” weighed heavily on its reception.⁶

This assumption might have been widely shared by much of the audience, which might explain why “artistically, [*AMT*] was generally considered a failure.”⁷ But, we believe that precisely due to this “failure,” *AMT* raises significant questions for discussion. As mentioned, there was expectation about the presence (or absence) of Indigenous people in an opera, which is a form of art considered to be “high culture,” and this expectation raised questions concerning the judgement of its aesthetic features and other works with Indigenous people. Nonetheless, audiences in Germany and Brazil reacted in opposite ways: the German audience was mostly repelled by *AMT*, while the Brazilian one promptly embraced it. *AMT* was presented at the 11th Munich Biennale, under the umbrella term *musiktheater* “for reasons specific to the musical world of Munich, which reserves the term ‘opera’ for a very particular segment of contemporary operatic works.”⁸ Whether *AMT* is presented as an opera, or *musiktheater*, may sound like an unimportant issue. But, if we consider that “in engaging with opera one engages directly with the politics of culture,”⁹ *AMT* then brings to the forefront, purposefully or not, issues of inequality in contemporary art.

6. “Erstens die Erwartungshaltung, die Schamanen würden selbst auf der Bühne stehen und sich selbst darstellen. Das ist vollkommen undenkbar. Kein Musikwerk, das sich ernsthaft mit der Kultur der Schamanen befasst, kann die Schamanen selbst auf die Bühne stellen. Und zweitens die Annahme, dass die Kultur der Yanomami keine zeitgenössische, sondern eine archaische Kultur sei, deren Integration und Gegenüberstellung innerhalb eines zeitgenössischen, avantgardistischen Musikprojekts an ästhetischen Kriterien scheitern muss.” Laymert Garcia dos Santos, “Die Yanomami sind kein Volk aus der Vergangenheit,” *Goethe-Institut*, November 2010, para. 6, available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20160628203546/http://www.goethe.de/ins/pt/lis/prj/ama/lab/de6761954.htm> (accessed 24 November 2021, our translation).

7. Wolfgang Kapfhammer, “Amazonian Pain: Indigenous Ontologies and Western Eco-Spirituality,” *Indiana*, vol. 29, 2012, p. 146.

8. Laymert Garcia dos Santos, *Transcultural Amazonas—Shamanism and Technoscience in the Opera*, São Paulo, N-1 Edições, 2013, p. 65.

9. Nicholas Till, “‘I Don’t Mind if Something’s Operatic, Just as Long It’s Not Opera.’ A Critical Practice for New Opera and Music Theatre,” *Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2004, p. 20.

We, therefore, think that the way *AMT* defies the power structures of the musical world may be analyzed as a form of resistance. We do not conceive of resistance as a simple confrontation between the dominant and the dominated. Sherry B. Ortner recalls that “in a relationship of power, the dominant often has something to offer, and sometimes a great deal (though always of course at the price of continuing in power). The subordinate thus has many grounds for ambivalence about resisting the relationship.”¹⁰ In asking whether the Yanomami could create an opera, or whether an opera could be considered Yanomami, we are reminded of the case of Carlos Gomes¹¹ (1836–1896), famous for *Il Guarany* (1875), a work performed from 1870 to 1884 in fourteen countries. Despite its success, the question of whether Gomes might be considered a truly national artist or a foreign artist dependent on foreign models lingered for the rest of his career.¹² The subjective ambivalence inherent to the concept of resistance may be, thus, seen as closely related to issues regarding authenticity and “the crisis of representation—the possibility of truthful portrayals of others (or Others) and the capacity of the subaltern to be heard.”¹³

All these questions are at the core of theoretical discussions regarding transculturation. Diana Taylor, drawing from Fernando Ortiz and Angel Rama, defines transculturation, on one hand, as:

the process by which symbols, discourse, and ideology are transformed as one culture changes through the imposition or adoption of another, and examines the historical and socio-political forces that produce local meanings. On the other, the theory of transculturation is a political one in that it suggests the

10. Sherry B. Ortner. “Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 37, no. 1, 1995, p. 175.

11. Furthermore, since Carlos Gomes was a Black man in deeply racist societies, he was often called demeaning names (by foreign and Brazilian natives alike). For more about the composer’s life and career, see Verónica Zárate Toscano and Serge Gruzinski, “Ópera, imaginación y sociedad. México y Brasil, siglo XIX, Historias conectadas: *Ildegonda* de Melesio Morales e *Il Guarany* de Carlos Gomes,” *Historia Mexicana*, vol. 58, no. 2, 2008. A reconfiguration of *Guarany* with an approach similar to *AMT* is Zeca Rodrigues and Marco Antonio Rodrigues’ *Guarani em Chamas*, whose premiere was to take place at the Theatro Municipal de São Paulo but was cancelled due the pandemic. A documentary about it may be seen on YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SmC-jadRty4> (accessed 24 November 2021).

12. The necessity of such legitimation is a constant through most of the history of Brazilian opera. For more about Brazilian opera in general, see José Maurício Brandão, “Ópera no Brasil: um panorama histórico,” *Revista Música Hodie*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2012, available at Revista.ufg.br, <https://www.revistas.ufg.br/musica/article/view/22543> (accessed 24 November 2021).

13. Ortner, 1995, p. 190.

consciousness of a society's own, historically specific, cultural manifestations—in contact with but differentiated from other societies.¹⁴

Two questions undergird *AMT*'s production and reception: first, can mutual comprehension truly exist, and second, what can we learn from Indigenous contributions to the performing arts? This last point made the opera an object of intense discussion and negotiation between the *AMT* creators. Garcia dos Santos argues that *AMT* is more than a unification of multicultural concepts, it is “not an opera *about* the people, but an opera *with* the forest and its people.” Garcia dos Santos’ orientation implied, from the outset, that *AMT* was about the possibility of opening a transcultural dialogue, and not merely “an intercultural or multicultural one.”¹⁵ For Garcia dos Santos, an intercultural dialogue would involve members of two different cultures, each in its own place; in a multicultural one, on the other hand, multiple cultures would share the same place but would not mingle. Converging with Garcia dos Santos’ argument, Taylor proposes that a transcultural dialogue involves the transformation of the subjects involved, since “both the dominant and the dominated are modified through their contact with another culture, [but] it is clear that their interaction is neither equal in power or degree, nor, strictly speaking, reciprocal.”¹⁶

In this article we question whether *AMT* could be labeled as an opera and whether it could be considered as a transcultural work. With this purpose in mind, we focus and reassess aspects of its creative process and context of reception, rather than providing a full analysis of *AMT*.¹⁷ This article is structured in five parts. In the first part, we briefly expand on previous engagements of the Yanomami with art, touching upon the leitmotifs of transculturation and resistance. In the second part, we discuss the relevance of labelling a work as opera or as *musiktheater*. In the third part, we discuss the arguments against labelling *AMT* as an opera for reasons we believe are mainly political; in this section, we also draw upon previous operas (labelled as such) to demonstrate how the boundaries between opera and *musiktheater* are not set in stone. In the fourth part, continuing from the premise that *AMT* might be considered an

14. Diana Taylor, “Transculturating Transculturation,” *Performing Arts Journal*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1991, p. 91.

15. Garcia dos Santos, 2013, p. 13.

16. Taylor, 1991, p. 93

17. Our interpretation is based on recordings of *AMT*. There are two reasons for this: the first, it was exhibited in 2010; the second, we had, at that time, little knowledge of music theory.

opera, we discuss whether it is a transcultural opera and, once again, elaborate about the fluid boundaries of what might characterize a transcultural experience. In the fifth and last part, we revisit our first discussion about the importance of labelling *AMT* as a transcultural opera and, even without complete certainty that the category is suited to *AMT*, emphasize the term's political implications.

