

**IMT School for Advanced Studies, Lucca, Italy**

**EXPLORING THE SOCIAL, STRATEGIC AND COMMUNITY-BASED ANTECEDENTS  
OF NORM-BREAKING BEHAVIORS:  
EVIDENCE FROM THE ITALIAN OPERA FIELD**

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## ARTICLES:

- Cancellieri, G., and Turrini, A. 2015. The Phantom of Modern Opera: How Economics and Politics Affect Opera Houses' Programming Strategies. *International Journal of Arts Management*, 18(3): 25-36.
- Cancellieri, G., and Riccaboni, M. 2015. From La Bohème to La Wally: How Organizational Status Affects the (Un)conventionality of Opera Repertoire. Accepted for Presentation at:
  - the 75<sup>th</sup> Academy of Management Annual Meeting (AOM), Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, August, 2015;
  - the 35<sup>th</sup> Strategic Management Society Annual Conference (SMS), Denver Colorado, October, 2015;
  - the 31<sup>st</sup> European Group of Organizational Studies (EGOS) Colloquium, Athens, Greece, July, 2015.(An old version of this article has been published as a EIC working paper # 5/2015, ISSN: 2279-6894).
- Cancellieri, G. 2015. Strategic Practices and Italian Opera Houses' Performance: the Innovation Dilemma. *Mercati e Competitività*, 3: 39-59.
- Cancellieri, G., and Turrini, A. 2015. Le Cultural Factoris tra Iconicità e Management: un Benchmarking Europeo. *Economia & Management* (Egea, Bocconi). Volume 5, Ottobre/Novembre. Dossier Istituzioni culturali, venti di riforma.
- Cancellieri, G., and Turrini, A. 2015. Understanding the Profile of Omnivorous Music Consumers: Cultural Voracity vs. Taste Eclecticism. In the 13<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Arts and Cultural Management (AIMAC), Marseille, France, June, 2015. Winner of the Best Conference Paper Award.
- Cancellieri, G., and Riccaboni, M. 2014. To Blend or Not to Blend: it's a Matter of Status and Networking Relationships. Paper accepted for presentation at the 30<sup>th</sup> European Group of Organizational Studies (EGOS) Colloquium, Rotterdam, Netherlands, July, 2014.
- Cancellieri, G., Dubini, P., and Morganti, I. 2013. Innovating within tradition. The case of Italian Opera. In the 12<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Arts and Cultural Management (AIMAC), Bogotá, Colombia, June, 2013. Winner of the Best Conference Paper Award.
- Cancellieri, G., Turrini, A. 2012. Exploring Determinants of Programming Contemporary Music and Opera: Evidence from Italy. Accepted for presentation at

the 17<sup>th</sup> International Conference of the Association for Cultural Economics International (ACEI), Kyoto, Japan, June, 2012.

- Cancellieri, G., and Dubini, P. 2012. Innovative Practices and Opera Houses' Performance: Evidence from Italy'. In the 12<sup>th</sup> European Academy of Management Conference (EURAM), Elsevier, Rotterdam, Netherlands, June, 2012.
- Turrini, A., Cancellieri, G. 2012. 'Un' Opera da Finanziare in Privato'. [www.lavoce.info](http://www.lavoce.info), September.
- Cancellieri, G., and Turrini, A. 2011. When the Curtain Goes Up: Investigating How Iconic Performing Arts Centers are Managed in Europe'. Paper presented at the 19<sup>th</sup> Conference of the European Network of Cultural Administration Training Centers. (ENCATC), Helsinki, Finland, October, 2011.

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

Distinctiveness and conformity are core interests for researchers of organizations and management studies. Distinctiveness allows firms to cultivate new identities and styles and to contribute to the evolution of entire industries through innovation. However, conformity is recommended as audiences are more likely to accept organizations whose product offerings follow widely established normative expectations embodied in conventional product features while sanctioning nonconforming behaviors that run against the taken for grantedness of established prescriptions. Several studies have investigated how organizations face the tension between conformity and distinctiveness as a way of gaining social and economic benefits (e.g., status advantage, reputation improvement, better financial performance and competitive advantage).

My dissertation focuses on unexplored social, strategic and community-based factors enabling organizations to pursue distinctiveness even in contexts where conformity pressures are strong. I explore this topic in the innovative empirical setting of Italian opera where opera houses' need to achieve distinctiveness through the artistic renewal of their programming strategies clashes with the necessity for them to conform to taken for granted expectations for the preservation of a historically established operatic patrimony.

This research falls into two broad streams. The first examines how organizations' social positioning (i.e., social standing) affects their ability to violate established normative prescriptions through nonconforming behaviors and which strategic actions enable them to offset the penalties of nonconformity. The second sheds light on the community-based antecedents of opera houses' non-conforming behaviors and contributes specifically to the arts management literature on innovation in performing arts organizations. Within this second perspective I conducted an analysis of the opera audiences' profile as a way of



providing opera managers who aspire to renew their artistic program with insight into the specific traits that characterize their audience.

The dissertation is structured as follows. First, using network analysis and panel data regression analysis, I explore how organizations' social positioning (its status) affects their willingness to adopt nonconforming behaviors. Second, I theorize and empirically test how organizations can act strategically to mitigate the potential penalties that derive from a particular form of norm-breaking behaviors which consists in hybridizing the features of a taken for granted category of products infused with established normative prescriptions. Focusing specifically on the arts management literature, I then theorize about the political and economic factors that may drive norm-breaking behaviors in the field of opera. Finally I close the dissertation with an analysis of the profile of the Italian opera audience as a way of providing opera houses' managers with an in depth knowledge of their audience-base which can be put at the service of the development of innovative programming strategies.

**From *La Bohème* to *La Wally*:  
How Organizational Status Affects the (Un)conventionality of Opera Repertoire**

**INTRODUCTION:**

Status is defined as “an organization’s position in the social system that can be ranked among other positions based on its relative prestige or social esteem” (Collet and Philippe, 2014; Jensen, Kim and Kim, 2011, p.87; Merton, 1957). Although status has commonly been depicted as “an inherently conservative, stabilizing force” (Podolny 2005, p. 255; Sauder, Lynn and Podolny, 2012), recent literature highlights the instability that shapes most status structures: high status organizations can “fall from grace” (Graffin et al., 2013; Jensen, 2006) while organizations lower in status can ascend the status hierarchy (Lounsbury, 2002).

The mobility of organizations within a status structure can take different forms (Jensen, Kim and Kim, 2011). First, organizations can make targeted investments in specific product features that respond to the dominant criterion used to rank them in a market space. Second, organizations can attempt to improve their social position by attracting flows of individuals from their higher status counterparts. Whether status mobility occurs through targeted investments or by individuals’ mobility (Jensen, Kim and Kim, 2011), most research focuses

on the contextual factors that shape status dynamics in a field (Collet and Philippe, 2014; Huang and Washington, 2011; Lifschitz, Sauder and Stevens, 2014; Lounsbury, 2002). Against this backdrop, studies have started to examine how conflicting normative expectations of status-worthy behaviors affect the mobility of firms within the status hierarchy (Lifschitz, Sauder and Stevens, 2014; Lounsbury, 2002). However, the investigation of status instability as a specific condition that shapes the willingness of firms to embrace deviant status-based expectations is an under-examined area of research. We focus therefore on how status instability shapes the systems of incentives for firms in different social positions to undertake nonconforming actions that deviate from a dominant status-based norm.

A central argument in theory on status and nonconformity is that high and low status organizations are willing to defy established conventions because they are secure of the respective social acceptance and rejection of their actions while middle status organizations conform more to protect their social standing (Phillips and Zuckerman, 2001). In this regard, normative pressures orient middle status organizations to align their offer to mainstream contents (Durand and Kremp, 2015) that confer them with status in front of relevant audiences. We add that when conflicting audiences' expectations challenge the dominant criterion for status distinction in a field, opportunities to leverage deviant status-based expectations to protect and improve their social standing encourage middle status organizations to defy prevailing normative prescriptions. By contrast, high and low status organizations' freedom of deviance is constrained. What hampers the ability of high status organizations to challenge dominant normative pressures is the threat of status loss that stems from the betrayal of dominant audiences' interests they are committed to serve (Phillips, Turco and Zuckerman, 2013). At the same time, low status organizations increase their conformity to the expectations of this audience as a way of filling their legitimacy-gap

and avoiding the penalties associated with the risk of social rejection (Deephouse and Carter, 2005; Dittes and Kelley, 1956).

Recent studies on the social antecedents of conformity and deviance have shown that organizations can both preserve and diverge from a dominant norm concurrently, and that conformity to a norm can be a way to achieve distinctiveness (Durand and Kremp, 2015; Durand, Rao and Monin, 2007; Jensen and Kim, 2013). Building on these studies, we argue that aesthetic conventionality – the adoption of visual features (Bloch, Brunel and Arnold, 2003; Castaner and Campos, 2002) that reflect taken for granted forms of presenting an organization's product offering – differentially alters high, middle and low status organizations' willingness to diverge from a dominant norm. By masking the controversial aspects of contents that are unacceptable by dominant audiences, an increased aesthetic conventionality confers high and low status organizations a discretionary power of deviance by protecting their social standing against status loss. Conversely, by de-emphasizing the counter-normative aspects of deviant undertakings among divergent audiences, aesthetic conventionality creates barriers to upward status mobility efforts built around divergent expectations which in turn reduces the incentives for middle status firms to depart from dominant normative prescriptions.

Our study advances research on status and nonconformity (Durand and Kremp, 2015; Durand, Rao and Monin, 2007; Jensen, 2006; Jensen, Kim and Kim, 2011; Phillips and Zuckerman, 2001) in several ways. First, we shed light on how possibilities for upward and downward status mobility that stem from the enactment of divergent status based prescriptions create incentives and constraints for firms in different social positions to undertake norm-breaking actions. Second, we identify the degree of conventionality in the forms or design of presenting their offering (aesthetic conventionality) as a mechanism that affects high, mid and low status organizations' freedom to infuse the contents of their

product offering with deviant status-based prescriptions. High and low status organizations can leverage aesthetic conventionality to achieve greater distinctiveness in the contents of their offerings while middle status organizations are forced to increase their conformity to mainstream contents when they emphasize the conventional visual appearance of their offering.

I test our hypotheses on how status affects nonconformity within unstable status hierarchies with data on the Italian opera market from 2004 to 2011. We begin by providing a review of the literature on the relationship between status and nonconformity, before theorizing why opportunities for status mobility triggered by the tension between competing status-based norms alter the relationship between status and the degree of unconventionality of opera house repertoires. We hypothesize next that the success or failure of status in fostering unconventional programming decisions is contingent upon the level of opera houses' commitment to an authorized way of visually presenting their repertoire to different audiences, which in turn reshapes the incentives for opera houses in different status positions to program unconventional operas. We end our study by discussing the implications of our findings for research and practice, examining limitations, and making suggestions for future research.

## **STATUS AND NONCONFORMITY WITHIN UNSTABLE STATUS HIERARCHIES**

The status of an organization refers to “its position in the social hierarchy that results from accumulated acts of deference and respects” (Collet and Philippe, 2014; Goode, 1978; Sauder, Lynn and Podolny, 2012, p. 268; Whyte, 1943). Status has a signaling value: it acts as a lens through which external parties interpret the quality of the products produced by an

organization. In this regard, status functions as an uncertainty-reducing signal that enhances the positive perception of the products that the organization produces. Indeed, the products of high status organizations are perceived to be of higher quality than those of organizations in lower vertical positions. The uncertainty-reducing value of status is particularly important when it is difficult for the external audience to evaluate the quality of the products of an organization before purchase (Podolny, 1994). This is the case of cultural products whose appreciation cannot be determined *a priori* and requires the audience to be immersed in the consumption experience (De Vany, 2004; Hirsch, 1972).

Status research often emphasizes the reproduction of current status arrangements and the relative stability of status hierarchies over time, with more organizations staying in the same position rather than moving from one position to another. However, recent studies have shown that most status structures are unstable, as firms within those hierarchies may strive to undertake status-enhancing actions aimed at acquiring a higher social position (Lounsbury, 2002; Graffin et al., 2013; Rao, Monin and Durand, 2005). Status mobility can take two different forms. First, organizations can undertake targeted investments in specific product features that respond to the dominant criterion to rank them in a market space in an attempt to move to a higher vertical position (Jensen, Kim and Kim, 2011). For example, if the dominant criterion for a coffee shop chain to be ranked as a high status one is to deliver high quality in-shop consumer experiences, organizations in the coffee shop market may decide to invest more resources in the quality of their consumer experiences in an attempt to enter a higher vertical status bracket.

Second, regardless of the direct investments to improve their rankings, organizations may also attempt to move to a higher vertical position by affiliating with organizations in the desired vertical position (Jensen, Kim and Kim, 2011). This perspective acknowledges the relational component of status, constructed as a set of exchange relationships among actors

in a field (Benjamin and Podolny, 1999; Collet and Philippe, 2014; Podolny, 2001; Podolny and Phillips, 1996). Firms have strong incentives to establish relationships with firms in higher status positions in order to benefit from status-enhancing effects while increasing the perception of their quality in a market. Gulati and Higgins (2003) argue that by affiliating with highly esteemed organizations, a focal organization can accumulate status over time. Status flows through the ties that link market actors within a social structure and the mobility of individuals between firms is a typical conduit that enables the transfer of status. For example, by attracting a major figure from a high status competitor, a firm can improve its social standing. Similarly, the flow of academics between institutions often facilitates the transfer of status among academic departments; recruiting a prominent member from a prestigious department is a typical strategy for enhancing a department's status (Podolny, 1993).

Despite the widespread interest in the factors that trigger status mobility (Lifschitz, Sauder and Stevens 2014; Lounsbury, 2002; Rao, Monin and Durand, 2005; Sauder, 2006), the examination of how firms behave within unstable status hierarchies remains largely unexplored. We shift attention accordingly from the factors that trigger instability to the examination of the disposition of firms within unstable status structures to undertake norm-breaking behaviors that violate the dominant norm that solidifies the status hierarchy. We concentrate on a specific type of status mobility that occurs when conflicting audiences' expectations of status-worthy behaviors can be leveraged by firms to attract individuals from organizations in higher status positions in order to move up in the status hierarchy.

However, as firms within different status brackets are differentially dependent on dominant audiences' prescriptions to safeguard their status positions, their dispositions to embrace divergent audiences' interests may vary. A core claim in theory on status and nonconformity is that middle status organizations follow prevailing normative expectations

for fear of compromising their social standing (Deephouse and Carter, 2005; Phillips and Zuckerman, 2001; Sauder, Lynn and Podolny, 2012). The extent to which middle status organizations' freedom of deviance is constrained, however, depends on the levels of risk they face by breaking with dominant conventions, as well as on how nonconformity hampers possibilities for them to ascend the status hierarchy (Cancian, 1967; Phillips and Zuckerman, 2001).

