Offenbach and the Voices of Limpopo: Vocal and Visual Narratives in a "Land of Contrast"

By Lee Chambers

This piece was awarded the Vida Chenoweth Student Paper Prize of the SEM Southern Plains Chapter. An expanded version of Chambers's prize-winning work is being submitted for consideration by another academic journal. Still, we would like to recognize this piece in its original conference paper form for its success, and thus have included the original paper abstract. When the expanded article is accepted for publication, we will also link to it in this space.

Abstract: In recent years, scholars have given considerable attention to the presence of indigenous peoples from beyond the West in the world of opera; topics have ranged from the representation of these peoples by Western composers to the engagement of opera by “Indigene” composers and performers to express their identities amidst the fractures of postcolonial life. In the case of African operatic contexts, these perspectives address the ways in which opera interfaces with African convictions by exploring of the motivations for operatic practice, perceptions about opera and operatic voices, and the intended function of African voices and viewpoints within these practices. This study considers the Mozambique Ministry of Tourism promotional campaign “Land of Contrast,” which filmed two Mozambican singers—soprano Stella Mendonça and contralto Sonia Mocumbi—singing the Barcarolle Duet from Les Contes d’Hoffman with the French Symphonic Orchestra of Pontarlier in Limpopo National Park, incorporating video imagery of wildlife from the park. Employing the stated goals of the campaign, I provide an analysis of the imagery in these commercials and its relationship to the musical backdrop. Discussing the layers of opposition that are constructed between the images, the music, and the voices of both Mendonça and Mocumbi, I argue that Mozambique is presented to the potential tourist as a destination where the experience of cultivated amenities co-exists with that of an untamed idyllic nature. As such, the advertisement demonstrates the ways in which the juxtaposition of “indigenous” and “global” objects signifies networks of prestige, commonality, and individuality.

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