EARLIER CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THE YANOMAMI

The Yanomami have commonly been represented in a pejorative way. For a long time they were depicted as “a fierce people” that only bred warriors, as proposed by Napoleon Chagnon. This idea was discredited by many anthropologists such as Bruce Albert and Alcida Rita Ramos.¹⁸ Despite Chagnon's often refuted view of the Yanomami, their “fierceness” lived on and was still used as an excuse for all sorts of aggressions against them. Chagnon collaborated with Timothy Asch to create what became known as the Yanomamö movie series, which included the controversial *The Ax Fight* (1975). The violence displayed in this movie might have been a source of inspiration for Ruggero Deodato's famous *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980), where the Yanomami, as well as the Shamatari, are portrayed as blood-lusting cannibals. Positive portrayal of the Yanomami would only come with Juan Downey's movies, such as *Video Trans Americas* (1976), *The Singing Mute* (1978), and *El shabono abandonado* (1979), as well as Claudia Andujar's photographs and exhibitions, not to mention Davi Kopenawa's work, which explicitly addresses Chagnon's allegations. But, besides their

18. Bruce Albert and Alcida Rita Ramos, “Yanomami Indians and Anthropological Ethics,” *Science*, vol. 244, no. 4905, 1989; Maria Inês Smiljanic, “Exoticism and Science: The Yanomami and the Exoticist Construction of Alterity,” *Anuário Antropológico*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2012. Alcida Rita Ramos recalls the *Times* magazine feature about the Yanomami titled “Beastly or Manly?,” which, quoting Chagnon, compared the Yanomami to baboons. Alcida Rita Ramos, “Los Yanomami en el corazón de las tinieblas blancas,” *Relaciones: estudios de historia y sociedad*, vol. XXV, no. 98, 2004, available on Redalyc.org, <https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/137/13709802.pdf> (accessed 24 November 2021).

portrayal by third parties, it is crucial to discuss the ways the Yanomami themselves influenced or participated in the art production that was being composed.¹⁹

One relevant work that helped us interpret *AMT* comes from the period of cultural exchange between Eugenio Barba's Odin Teatret, in 1976, with a Venezuelan Yanomami community, in the region of Orinoco-Mavaca. Noticeably, the result of this collaboration was unbeknownst to both sides, the researchers and the Yanomami, but, based on the results (to be explained further ahead), Odin Teatret ended up having much more than what had been firstly bargained. For instance, there were doubts if any meaningful contact could be reached because of linguistic and cultural barriers, notwithstanding, potential anthropological insights took over hesitation. Could Odin Teatret's theatrical theory be grasped by the Yanomami? If so, could art become a more meaningful way of communication between different cultures?²⁰ In the second video (see Fig. 2) we may see how the experience went.

19. Although not exhaustive, we present a list of works that portray or are written by Yanomami. In literature: Helena Valero, Luigi Cocco, and Ettore Biocca, *Yanoama: The Narrative of a Young Woman Kidnapped by Amazonian Indians* [1965], Boston, Massachusetts, Dutton, 1970; Paulo Jacob, *Chãos de Maiconã*, Rio de Janeiro, CEA, 1974; photographer Claudia Andujar's *Yanomami*, São Paulo, Editora Praxis, 1978 and *Mitopoemas Yanomam*, São Paulo, Olivetti do Brasil, 1979; Paulo Jacob, *Assim contavam os velhos índios ianônãmes*, Rio de Janeiro, Nórdica, 1995; Claudia Andujar, Marcados, São Paulo, Cosac Naify, 2009; Inês Daffon and Maria Lúcia Daffon, *Os Orfãos de Haximu*, Curitiba, Brazil, FTD Educação, 2010; Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert, *Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman* [2010], Boston, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2013; Devair Fiorotti, *Urubi: nossa terra, nossa floresta*, São Paulo, Editora Patuá, 2017. In contemporary art the works of artists such as Barbara Crane Navarro present an important caveat to this article's subject in the exhibition *Pas de Cartier! Is Art Just Another Luxury Item?* (The Bridge Gallery, Nemours, France, 31 October 2021–22 December 2022). Other examples are *The Cosmic Anaconda*, installation by Arte Amazônia (exhibition, ORINOCO, Indians of the Amazon Rainforest by the Cisneros Foundation, Slovene Ethnographic Museum, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 20 April 2011–2 September 2012); Pierre Crapez' exhibition *Xamá* (Centro Cultural Paschoal Carlos Magno, Niterói, Brazil, 5–29 May 2011), and the collaboration of Mavi Morais (@moraismavi), herself an Indigenous artist, in *As línguas Yanomami no Brasil: diversidade e vitalidade* (Helder Perri Ferreira, Estêvão Benfica Senra, Ana Maria Antunes Machado (eds.), São Paulo; Boa Vista, Instituto Socioambiental; Hutukara Associação Yanomami, 2019). In movies: Timothy Asch's *Magical Death* (1973) and *Children's Magical Death* (1974); Manuel de Pedro's *Iniciación de un shaman* (1980); Stella Senra, Bruce Albert, Laymert Garcia dos Santos, Gisella Motta, and Leandro Lima's *Xapiri* (2012); Luiz Bolognesi's *The Last Forest* (2012). In theatrical works: Peter Rose and Anne Conlon's *Yanomamo: Song of the Forest* (1988), Cia Livre and Cia. 8 Nova Dança's *Xapiri Xapiripé, lá onde a gente dançava sobre espelbos* (2014), and Lia Rodrigues' *Para que o céu não caia* (2016). For more about the last two plays, see Lúcia Regina Vieira Romano, "Do Asfalto ao Mato: a pesquisa da Cia. Livre na criação de uma cena épica e perspectivista," *Revista Brasileira de Estudos da Presença*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2021. Luiz Davi Vieira Gonçalves' case with the Yanomami of Maturacá should also be mentioned: Luiz Davi Vieira Gonçalves, *O(s) corpo(s) Kókamôu: a performatividade do pajé-bekura Yanomami da região de Maturacá*, doctoral dissertation, Universidade Federal do Amazonas, 2019.

20. Arianna Berenice de Sanctis, "Venezuela 1976: o encontro entre o Odin Teatret e os Yanomamis," *Revista Brasileira de Estudos da Presença*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2012, p. 184.



Fig. 2. Screenshot from *Barter with the Yanomami*, 4'57, excerpted from *Theatre Meets Ritual*, directed by Torgeir Wethal, produced by “Kurare” & Odin Teatret Film, 60 min, colour, 1976, <https://youtu.be/76KkhdK4Mzs> (accessed 2 February 2022).²¹

It should be noted that the exchanges were thought by many to be mostly one-sided, that is, Western communities were to act as the conveyors and the Yanomami as the receivers of “culture.” Yet, this would not accurately describe their encounter. Barba, in a conversation with the actress Julia Varley, confided that the “best definition of exchange” was given to him by the Yanomami shaman who believed they were there to “exchange energy.” He understood then that “the mechanism of exchange is not mechanical. It depends on the vulnerable balance of mutual trust.”²² This insight resulted in numerous, yet constructive, misunderstandings. For instance, what Barba’s group thought to be “universally” humorous was bewildering for the Yanomami,²³ while tragic segments were hilarious; upon this reaction, Barba’s group reassessed their whole theatrical theory and practice by asking themselves questions such as “where do

21. We are grateful for Odin Teatret allowing us to include this video in our article.

22. “O mecanismo de troca não é mecânico. Ele depende do equilíbrio vulnerável da confiança mútua.” Julia Varley, “Holstebro Festuge: Re-pensando o Teatro,” *Poiesis*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2016, p. 40 (our translation).