Middle status organizations have the flexibility to embrace norm-deviant behaviors infused with the interests of divergent audience segments. This is because, contrary to high status firms that are more committed to serving the interests of dominant audience segments (Phillips, Turco and Zuckerman, 2013), middle status firms are more protected from the external sanctions of dominant audiences, which in turn reduces the risk of status loss that stems from deviant behaviors. Moreover, opportunities for upward mobility are strong incentives for middle status organizations to pursue nonconformity. Norm-breaking behaviors may in fact enable them to attract individuals from firms in high status positions by providing these individuals with opportunities to be acclaimed among a divergent audience without making them incur the criticism of dominant audiences. Indeed, studies have shown that individuals are not always following-the rules actors and have interests in nurturing the divergent traits of their market popularity through an intentional violation of dominant norms (Rindova, Pollock and Hayward, 2006), while gaining acclaim among a divergent audience (Jensen, 2010).

Conversely, high and low status organizations' freedom to violate dominant status-based expectations is obstructed by the threat of downward status mobility. As embracing a conflicting norm implies a betrayal of the interests of audience segments they are committed to serve, high status organizations risk their high status advantage when they violate dominant normative prescriptions (Phillips, Turco and Zuckerman, 2013; Sauder, Lynn and



Podolny, 2012). Criticism by core audience segments threatens the security in their social position because it damages their reputation for quality. At the same time, the very low social acceptability of organizations at the bottom of the status hierarchy (Kim, Jensen and Kim, 2011) and their low access to survival-enhancing opportunities (Deephouse and Carter, 2005; Sauder, Lynn and Podolny, 2012) makes them particularly sensitive to the risk of social rejection. Rejection-based status anxiety limits their freedom of deviance (Dittes and Kelley, 1956).

The extent to which high and low status openness to norm-breaking behaviors is constrained ultimately depends on their exposure to the social penalties that stem from nonconformity (Durand and Kremp, 2015). We argue that high and low status firms' efforts to raise the recognizability and identifiability of the visual aspects of their offering enables them to protect their social position against the sanctions stemming from nonconformity. Whereas nonconformity signals an organization's effort to evidence its offer with respect to mainstream contents that are widely accepted by relevant audiences (Durand and Kremp, 2015), aesthetic conventionality enables firms to mask illegitimate, deviant contents (Elsbach and Sutton, 1992; Scott, 1987) under a legitimate visual appearance. This in turn fosters high and low status firms' ability to create a taken for granted interpretation of deviant behaviors in the eyes of dominant audiences. On the one hand, aesthetic conventionality provides low status organizations with an increased social acceptability in the eyes of dominant audience segments, which mitigates their anxiety of being exposed to the economic penalties that stems from the exclusion from the social system. At the same time, it provides high status organizations with an increased security in their social positions that alleviates the risk of status leakage that can arise as a consequence of nonconformity.

On the other hand, by de-emphasizing the counter-normative aspects of norm-breaking behaviors, aesthetic conventionality results in a reduced potential for middle status

organizations to raise the success of their nonconforming actions among divergent audiences which is what drives the willingness of individuals within higher status brackets to affiliate with them (Jensen, 2010). This in turn constrains middle status organizations' openness to nonconformity by hampering their ability to protect and improve their social standing through norm-breaking behaviors.

Shifting focus from general arguments on status and nonconformity to status and nonconformity in the opera field we will now discuss why, under conditions of status instability, opera houses in distinct status positions have different incentives and degrees of leeway to violate dominant normative prescriptions.

## **STATUS AND NONCONFORMITY IN THE ITALIAN OPERA FIELD**

### **Conflicting expectations and the instability of the Italian opera houses' status hierarchy**

The status of Italian opera houses depends on their centrality in the social system arising from their artists-exchange relationships and is transferred through the mobility of artists (Cori, 2004). Drawing a prominent artist from an opera house in a higher status position is a way for a focal theatre to acquire status through affiliations with peers in higher status positions. At the same time, the dissolution of an opera house's artists-sharing relationships with other peers in the same status bracket engenders status loss.

The dominant criterion for opera houses' status distinction is the conservation of a mainstream repertoire that reflects the taste of a wide audience and builds the backbone of the Italian operatic heritage. However, as tax-exempt, government-funded organizations, Italian opera houses have an obligation to society to design their programs not only on the

basis of the audience's actual tastes (i.e., the box office), but also on the basis of what experts regard as 'good' or 'necessary' for cultivating audience tastes, for future generations of spectators and for the development of the opera field itself. In this scenario, opera houses face the dueling, competing pressures to conform and to deviate from the preservation of an historically established, conventional operatic patrimony. By programming underperformed operas by Alfredo Catalani (e.g., *La Wally*), an opera house is less conventional in its programming decisions compared to one whose season revolves around well-known Giacomo Puccini masterpieces (e.g., *La Bohème*).

At the origin of status instability in this field lies the tension between conflicting status-based expectations, which gives rise to contrasting motives for artists to participate in artistic performances with different degrees of conventionality. Being part of the profession, artists support the artistic renewal of the standard repertoire, thereby reflecting their need to challenge audiences by questioning and transcending existing aesthetic beliefs (Kim and Jensen, 2011). In this scenario, opera houses in lower status positions can leverage divergent claims for artistic renewal to move up in the status hierarchy. As well-expressed by the managing directors of the Teatro del Giglio in Lucca, the Teatro Comunale in Livorno and the Teatro di Pisa "over years we have developed a cycle of highly unconventional opera titles including underperformed contemporary works (e.g., *Il Cappello di Paglia di Firenze*, *Napoli Millionaria* by Rota) and forgotten masterpieces of the past (e.g., *La Rondine* by Puccini). While these projects have been supported by experts and public bodies, they also attracted high quality directors and conductors who nurtured our prestige and social standing" (Tarabella, Paloscia and Proietti, 2013).

At the same time, though, as in other arts and entertainment domains, the participation in unpopular artistic productions can lead artists to stigmatize themselves. This is particularly costly, especially for those artists performing at the top of the social system (Jensen, 2010). In

this scenario, deviant theatres can lose their status either because of their inability to attract artists from other houses in the same or higher status brackets or because of the unwillingness of other houses to hire artists who have stigmatized themselves through their participation in unpopular productions. The risk of status loss is a major issue for theatres striving for artistic renewal: the Teatro Comunale in Bologna lost status, falling from the top to the lowest rank of the status hierarchy during the 2008-2009 artistic season, after having significantly decreased the average conventionality of its repertoire by almost 50 percent. By programming less performed titles from the Italian and the French operatic traditions, such as *Pinotta* by Mascagni or *Sansone et Dalila* by Camille Saint-Saens, the low status Teatro Comunale di Lecce has lowered its social standing from the 2007-2008 artistic season to the 2008-2009 artistic season, to the point of facing the risk of exiting the social system.

Field level evidence, therefore, highlights possibilities of upward and downward status mobility that arises as the result of theatres' efforts to challenge dominant tastes through the artistic renewal of the repertoire. Theaters within distinct status brackets are unequally exposed to the risk of status loss and to the opportunities for status advancement that stems from the renewal of their repertoire. This engenders significant variations in their disposition to satisfy divergent audiences' preferences by increasing the unconventionality of their repertoires.

Middle status opera houses' intermediate social position enables them to betray the expectations of conservative audience segments without incurring in the risk of being sanctioned for infringing dominant normative prescriptions. As this safeguards the reputation of artists performing on their stages against the negative judgment of a wide audience, middle status opera houses that renew their repertoires benefit from an increased protection against the risk of failing to draw artists from theatres in the same status bracket, which in turn cements their social standing.

Middle status opera houses are not only protected against the risk of losing status as a consequence of nonconformity, they also benefit from the upward mobility incentives that stem from it. Their intermediate, boundary-straddling position between the core and the margin of the social system enables them to enhance the creative performance of their unconventional repertoires among the divergent segments of critics and experts. Cattani and Ferriani (2008) argue that intermediate rather than central or peripheral social positions are particularly beneficial for raising the creative performance of innovative artistic projects. Thus, mid-status opera houses can offer artists performing at the top of the status hierarchy increased opportunities for achieving artistic success among experts through their participation in unconventional operas without subjecting them to the criticism of dominant audience segments. This in turn increases mid-status theatres' ability to attract their attention and move up in the status hierarchy. In sum, opportunities for upward status mobility and barriers to downward mobility offered by the programming of unconventional operas are strong incentives for middle status opera houses to renew their repertoires.

Unlike middle status opera houses, high and low status theatres are in a less advantageous position to program unconventional operas. As high status opera houses are highly exposed to the external sanctions by conservative audiences, programming unconventional operas confronts them with possibilities of status loss because artists from other high status houses may avoid compromising their reputation for quality by participating in artistic projects carried out by theatres that have been devalued by conservative audience segments. As suggested by Alexander Pereira, the new general manager of the La Scala theatre "it is a hard task for artists to perform unconventional productions at La Scala because of the famous booing of La Scala's loggionisti and season ticket holders (those in the upstairs balconies).....most of these artists they are intimidated if not frightened to death" (Pereira, 2014). Since the consequences of a loss of reputation is

particularly high for artists performing at the top of the social system (Jensen, 2010), they are likely to disassociate themselves from high status theatres whose programming decisions elicit negative external reactions.

Jensen (2006) noted that organizations at the top of the social system suffer from status anxiety – concerns about being devalued because important external actors question the quality of a firm's partner – which in turn may lead them to break their relationship with deviant firms. Status anxiety increases the reluctance of high status theatres to draw artists from deviant peers in the same status bracket. Indeed, high status houses are afraid that their social standing can be compromised by the employment of artists who carry with them the stigma of theatres criticized by the audience they are committed to serve. Thus, the need for high status opera houses to protect their social position against the dissolution of their artists-sharing relationships and the consequential threat of status loss leads them to conform more to an established operatic repertoire that satisfies the taste of a wide audience. The reasons lie in their attempt to stabilize their network of artists-exchange relationships with peers in the same status brackets, thus securing their position at the top of the status hierarchy.

Research on middle status conformity suggests that low status organizations have little to lose from violating prevailing norms (Phillips and Zuckerman, 2001). However, avoidance of the penalties associated with social rejection is a strong constraint for low status organizations to undertake norm-breaking actions (Dittes and Kelley, 1956). Being at the bottom of the social system, low status opera houses have limited access to economic resources that may enhance their chances of long-term survival (Sauder, Lynn and Podolny, 2012). This makes them strive to gain recognition among a dominant audience and refuse to draw artists from other low status theatres that have disregarded the tastes of a dominant audience to whom they are economically dependent. As a result, embracing conflicting

audiences' interests can expose low status opera houses to the dissolution of their system of relationships that confronts them with the risk of social exclusion. Exclusion from the social system is particularly detrimental to the economic sustainability of low status opera houses because it may further reduce their prospect of success among dominant audiences.

Thus, rejection-based status anxiety will push low status opera houses to redouble their effort to conform to conventional operas. Complying with the norm that shapes the position of high status organizations is a way for low status theatres to claim indirect affiliations with their higher status counterparts (Phillips and Zuckerman, 2001), enhancing their legitimacy (Deephouse and Carter, 2005) in an attempt to protect and eventually improve their position while avoiding the economic penalties that stem from exiting the social system.

In sum, unlike mid status theatres, high and low status theatres have a lower disposition to program unconventional operas because of the respective risk of status loss and social exclusion engendered by the inclusion of these operas in their repertoires.

*Hypothesis 1. The relationship between opera houses' status and the unconventionality of their repertoires is inversed U-shaped.*

We further contend that the disposition of theatres in different status positions to raise their repertoire unconventionality also depends on how their repertoires are presented to the audience. Indeed, by making decisions about the stage designs of their repertoires, theatres have the power to emphasize the legitimate vs. controversial aspects of their programs, which in turn determines how operas with different levels of unconventionality will be interpreted by both conservative and innovation-oriented audience segments. Theatres' efforts to enhance the authorized, taken-for-granted way of staging their repertoire

give birth to productions that respect the visual codes of the time where the opera was set (aesthetic conventionality). By contrast, theatres violate conservative ways of presenting their operas when their productions reinterpret the meaning of an opera by transferring the plot to a different time (aesthetic unconventionality). Giving a contemporary twist to the 19<sup>th</sup> century opera *La Traviata*, by setting the opera in the present and making the protagonists feel contemporary is an example of aesthetic unconventionality. This gives rise to staging experiences that change the identifiable, recognizable features of an opera, making even highly conventional operas less familiar to the audience by decreasing their comparability with other performances of the same music piece.

Enhancing the conservative traits of their repertoires' stage designs restricts middle status opera houses' incentives to program unconventional titles because it hampers opportunities for middle status theatres to consolidate their social position by undertaking norm-deviant behaviors. By hiding the controversial aspects of unconventional repertoires behind a legitimate mask, conservative stage designs make the operas in the repertoire less appealing and more subject to the critics of opera experts. This divergent audience segment is not only seduced by theatres' search for novelty and artistic originality (Jensen and Kim, 2013; Kim and Jensen, 2011; Turrini, O'Hare and Borgonovi, 2008), but it is also willing to attack theatres' reluctance to simultaneously renew the content (e.g., unconventionality of the programmed titles) and the form of presenting their repertoire as well (Castaner and Campos, 2002).

Offering conventional staging of unknown repertoire or, *vice versa*, unconventional staging of very popular operas (e.g., *La Traviata*) is condemned by critics and experts as a trivial effort of theatres' managers to raise the popularity instead of the innovative traits of their programs. Indeed, critics strongly encourage cultural institutions to safeguard their offering against commercial or mainstream interests (Glynn and Lounsbury, 2005). The



renowned opera critic Elvio Giudici suggests that “opera houses are anchoring unconventional repertoires to conservative staging experiences, treating their repertoires as dead forms of artistic expression instead of emphasizing what makes them contemporary” (Giudici, 2012). Thus, by compromising the artistic success of their repertoire, conservative staging experiences obstruct the middle status opera houses’ ability to draw artists from their high status peers by leveraging the unconventionality of their repertoire. This in turn reduces the incentives for opera houses to pursue nonconformity by constraining opportunities for upward mobility.

Adopting conservative staging procedures may not only hamper middle status theatres’ opportunities to raise the status hierarchy through repertoire unconventionality, but it may also lead to the dissolution of middle status theatres’ network of relationships. Indeed, other mid status theatres may be unwilling to draw artists from middle status opera houses that have been devalued by experts as this can give rise to forms of social contagion that may reverberate throughout these theatres’ network or relationships, negatively affecting their own social standing. Thus, decreased incentives to upward mobility and increased need of protection against the risk of status loss lead middle status opera houses to being more conventional in the selection of the titles in the repertoires when they enhance the conservatism of their stage designs.

Durand and Kremp (2015) noted that “organizations conform selectively by overplaying certain features while also introducing novelty” (Durand and Kremp, 2015, p.2; Kim and Jensen, 2011; Uzzi and Spiro, 2005). The reason is the need for firms to increase their immunity from the penalties that stem from norm-breaking behaviors by providing a basis of legitimacy and social acceptability to counter-normative actions (Durand, Rao and Monin, 2007). In this regard, we argue that aesthetic conventionality has an enabling role for repertoire unconventionality for high and low status opera houses because it provides them

with protection against the risk of status loss that stems from nonconformity. The reason is that operas in the repertoire will be increasingly brought to dominant audience segments following a clearly recognizable and understandable visual dimension in line with their plot, which in turn enhances the comparability and familiarity of opera houses' offering in the eyes of this audience. Indeed, when an organization's offering exhibits familiar features is more likely to be accepted by broad audiences (Hsu, Hannan, and Koçak, 2009).

Raising the taken for grantedness of the visual components of their operas makes opera houses' repertoires be perceived as less detached from the expectations of dominant audiences because their artistic programs will lie within the boundaries of legitimate, conservative staging dimensions. In this scenario, high and low status opera houses will be able to enhance their repertoire unconventionality as they benefit from an increased barriers against the critics of risk averse audience segments.

As the lowest ranked opera houses strive to gain recognition in front of a dominant audience, the enhanced legitimacy provided by conservative stage designs lowers the reluctance of low status theatres to share artists with deviant low status counterparts. Thus, aesthetic conventionality defends low status theatres from the risk of social exclusion that stems from norm-breaking behaviors which in turn increases their freedom of deviance. A reinforced commitment to conservative staging provides high status opera houses with enhanced opportunities to protect their reputation for quality as it decreases the negative reactions of dominant audience segments against unconventional repertoire decisions. As a result, high status opera houses that are more committed to taken-for-granted, authorized ways of presenting operas benefit from a greater security, which justifies unconventional actions undertaken by organizations at the top of the social system and drives their willingness to deviate (Phillips and Zuckerman, 2001).

In sum, the degree of leeway for theatres in different status positions to program unconventional operas depends on their ability to mask vs. unveil the controversial traits of their repertoire through their stage designs. We predict that at the highest and lowest levels of status, enhancing the legitimacy and social acceptability of the staging procedures mitigates the social barrier toward nonconformity. By contrast, the combination of middle status positions with increasingly legitimate way of staging is likely to have the lowest impact on opera houses' openness to nonconformity.

*Hypothesis 2. An increased commitment to an authorized, conservative way of staging operas (aesthetic conventionality) will moderate the curvilinear relationship between opera houses' status and nonconformity in such a way that high and low, but not moderate, levels of status will positively relate to nonconformity.*

## METHODS

### Data and sample

The empirical setting of our research is the Italian opera market from 2004 to 2011. Italy is the birthplace of opera and opera is part of the cultural heritage of the country. Not surprisingly, Italian opera houses' programming strategies mainly revolve around the preservation of historically established Italian operas. Table I shows the most frequently

represented operas in Italy from 2004 to 2011: the masterpieces of Puccini and Verdi, the most important composers of the Italian opera tradition, are at the top of the ranking. As well-expressed by Martorella (1977, p.358) and Jensen and Kim (2013), *La Bohème* and *Madama Butterfly* continue to be the “Opera ABC” for commercial success, as their inclusion in the repertoire satisfies the taste of a wide audience for “opera warhorses”.

Nowadays Italian opera houses are a fragmented sector, characterized by an offer shared between different non-profit institutions (Sicca and Zan, 2005). Our sample is composed by the most important professional Italian opera houses (i.e., *Lyric and Symphonic foundations, Teatri di Tradizione*) and operatic festivals. The Lyric and Symphonic Foundations (LSF) are private foundations located in the largest Italian towns. By contrast, Teatri di Tradizione (TDTs) are usually smaller than LSFs in size, and mainly located in medium size cities. Given the relevance of festivals for the Italian operatic tradition and for the artistic development of the field, we decided to include them in our sample. Operatic festivals are realized in a limited timeframe and located in distinct geographic area. Both LSFs, TDTs and festivals receive significant funding from public bodies at both national and local levels. We excluded from our sample ‘*lirica ordinaria*’, small-scale theatres with short seasons that sporadically include operas in their repertoires. Moreover, we did not consider Accademia S. Cecilia in Rome, a lyric and symphonic foundation whose repertoire is not focused on staged operas but on concert opera and symphonic productions.

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Insert Table I around here

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Information about opera houses’ funding sources, casts and programming decisions was

collected manually from specialist yearly magazines (*Annuari EDT/CIDIM dell'Opera Lirica in Italia*), widely regarded as industry references. Each issue provides artistic and economic information about the operas performed by Italian opera houses. Each opera is documented by means of various qualitative and quantitative data such as titles, composers, number of reruns and cast.

We constructed a panel data set containing information on opera institutions from the 2004-2005 artistic season to the 2010-2011 artistic season. As most of the time Italian opera houses' artistic seasons do not coincide with the solar year, we have decided to adopt the artistic season as the reference time frame. This allows us to maintain the integrity of all the seasons in the database.

Using seasonally updated data from 2004 to 2011, our final sample includes 42 professional opera companies and festivals, which, given our lagged repertoires (discussed in the next section), results in 200 observations.<sup>1</sup>

## Measures

### *Dependent variables*

*Unconventionality (nonconformity) of opera repertoires.* We measured this variable as the inverse of the conformity index (Di Maggio and Stenberg, 1985; Jensen and Kim, 2013; Kim and Jensen, 2011; Pierce, 2000), which is calculated as the average number of times the opera titles programmed by a given theatre are also programmed by the other theatres in the sample. Repertoire unconventionality captures the extent to which an opera house programs

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<sup>1</sup> Nine observations have been dropped due to missing financial data.

unpopular, unfamiliar operas in attempt to meet the goal of artistic originality. The higher the index, the higher the innovativeness of a theatre's repertoire. The lower the index, the higher the theatre's propensity to program the "opera ABC" for financial success (Jensen and Kim, 2013; Martorella, 1977, p.358). As operatic seasons are programmed two or three years in advance, to measure the conventionality of the operas programmed by a theatre over a given artistic season we first counted the number of times each opera in that season was produced by all the opera companies in our population over the last two artistic seasons (prior to the current one). We then calculated the average conventionality of these operas. The first season in our statistical analysis is 2006-2007 (conventionality based on the 2004-2005 and 2005-2007 artistic seasons) and the last one is 2010-2011 (conventionality based on the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 artistic seasons).

### *Independent variable*

*Relational measure of status.* Theatres' status hierarchy derives from patterns of artists exchange relationships. We identify an opera house's network from the opera house's sharing of artists (e.g. conductors and directors) with other opera houses. That is, a tie between opera house  $i$  and opera house  $j$  exists when opera house  $i$  shares artists with opera house  $j$ . To assess the status of opera house  $i$  we constructed a relational matrix  $R$  where each cell  $R_{ij}$  denotes the number of times that the artists hired by the opera house  $i$  are also hired by the opera house  $j$ .  $R$  is a symmetric  $n \times n$  matrix where  $n$  denotes the number of times that the artists employed by the opera house  $i$  perform at opera house  $j$ . Having constructed the matrix, we then calculated status scores based on Bonacich's (1987) centrality measure, a standard measure for relational data on status, to determine each organization's status relative to that of other organizations. The measure is defined as follows:

$$S_t(\alpha, B) = \sum_{k=0}^{\infty} \alpha B^k R_t^{k+1} \mathbf{1}$$

where,  $\alpha$  is an arbitrary scaling coefficient,  $B$  is a weighting parameter,  $\mathbf{1}$  is a column vector where each element has the value “1,” and  $S_t$  is also a column vector where element  $S_{i,t}$  indicates the status of opera house  $i$ . Status scores are standardized so that the highest status opera house in a given year has a status of 1. The upper bound on  $B$  is the reciprocal of the largest eigenvalue of the  $R$  matrix. For the analyses that follow, we set  $B$  at this upper bound. Given this specification, an opera house’s status is a function of the number of opera houses that hire the same artists and of the status of these opera houses (which in turn derives from the number and the status of opera houses with whom they share artists and so on).

Since an opera house’s artistic season in the time period  $t$  is programmed over the previous two artistic seasons, we believed it was more appropriate to include the status of an opera house as a lagged variable  $t-2$ . This allows us to measure the status of an opera house at the time in which the programming decisions for a given artistic season were actually made.

Table II shows the average relational status of Italian opera houses and the percentage of mainstream operas in their repertoires from 2004 to 2011. On average, mainstream operas account for the 44 percent of the repertoire programmed by the 14 highest ranked opera houses. The proportion of mainstream operas in the repertoire is lower for operas houses at intermediate levels of status (41 percent) and higher for opera houses at the bottom of the status hierarchy (50 percent).

*Aesthetic conventionality* refers to the conventionality of the stage design and visual representation of the music that constitutes an opera (Heilbrun and Gray, 1993; Jensen and Kim, 2013). An opera house adopts a conventional stage design when it respects the time

and place where an opera was originally set by the author of its plot (*librettista*). By contrast an opera house adopts an unconventional stage design when it alters an authorized staging procedure by transferring the plots and the characters of an opera to a different time and place. Aesthetic conventionality is a proxy of a theatre's willingness to reinforce the legitimate and taken-for-granted traits of their identity. To measure aesthetic conventionality we divided the percentage of conventional staging adopted by a focal opera house by the average percentage of conventional staging adopted seasonally by the other houses in the sample (Giudici, 2012; Heilbrun and Gray, 1993).

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 Insert Table II around here  
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### ***Control variables***

We used a number of variables to control for alternative explanations for the unconventionality of an opera repertoire. All the control variables were updated seasonally.

*Structural holes.* We rely on Burt's measure of structural holes (2004) to account for the effect of brokerage on opera houses' willingness to stage unconventional operas. As a matter of fact, organizations occupying the position of brokers are more open to pursue innovativeness due to their ability to collaborate with previously unconnected alters and to recombine knowledge coming from different actors in the network (Burt, 2004). This measure is defined as follows:

$$H_i = \sum_{i' \neq i' \neq q} \left( p_{ii'} + \sum_q p_{iq} p_{qi'} \right)^2$$



where  $p_{ii'}$  denotes the proportion of  $i$ 's network that is invested in the relation with  $i'$ ,  $p_{qi'}$  indicates the proportion of  $q$ 's network that is invested in its relation with  $i'$ .  $H_i$  ranges from 0 to 1. As  $i$  is connected to an infinite number of others who are themselves disconnected,  $H_i$  approaches 0. If  $i$  shares artists with few opera houses that are well connected to each other (e.g. they constitute a clique and share the same artists), then  $H_i$  will approach 1.

*Opera houses' funding sources.* Opera houses' funding sources may also influence nonconformity in different ways. As audience numbers diminish dramatically for unconventional operas (Martorella, 1977; Di Maggio and Stenberg, 1985), performing arts organizations that enjoyed high box office revenues and private funding in the past may have fewer incentives to favor unconventional repertoires. Conversely, as studies have shown that government intervention has a substantial influence in boosting artistic renewal in performing arts organizations (Alexander, 1996; Krebs and Pommerehne, 1995; Pierce, 2000) we might expect government funding to positively influence opera houses' willingness to develop unconventional repertoires.

We controlled for opera houses' funding sources by computing the share of total revenues accounted for by national and local government grants, private funds and box office revenues.

*Time dummies.* We also included dummies for each artistic season in the model.

*Artistic merit.* Following Delmestri, Montanari and Usai (2005) we consider the awards received from leading national critics as a measure of theatres' artistic merit. As critics constantly seek to review unconventional performances (Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988), an increased appreciation by critics might support theatres' nonconformist artistic undertakings. We included the number of awards a theatre received over the two previous artistic seasons as a proxy of the theatre's artistic merit. Data on awards come from the well-

established National Association of Italian Music Critics. This association awards the Franco Abbiati Prize to the worthiest productions staged by Italian opera houses on a yearly basis.

*New productions.* Theatres that put new productions on stage are typically less risk averse and may be more open to program unconventional operas. A new production includes new cast, set designs, costumes, and stage directions that had not been previously used by the opera house. For example, in 2006 Teatro alla Scala in Milan set up a production of the famous opera *Aida* (composed by Giuseppe Verdi) *ex novo* with new cast, set designs and costumes, under the stage direction of Franco Zeffirelli. By contrast, in 2006 the same theatre rented a production of *Eugenio Oneghin* that has already been staged by the Glyndebourne Festival Opera (EDT/CIDIM, 2006). We measure theatres' willingness to mount new productions as the percentage of new productions staged by a theatre seasonally.

*Size.* Size may affect the extent to which an opera company stages unconventional operas. As larger theatres have more resources and capabilities to foster innovation, size could decrease conventionality. At the same time, though, larger theatres may be more embedded in institutionalized frameworks that augment pressure to conform and resistance to change (DiMaggio and Stenberg, 1985; Pierce 2000).

We used the *total number of programmed runs* to control for an opera house's size. We measure this as the number of performance runs an opera house set up in the artistic season  $t$ .

*Coproductions.* Coproducing operas with other theatres can lower the perception of risk related to unconventional opera programming which in turn enhances their openness to renew their repertoire. We measure theatres' propensity to coproduce operas with other theatres as the percentage of coproduced operas in the repertoire.

Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix are presented in Table III.

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Insert Table III around here

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## RESULTS

Table IV presents the fixed-effects ordinary least squares (OLS) regression results (a Hausman test indicated that the fixed-effect model was more appropriate than random-effects) (Stock and Watson, 2007). Model 1 in Table IV is a baseline model that contains only the control variables. In Model 2 (Table IV) we added the status of opera houses as an independent variable. As shown in this model, the linear relationship between opera houses' status positions and nonconformity is not significant. In Model 3 (Table IV) we added the status position of opera houses and the status position squared as independent variables in our model in order to test the inverse U-shaped hypothesis, as well as the moderator aesthetic conventionality. In Model 4 (Table IV), in order to test the positive or negative moderating effect of aesthetic conventionality on the relationship between opera houses' status and repertoire unconventionality, following Aiken, West and Raymon (1991), we computed the first and second order interaction between status and aesthetic conventionality. Model 4 –our *full model* – includes all controls, main effects and interaction terms. All the variables have been standardized in order to guard against multicollinearity (Aiken, West and Raymon, 1991). (See Table VII of the robustness checks for the unstandardized regression coefficients).

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Insert Table IV around here  
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Following Haans, Pieters and He (2015), we provided evidence of the existence of a curvilinear inversed U shaped relationship between status and nonconformity through a

three-step procedure. First, we analyzed the significance and sign of the coefficient of the independent variable status position squared. Second, we explored if the slope of the curve is sufficiently steep at both ends of the data range. In this regard, we performed the Lind and Melhum (2010) test to check if the slope of the curve is positive and significant at the low end of the data range and negative and significant at the high end of the data range. Finally, we considered if the turning point is located within the data range.