23. Julia Varley, *Notes from an Odin Actress: Stones of Water*, New York, Routledge, 2011, p. 145.

the expressive codes used by the actors come from? [...] why do they not produce the same effects in different audiences?”²⁴ Barba came to realize that, even though Western cultures assumed that their humour and tragedy were universal, the way these concepts were applied meant little for the Yanomami. Therefore, what started as an intercultural practice whereby the Odin Teatret would teach their ways to the Yanomami, ended up producing its opposite, a humbling experience of transculturation.

While we cannot know for sure how the Yanomami of Orinoco-Mavaca responded to the situation, we believe that at least the experience within Odin Teatret shows how much they were open and welcoming to other types of culture, a crucial counterpoint to Chagnon’s portrayal. They were ready to “exchange energy,” create “mutual trust.” Such willingness to learn and teach is a stance that may be seen in *AMT*. The Yanomami, in general, have been resisting abuse for a long time. One of its leaders, Davi Kopenawa, denounces how capitalist society is destroying nature and, by doing so, destroying the Earth. Had it not been for Indigenous shamans that hold the world together, it would have already crumbled. In his words, translated in lyrical passages of *The Falling Sky* (2013): “[S]o I entrusted you with my words and I asked you to carry them far away to let them be heard by the white people, who know nothing about us. [...] Now I would like them [words] to divide themselves and propagate over long distances so they can truly be heard.”²⁵ This mediation, “words that propagate,” is exemplified by Kopenawa’s book and, as we argue, continued and amplified by *AMT*.

OPERA AS A CULTURAL FORM

Garcia dos Santos, pondering about how to better categorize *AMT*, as an opera or *musiktheater*, defends that “among ourselves, [...] we always knew we were working on a contemporary multimedia opera called *Amazonas*.”²⁶ However, the intentions of its creator and how it was received by its reviewers and audience were quite different. We believe the differences that were highlighted so as to set it apart from operas are mainly political and not aesthetic concerns, since opera:

24. “Da onde vem os códigos expressivos utilizados pelos atores e porque eles não produzem os mesmos efeitos em diferentes públicos?” de Sanctis, 2012, p. 191 (our translation).

25. Kopenawa and Albert, 2013, p. 11–12.

26. Garcia dos Santos, 2013, p. 65.

continues to command a grotesquely inflated socio-economic position within our culture. This is because opera sits at the apex of a whole set of cultural values that are based upon the association of “high” art and class. Yet opera also offers itself as the most vulnerable point of that nexus; the point where the values of high art conventionally understood reveal themselves to be the closest to vacuity and kitsch.²⁷

The status of opera as an “elite” form of artistic expression allows us to highlight the tensions and forms of resistance surrounding the production and aesthetics of *AMT*. For instance, one of *AMT*'s previous sponsors was Petrobras, a company mentioned several times in the documents assessing the crimes committed against Indigenous people by the Brazilian state during the dictatorship period.²⁸ As Joachim Bernauer, one of *AMT*'s creators, explains, “it is a touchy challenge to work on [*AMT*] with a partner that is not just an observer or researcher, but in fact a major player in the area of environmental destruction and protection—an oil company that drills for natural resources in order to sell them.”²⁹ It might be said that the same banks who sponsor politically artistic manifestations are also responsible for much of the capital invested in deforestation and (illegal) mining. Some of these questions had already been posed by Bernauer in the performance's program for the Brazilian audience:

Could one justify, from an ecological standpoint, engaging in a project of international cooperation for the conservation of the forest, even though the flights of artists and other professionals overloads the CO balance sheet? Would it have been possible to save a single tree with this opera? Is that too much to expect from an operatic project that at the same time makes a socio-political claim? Can new impulses for contemporary opera be expected from a multimedia theatre

27. Till, 2004, p. 19.

28. Petrobrás is one of the biggest patrons of Brazilian opera. It is the sponsor of Márcio Páscoa's amazing project “Ópera na Amazônia durante o Período da Borracha (1850–1910).” We do not know the reasons why Petrobrás discontinued its sponsorship of *AMT*, yet, if we could afford a guess, it might be that *AMT* is too experimental to be considered an opera or that it was not legitimized by foreign peers.

29. “[...] é um desafio delicado trabalhar no projeto da ópera amazônica com um parceiro que não seja apenas um observador ou pesquisador, mas de fato um dos importantes players na área de destruição e proteção ambiental—uma empresa petrolífera que faz perfurações em busca de recursos naturais para vendê-los.” Joachim Bernauer, “O Amazonas como ópera: onde artemídia e teatro musical contemporâneo se encontram como os rios Negro e Solimões,” Willi Bolle, Edna Castro, and Marcel Vejmelka (eds.), *Amazônia: região universal e teatro do mundo*, São Paulo, Globo, 2010. p. 283 (our translation).

combining art-media and scenic art? And for a project like this, wouldn't it be better and more consistent to avoid the term "opera"?³⁰

In *AMT*'s case, both the provenance of the funding and its use were in question, for there were many accusations of *AMT* having squandered money.³¹ For example, Moritz Eggert³² recalls how the German public felt about the opera, especially act III:

Now, of course, we are all curious to see how [act III] will be received in Brazil. It's no secret that this part was the most rebuked by German critics. Almost unanimously it was condemned as "too naive," the production was compared to an educational event for adults. The ZKM team, who put a lot of work into this, had to bravely endure many scoldings, especially at the last performance in Munich, where, after half the audience had left during the performance, everyone involved in the production was greeted by cries of "Lying shit!," "You assholes,"

30. "Pode-se justificar ecologicamente se engajar num projeto de cooperação internacional para a conservação da floresta, embora o vôo dos artistas e especialistas sobrecarreguem o balanço de CO₂? Com essa ópera teria sido possível poupar uma árvore? Espera-se demais de um projeto operístico, se ao mesmo tempo com ele representa uma reivindicação sociopolítica? De um teatro-música multimídia como a combinação de artemídia e arte cenográfica pode-se esperar novos impulsos para a ópera contemporânea? E para um projeto como esse não seria melhor e mais consequente evitar o termo ópera?" Joachim Bernauer, "Bem-vindos ao laboratório amazônico de ópera," SESC-SP, [21–25 July 2010], 2015, slides 10–11, <https://www.laymert.com.br/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Programa-%c3%93pera-Amaz%b4nia-S%c3%a3o-Paulo.pdf> (accessed 24 November 2021, our translation).

31. Criticism in German media includes: Frieder Reininghaus, "Tropische Klanglandschaft," *Deutschlandfunk*, 9 May 2010, https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/tropische-klanglandschaft.691.de.html?dram:article_id=54160 (accessed 24 November 2021); Jörn Florian Fuchs, "Wunder aus China, Krawall und Videowunden," *DrehPunktKultur*, 13 May 2010, http://www.drehpunktkultur.at/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1109:wunder-aus-china-krawall-und-videowunden&catid=45:ausland&Itemid=75 (accessed 24 November 2021); Klaus Kalchschmid, Halbseiden, Münchens Biennale für Musiktheater, *Welt Print*, 17 May 2010, https://www.welt.de/welt_print/kultur/article/7661438/Halbseiden-Muenchens-Biennale-fuer-Musiktheater.html (accessed 24 November 2021).

32. Singer and actor Moritz Eggert recalls that the Brazilian audience liked Acts II and III better; while the German audience mostly liked only Act I. Moreover, Eggert mentions some of the reasons, which, he believed, explained these differences and which we find unacceptable: 1) Brazilians' lack of familiarity with English in Act I; 2) the familiarity of Brazilians with composer Tato Taborda; 3) the Brazilian preference for content rather than aesthetics, which would explain the appreciation for Act III. Moritz Eggert, "Klimarettung in Sao Paulo Teil 5: Der Prophet im fremden Land," *Goethe-Institut*, 5 February 2011, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160629014946/http://blog.goethe.de/amazonas/archives/78-Klimarettung-in-Sao-Paulo-Teil-5-Der-Prophet-im-fremden-Land.html> (accessed 24 November 2021).