Hypothesis 1 suggests the presence of an inverted U-shaped (IUS) relationship between an opera houses' status position and repertoire unconventionality: middle status opera houses are more nonconforming with respect to high and low status opera houses. Model 4 provides strong support for this hypothesis. As shown in Model 4 (Table IV), there is a statistically significant, positive relationship between status and repertoire unconventionality ( $\beta = 2.530, p < 0.001$ ) and a negative and significant relationship between status squared and repertoire unconventionality ( $\beta = -2.461, p < 0.001$ ). The latter relationship denotes the presence of an inverted U-shaped relationship between status and nonconformity, thereby supporting [Hypothesis 1](#). Results of Lind and Melhum (2010) formal test for U shaped relationships further support our hypothesis (Table V): the slope of the curve is positive and significant at the lower bound of the unstandardized data range and negative and significant at the upper bound of the data range. The overall test of presence of an Inverted U-shaped is significant (t-value: 3.60;  $p < 0.001$ ).

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Insert Table V around here

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Turning our attention to interpreting the inverted U-shaped curve's turning point, we

found that the turning point is located almost in the middle of the status range. In particular, in our sample, the unstandardized status index ranges from 0 to 1, with a mid-range equal to 0.5. The turning point is located at a level of status equal to 0.51 (meaning that nonconformity increases within the [1, 0.51] range of status, while decreases within the [0.51,1] range). This highlights that empirical results are in line with our argument that nonconformity increases up to moderate (mid-range) levels of status, and after that nonconformity starts to decline. Below the turning point rest 66% of our observations, while 34% of them are above it.

Figure 1 shows the relationship between status and repertoire unconventionality using the unstandardized estimates shown in column 15 of Table VII of the robustness check. This graph confirms that the nonconformity of opera repertoires is maximized at intermediate levels of status.

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 Insert Figure 1 around here  
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In Hypothesis 2 we argue that aesthetic conventionality moderates the IUS relationship between status and repertoire unconventionality in such a way that high and low but not moderate levels of status will positively relate to nonconformity. As suggested by Aiken, West and Raymon (1991), in interpreting the effect of aesthetic conventionality on the curvilinear inverse U-shaped relationship between status and repertoire unconventionality, we focus on the sign and significance of the second order interaction coefficients (i.e., squared term \* moderator). As shown in Model 4 (Table IV) the interaction between opera houses' status squared and aesthetic conventionality is positive and significant (status

squared \* aesthetic conventionality:  $\beta = 1.907$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). This suggests that at high levels of aesthetic conventionality middle status opera houses program less unconventional repertoires than at low levels of aesthetic conventionality. This provides support to our hypothesis.

To make sure our results are robust, we performed several robustness checks and report them in Tables VI and VII. First, as a control for the moderating effect of aesthetic conventionality on the inversed U shaped relationship between status and repertoire unconventionality we create three subsamples, by dividing the sample in three status groups - high, middle and low - of the same size. We check if aesthetic conventionality moderates high, low and mid status opera houses' propensity to program unconventional operas according to our prediction (Table VI). As can be observed in Model 7 (Table VI), aesthetic conventionality negatively moderates middle status theatres' willingness to program unconventional operas ( $\beta = - 0.441$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Conversely, in model 9 aesthetic conventionality positively moderates both high and low status opera houses' propensity to unconventional opera programming ( $\beta = 0.351$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ;  $\beta = 0.590$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). This provides further support to our predictions that at high levels of aesthetic conventionality, high and low but not middle levels of status will positively relate to repertoire unconventionality.

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 Insert Table VI and Table VII around here  
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Second, we split the data based on the empirically determined turning point and we checked if two linear regressions give slopes that are consistent with the predicted shape of the curve. We found that regressions with status values below the turning point, indicate a positive relationship between status and repertoire unconventionality while regressions with status values above the turning point indicate a negative relationship between status

and repertoire unconventionality. This supports the existence of an inverted U shaped between status and nonconformity (see Table VII, Models 12 and 13).<sup>2</sup> Finally, although the independent variables reported in Table III are only weakly correlated, we decided that in light of the quadratic coefficient and interaction in our model it is advisable to check for a multicollinearity effect on regression results. We developed a variance inflation factor (VIF) between the explanatory variables. Since none of the independent variables have VIF values greater than 10 (the average VIF value is equal to 1.42), we do not find evidence of multicollinearity (Hair et al., 1995).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION:

Our objective in this article was to understand how opportunities for status mobility triggered by the tension between competing status-based expectations shape the system of incentives for firms in different status positions to deviate from a dominant status based norm. We explore this relationship within the context of the Italian opera scene, where norm-breaking behaviors imply a betrayal of dominant audiences' expectations for the conservation of a standard repertoire and the enactment of divergent audiences' expectations for its artistic renewal.

We argue that the relationship between opera houses' status and their willingness to program operas that deviate from the standard repertoire is inversed U-shaped. The risk of status loss and the threat of social exclusion that stem from unconventional programming strategies encourage high and low status opera houses to signal conformity to dominant normative expectations for the conservation of the repertoire. Conversely, the potential for

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<sup>2</sup> As an additional robustness check we added a cubic term to equation 3 (model 4) to check whether the relationship between status and repertoire unconventionality is perhaps S-shaped rather than U-shaped. We found that the relationship between the cubic term of status and repertoire unconventionality is not significant.



consolidating and improving their social standing emboldens their middle status counterparts to embrace deviant normative expectations.

We also argue that the extent to which opera houses adopt a taken-for-granted way of staging their repertoire alter the motivations for them to program unconventional operas by differentially affecting their ability to protect and advance their social position through the satisfaction of divergent audiences' expectations. Our statistical analyses provide strong support for our theoretical arguments. Specifically, our analyses show that an increased commitment to conservative staging procedures that embody dominant audience expectations positively moderates the relationship between opera houses' status and the unconventionality of their repertoires. Increasing the taken-for-granted aspects of the stage designs of their operas supports low and high status opera houses' openness to the selection of unconventional titles, responding to their need to safeguard their social positions from the risk of social exclusion or status loss that may arise as a consequence of deviant behaviors. At the same time, though, by reducing the exposure of their unconventional titles among divergent segments of the audience, an increased commitment to the conservative stage designs restricts middle status organizations' incentives to program unconventional operas.

Our study contributes to literature on status and (non)conformity (Cancian, 1967; Dittes and Kelley, 1956; Jensen, 2006; Phillips, Turco and Zuckerman 2013; Phillips and Zuckerman, 2001) by examining this relationship under conditions of status instability and conflicting audiences' expectations about status conferring actions. We also shed light on the commitment to conventional aesthetics and designs as an under-examined factor that affects the freedom of deviance of firms within unstable status hierarchies by reshuffling their incentives to infuse the contents of their offering with divergent normative prescriptions. In this regard, we contribute to shedding further light on the role of conformity as a driver for distinctiveness (Durand, Rao and Monin, 2007, Durand and Kremp, 2015) by emphasizing

how raising the taken-for-granted visual features of a firm's offering may have an enabling vs. constraining role for the ability of firms in distinct status positions to achieve distinctiveness.

In addition to these contributions discussed in the introduction of the paper, our research contributes more broadly to status theory as well. By showing that over-emphasizing recognizable visual forms enable high status organizations to deviate more easily from mainstream contents that embody dominant audiences' expectations we identify an important, yet under-examined, condition that determines the extent to which the willingness to deviate of high status organizations is constrained vs. enhanced. Specifically, this condition is related to high status organizations' ability to shape the interpretation of norm-breaking behaviors in the eyes of dominant audience segments by masking the potential controversial aspects of these behaviors through a legitimate way of presenting them. Status research highlights that having status may limit and constrain the opportunities and choices of action available to a firm (Sauder, Lynn and Podolny, 2012). In this regard we further contribute to better understanding the specific conditions under which having status constrains high status firms' ability to behave differently in the market.

Studies have already shown that high status positions at the top of the social system allow them greater control over how audiences perceive and make sense of their actions (Martin, 2009). We add that the capacity of high status opera houses to manipulate how the audience interprets their actions have important consequences on the willingness of these firms to contradict the expectations of these audiences through norm-breaking behaviors. Specifically, adopting widely accepted designs and visual forms that change the interpretation that dominant audiences give to actions that contradict their interests is an important source of protection from the risk of downward mobility. High status

organizations can leverage conventional visual experiences to raise the unconventionality of their product offering.

We also highlight the conditions under which not having status provides leeway for firms to violate dominant audiences' expectations. In particular we emphasize that the threat of social exclusion that stems from the violation of dominant audiences' expectations and the economic penalties that arise from it are strong incentives for low status firms to conform to these expectations. This relates to the fact that, although low status organizations have a low legitimacy that constrains their ability to be successful with a dominant audience, their deprivation of economic and reputational assets make them redouble their efforts to gain recognition among a wide audience by conforming to their prescriptions. We also point out that low status organizations' ability to gain a minimum standard of social acceptability in the eyes of a dominant audience segments through the adoption of a socially accepted way of presenting the contents of their offering can fill their legitimacy-gap. This in turn boosts their freedom of deviance by creating barriers against the risk of social exclusion.

Despite these contributions, our study also has limitations. First, we did not examine the process through which unconventional operas developed by middle status opera houses become consecrated over time and emulated by their high and low status peers. Future studies should explore how nonconformist productions, once adopted, diffuse throughout the organizational field. Second, we did not explore the artistic and commercial consequences of nonconformity for actors at the different levels of the status hierarchy. We strongly encourage future studies to explore the artistic and financial performance of nonconformity for opera houses in different status positions. Third, the decision to focus on a specific industry and geographic market may limit the generalizability of these findings. Studies re-assessing the relationship between status and nonconformity in different settings

shaped by similar contextual conditions will help to further test the generalizability of our findings.

**Mainstream Italian operas. Top 30 operas in Italy and number of productions. 2004-2011**

Ranking	Title	Composer	Number of productions
1	<i>La Bohème</i>	Puccini	50
2	<i>Madama Butterfly</i>	Puccini	50
3	<i>Tosca</i>	Puccini	49
4	<i>La Traviata</i>	Verdi	48
5	<i>Il Barbiere di Siviglia</i>	Rossini	42
6	<i>Rigoletto</i>	Verdi	41
7	<i>Carmen</i>	Bizet	36
8	<i>Turandot</i>	Puccini	36
9	<i>Aida</i>	Verdi	31
10	<i>L'Elisir d'Amore</i>	Donizetti	31
11	<i>Pagliacci</i>	Leoncavallo	29
12	<i>Don Giovanni</i>	Mozart	28
13	<i>Il Trovatore</i>	Verdi	28
14	<i>Cavalleria Rusticana</i>	Mascagni	25
15	<i>Nabucco</i>	Verdi	25
16	<i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i>	Donizetti	22
17	<i>Così Fan Tutte Ossia la Scuola degli Amanti</i>	Mozart	21
18	<i>Manon Lescaut</i>	Puccini	21
19	<i>La Cenerentola</i>	Rossini	20
20	<i>Le Nozze di Figaro</i>	Mozart	20
21	<i>Norma</i>	Bellini	20
22	<i>Don Pasquale</i>	Donizetti	19
23	<i>Gianni Schicchi</i>	Puccini	18
24	<i>Falstaff</i>	Mozart	17
25	<i>Macbeth</i>	Verdi	17
26	<i>Il Flauto Magico</i>	Mozart	16
27	<i>Il Ratto del Serraglio</i>	Mozart	14
28	<i>L'Italiana in Algeri</i>	Rossini	13
29	<i>Werther</i>	Massenet	13
30	<i>La Forza del Destino</i>	Verdi	12

**Table II. Average relational status of Italian opera houses  
and percentage of popular operas in the repertoires, 2004-2011.**

<b>Theatre</b>	<b>Status</b>	<b>% of Popular Operas</b>
Teatro alla Scala (Milan)	0.836	26%
Teatro Regio (Turin)	0.746	29%
Teatro Comunale "L. Pavarotti" (Modena)	0.745	40%
Teatro Amilcare Ponchielli (Cremona)	0.719	62%
Ravenna Manifestazioni (Ravenna)	0.714	28%
Teatro Grande (Brescia)	0.709	65%
Teatro "G. Frascini" (Pavia)	0.699	61%
Teatro Sociale (Como)	0.694	55%
Teatro Verdi (Trieste)	0.683	39%
Teatro Massimo (Palermo)	0.586	41%
Teatro Comunale (Bologna)	0.567	37%
Teatro dell'Opera (Rome)	0.566	51%
Teatro "C. Goldoni" (Livorno)	0.547	33%
Arena di Verona	0.531	72%
Teatro La Fenice (Venice)	0.529	26%
<b>Average</b>	<b>0.667</b>	<b>44%</b>
Teatro Verdi (Pisa)	0.497	31%
Teatro Sociale (Rovigo)	0.493	31%
Teatri di Piacenza	0.490	48%
Teatro del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino	0.488	40%
Teatro Comunale (Ferrara)	0.486	36%
Teatro del Giglio (Lucca)	0.455	45%
Teatro Regio (Parma)	0.419	48%
Petruscelli e Teatri di Bari	0.418	45%
Teatro Carlo Felice (Genova)	0.415	49%
I Teatri (Reggio Emilia)	0.354	28%
Teatro di San Carlo (Naples)	0.347	39%
Teatro G.B. Pergolesi (Jesi)	0.319	45%
Teatro dell'Opera Giocosa (Savona)	0.272	47%
Teatro Massimo Bellini (Catania)	0.271	42%
Teatro Lirico (Cagliari)	0.243	43%
<b>Average</b>	<b>0.427</b>	<b>41%</b>
Teatro Comunale e Auditorium (Bolzano)	0.237	38%
Teatro Donizetti (Bergamo)	0.237	48%
Rossini Opera Festival (Pesaro)	0.189	11%
Teatri S.P.A. (Treviso)	0.186	77%
Sferisterio (Macerata)	0.161	48%
Teatro Coccia (Novara)	0.158	53%
Festival Pucciniano (Torre del Lago)	0.144	80%
Marialisa de Carolis (Sassari)	0.122	34%
Festival della Valle D'Itria	0.097	0%
Teatro Alfondo Rendano (Cosenza)	0.053	73%
Teatro Politeama Greco (Lecce)	0.051	55%
Lirica in Piazza (Massa Marittima)	0.001	82%
<b>Average</b>	<b>0.153</b>	<b>50%</b>