“Fuck you” and the slogan “Two million euros for shit!” by the audience, without any applause.³³

To demand better use of the money is valid criticism; however, it should not only be levied against the artists, but also at the cultural institutions that profit from the production. Nothing guarantees that if the money had been spent on boats, tools, or guns, the Yanomami would have been in a better position in our society. Moreover, many facts point in other direction: without prying eyes, even in broad daylight, a massacre such as the one in Haximu³⁴ may happen again. If the problem is “efficient” use of money, why produce any artwork at all? Furthermore, some critics emphasized the irony that, in spite of *AMT*’s combative spirit, the play ended with a buffet and champagne. We fully endorse this critique but, regrettably, the *tu quoque* still applies for us, since we have not attended many symposiums, at least in Brazilian universities, that did not indulge in shrimp cocktail and overpriced wine. That academic events sometimes indulge in displays of status is not a good reason to prohibit them or bar

33. “Nun sind wir natürlich alle gespannt, wie der ZKM-Teil in Brasilien ankommen wird. Es ist kein Geheimnis, dass dieser Teil der von den deutschen Kritikern der Meistgescholtenste war. Fast einstimmig wurde er als ‘zu naiv’ verdammt, die Inszenierung mit einer Volkshochschulveranstaltung verglichen. Das ZKM-Team, das hier viel Arbeit hineingesteckt hat, mußte hier manche Schelte tapfer aushalten, vor allem bei der letzten Münchener Aufführung, bei der nach der Abwanderung der Hälfte des Publikums während der Auführung alle Beteiligten vom Publikum mit Rufen wie ‘Verlogene Scheisse!’ ‘Ihr Arschlöcher,’ ‘Fickt Euch’ und—unvergessener Spruch— ‘Zwei Millionen Euro für Scheisse!’ bedacht wurden, ohne dass es überhaupt Applaus gab.” Moritz Eggert, “Klimarettung in Sao Paulo Teil 4: Andere Länder, Andere Sitten,” Goethe-Institut, 21 July 2010, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160629020138/http://blog.goethe.de/amazonas/archives/77-Klimarettung-in-Sao-Paulo-Teil-4-Andere-Laender,-Andere-Sitten.html> (accessed 24 November 2021, our translation).

34. The Haximu’s massacre happened in 1993; it is estimated that between sixteen and seventy-two Yanomami (mostly women and children) were murdered. Only two of the twenty-two perpetrators have faced trial and have received prison sentences. The masterminds, that is, those who own the planes and the capital, were never indicted. For a recollection of the massacre, see Survival International, “Remembering the Haximu Massacre 20 Years on,” 2013, <https://www.survivalinternational.org/articles/3298-haximu-survivors> (accessed 24 November 2021). For an assessment of Yanomami conflicts with illegal mining, see Jasmine Plummer, “The Yanomami: Illegal Mining, Law, and Indigenous Rights in the Brazilian Amazon,” *Georgetown Environmental Law Review*, vol. 27, 2015, p. 479–496, available at Upr-info.org, https://www.upr-info.org/sites/default/files/document/brasil/session_27_-_mai_2017/hay_upr27_bra_e_annexe1.pdf (accessed 28 November 2021); and the recent report by the Associação Hutukara Yanomami and the Instituto Socioambiental (ISA) at: <https://acervo.socioambiental.org/acervo/documentos/cicatrizes-na-floresta-evolucao-do-garimpo-ilegal-na-ti-yanomami-em-2020> (accessed 24 November 2021). For a discussion about political maneuvers against Brazilian Indigenous people, see Luiz Henrique Eloy Amado, “Povos Indígenas e o Estado Brasileiro: a luta por direitos em contexto de violações,” *Vukápanavo: Revista Terena*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2018; Fernanda Frizzo Bragato, Marco Antonio Delfino de Almeida, and Jocelyn Getgen Kestenbaum, “Indigenous Peoples, Genocide and Pandemics in Brazil,” *Revista Culturas Jurídicas*, vol. 7, no. 17, 2020.

someone from participating in them. Similarly, *AMT*'s incongruences caused enough backlash that we tend to agree with Nicholas Till's quote: opera foregrounds the vacuities of "high" culture. But if the aim of *AMT* was to cause discomfort about Amazon's future, then, by failing as an artwork, it succeeded as a critique. Either way, we are under the impression that nothing short of a masterpiece would have pleased the audience members—which is another heavy burden to put on an experimental work.

We return to the questions: Could an opera—financed by some of those who profit from Yanomami's plight—really create meaningful communication? Could dialogue exist between the Yanomami and an encroaching society that continues to prioritize profit over everything else? Kopenawa, when asked if he thought this music-theatre work would help the Yanomami, responded: "I hope it will help a bit. It's not much. The *Amazonas Opera* is making white man respect us. It is clamoring attention, so that the city people will listen."³⁵ This marks the importance of access. Taylor's arguments about José María Arguedas also apply to *AMT*'s situation: "[R]ather than merely revalorize the undervalorized (the Indigenous), Arguedas took the colonizer's discourse (again, verbal and symbolic) and used it against them."³⁶ Similarly, Ulrike Prinz argues:

In the end, however, we all sit in the forest. Is it the same forest for the Western opera-goer as for the Yanomami? Certainly not. But music has always had magical power in the Amazon. The missionaries of the Jesuit reductions in Paraguay were certain: with music they could easily convert the Indians. The Amazon opera is

35. "Eu espero um pouco. Não é muito. A ópera Amazonas está fazendo o homem respeitar. Estão chamando a atenção para o homem da cidade escutar. A Terra está brava com o homem branco," diz líder Yanomami Davi Kopenawa," *Deutsche Welle*, 13 May 2010, para. 7, <https://www.dw.com/pt-br/a-terra-est%C3%A1-brava-com-o-homem-branco-diz-1%C3%ADder-yanomami-davi-Kopenawa/a-5564758> (accessed 16 November 2021, our translation). Furthermore, Claudia Andujar's artwork helped to secure Yanomami Indigenous Territory demarcation. Issues pertaining to Indigenous peoples' rights receive meager coverage in mainstream media, which is one of the reasons why various Indigenous groups took upon themselves the challenge of creating ways of being seen and heard. For example the websites: <https://midiaindia.org/> and www.radioyande.com are both folk media organizations; this is the official website from the Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (APIB): <http://apib.info/>; this is the website from the Coordination of Indigenous Organizations of the Brazilian Amazon (COIAB): <https://coiab.org.br/>; lastly, specifically when it comes to the Yanomami associations, one should see the websites www.hutukara.org and <https://www.foragarimpoforacovid.org/>.

36. Taylor, 1991, p. 94.

based on the opposite approach. Today, the Yanomami convert us by a host of modern media artists and musicians who act as translators.³⁷

IS IT AN OPERA?