**Table III. Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix**

Significance: † $p < .10$

	Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1	Repertoire	-23.972	13.936	1										
2	Status	0.416	0.275	0.134†	1									
3	Aesthetic conventionality	0.989	0.439	-0.327†	-0.029	1								
4	Structural holes	0.286	0.134	-0.277†	-0.515†	0.185†	1							
5	Private funding	0.091	0.085	0.018	0.062	0.047	0.034	1						
6	Box office	0.151	0.126	-0.336†	-0.012	0.111	0.128†	0.001	1					
7	State funding	0.347	0.177	0.041	0.166†	-0.066	-0.187†	-0.286†	-0.127†	1				
8	Artistic merit	0.280	0.450	0.215†	0.446†	-0.034	-0.182†	0.190†	-0.035	0.116†	1			
9	Coproduction	0.464	0.360	0.133†	0.260†	-0.188†	-0.262†	0.057	-0.042	-0.284†	-0.194	1		
10	Repertoire size	5.799	2.846	0.142†	0.482†	0.010	-0.279†	0.055	-0.000	0.345†	0.347†	-0.163†	1	
11	New Production	0.389	0.296	0.297†	-0.125†	-0.142†	-0.037	-0.009	-0.152†	0.193†	0.158†	-0.303†	0.136†	1

**Table IV. Model Estimation. The effect of opera houses' status on repertoire unconventionality and the moderating role of aesthetic conventionality**

	Independent Variable: <i>Repertoire Unconventionality</i>			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<b>Independent variables</b>				
Status	-	-0.007 (-0.07)	0.939* (2.54)	2.530*** (4.05)
Status Squared	-	-	-0.820** (-2.66)	-2.461*** (-3.97)
Aesthetic conventionality	-	-	-0.007 (-0.13)	0.405* (2.63)
<b>Interaction effect</b>				
Status *Aesthetic conventionality	-	-	-	-2.012** (-3.11)
Status squared* Aesthetic conventionality	-	-	-	1.907** (3.06)
<b>Control variables</b>				
Repertoire Size	0.286** (2.66)	0.285** (2.63)	0.261* (2.43)	0.266* (2.55)
New Production	0.141* (1.99)	0.141 † (1.98)	0.133 † (1.89)	0.123† (1.79)
Structural Holes	-0.162 (-1.21)	-0.167 (-0.08)	0.008 (0.05)	0.015 (0.10)
Artistic Merit	-0.056 (-0.76)	-0.053 (-0.66)	0.009 (0.12)	0.020 (0.26)
State Funding	0.097 (0.70)	0.097 (0.69)	0.068 (0.49)	0.129 (0.94)
Private Funding	-0.046 (-0.42)	-0.047 (-0.43)	-0.036 (-0.34)	-0.051 (-0.48)
Box Office	-0.254* (-2.00)	-0.254* (-1.99)	-0.259* (-2.05)	-0.224† (-1.81)
Coproduction	-0.010 (-0.11)	-0.011 (-0.11)	-0.019 (-0.21)	0.027 (0.29)
<b>Time dummies</b>	<i>Included</i>	<i>Included</i>	<i>Included</i>	<i>Included</i>
<i>Constant</i>	0.163 (1.49)	0.162 (1.47)	0.133 (1.22)	0.088 (0.83)
<i>No. of observations</i>	201	201	201	201
<i>R-sq</i>	0.178	0.178	0.218	0.268
<i>F</i>	2.66**	2.44**	2.68**	3.06***

Significance:

\*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; † $p < .10$ ; t-statistic in parenthesis. Standardized regression coefficients

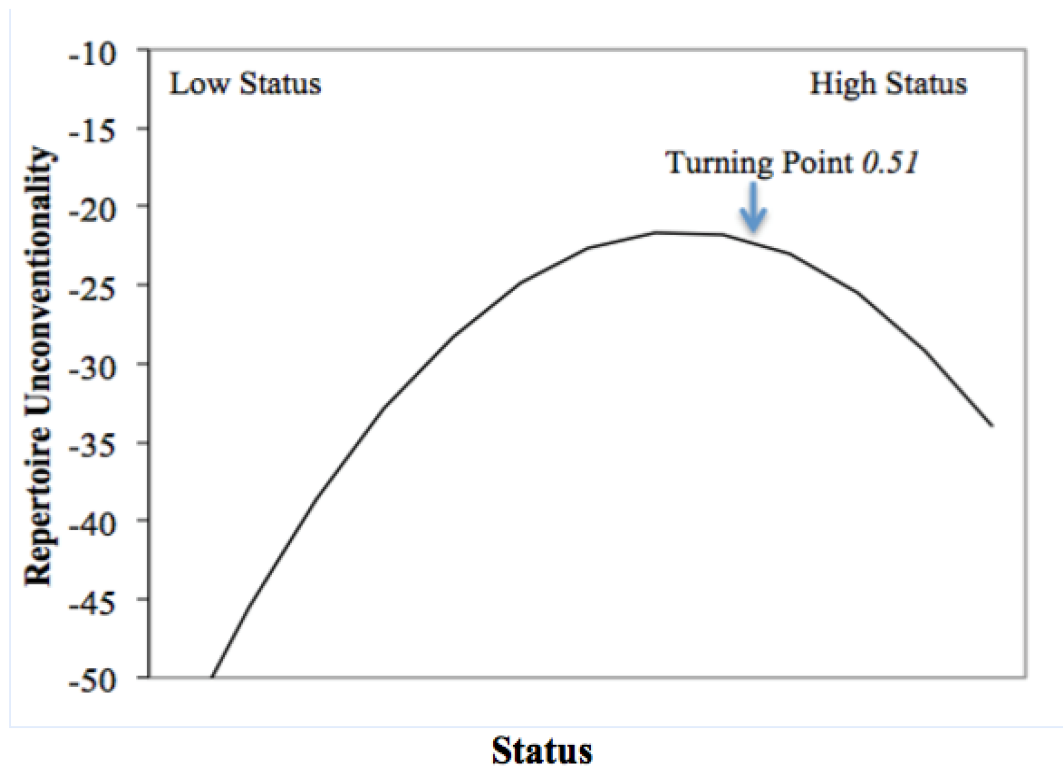
Table. V Lind and Melhum test for inversed U-shaped

	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Interval	0	1
Slope	127.984	-121.499
t-value	4.050	-3.597
P >  t	0.000	0.000

Overall test of presence of an inversed U-shaped

t-value	3.60
P >  t	0.000

Figure 1. The curvilinear Inverted U-Shaped relationship between status and repertoire unconventionality





**Table VI. Robustness Check. The moderating effect of aesthetic conventionality on high, low and middle status repertoires' unconventionality.**  
**Results of moderated regression analysis**

	<b>Dependent Variable: <i>Repertoire unconventionality</i></b>				
	<b>Model 5</b>	<b>Model 6</b>	<b>Model 7</b>	<b>Model 8</b>	<b>Model 9</b>
<b><i>Independent Variables</i></b>					
High status	-	-	-	-0.066 (-0.89)	-0.357* (-2.27)
Middle status	-	0.138* (2.25)	0.518*** (4.06)	-	-
Low status	-	-	-	-0.212* (-2.43)	-0.654*** (-4.33)
Aesthetic conventionality	-	-0.012 (-0.22)	-0.111† (-1.68)	-0.013 (-0.23)	-0.273** (-2.94)
<b><i>Interactions Effects</i></b>					
High Status * Aesthetic conventionality	-	-	-	-	0.351* (2.19)
Middle Status * Aesthetic conventionality	-	-	-0.441** (-3.37)	-	-
Low Status * Aesthetic conventionality	-	-	-	-	0.590** (3.56)
<b><i>Control Variables</i></b>					
Repertoire Size	0.286** (2.66)	0.277** (2.59)	0.305** (2.95)	0.279** (2.62)	0.296** (2.85)
New Production	0.141* (1.99)	0.128† (1.80)	0.109 (1.59)	0.129† (1.82)	0.114† (1.67)
Structural Holes	-0.162 (-1.21)	-0.145 (-1.09)	-0.154 (-1.20)	-0.041 (-0.27)	-0.077 (0.53)
Artistic Merit	-0.056 (-0.76)	-0.022 (-0.29)	-0.001 (-0.02)	-0.039 (-0.52)	-0.030 (0.41)
State Funding	0.097 (0.70)	0.068 (0.49)	0.129 (0.95)	0.064 (0.46)	0.140 (1.03)
Private Funding	-0.046 (-0.42)	-0.053 (-0.50)	-0.057 (-0.56)	-0.031 (-0.29)	-0.037 (-0.36)
Box Office	-0.254* (-2.00)	-0.253* (-2.00)	-0.242† (-1.98)	-0.255* (-2.01)	-0.239* (-1.95)

Coproduction	-0.010 (-0.11)	-0.023 (-0.24)	0.016 (0.18)	-0.027 (-0.29)	0.031 (0.34)
<i>Time dummies</i>	<i>Included</i>	<i>Included</i>	<i>Included</i>	<i>Included</i>	<i>Included</i>
<i>Constant</i>	0.163 (1.49)	0.121 (1.11)	0.089 (0.84)	0.133 (1.21)	0.121 (1.14)
<i>No. of observations</i>	201	201	201	201	201
<i>R-sq</i>	0.178	0.207	0.265	0.214	0.280
<i>F</i>	2.66**	2.71**	3.46***	2.61**	3.25***

*Significance:*

\*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; † $p < .10$ ; t-statistic in parenthesis. Standardized regression coefficients.

**Table VII. Robustness check. The effect of opera houses' status on repertoire unconventionality and the moderating role of aesthetic conventionality. Unstandardized Regression Coefficients**

			<i>Dep Variable: Repertoire Unconventionality</i>			
	<b>Model 10</b>	<b>Model 11</b>	<b>Model 12 Subsample1</b>	<b>Model 13 Subsample2</b>	<b>Model 14</b>	<b>Model 15</b>
<i>Independent variables</i>						
Status	-	-0.366 (-0.07)	-5.526 (-0.55)	31.427* (2.09)	47.493* (2.54)	127.984*** (4.05)
Status Squared	-	-	-	-	-41.5770** (-2.66)	-124.742*** (-3.97)
Aesthetic Conventionality	-	-	-	-	-0.234 (-0.13)	12.731 (-2.63)
<i>Interaction effect</i>						
Status *Aesthetic Conventionality	-	-	-	-	-	-81.387** (-3.11)
Status squared* Aesthetic Conventionality	-	-	-	-	-	82.466** (3.06)
<i>Control variables</i>						
Repertoire Size	1.400** (2.66)	1.397** (2.63)	0.733 (0.72)	1.792* (2.14)	1.277* (2.43)	1.305* (2.55)
New Production	6.641* (1.99)	6.629 † (1.98)	0.151 (0.03)	7.321 (1.66)	6.273 † (1.89)	5.822† (1.79)
Structural Holes	-16.812 (-1.21)	-17.380 (-0.08)	-21.863 (-0.36)	3.198 (0.16)	0.861 (0.05)	1.629 (0.10)
Artistic Merit	-1.740 (-0.76)	-1.666 (-0.66)	-2.55 (-0.80)	2.776 (0.70)	0.299 (0.12)	0.649 (0.26)
State Funding	7.698 (0.70)	7.690 (0.69)	4.893 (0.16)	-10.872 (-0.68)	5.399 (0.49)	10.157 (0.94)
Private Funding	-7.512 (-0.42)	-7.677 (-0.43)	11.340 (0.39)	-2.867 (-0.09)	-5.995 (-0.34)	-8.335 (-0.48)
Box Office	-28.043* (-2.00)	-28.027* (-1.99)	11.849 (0.28)	-45.461* (-2.56)	-28.628* (-2.05)	-24.783† (-1.81)
Coproduction	-0.415 (-0.11)	-0.425 (-0.11)	0.707 (0.12)	-3.231 (-0.60)	-0.753 (-0.21)	1.056 (0.29)
<i>Time dummies</i>	<i>Included</i>	<i>Included</i>	<i>Included</i>	<i>Included</i>	<i>Included</i>	<i>Included</i>
<i>Constant</i>	-24.633** (-2.98)	-24.307* (-2.57)	-23.442 (-1.19)	-30.853 (-2.18)	-38.120** (-3.27)	-54.719*** (4.56)
<i>No. of observations</i>	201	201	70	131	201	201
<i>R-sq</i>	0.178	0.178	0.147	0.282	0.218	0.268
<i>F</i>	2.66**	2.44**	0.44	2.42**	2.68**	3.06***

\*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; † $p < .10$ ; t-statistic in parenthesis. Subsample 1: turning point  $> 0.51$  ; Subsample 2: turning point  $< 0.51$

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## **Giving *La Traviata* a Contemporary twist? How Legitimate Unconventionality Shapes Hybridity in Italian Opera**

### **INTRODUCTION:**

Categories are cognitive lenses that help the audience to identify and group products and organizations together (Durand and Paoletta, 2012; Vergne and Wry, 2014; Zhao, Ishihara and Lounsbury, 2013). Categories define legitimate attributes and actions possible for their members (Durand, Rao and Monin, 2007; Polos et al., 2002) and shape organizations' market identities by clarifying what to expect from organizations and products that claim membership in a given category (Jensen, Kim and Kim, 2011). Research in this tradition suggests simultaneously positioning products across different categories (a phenomenon called category spanning) (Hsu, Negro and Perretti, 2012), confuses the audience and exposes organizations to social and economic penalties (Zuckerman, 1999; Hsu, 2006). Despite this empirical regularity, recent category studies have started to explore the factors that mitigate the negative effect of spanning. Most of these studies focus on category structure (e.g., degree of contrast and similarities between categories) as playing a central role in determining the consequences of this practice (Kovacs and Hannan, 2010; Hsu, Negro and Perretti, 2012; Kovacs and Hannan, 2015; Lounsbury and Wry, 2013). Few studies have started to analyze how organizations can act strategically to overcome the penalties of spanning and enable hybridity (Zhao, Ishihara and Lounsbury, 2013). Within this strategic perspective, however, no study has investigated how organizations can emphasize different attributes of a legitimate category that defines their identities to offset the negative consequences of category spanning and facilitate the adoption of this practice.

We address this question by investigating how strategically emphasizing elements that, although belonging to a legitimate category where organizations claim membership, exhibit

different degree of conventionality affects organizations' ability to pursue hybridity and draw attention to boundary spanning products. In doing so, we shift focus from symmetric to asymmetric forms of spanning where one category anchors interpretations but it is modified by the codes of another one (Vergne and Wry, 2014; Lounsbury and Wry, 2014). Specifically we highlight the case where organizations reinterpret a legitimate category that defines their identities through the lens of a rival one. This form of spanning not only confuses the audience but also triggers external sanctions because it implies a violation of broad societal expectations and consensus about actions that are appropriate for organizations that claim a given identity (Jensen, Kim and Kim, 2011; Kim and Jensen, 2013). At the same time, it raises authenticity challenges by altering the rules of conducts of a category where organizations legitimately claim membership while giving rise to a rival interpretation of the same category (Negro, Hannan and Rao, 2010; Carroll and Swaminathan, 2000).

Drawing on a recent notion of conventionality defined as the adoption of highly salient and prominent features (Durand and Kremp, 2015), we contend that emphasizing conventional features of a legitimate category that shapes organizations' market identity makes it difficult to reinterpret them through the codes of a rival category. By contrast, emphasizing features that are less conventional but still respect the codes of that category is a viable vehicle to pursue this form of hybridity. Conventional features that are more representative of a legitimate type carry with them strong and broad societal expectations (Jensen and Kim, 2011; Durand and Kremp, 2015) which renders deviation from those expectations more prominent and subject to sanction, placing constraints on hybridization. Accentuating unconventional features instead raises the importance of elements that are less emblematic of a category where organizations legitimately claim membership which confers them leeway to reinterpret that category through a divergent lens.



We also posit that reinterpretations of a category that shapes organizations' identity through an oppositional lens positively contributes to raise audience attention when they coalesce around features that are more unconventional than those distinguishing original interpretations of the same category. This may in fact enable organizations to hide standards of comparisons between conflicting interpretations of the same category, protecting hybrids from being perceived as illegitimate and inauthentic or fake. At the same time, this mechanism boosts the perception of innovativeness and freshness of the hybridization process itself which positively contributes to an organization's performance (Hsu, Negro and Hannan, 2012). This especially holds true when organizations position themselves in a closed social network of relationships which facilitates reciprocity (Coleman, 1985) and the adoption of cooperative behaviors (Granovetter, 1985) aimed at promoting innovative efforts stemming from hybridity and raising audiences' attention around them.

This study contributes to research on multiple category membership in markets (Durand and Paoletta, 2012; Vergne and Wry, 2014; Kovacs and Hannan, 2014; Lounsbury and Wry, 2013; Lounsbury and Wry, 2014; Negro, Hannan and Rao, 2011). Specifically, we contribute to advance studies on how firms can act strategically to alter perceptions about boundary spanning products and draw external attention to them. Instead of examining how firms can strategically signal affiliations with a legitimate category to offset the negative consequences of spanning, we highlight how firms can strategically modify their position within a category to mitigate the negative effects of this practice. We also shed light on how this mechanism is influenced by the extent to which firms position themselves in a close vs. open network of relationships.

We test our hypotheses with data on the Italian opera market from 2004 to 2011. We begin by theorizing why selecting unconventional features from a legitimate category enables organizations to reinterpret them through the codes of an oppositional category. We also

theorize why and under which social conditions offering hybrid reinterpretations of a legitimate category whose features are more unconventional than those identifying its original interpretation enhances organizations' ability to attract audiences' attention. We end our study by discussing the implications of our findings for research and practice, examining limitations and making suggestions for future research.

## **HYPOTHESES: UNCONVENTIONALITY AND CATEGORY SPANNING**

Categories represent meaningful consensus about products and organizations' features as shared by actors grouped together as an audience (Durand and Paoletta, 2013). By driving external beliefs and expectations about organizations' characteristics and behaviors, membership in categories shapes organizations' market identities (Jensen, Kim and Kim, 2011). Practices that conform to the social codes inherent in established categorization systems are easier for market audiences to identify. Thus, by developing products that conform to well-accepted standard categories firms enhance their legitimacy and prospect of success (Zuckerman, 1999; Hsu, Hannan and Koçac, 2009).

Conversely, firms may sometimes decide to mix the characteristic features of existing categories, simultaneously positioning their offer across multiple product categories, a phenomenon called category spanning. This gives rise to hybrids that provide new dimensions to traditional categories through the recombination of commonly understood

and established categorization systems (Hannan and Freeman, 1989; Haveman & Rao, 2006; Hsu et. al, 2012). This blending mechanism is widely regarded as a source of innovation (Rao, Monin and Durand, 2005) and fosters the development of products with high fuzziness, weaker boundaries and partial memberships because members of one category may be exposed to elements belonging to other categories (Hannan, Polos and Carroll, 2007; Negro, Hannan and Rao, 2010). For example Rao, Monin and Durand (2005) analyzed blending processes in the French Haute cuisine, exploring the erosion of categorical boundaries that divided classical and nouvelle cuisine as a result of a borrowing process that blurred the boundaries between these categories by binding together their elements and techniques. Similarly, the establishment of the new “Indian modern art” (Khaire and Wadhvani, 2010) was initiated by the mixing of traits from “Indian” and “modern Western” categories.

A large body of works has explored category spanning. These studies mainly focus on the negative consequences of multiple category membership which in turn disincentives firms to span categories. Organizations and products that mix categories may be more difficult to make sense of than category purists, thus they result in poor evaluation (Rao, Durand and Monin, 2005), inattention (Zuckerman, 1999) and legitimacy challenges (Greenwood, Sudday and Hinings 2002).

Recently, attention has begun to shift from the negative effects of spanning to the factors that may potentially mitigate them. Most of these studies shed light on category structure and audience perception as playing a central role in attenuating the penalties of spanning. For example, it has been noted that the effects of spanning are mitigated when categories have low contrast (Kovacs and Hannan, 2010), when they exhibit similarities (Wry and Lounsbury, 2013) or when the audience positively evaluate how the categories fit together (Wry and Lounsbury, 2014). Drawing on a strategic categorization perspective, few studies

have started to analyze how organizations can act strategically to overcome the penalties of spanning and enable hybridity. Within this perspective, studies have mainly focused on the use of naming strategies to signal affiliations with existing legitimate categories (Zhao, Ishihara and Lounsbury, 2013; Smith and Chae, 2015).

We, instead, focus on how firms can strategically emphasize different elements of a category that shapes their market identities as a way of enabling hybridity and drawing external attention to it. In doing so, we shift attention from a symmetric to an asymmetric form of spanning where a category is reinterpreted through the lens of a different one. This structure has been documented by Lounsbury and Wry (2014) who showed how science start up firms secured technology patents as a way to translate their basic science in applied products: in this case science was reinterpreted through a technological lens. We highlight the case where a legitimate category that defines a firm identity is reinterpreted through the lens of a rival one: in this case the category that anchors interpretation is different, oppositional from the one that defines the identity of organizations.

When organizations that claim membership in a category reinterpret its codes through those of an oppositional one, they give rise to a rival interpretation of that category that contaminates its rule of conducts and departs from a credible representation of that category in the eyes of the external audience (Peterson, 1997; Negro, Hannan and Rao, 2011). As a result it may be discarded by an audience who is accustomed to the original interpretation. This for example occurred when industrial brewers made claim of being authentic craft brewers and develop artisanal productions but they did not hold or own brewing facilities or made their own beers (Carroll and Swaminathan, 2000), or when traditional winemakers reinterpret traditional practices for making Barolo and Barbaresco wines through a modernist style (Negro, Hannan and Rao, 2011). This form of spanning confuses the audience and may be explicitly devalued because it undermines the authenticity of

organizations' membership in a category that shapes their identities and implies the violation of attributes that are legitimately possessed by these organizations (Jensen, Kim and Kim, 2011). This in turn may act as a constraint on organizations' decision to undertake it.

We contend that organizations have more leeway to reinterpret the features of a legitimate category that shapes their identity through the lens of an oppositional one when they emphasize features that, although respecting the codes of that category, are unconventional. By contrast, an excessive emphasis on the most salient, emblematic features of a legitimate category that defines their identity enhances the potential penalties faced by organizations that pursue this form of hybridity. Highlighting conventional features of a legitimate category that builds their identity means emphasizing the core aspects of their identity and the most representative elements of a legitimate type (DiMaggio and Stenberg, 1985) which confers them increased status. Indeed, studies have shown that status may be acquire through category attributes that are deemed more valuable than others because they embody a high degree of consensus about how a firm should behave (e.g., being a blockbuster producing film studio) (Jasso, 2001). At the same time, though, an increased status makes firms more conspicuous in the eyes of the external audience who have higher expectations towards these organizations (Jensen, Kim and Kim, 2011). This in turn exposes them to penalties and external sanctions for violating core aspects of their identities (Jensen, Kim and Kim, 2011; Hsu and Hannan, 2005) which de-incentivizes organizations' attempts to reinterpret these attributes through a divergent, oppositional lens. For example, Durand, Rao and Monin (2007), found that attempts by high status restaurants to change the social codes that defined the core aspects of their market identities tend to receive less positive evaluations.

Conversely, accentuating the unconventional features of a legitimate category that delineates organizations' identity give firms leeway to reinterpret that category through the codes of a divergent one. Emphasizing those features, in fact, means unveiling peripheral identity markers and raising the importance of elements that, although respecting legitimate category codes, are less emblematic of that category. These elements preserve organizations' membership in a category that shapes their identity, thus protecting their legitimacy and facilitating positive external evaluations (Durand, Rao and Monin, 2007) while at the same time being characterized by a high degree of newness. This makes organizations that adopt them less conspicuous and subject to high expectations which free their ability to reinterpret these attributes through a divergent lens.

On these grounds, we argue that organizations' decisions to emphasize unconventional features of a legitimate category that shapes their identity enables them to reinterpret that category through a divergent category lens because it reduces the potential negative effect of this practice.

We argue:

*Hypothesis 1: The higher organizations' willingness to emphasize the unconventional features of a legitimate category that defines their identity, the higher their ability to reinterpret that category through a rival one.*

We also contend that reinterpretations of a category that shapes organizations' identity through an oppositional lens positively contribute to raise audience attention when they coalesce around features that are more unconventional than those distinguishing original interpretations of the same category. When the reinterpreted features are more unconventional than those to which the original interpretation is applied, they are regarded and understood as more innovative in nature rather than emulative of existing models

(Durand and Kremp, 2015; Di Maggio and Stenberg, 1985), which in turn facilitates the success of hybrids and their positive contributions to an organization's performance (Hsu, Negro and Perretti, 2012). Moreover, this mechanism enables organizations to gain the benefit of differentiation that stems from hybridity (Hsu, Negro and Perretti, 2012) while escaping the penalties that arise from violating the rule of conducts of a category that defines organizations' identity. The reason is that reinterpreting features that are more unconventional than those identifying the original interpretation of that category acts as a camouflage signal (Connelly et al., 2011) that disguises the liability of this form of spanning through the hybridization of features that are less core and representative of organizations' identity which renders hybridity less prominent and sanctionable. At the same time, the higher degree of unconventionality of the reinterpreted features compared to those identifying the original interpretation creates a perceptual detachment between rival interpretations of a category that defines organizations' identity. This obstructs audiences' ability to compare and evaluate hybrid reinterpretations of this category against the original, safeguarding hybrids from being perceived as not credible representations of that category in the eyes of the external audience.

We argue:

*Hypothesis 2: The higher organizations' willingness to create hybrid reinterpretation of a legitimate category that defines their identity whose features are more unconventional compared with those distinguishing the original interpretation of that category, the higher their ability to attract the external audience attention.*

Finally, we contend that when organizations are part of a closed network of relationships reinterpreting a legitimate category whose features are more unconventional compared with those distinguishing purist interpretation of that category has a stronger effect on audiences' attraction. In closed social network of relationships organizations tend to be partners (Baum,

Liere and Rowley, 2006) which facilitates reciprocity, trust (Coleman, 1985) and the adoption of cooperative behaviors (Granovetter, 1985) in a supportive social context (Edmondson, 1999). Closed networks also simplify the transfer and exchange of fine-grained knowledge which tends to be tacit or complex (Ajuha, 2000; Walker et al., 1997) which is particularly relevant to further enhance the success of hybrid reinterpretations of a category that are externally perceived as highly innovative because detached from previous benchmark of comparisons. Being part of a closed network may in fact enable organizations to acquire knowledge about how to promote innovative hybrids and how to maximize the attraction of audiences' attention on them. When organizations are part of closed network of relationships it is also more common for them to engage in large relationship-specific investments that help maximize the benefits of collaboration (Walker, Cogut and Shan, 1997). In this regard, organizations that are part of closed networks may also decide to co-brand innovative hybrids which implies coordinated and reinforced communication efforts aimed at maximizing the marketplace exposure of organizations' products (Washburn, Till and Priluck, 2000). In sum we contend that when organizations offer hybrid reinterpretations of a category that are perceptually detached from their original interpretations, audiences' curiosity and attention toward these efforts are particularly enhanced when organizations position themselves within closed networks of relationships.

We argue:

*Hypothesis 3: The higher organizations' willingness to reinterpret a legitimate category that defines their identity whose features are more unconventional compared with those distinguishing the original interpretation of that category and the closer their network of relationship, the higher their ability to attract the external audience attention.*



## THE EMPIRICAL CONTEXT

The empirical setting of our research is the Italian opera market from 2004 to 2011. Italian opera houses' market identities is highly traditional and focused on historically operas of the pre-20th century tradition. Traditional operas reflect the prevailing logic of preservation of a historically established operatic patrimony that reflects broad audiences' tastes and constitutes the bulk of Italian opera houses' artistic programs (Cancellieri and Turrini, 2016). By contrast, modern 20th century operas define themselves as a divergent and oppositional genre that responds to the need for developing and innovating the operatic genre through disruptive schema shaped by a contemporary style of music and drama (e.g., atonal system of music expression, antitheatrical oratorio like appearance, aesthetics of difficulty and nonbeauty, intent to provoke and scandalize the audience (Lindenberger, 2007; Jensen and Kim, 2013). Over the last year the necessity for Italian theatres to recombine the logics of conservation and development of the opera patrimony while distinguishing themselves from their peers has encouraged them to produce modern reinterpretations of traditional, pre-20<sup>th</sup> century operas conferring this repertoire a modern and contemporary visual dimension "by putting old wine in new bottles" (Gossett, 2010; Heilbrun, 1993). For example, staging the 19<sup>th</sup> century opera *La Traviata* in the present and making the protagonists feel contemporary (Loomis, 2013) is an example of modern reinterpretations of traditional operas. Similarly, staging Mozart's *Don Giovanni* as a New York drug dealer is another example of this practice in the field of opera (Jensen and Kim, 2013). Opera houses' managers believe this strategy has the potential to foster the accessibility of a cultural product that for a long time has been conceived as an exclusive and elitist art form, while at the same time contributing to the development of a conservative artistic *genre* (Pogue and Speck, 1997:7). The aim of modern staging in the opera field has been clearly expressed by Stephane Lissner, the former chairman of La Scala theatre in Milan: "setting side by side the

repertoire and the modern day is part of the Scala's mission, not repeating the same show as the conservatives would like" (Biennie, 2013). In a similar vein, the former chairman of Teatro dell' Opera in Rome noted "we're trying to marry traditional Italian opera with a more modern vision of what a theatre can be, recovering our credibility and searching for different audiences in the meantime" (Povoledo, 2013).