AMT challenges the dominant and conventional notions of opera and shows that even such established notions need to be questioned. In terms of aesthetic reasoning, however, not calling *AMT* an opera is an ambiguous choice since the boundaries between traditional operas and experimental music theatre presentations are becoming less clearly marked.³⁸ The matter becomes complicated because some aspects of what generally constitutes an opera are subverted in *AMT*. For instance, in the words of Hans-Jürgen Linke, “TILT” [...] comes closest to meeting conventional expectations: there are performers, a story, evidential relationships between music and text, and a duality between stage and audience.”³⁹

The ambiguity in defining *AMT* as an opera mostly hinged, at first, on its use of technology to stretch boundaries, especially in Act III, and secondly, on the choice of not including a Yanomami performer. Regarding the first aspect, we recall that thematic and technological innovations have long been used, for example, in Hector Berlioz’ *Euphonia* (1844)⁴⁰ or Max Brand’s *Maschinist Hopkins* (1929), as well as contemporary

37. “Zum Schluss aber sitzen wir alle im Wald. Ist es für den westlichen Opernbesucher derselbe Wald wie für den Yanomami? Sicher nicht. Doch war Musik am Amazonas immer ein Zaubermittel. Die Missionare der Jesuitenreduktionen in Paraguay waren sich sicher: Mit Musik hätten sie die Indianer ohne Weiteres bekehren können. Die Amazonas-Oper versucht den umgekehrten Weg. Heute bekehren uns die Yanomami über den Umweg einer Heerschar moderner Medienkünstler und Musiker, die als Übersetzer tätig sind.” Ulrike Prinz, “Die Stimme des Waldes,” Humboldt, September 2010, available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20131027121649/http://www.goethe.de/wis/bib/prj/hmb/the/154/de6571951.htm> (accessed 28 July 2021, our translation).

38. Björn Heile, “Recent Approaches to Experimental Music Theatre and Contemporary Opera,” *Music & Letters*, vol. 87, no. 1, January 2006.

39. “Tilt” [...] entspricht noch am ehesten konventionellen Erwartungen: Es gibt Darsteller, eine Geschichte, evidente Beziehungen zwischen Musik und Text sowie eine Dualität zwischen Bühne und Publikum.” Hans-Jürgen Linke, “Sir Walter und der erste Flipper,” *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 21 June 2010, available at https://web.archive.org/web/20100621074811/http://www.fr-online.de/in_und_ausland/kultur_und_medien/feuilleton/2628367_Sir-Walter-und-der-erste-Flipper.html (accessed 24 November 2021, our translation).

40. Inge van Rij, “Back to (the Music of) the Future: Aesthetics of Technology in Berlioz’s *Euphonia and Damnation de Faust*,” *Cambridge Opera Journal*, vol. 22, November 2010, p. 257–300. The tensions between Wagner’s and Berlioz’ definitions of opera might be a fruitful approach for a further analysis of *AMT*. Here we only mean to point out that technological innovations were used in operas that had been labelled as such before.

examples mentioned by *AMT*'s creator, such as Christoph Schlingensiefel's *Ghost Train* (2007) and *The Flying Dutchman* (2007), a montage of Richard Wagner's opera. Wagner's concepts, especially the *gesamtkunstwerk*, influenced *AMT*'s attempt to incorporate different technologies in the final work. Technology, for them, could help *opsis*, *melos*, and *lexis* harmonize and not overpower one another. For example, Garcia dos Santos interprets composer Tato Taborda's conception as:

An attempt to unfold the spectacle on three levels of meaning simultaneously. On the one hand there is the metaphor of the tropical rainforest and on the other a multifaceted screen on which visions, dreams, and prophecies of the Shaman take form, whose song encompasses his own voice, the voice of the forest, and the *xapiri pë*. Finally, there is Tato's ambition to make these force fields visible as well, as a representation of the structure of the Shaman's brain. To this end, the attention of the audience is called to an experiment in audiovisual form, since the musical evolution of the piece is synchronized with the projections that play over the screens and the actions that take place on the floor of the performance space.⁴¹

Peter Weibel's conception of Act III also echoes these three levels of meaning, but, in his view, the computer serves as a mediator and a unifier, since it is a "universal medium of light, image, and sound."⁴² This union might be seen in Weibel's attempt to "make sound visible," using synesthesia as a guiding creative principle. In Garcia dos Santos' words, "sound-image was neither illustrative nor complementary, which meant that in our opera there would be no scenography in the traditional sense, because sound is inseparable from the image, sound is an image, and the image is sound."⁴³ For example, in "Paradise," lights flicker on and off while a tense, suspenseful E augmented chord is being played. Suddenly, a synthesizer plays the flat 5th of that previous E chord, which ends up creating a cluster between the notes B and C. This dissonant cluster, alongside the myriad of visual resources surrounding it, creates an interplay of sound and light that anticipates the tension related to the imminent arrival of the tripartite chaotic entities embodying the extractivist mentality. Their arrival is certainly chaotic and marked by a polytonal sequence of chords wherein minor and major melodies are mixed; this colourful, yet tense, soundscape is accompanied by a number of digital

41. Garcia dos Santos, 2013, p. 82.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

resources—pictures, machinery noises and whirs, mass produced bobbin sliders and steam presses—that are a way of foreshadowing what might follow. The multitude of tonalities and melodies reminds us of Igor Stravinsky's *Petrushka* (1911), wherein mockery is represented by a trumpet played in a different key; in *AMT*'s case, the insidious intentions underlying each of the extractivists on stage are presented by the shocking notes of an augmented chord they sing—an allusion to their different origins and destructive interests. Curiously, whereas their intentions are expressed by an immersive musical presentation, the openness of the Amazon as a spiritual entity idly stands before them in the background. Earth, water, and its living beings observe steadily, calmly, and openly as their structural ecosystem is to be reaped.

AMT's theatrical nature differs from that of most operas, as it draws from technological resources more often than its predecessors. Regular opera stages are often still, whereas in *AMT* the use of video projections is seen all around the stage, thus allowing for more messages to be sent during its operatic movements. This is seen, for instance, in its references to the devastation brought by atomic technology in its lyrics and in the background pictures. Percussion is also somewhat different, as when it focuses on what is arriving/leaving in the scene with noises that foreshadow events or that outline the theme of the movement being played, or to be played, such as happens in Heitor Villa-Lobos' *Bachianas brasileiras no. 2—Trenzinho do caipira* (1933). *AMT*'s soundscape, however, opens broader horizons in terms of synesthetic experiences once it draws from elements from other genres, such as electronic music, bass drops, and unique industrial samples, to allow them to incorporate contemporary aesthetic concepts that would be difficult to be placed in traditional operas. The bittersweet feeling that otherwise would be expressed through static scenarios and virtuoso musical performances were brought to a different level: all of *AMT*'s movements make the spectator hear, feel, and see how the Amazon is being expropriated right now.

Whereas the polytonality in *AMT* can be seen as a sound resource to represent bad intentions, the polytonal unison presented in the defenders' singing represents the confluence of positive intentions of those who work towards Amazon's protection. While the relationship is not as tense as in the first part, and the melody is less shocking, it proves itself to be unnerving, once different registers and melodic lines are used to employ different scientific points of view. While these melodic lines clash, a number of scientific facts and data are projected on a screen so as to show how much would

be lost if the Amazon were to disappear. Warnings about the consequences of going beyond tipping points are shown in the background while one of the elements that symbolizes life, the colour green, slowly fades away, announcing the end of this act.

“Entropy” begins with a sheer amount of fire and destruction on the screen in the background. The videos and pictures represent how much of the Amazon is being destroyed, while the polytonal sound quality again evokes the extractivists, by having a whirring machine punctuate the musical scene. *AMT*’s microtonal, digital, and experimental composition music might refer to previous operas, such as Alois Hába’s *Mother op. 35*, which extensively explores polytonality. Hába’s approach to composition is relevant to our argument towards labelling *AMT* as an opera because he was one of many who transcended what was formerly popular in opera composition, such as dodecaphonic and serial harmonic works; yet, his work was still qualified as “opera,” despite having many differences when compared to previously established operatic works of his time.

Like Hába’s compositions, *AMT* defies common conceptions of what qualifies as multimediatic spectacle commonly known as “opera.” Weibel affirms that the “opera was born as a multimedia art form—a web of relations between image and movement, between theatre and music.”⁴⁴ Therefore, incorporating new audiovisual equipment was something done to unfold new dimensions in its own expression. Nonetheless, according to Garcia dos Santos, Weibel did not conceive the third part of *AMT* as a “contemporary opera in the conventional or established meaning of the term. In Weibel’s vision, “the work was an opportunity to explore, in a radical manner, the powers that information technology and technoscientific knowledge open up for the renewal of what we used to call opera, or, if you prefer, theatre-music.”⁴⁵

Technoscience, here, is seen as a new reality that conflates science, engineering, entrepreneurship, politics, and the military.⁴⁶ Technoscientific ways of thinking are prevalent in the Brazilian Amazon, for instance, when large-scale mining is heralded as the only salvation for the region. But sometimes, the same science (as an institution) may also be an ally to the Amazon region and to the Indigenous people. This shifting position can be seen in *AMT* when the scientist is an antagonist in Act II, and an

44. *Ibid.*, p. 87

45. *Ibid.*.

46. Adilson Koslowski, “É o conceito de tecnociência confuso?” *Philosophos*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.5216/phi.v20i1.36115> (accessed 28 November 2021).

ally in Act III. Nevertheless, as Garcia dos Santos points out, for “contemporary technoscience, the [Amazon] forest is, above all, information; and it is not by chance that biologists and ecologists compare it to an immense library being lost, before even the ‘books’ of nature have been read.”⁴⁷ But despite the potential benefits:

the accumulated technoscientific knowledge about the forest does not seem to have the power to influence decisively the course of predatory development carried out by civilized peoples; while on the other hand, the traditional knowledge of the Indigenous peoples turned out to be operative in ensuring the coexistence and the sustainability of a positive relation between nature and culture—but it seems that “whites” are incapable of hearing what the indigenous people are saying.⁴⁸

When part of the technoscientific institutions decry the irrationality of “burning” the forest, the argument boils down to saying that the region and the people who inhabit it should be “preserved,” for their genetic material might be useful someday. This kind of argument might seem to be favourable towards Indigenous people, but only insofar as what is currently happening is even worse, with outright dispossession and genocide. Garcia dos Santos has himself participated in discussions about the Brazilian law of biotechnology and access to genetic materials; for him, to maintain the logic of patenting Indigenous traditional knowledge is to make their knowledge always as subsidiary, as raw material for technoscience.⁴⁹ What comes in question here is the value given to Indigenous and to technoscientific knowledge.

This question was posed by Joachim Bernauer: “Isn’t all work with Indigenous people in danger of being misinterpreted as a folkloric event? [...] Can shamanism be

47. “Para a ciência e a tecnologia contemporâneas a floresta é, antes de tudo, informação, e não é por acaso que biólogos e ecólogos a comparam a uma imensa biblioteca sendo irremediavelmente perdida, antes mesmos que os ‘livros’ da natureza tenha sido lidos.” Laymert Garcia dos Santos, “Amoahiki—o canto da floresta,” *Ópera Amazônia*, May 2008, p. 3, <https://www.laymert.com.br/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Amazonas-Oper-Amoahiki.pdf> (accessed 24 November 2021, our translation).

48. “Pois o conhecimento tecnocientífico acumulado sobre a floresta não parece ter força para influir decisivamente nos rumos do desenvolvimento predatório levado a cabo pelos civilizados; por outro lado, o conhecimento tradicional dos povos indígenas revela-se operatório para assegurar, mais do que a coexistência, a sustentabilidade de uma relação positiva entre natureza e cultura—mas parece que os “brancos” são incapazes de ouvir o que estão dizendo.” *Ibid.*, para. 5 (our translation).

49. Laymert Garcia dos Santos. “Seminário, ‘Proteção aos conhecimentos tradicionais: consentimento prévio e informado,’” André Lima & Nurit Bensusan, *Quem cala consente?*

characterized as state-of-the-art technology?”⁵⁰ Nowadays, the suggestion that these two types of knowledge are intimately related is taken up by Brazilian science fiction, especially through the subgenres of amazofuturism and Indigenous futurism. But this is already anticipated in *AMT* when it labels itself as a transcultural opera. With this, *AMT* tries to dislodge what is seen as important and valuable knowledge about the Amazon region.

It might not be an exaggeration to say that the result was “a reconfiguration of opera as a genre and a mode of human expression.”⁵¹ The very essence of what an opera is—a multimediatric expression—is fulfilled in *AMT*'s spectacle. There is not, however, a consensus when it comes to defining *AMT* as an opera. We acknowledge that categorizing it as “theatre-music” does not diminish its importance or impact. Notwithstanding, the question remains, once *AMT* has achieved all that an opera is supposed to, once it has successfully mixed different media into one spectacle, why not call it an opera? The reasons, in our view, are mainly political.

AMT—A TRANSCULTURAL OPERA?

Act II draws upon the throat singing technique. The voice of the shaman, played by Christian Zehnder, has twenty-four different output devices representing his connection and unison with nature, whereas the Western representatives have only one, but are empowered by the *xawara*. This is represented dramaturgically by having the *xawara* moving, acting, and occupying a bigger space on the stage than the shaman, who remains static:

The choice of an overtone to perform the role of the shaman, a strategy frequently used in ethnic music, was a judicious and effective one, according to music critics such as Claus Spahan. The costume conceived by Nora Scheidl conveys no ethnic

Subsídios para a proteção aos conhecimentos tradicionais, São Paulo, Instituto Socioambiental, no. 8, 2003, p. 95. See also Laymert Garcia dos Santos, “Desencontro ou ‘Malencontro?’ Os biotecnólogos brasileiros em face da sócio e da biodiversidade,” *Novos Estudos CEBRAP*, no. 78, 2007, available at Scielo.br, <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0101-33002007000200007> (accessed 28 November 2021).

50. “Todo trabalho com povos indígenas não corre o perigo de ser mal-interpretado como um evento folclórico? [...] Pode-se caracterizar o xamanismo como tecnologia de ponta?” Joachim Bernauer, “Bem-vindos ao laboratório amazônico de ópera” [21–25 July 2010], SESC-SP, 2015, p. 10, <https://www.laymert.com.br/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Programa-%c3%93pera-Ama-z%c3%b4nia-S%c3%a3o-Paulo.pdf> (accessed 24 November 2021, our translation).

51. Garcia dos Santos, 2013, p. 88.

attributes save for a discrete arrangement of feathers, which he holds in one of his hands. His powerful voice is distant from the registers of Western music, but also from the singing of the Yanomami shamans, which he does not intend to assimilate.⁵²



Fig. 3. Act I (top half), Act II (bottom half), *Program SESC-SP* [21–25 July 2010], 2015, p. 62.

We believe we should begin this section with the element that caught our eyes when first studying *AMT*—the audience’s disappointment upon discovering that the Yanomami shaman was played by a Western actor when the expectation was that a shaman would represent himself. Perhaps, as Taylor argues, “the single most important obstacle to the reception of Latin American theatre outside the geographical or academic area of study, is not so much that this theatre seems different, but that it looks oddly the same, that is, recognizable.”⁵³ Here, the body of the actor is a privileged performative locus. For instance, Taylor, in what she calls

52. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

53. Taylor, 1991, p. 96.

embodied performance, points out that “the bodies participating in the transmission of knowledge and memory are themselves a product of certain taxonomic, disciplinary, and mnemonic systems. Gender impacts how these bodies participate, as does ethnicity.”⁵⁴ Even though there are pervasive elements of the Yanomami culture in this piece, the portrayal of their corporality was limited to pictures and the presence of some Yanomami in the audience. It is obvious that a Yanomami portraying a Yanomami is better; but, to have a white actor play a Yanomami was at least a valid, even if somewhat contradictory, choice that helped *AMT* comment about Amazon’s future: the connection and shared responsibility of all.