Staging modern reinterpretations of traditional operas may, however, expose opera houses to external criticism. Both critics and experts as well the general audience converge in judging modern reinterpretations of traditional operas as inauthentic attempts to bastardize the visual dimension of tradition through the creation of trivial shows that trigger a *succès de scandale* instead of contributing to the artistic development of the field. Not surprisingly modern stagings are often negatively received by the audience who are reluctant to accept unpopular, unfamiliar artistic choices. For example, when in 2014 La Scala opened its artistic season with a modern staging of La Traviata by Giuseppe Verdi, the famous boo-ing of La Scala's loggionisty including conservative audience segments arise as a sign of criticism against the contemporary visual reinterpretation of this classic. Strong concerns were expressed by critics as well. Carla Fracci, the famous Italian dancer noted: "I am conservative, I am for the respect of tradition. This modern staging of La Traviata betrayed the meaning of Verdi's opera". In a similar vein, Giorgio Armani reported: "I was puzzled by this production....I think it betrayed the very spirit of the opera". Similarly, the famous conductor Muti expressed his disappointment against a production which "offended Verdi and the Italian opera tradition".

Despite the potential penalties that stems from the creation of modern staging of traditional operas, opera houses still pursue this strategy. What therefore enables theatres to mitigate the sanctions that stem from this practice, making it being perceived as a less risky and more rewarding strategic path? Drawing on the notion of unconventionality first

introduced by DiMaggio and Stenberg (1985) and further developed by Jensen and Kim (2011) and Durand and Kremp (2015), we contend that opera houses have less incentives to create modern reinterpretations of traditional repertoires when they raise the conventionality of traditional operas. Increasing the conventionality of traditional opera titles means choosing a small sets of operas that are performed frequently because they are the most salient and widely known identifiers of tradition among a broad audience (Jensen and Kim, 2013; Kim and Jensen, 2011). For example, in the Italian opera field, the masterpieces of Puccini and Verdi such as *La Traviata* and *Madama Butterfly* continue to be the “Opera ABC” for commercial success and their inclusion in the repertoire satisfies the taste of a wide audience for “opera warhorses”.

An increased focus on conventional opera titles implies an emphasis on highly salient and emblematic features (e.g., *La Traviata* and *Madama Butterfly*) that best fit the codes of tradition in the audiences’ mental representation system. These titles have in fact become the most emblematic and taken for granted representations of tradition among the audience. Programming these titles thus raises the external audiences’ expectations to see the codes of tradition being respected in their purist form. As a result the audience adopt taken for granted standards of comparisons against which they can evaluate, judge and eventually sanction performances of these operas that do not comply with their original form. By contrast, by programming under-performed pre-20th century operas such as *Il Fidelio* or *La Finta Giardiniera*, theatres draw attention away from the liability of conferring a modern visual reinterpretation to traditional operas. As unconventional operas have been unfrequently represented in their purist form, their association with the purist schema of tradition is less evident which in turn obstructs audiences’ ability to evaluate modern reinterpretations of these operas against their original schema. For example, when an opera house or a symphony orchestra select their repertoires focusing on the most representative

operas of the classic music tradition (Jensen and Kim, 2011; Durand and Kremp, 2015) they promote their status and visibility among a broad audience which creates strong external expectations about their compliance with the canon of tradition. At the same time, these highly familiar masterpieces of the music tradition can be easily recognized and evaluated by the external audience who can compare them with other performances of the same masterpiece (Durand and Kremp, 2015). This in turn may foster the sanctionability of attempts to reinterpret those features through a modern aesthetic canon.

As a result, the risk for these titles to be considered by broad audiences as inauthentic with respect to the codes of tradition is lower. In this scenario opera houses' ability to propose modern reinterpretations of those titles is enhanced.

Furthermore we argue that when opera houses increase the offering of modern reinterpretations of traditional operas whose titles are more unconventional compared with those identifying purist-traditional operas in the same opera season their ability to attract the audience is higher. This mechanism boosts opera houses' ability to achieve distinctiveness by recombining divergent prescriptions (i.e., artistic originality vs. preservation of tradition) embodied in the codes of traditional and modern operas (Jensen and Kim, 2013) through modern reinterpretations of tradition, while avoiding the risk for these performances to be conceived as inauthentic and devalued by the external audience. Indeed when modern reinterpretations of tradition are identified by titles that are more unconventional compared with those distinguishing purist traditional operas the perceptual detachment between the rival interpretations of traditional operas (hybrid modern vs. purist traditional) is higher. This emphasizes the innovativeness of modern reinterpretations of a traditional repertoires compared with purist interpretations of the same repertoire which protects modern reinterpretations of tradition from being externally perceived as inauthentic. At the same time this mechanism enables theatres to signal the innovativeness of their programs through

the modernist reinterpretations of traditional titles that would otherwise remained forgotten or hidden to the external audience attention (DiMaggio and Stenberg, 1985). When opera houses are part of a closed network of relationships their willingness to program modern reinterpretations of titles with a higher degree of unconventionality than those identifying purist traditional repertoires has a stronger effect on occupancy rate. Closed social network of relationships facilitates reciprocity, trust (Coleman, 1985) and the adoption of cooperative behaviors (Granovetter, 1985) in a supportive social context (Edmondson, 1999). When opera houses are part of closed network of relationships (e.g., Italian Circuiti Teatrali) they often coproduce show or, alternatively, distribute or acquire newly produced operas to the other theatres of the network (Mariani, 2007). The consequences of these cooperative behaviors are twofold. First, opera houses can share knowledge about how to appropriately promote innovative reinterpretations of modern repertoires that could maximize their ability to attract the audience and raise their occupancy rate. Second they can arrange common promotional strategies, coordinated communication efforts (Cori, 2004) and co-branding strategies aimed at gathering further attention around innovative shows.

## METHODS

### Sample

Nowadays Italian opera houses are a fragmented sector, characterized by an offer shared between different non-profit institutions (Sicca and Zan, 2005). Our sample is composed by the most important professional Italian opera houses (i.e., *Lyric and Symphonic foundations, Teatri di Tradizione*) and operatic festivals. The Lyric and Symphonic Foundations (LSF) are

private foundations located in the largest Italian towns. By contrast, Teatri di Tradizione (TDTs) are usually smaller than LSFs in size, and mainly located in medium size cities. Given the relevance of festivals for the Italian operatic tradition and for the artistic development of the field, we decided to include them in our sample. Operatic festivals are realized in a limited timeframe and located in distinct geographic area. Both LSFs, TDTs and festivals receive significant funding from public bodies at both national and local levels. We excluded from our sample '*lirica ordinaria*', small-scale theatres with short seasons that sporadically include operas in their repertoires. Moreover, we did not consider Accademia S. Cecilia in Rome, a lyric and symphonic foundation whose repertoire is not focused on staged operas but on concert opera and symphonic productions.

Information about opera houses' funding sources, casts and programming decisions was collected manually from specialist yearly magazines (*Annuari EDT/CIDIM dell'Opera Lirica in Italia*), widely regarded as industry references. Each issue provides artistic and economic information about the operas performed by Italian opera houses. Each opera is documented by means of various qualitative and quantitative data such as titles, composers, number of reruns and cast.

We constructed a panel data set containing information on opera institutions from the 2004-2005 artistic season to the 2010-2011 artistic season. As most of the time Italian opera houses' artistic seasons do not coincide with the solar year, we have decided to adopt the artistic season as the reference time frame. This allows us to maintain the integrity of all the seasons in the database.

Using seasonally updated data from 2004 to 2011, our final sample includes 42 professional opera companies and festivals, which, given our lagged repertoires (discussed in the next section), results in 200 observations.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Nine observations have been dropped due to missing financial data.

## Variables

### *Dependent variable:*

*Hybrid reinterpretations of a category that defines organizations' market identities (Modern reinterpretations of traditional operas):* we measured theatres' willingness to create hybrid reinterpretations of traditional operas (a category that defines opera houses' market identities) as the percentage of theatres' new productions that confers a modern visual dimension (set design, stage directions..) to traditional pre-20<sup>th</sup> century operas (e.g., Peter Sellar's 1990 staging of Mozart's Don Giovanni as a New York City drug dealer).

*Audiences' attention rate (opera houses' occupancy rate).* The occupancy rate is measured as the average occupancy per opera season. This indicator allows to evaluate the ability of each theatre to fill out its capacity by selling tickets and subscriptions (Agid & Tarondeau, 2008; Cori, 2004; Radbourne, 1998). To measure opera houses' occupancy we initially computed the average attendance per opera (average number of tickets sold per opera over the year  $t$ ). Then we measured the occupancy per opera, dividing the average attendance per opera by the opera house number of seats (opera house capacity). Finally we obtained the opera house occupancy summing each opera occupancy in year  $t$  and dividing it by the total number of operas offered by the theatre in year  $t$ .

### *Independent variables:*

*Degree of unconventionality of the features selected from a category that defines organizations' market identities (Unconventionality of traditional operas).* We measured this variable as the

inverse of the conformity index (Di Maggio and Stenberg, 1985; Jensen and Kim, 2013; Kim and Jensen, 2011; Pierce, 2000), which is calculated as the average number of times the traditional opera titles programmed by a given theatre are also programmed by the other theatres in the sample. The unconventionality of traditional repertoires captures the extent to which opera houses program unpopular, unfamiliar traditional titles instead of focusing their attention to over-performed traditional operas. The lower the index, the higher the theatre's propensity to include in their program the most conventional traditional titles (Jensen and Kim, 2013; Martorella, 1977, p.358). As operatic seasons are programmed two or three years in advance, to measure the conventionality of the traditional operas programmed by a theatre over a given artistic season we first counted the number of times each opera in that season was produced by all the opera companies in our population over the last two artistic seasons (prior to the current one). We then calculated the average conventionality of these operas. The first season in our statistical analysis is 2006-2007 (conventionality based on the 2004-2005 and 2005-2007 artistic seasons) and the last one is 2010-2011 (conventionality based on the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 artistic seasons).

We then computed the percentage of *hybrid reinterpretation of a legitimate category that defines their identity whose features are more unconventional compared with those distinguishing the original interpretation of that category*. In our empirical context this variable is related to theatres' willingness to offer modern reinterpretations of traditional operas with a higher degree of unconventionality than purist traditional operas. First we counted the total number of modern reinterpretations of traditional operas whose titles have a higher unconventionality than those identifying purist traditional operas (traditional, pre-20<sup>th</sup> century operas that have not been subjected to a modern reinterpretation). We then divided it by the total number of productions put on stage by a theatre over a given artistic season.



*Network Closure:* we identify an opera house's network from the opera house's sharing of artists (e.g., conductors and directors) with other opera houses. That is, a tie between opera house  $i$  and opera house  $j$  exists when opera house  $i$  shares artists with opera house  $j$ . We relied on Burt's constraint measure of structural holes (2004) to account for the effect of network closure on the performance of modern reinterpretations of traditional operas. This measure is defined as follows:

$$H_i = 1 - \sum_{i'} \left( p_{ii'} + \sum_q p_{iq} p_{qi'} \right)^2$$

$$i \neq i' \neq q$$

where  $p_{ii'}$  denotes the proportion of  $i$ 's network that is invested in the relation with  $i'$ ,  $p_{qi'}$  indicates the proportion of  $q$ 's network that is invested in its relation with  $i'$ .  $H_i$  can range from 0 to 1. As  $i$  is connected to an infinite number of others who are themselves disconnected,  $H_i$  approaches 0. Conversely, if  $i$  shares artists with few opera houses that are well connected among themselves (e.g., they constitute a clique and share the same artists), then  $H_i$  will approach 1.

### **Control Variables:**

*Relational measure of status.* Theatres' status hierarchy derives from patterns of artists exchange relationships. To assess the status of opera house  $i$  we constructed a relational matrix  $R$  where each cell  $R_{ij}$  denotes the number of times that the artists hired by the opera house  $i$  are also hired by the opera house  $j$ .  $R$  is a symmetric  $n \times n$  matrix where  $n$  denotes the number of times that the artists employed by the opera house  $i$  perform at opera house  $j$ .

Having constructed the matrix, we then calculated status scores based on Bonacich's (1987) centrality measure, a standard measure for relational data on status, to determine each organization's status relative to that of other organizations. The measure is defined as follows:

$$S_t(\alpha, B) = \sum_{k=0}^{\infty} \alpha B^k R_t^{k+1} \mathbf{1}$$

where,  $\alpha$  is an arbitrary scaling coefficient,  $B$  is a weighting parameter,  $\mathbf{1}$  is a column vector where each element has the value "1," and  $S_t$  is also a column vector where element  $S_{i,t}$  indicates the status of opera house  $i$ . Status scores are standardized so that the highest status opera house in a given year has a status of 1. The upper bound on  $B$  is the reciprocal of the largest eigenvalue of the  $R$  matrix. For the analyses that follow, we set  $B$  at this upper bound. Given this specification, an opera house's status is a function of the number of opera houses that hire the same artists and of the status of these opera houses (which in turn derives from the number and the status of opera houses with whom they share artists and so on).

Since an opera house's artistic season in the time period  $t$  is programmed over the previous two artistic seasons, we believed it was more appropriate to include the status of an opera house as a lagged variable  $t-2$ . This allows us to measure the status of an opera house at the time in which the programming decisions for a given artistic season were actually made.

*Opera houses' funding sources.* Opera houses' funding sources may exert a strong influence on opera houses programming decisions (Martorella, 1977; Di Maggio and Stenberg, 1985). We controlled for opera houses' funding sources by computing the share of total revenues accounted for by national government grants, private funds and box office revenues.

*Time dummies.* We also included dummies for each artistic season in the model.

*Size.* We used the *total number of programmed runs* to control for an opera house's size. We measure this as the number of performance runs an opera house set up in the artistic season  $t$ .

*Coproduction of modern reinterpretations of traditional operas (coproduced-hybrids).*

Coproducing operas with other theatres can lower the perception of risk related to hybrid strategies which in turn may affect theatres' propensity to undertake them. We measured theatres' propensity to coproduce hybrid operas with other theatres by dividing the number of coproduced modern reinterpretations of traditional operas by the total number of operas programmed in a given opera season.

*Competition:* We defined competitive pressures by the extent to which opera companies are located near other opera companies that offer operas in a season (*within-category competitive pressures*). Specifically, assuming that opera companies exert less competitive pressure on each other the farther away they are from each other and the fewer operas they offer, we measured competitive pressures by the repertoire-size weighted proximity of the focal opera company <sub>$i$</sub>  to all the other opera companies in the population:

$$C_i = \sum_{j=1}^n R_j d_{ij}^{-\alpha}$$

where  $R_j$  is the size (number of operas) of the repertoire of opera company <sub>$j$</sub> ,  $n$  is the number of opera companies,  $d_{ij}$  is the distance from opera company <sub>$i$</sub>  to opera company <sub>$j$</sub> , and  $i \neq j$ .

Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix are presented in Table I.

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Insert Table I around here

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## RESULTS:

Table II presents the fixed-effects ordinary least squares (OLS) regression results (a Hausman test indicated that the fixed-effect model was more appropriate than random-effects) (Stock and Watson, 2007). All the variables have been standardized in order to guard against multicollinearity (Aiken, West and Raymon, 1991).