Part II of *AMT* was meant to be different from the version previously described in this article. In a production from 2008, a group of shamans performed a shamanic ritual amidst the spectacle (at the 11th Munich Biennale), but afterwards *AMT*’s organization found that this sort of event was unsustainable for a number of reasons: “the complexity, beauty, and power of shamanism, as the highest expression of cosmology and the Yanomami culture, had to be articulated in another manner.”⁵⁵ This leads us to think that maybe their performance could not be accepted as part of an opera because of Western theatrical conventions and time constraints, which made it impractical (after all, if it takes too long, as opera usually does, who would pay for the babysitter’s overtime?). The producers therefore chose to put a non-Yanomami performer in the role of the shaman and reorganize the grounds of the spectacle, mingling the audience with performers and hence bringing all involved closer to one another, as if they were into some sort of collective trance.

Opera has long had a ritualistic aspect, as Gary Tomlinson suggests: “[O]pera from the 1600s on has taken the form of a repeatable enactment of relations between its creators and audience on the one hand and the metaphysical realms they conceive, on the other. But the logic of these rituals has changed according to the changing cultural circumstances.”⁵⁶ To understand that opera has this ritualist aspect implies that both the Yanomami and Europeans, at least in theory, could actually belong in an opera. This is not to mean that the Yanomami could be easily accepted in such

54. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Durham, North Carolina, Duke University Press, 2003, p. 86.

55. García dos Santos, 2013, p. 55–56.

56. Gary Tomlinson, *Music and Historical Critique: Selected Essays* [2007], New York, Routledge, 2016, p. 237.

works. For instance, since the nineteenth century opera has lost much of its hybrid characteristics and colourful characters (such as pirates, thieves, etc.), and the fantastic begins to be “displaced by the domestic—or, if the old stage-figures survive, they do so [...] in an altered and diluted form that makes them proper subjects for ‘play’.”⁵⁷ As Barry Emslie puts it, these different figures are domesticated, so:

The exotic is not so threatening because it can be utterly enjoyed elsewhere. It does not matter that the experience is shown to fail, for it retains its bitter-sweet quality as remembrance. The problem for European culture is much sharper when the multicultural threatens to become an intrinsic feature of domestic society. Then the exotic must be tamed and dressed up in order to pre-empt any evocation of the enemy within.⁵⁸

Thieves and pirates are decontextualized, domesticated so they can be safely “seized”; but in *AMT*'s case, the decontextualization of the Yanomami shaman could have been a strategy to create discomfort. When transculturation takes place within the Western subject's consciousness, when the public “see” the “other,” it becomes itself, it becomes an intolerable reflection: Will I be treated the same way the Yanomami are being treated now? This transformation of the Yanomami/White shaman highlights this issue:

In fact, it becomes more clear every day that the tragic destiny we reserved for the Yanomami—and for all Indigenous people—was only a prefiguration of what we are inflicting on ourselves today and on a planetary scale. Lévi-Strauss prophetically anticipated this situation when denouncing “the regime of internal poisoning” in which we are drowning ourselves: “[...] from now on we're all Indigenous, we're doing to ourselves what we did to them.”⁵⁹

57. Barry Emslie, “The Domestication of Opera,” *Cambridge Opera Journal*, vol. 5, no 2, 1993, p. 167.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 169.

59. “De fato, torna-se cada dia mais claro que o destino trágico que reservamos aos Yanomami—a todos os povos indígenas—terá sido apenas uma prefiguração do que estamos hoje nos infligindo a nós mesmos, desta vez, em escala planetária. Como Lévi-Strauss o anunciou profeticamente enquanto denunciava ‘o regime de envenenamento interno’ no qual estamos afogando: ‘[...] doravante todos Índios, estamos fazendo de nós mesmos o que fizemos deles.’” Bruce Albert, “Agora somos todos Índios,” *N-1 Edições*, no. 44, 2020, <https://www.n-1edicoes.org/textos/77> (accessed 24 November 2021, our translation).

The absence of a Yanomami performer did not seem to bother Kopenawa, who in an interview with Deutsche Welle commented on the opera:

I thought it was fine. It reminded me of what happens to our group, to other communities, too. But I thought it was good that it happened here [in Germany]. The play is not only for me, but for everyone who was there. I saw a Xawara [...], imitating the way white folks arrive in our communities and say things, promising material things—axes, fishnets, pants, pans—to weaken the Indigenous peoples.⁶⁰

The insidious nature of the promises that the *xawara* make, something that the Yanomami know very well, is represented by the confrontations between the shaman and his nemesis. An example of such confrontations can be seen when the *xawara* displace objects, or move through smoke screens, entering and exiting the stage so as to bring the audience a feeling of invasion.⁶¹ Audio samples of chainsaws, engine noises, and “pornographic sex complete the audio citations, reinforce the interaction with the Xawara.”⁶² The result of the conflict is that, little by little, the voice of the shaman is drowned out. The *xawarari* then erect a totem: a symbolic building that “defeats” nature by muting the shaman.

While it is possible to interpret the death of the shaman as a past transgression of Western society and the end of the connection between culture and nature, we see it as a warning. As stated by Garcia dos Santos, the shaman’s death is a sign of a catastrophe that has already begun: “[C]atastrophe is not coming. Catastrophe has already arrived.”⁶³ The conflict portrayed by this opera is the beginning of our current tragedy, the fall of the sky is but another outcome of the catastrophe that had already been carried out. Furthermore, “we are used to thinking, and even accepting, the disappearance of Indigenous peoples and the tropical rainforest, the disappearance of *their* world, but not, obviously, the disappearance of our own.”⁶⁴ Is that the reason why a white Yanomami shaman is so discomfoting? Even with its downsides, the

60. “Eu achei bom. Eu lembrei o que acontece com a nossa aldeia, nas comunidades. Mas eu achei bom ser aqui. Não é só para mim, é para todo mundo que estava ali. Eu vi um Xawara [...], imitando como os brancos chegam à nossa aldeia e falam, prometem material—machado, rede, calção, panela—, para derrubar a força do índio.” Kopenawa, 2010, para. 7 (our translation).

61. Garcia dos Santos, 2013, p. 58.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

second part of *AMT*, which is the most indebted to the Yanomami, elicited positive responses in some of the reviews. For instance, Augusto Valente states that “it is one of those rare moments when the promise of *gesamtkunstwerk*—the total work of art—is actually fulfilled,”⁶⁵ granting it a special place in opera, but the question of whether *AMT* is a “transcultural opera” still remains.



Fig. 4. Act II, *Program SESC-SP* [21–25 July 2010], 2015, p. 47.

FINAL REMARKS

In *AMT*, many resources are mobilized to help citizens of Western society understand the grim future that might lie ahead. By delivering a synesthetic experience that helps spectators understand the cultural depth of the Yanomami and the collapse that has,

65. “Parte dois de Amazonas, A Queda do Céu, é um desses raros momentos em que a promessa do *gesamtkunstwerk*—a obra de arte total—se cumpre de fato.” Augusto Valente, “Três vezes Amazonas,” *Deutsche Welle*, May 2010, para. 12–13, <https://www.dw.com/pt-br/teatro-m%C3%BAsica-estrea-em-munique-tr%C3%AAs-vis%C3%B5es-contrastantes-da-amaz%C3%B4nia/a-5558069> (accessed 24 November 2021, our translation).

insidiously, been taking place in the Amazon rainforest, *AMT* challenges a way of thinking about the Amazon, one that sees it only as a field for extractivist endeavours, and the most common assumptions about Indigenous peoples. It attempts to rewire our society.

No doubt, these are all pressing matters and there is a long and tortuous way ahead of us. *AMT* may represent a small act of resistance by the Yanomami, but it is the legitimization of their endeavours and this legitimization is essential for them to be heard. João Paulo Barreto Ye'pamahsã has some insights that may shed light on *AMT*'s importance. Ye'pamahsã, in a conversation with Luiz Davi Viera Gonçalves, recalls how much Indigenous people have been exoticized. For instance, visitors became confused when they saw João's uncle or father at Bahserikowi Centre of Indigenous Medicine at Manaus because they expected an exotic image of the *pajé* (shaman). This sort of expectation takes a heavy toll on Indigenous imagery, according to Ye'pamahsã: "[S]o, when I say decolonize, this is it, when we really want to take up these differences, the best way is to engage in a dialogue, as we are doing here, as some artists are doing; we can do a lot of good things, why not do an Amazon Opera?"⁶⁶ He does not specifically mention *AMT*, but the idea behind it is similar; that's why the Yanomami "enter the opera," because "if the main character of the opera is the Amazon forest, the Yanomami are spokespersons that can make us accede to the forest's spirit; they are the ones that warn us about the forest's demise. The threat of this irreparable loss causes grief in the Yanomami, [...] but what they say is that the grief of the forest is also our own grief."⁶⁷

66. "Então, quando digo em descolonizar é isso, quando a gente quer retomar de fato essas diferenças, o melhor caminho é dialogar como estamos fazendo aqui, como alguns artistas estão fazendo, nós podemos fazer muita coisa boa, por que não fazer uma Ópera Amazônica?" João Paulo Barreto Ye'pamahsã and Luiz Davi Viera Gonçalves, "Teatro e povos indígenas: o perigo da folclorização," N-1 Edições, Série Teatro e os Povos Indígenas, 2021, para. 6, <https://www.n-1edicoes.org/o-perigo-da-folclorizacao> (accessed 24 November 2021, our translation).

67. "Se a personagem central da ópera é a floresta da Amazônia, os Yanomami são os porta-vozes que podem nos fazer aceder ao espírito da floresta; por isso mesmo, são eles que alertam para o perigo do fim. A ameaça da perda irreparável suscita a agonia dos Yanomami," Garcia dos Santos, 2008, para. 8, <https://www.laymert.com.br/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Amazonas-Oper-Amoahiki.pdf> (accessed 24 November 2021, our translation).

APPENDIX A: TIMELINE

DATE	PLACE	COMMENTARY AND SOURCE
22/11/2006	Karlsruhe	First meeting of all project partners Bernauer, 2010.
08-10/12/2006	São Paulo	Amazonian Essays https://www.laymert.com.br/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Histórico-do-seminário-ensaios-amazônicos.pdf
02/2008	Watoriki	Pupunha festival https://www.laymert.com.br/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Relato-da-visita-à-Aldeia-Watoriki--festa-da-pupunha.pdf
01/05/2008	Munich	Amazon Oper at 11th Munich Biennial https://www.laymert.com.br/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Programam-Amazonas-oper-MunIQUE.pdf ; https://www.laymert.com.br/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Amazonas-Oper-Amoahiki.pdf
08/2009	Watoriki	Workshop by Yanomami shamans Bernauer, 2010.
11-15/01/2010	Lisbon	Rehearsal Garcia dos Santos, 2013.
07/05/2010	Munich	Conference at Goethe-Institut Zentrale de Munich
08-12/05/2010	Munich	XII Münchener Biennale https://www.laymert.com.br/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Bienale-2010-Amazonas.pdf
29-30/05/2010	Rotterdam	Garcia dos Santos, 2013.
21-25/07/2010	São Paulo	Amazônia: teatro música em três partes https://www.laymert.com.br/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Programa-Ópera-Amazônia-São-Paulo.pdf
04-08/10/2010	Lisbon	It seems that the event did not occur
25-27/04/2013	Vienna	Out of Control—Festival for New Music Theatre Garcia dos Santos, 2013.

APPENDIX B: VIDEO FOOTAGE

- ACT I**
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fo4QoUatoVM>
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KHTwEOmZoIk> (from Vienna's performance)
 - <https://vimeo.com/123734555>
 - <https://vimeo.com/122860877>
 - <https://vimeo.com/121997519>
- ACT II**
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KHTwEOmZoIk> (from Vienna)
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZlr2roL-s0>
 - <https://vimeo.com/122203478>
 - <https://vimeo.com/122139283>
 - <https://vimeo.com/30371390>
- ACT III**
- <https://vimeo.com/153274583>
 - <https://vimeo.com/122757286>
 - <https://vimeo.com/122810290>
 - <https://zkm.de/en/media/video/amazonas-musiktheater-in-drei-teilen-1-3>
 - <https://zkm.de/en/media/video/amazonas-musiktheater-in-drei-teilen-2-3>
 - <https://zkm.de/en/media/video/amazonas-musiktheater-in-drei-teilen-3-3>
- ENTIRE PERFORMANCE**
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VNTfNYmGf8g>
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZlr2roL-s0>
 - <https://vimeo.com/117124522>
 - <https://zkm.de/en/media/video/amazonas-musiktheater-in-drei-teilen>

Amazonia—Music Theatre in Three Parts : A Transcultural Operatic Experience?

VÍTOR CASTELÕES GAMA
UNIVERSIDADE DE BRASÍLIA

MARCELO VELLOSO GARCIA
UNIVERSIDADE DE BRASÍLIA

ABSTRACT

This article discusses *Amazonia—Music Theatre in Three Parts* ([*AMT*] 2010), a collaboration between the Yanomami, Brazilian and German producers as a transcultural form of resistance that touches on issues of transculturation and Indigenous peoples' culture and portrayal. We argue that *AMT* claimed legitimation as an opera and publicized the Yanomami's views about what extractivism is doing to our planet: devastation beyond tipping points. We first discuss how the Yanomami had been portrayed in art before this opera, and then turn to how the operatic form of *AMT* was perceived by its reviewers; finally, we offer a critique of the reviewers' arguments against labelling *AMT* as a transcultural opera, as we believe these arguments are mainly political. This article aims to demonstrate the fluidity of the boundaries between opera and *musiktheater*, and of what characterizes a transcultural experience.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet essai traite de l'*Amazonie — Théâtre musical en trois parties* ([*AMT*] 2010), une collaboration entre producteurs yanomami, brésiliens et allemands, comme une

forme de résistance transculturelle afin de discuter de la transculturation et de la culture et de la représentation des peuples indigènes. Nous soutenons que l'*AMT* a revendiqué sa légitimité en tant qu'opéra et a fait connaître les vues des Yanomami sur ce que la pensée extractiviste fait à notre planète: la dévastation au-delà des points de basculement. Tout d'abord, nous discutons de la manière dont les Yanomami ont été représentés dans l'art avant cet opéra; ensuite, nous discutons de la manière dont sa forme opératique a été perçue par ses critiques; enfin, nous discutons des arguments utilisés contre l'étiquetage de l'*AMT* comme un opéra transculturel pour des raisons que nous croyons être principalement politiques. Dans cet article, nous démontrons la fluidité des frontières entre l'opéra et le *musiktheater* ainsi que de ce qui caractérise une expérience transculturelle.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Vítor Castelões Gama is a doctoral student at the University of Brasília, Brazil. His research is about the Amazon as represented in Brazilian science fiction and he is interested in Brazilian and international science fiction. His works have been published in *Vector*, the journal of the British Science Fiction Association, *Aeternum*, and *Post-Scriptum*, among others.

Marcelo Velloso Garcia is a doctoral student at the University of Brasília, Brazil. His research focuses on testing and assessment, sociolinguistics, proficiency tests, and second language acquisition. He also has interest in arts, specifically literature. His works have been published in *Vector*, the journal of the British Science Fiction Association, *Aeternum*, and *Post-Scriptum*, among others.