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Insert Table II around here  
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In models 1 and 2 (Table II) we tested hypothesis 1 which states that organizations' willingness to emphasize the unconventional features of a legitimate category that defines their identity (unconventionality of traditional operas in our empirical context) positively affects their ability to reinterpret that category through a rival one (e.g., modern reinterpretations of traditional operas). Model 1 in Table II is a baseline model that contains only the control variables. In Model 2 (Table II) we added our independent variable. Model 2 provides strong support to our hypothesis 1 as there is a positive and significant relationship between the unconventionality of the features selected from a legitimate category that defines organizations' identities and their willingness to reinterpret it through a rival category ( $\beta = 0.275$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). This provides strong support to our hypothesis 1.

In models 3, 4 and 5 (Table II) we tested hypothesis 2. In hypothesis 2 we posited that organizations' ability to attract audience attention (e.g., opera houses' occupancy rate) is positively affected by their willingness to increase the offer of hybrid reinterpretations of a

legitimate category that defines their identity whose features are more unconventional compared with those distinguishing its purist interpretation (e.g., modern reinterpretations of traditional operas whose titles are more unconventional than those identifying their purist interpretations). Model 3 includes only the control variables. In model 4 we added the percentage of hybrid reinterpretations of a legitimate category identified by unconventional features as an independent variable. Results from this model supports our hypothesis 2: there is a positive and significant relationship between the percentage of hybrid reinterpretations of a legitimate category whose features are more unconventional than those characterizing purist interpretations of the same category and organizations' ability to attract audiences' attention, measured as opera houses' occupancy rate ( $\beta = 0.167$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Finally, in model 5 (Table II), we tested whether the previously defined relationship is positively moderated by organizations' positioning within closed networks or relationships (hypothesis 3). As one can see the moderating effect of the degree of organizations' networks closure is positive and significant ( $\beta = 0.352$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), thereby supporting our hypothesis 3.

As organizations' hybrid strategies and their ability to attract audience attention may be path dependent on their willingness to pursue hybridity in the past and on their previous ability to catch audiences' attention, we decided to control for these factors by including these variables as lags in our models. To avoid autocorrelation we re-estimated all the models by using the Arellano Bond GMM Estimator. The estimated coefficients of the dynamic models are presented in Table III.

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 Insert Table III around here  
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The baseline specifications (Model 7 and Model 9) are designed to catch the effects of the

control variables respectively on organizations' willingness to pursue hybridity by contaminating the codes of a dominant category with divergent ones and organizations' ability to attract audiences' attention (measured in our empirical context as opera houses' occupancy rate). In Models 8, 10 and 11 we tested our hypotheses 1, 2 and 3.

As a first step to assess the validity of the five dynamic specifications (from model 7 to model 11) we compute for each of them the statistics of the Sargan tests. All of them are insignificant, indicating that all our over-identifying restrictions are valid. Moreover, for each of the five dynamic specifications (from model 7 to model 11) we cannot reject the null hypothesis of no autocorrelation at any conventional significance level. We therefore conclude that the GMM method is appropriate for our models (Table IV).

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 Insert Table IV around here  
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Model 8 provides a further confirmation of our hypothesis 1 which is significant even when tested through a dynamic panel data model ( $\beta = 0.346$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Whereas model 9 does not confirmed our hypothesis 2, model 11 provides strong support to hypothesis 3 ( $\beta = 0.263$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) (Table III).

## CONCLUSIONS:

Our objective in this article was to understand how organizations can strategically emphasize elements that, although belonging to a legitimate category that defines their identity, exhibit different gradient of conformity to the exemplar of that category as a way of offsetting the penalties of category spanning and enabling the adoption of this practice. We focus on a particular form of spanning consisting in the reinterpretation of a legitimate

category that defines organizations' identity through the codes of a rival category. We explore this relationship within the context of the Italian opera scene, where the need for opera houses to distinguish themselves while at the same time facing the tension between conservative vs. innovation-oriented logics push them to contaminate the codes of traditional repertoires with the visual elements of modernity.

We reported evidence that opera houses are more willing to offer operas that reinterpret the taken for granted features of tradition through the visual codes of modernity when they select operas that are unconventional because less representative of tradition (e.g., unconventional opera titles of the pre-20<sup>th</sup> century tradition). In a second set of analysis we demonstrated that opera houses can raise the attention of the external audience by increasing their offering of hybrid reinterpretations of traditional operas more unconventional compared with those distinguishing purist versions of traditional operas offered over the same artistic season. This especially holds true when opera houses position themselves in a closed social network of relationships (e.g., Circuiti Teatrali) which facilitates reciprocity (Coleman, 1985) and the adoption of cooperative behaviors (Granovetter, 1985) aimed at promoting innovative efforts and raise audiences' attention around them.

Our results suggest that organizations can leverage the selection of features that are differentially emblematic of a category to mitigate the penalties of merging antagonist product categories. At the same time, we also suggest that audiences' attention can be raised through the offer of hybrid products whose features are more unconventional compared with those identifying purist ones. This helps creating a perceptual detachment between rival interpretations of the same category which protects hybrids from being perceived as inauthentic. This strategy may in fact enable organizations to gain the benefit of differentiation that stems from hybridity (Hsu, Negro and Perretti, 2012) while avoiding its penalties by highlighting the innovativeness of hybrids, reducing the risks for them to be

perceived as blurred emulations of existing models. Organizations' positioning inside a closed network of relationship supports organizations efforts to promote hybrid products that are externally perceived as innovative which in turn contributes at raising external attention around them.

This study advances research on multiple category membership in markets (Durand and Paoletta, 2012; Vergne and Wry, 2014; Kovacs and Hannan, 2014; Lounsbury and Wry, 2013; Lounsbury and Wry, 2014; Negro, Hannan and Rao, 2011). Specifically, we contribute to expand the strategic perspective on category studies shedding light on how firms can act strategically to alter perceptions about boundary spanning products and draw external attention to them. In doing so, we depart from previous studies examining how firms can signal affiliations with a legitimate category through the strategic use of names or other symbols (Zhao, Ishihara and Lounsbury, 2013). We instead highlight how firms can strategically modify their position within a category to mitigate the negative effects of this practice. Drawing on a recent theorization of unconventionality, we shift focus from considering unconventionality as an outcome of specific social and strategic determinants to the exploration of how unconventionality can be leveraged within a category to mitigate the negative consequences of spanning. We also highlight the importance of considering the other category features of a product (rather than just its multiple membership) to assess its ability to gather the external audiences' attention. Indeed, a hybrid product may be perceived very differently depending on the degree of conventionality of its internal features. By shedding light on how the degree of conventionality of a category that defines organizations' identity affects their ability to reinterpret them through a rival category, we also emphasize the idea that identities may exhibit differences that are individuated within a particular category (Navis and Glynn, 2011) which in turn may affect organizations' ability to transform their identities through hybrids.



Our analysis also contributes to the discussion about audiences' reactions to different forms of spanning (Vergne and Wry, 2014), suggesting that unconventional feature can be used by firms to disguise a potential liability, namely the risk of inauthenticity that arises when the organizations alter the codes of a category that defines their identities through rival ones. In this scenario, positive reactions to this particular form of spanning will be contingent on organizations' ability to signal the perceptual detachment between between hybrid and purist interpretations of the same product features, thus safeguarding products that do not conform to the conventions of an existing genre or category from the risk of being perceived as inauthentic.

Table I. Descriptive Statistics and correlation matrix

*Significance:*† $p < .10$ .

	Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1	Modern reinterpretation s of traditional operas (hybrids)	0.168	2.111	1												
2	Unconventionality of traditional operas	-27.22	14.98	0.348†	1											
3	Modern reinterpretations of unconventional features	0.068	0.121	0.449†	0.787	1										
4	Audience attraction	0.700	0.241	0.176†	0.104	0.179†	1									
5	Network closure	0.286	0.134	-0.064	-0.218†	-0.084†	0.044	1								
6	Relational status	0.416	0.275	-0.015†	0.054	0.020	-0.031	-0.521†	1							
7	Private funding	0.091	0.085	-0.053	0.053	-0.004	-0.045	0.034	0.067	1						
8	Box office	0.151	0.126	-0.155†	-0.283†	-0.044	-0.007	0.128†	-0.025	0.001	1					
9	State funding	0.347	0.177	0.124†	0.011	0.020	0.136†	-0.187†	-0.157†	-0.286†	-0.127†	1				

10	Local funding	0.326	0.179	0.026	0.105	0.075	-0.073	0.170†	-0.281†	-0.198†	-0.496†	-0.490†	1			
11	Coproduction hybrid	0.148	0.199	-0.260†	0.138†	-0.214†	-0.052	-0.168†	0.248†	-0.022	0.025	-0.207†	-0.017	1		
12	Repertoire size	5.799	2.846	-0.045	0.087	0.215	0.088	-0.279†	0.458†	0.055	-0.000	0.345†	-0.243†	-0.129†	1	
13	Competitive pressures	0.039	0.035	-0.161†	-0.053	-0.138†	-0.097	-0.143†	0.203†	0.227†	0.212†	-0.333†	-0.251†	0.375†	-0.099	1

Table II. Model Estimation. Static panel data  
Fixed Effect Regression

	Dependent var: modern reinterpretations of traditional operas (hybrids) Dep var: audiences' attention rate				
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Unconventionality of traditional operas	-	0.275** (2.66)	-	-	-
Modern reinterpretations of unconventional features	-	-	-	0.167* (2.05)	0.184* (2.33)
Modern reinterpretations of unconventional features* network closure	-	-	-	-	0.352** (3.07)
Network closure	-0.105 (0.47)	-0.055 (-0.26)	0.180 (0.72)	0.171 (0.69)	0.109 (0.43)
Status	-0.003 (-0.003)	0.011 (0.09)	-0.137 (-0.93)	-0.127 (-0.87)	-0.221 (-1.53)
State funding	-0.225 (-0.99)	-0.213 (-0.96)	-0.142 (-0.54)	-0.130 (-0.50)	-0.185 (-0.73)
Private funding	0.061 (0.39)	0.067 (0.44)	0.063 (0.28)	0.114 (0.51)	0.062 (0.29)
Local funding	-0.027 (-0.10)	0.019 (0.07)	-0.143 (-0.44)	-0.192 (-0.59)	-0.193 (-0.61)
Box office	-0.196 (-0.93)	-0.094 (0.44)	-0.079 (-0.35)	-0.050 (-0.22)	-0.034 (-0.16)
Size	0.104 (0.68)	0.041 (0.28)	-0.209 (-1.28)	-0.236 (-1.46)	-0.229 (-1.46)
Hybrid coproduction	-0.192 † (-1.91)	-0.224* (-2.26)	-0.034 (-0.32)	-0.012 (-0.11)	-0.026 (-0.25)
Competitive pressures	0.150 (0.47)	0.097 (0.31)	0.028 (0.07)	0.051 (0.12)	0.153 (0.38)
<i>Time dummies</i>	<i>Included</i>	<i>Included</i>	<i>Included</i>	<i>Included</i>	<i>Included</i>
<i>Constant</i>	0.251 (0.46)	0.103 (1.16)	0.133 (1.22)	-0.821 (-1.34)	-0.728 (-1.23)
<i>No. of observations</i>	196	201	201	173	173
<i>Adj R-sq</i>	0.21	0.25	0.17	0.19	0.24
<i>F</i>	2.00***	2.18***	1.70**	1.79***	2.06***

\*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; † $p < .10$ ; t-statistic in parenthesis

Table III. Arellano Bond linear dynamic panel data estimation (two step results)

	Dep var: modern reinterpretations of traditional operas (hybrids)		Dep var: audiences' attention rate		
	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10	Model 11
Unconventionality of traditional operas	-	0.346** (2.86)	-	-	-
Audiences' attention rate (occupancy t-1)		-	0.035 (0.20)	0.050 (0.28)	-0.014 (-0.08)
Modern reinterpretations of a dominant category t-1	0.242 (1.70)	0.307* (2.34)			
Modern reinterpretations of unconventional features	-	-	-	-0.108 (-1.01)	-0.032 (-0.31)
Hybrid reinterpretations of unconventional features* network closure	-	-	-		0.263** (3.02)
Network closure	-0.073 (-0.47)	0.116 (-0.69)	-0.162 (-0.69)	-0.218 (-0.92)	-0.164 (-0.54)
Status	0.238† (1.74)	0.230 † (1.86)	-0.191 (-1.18)	-0.192 (-1.22)	-0.190 (-1.18)
State Funding	-0.177† (-1.81)	-0.102 (-1.10)	-0.367† (-1.70)	-0.354 (-1.62)	-0.409 † (-1.83)
Private Funding	0.061 (0.39)	-0.041 (-0.50)	0.153 (0.39)	0.161 (0.41)	0.111 (0.29)
Local Funding	0.554* (1.97)	0.789** (3.12)	-0.094 (-0.43)	0.032 (0.14)	-0.101 (-0.46)
Box Office	-0.196† (-0.93)	-0.039 (0.34)	-0.543** (-3.43)	-0.543** (-3.37)	-0.556** (-0.34)
Size	-0.108 (-0.68)	-0.153 (-1.14)	-0.704*** (-4.35)	-0.709*** (-4.34)	-0.674*** (-4.28)
Hybrid Coproduction	-0.192† (-1.91)	-0.342* (-2.20)	-0.209* (-2.04)	-0.238* (-2.28)	-0.200* (-0.20)
Competitive Pressures	-0.052 (-0.17)	-0.073 (-0.23)	0.204 (0.76)	0.230 (0.90)	0.194 (0.78)
<i>Time dummies</i>	<i>Included</i>	<i>Included</i>	<i>Included</i>	<i>Included</i>	<i>Included</i>
<i>Constant</i>	0.251 (0.46)	0.103 (1.16)	0.034 (0.16)	0.022 (0.10)	0.042 (0.18)
<i>No. of observations</i>	115	115	98	98	98
<i>Degrees of freedom</i>	10	11	10	11	12
<i>Wald<sub>χ</sub><sup>2</sup></i>	38.75***	50.91***	92.98***	102.94***	50.91***

\*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; † $p < .10$ ; t-statistic in parenthesis

\*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; † $p < .10$ ; t-statistic in parenthesis

Table IV. Sargan Test for overidentifying restrictions and Arellano and Bond m2 test for autocorrelation

	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10	Model 11
<i>Sargan Test</i>	5.378 (0.25)	4.538 (0.33)	4.265 (0.37)	3.937 (0.41)	4.678 (0.321)
<i>Second order autocorrelation (m2)</i>	-0.913 (0.36)	-0.630 (0.52)	0.803 (0.42)	0.920 (0.35)	-0.130 (0.89)

Notes: *p*-values in parentheses \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; † $p < .10$ .

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### **The Phantom of Modern Opera: How Economics and Politics Affect Opera Houses' Programming Strategies**



## INTRODUCTION

Despite the surging number of new music compositions by living composers, opera houses are often reluctant to include modern and contemporary operas in their programs (Copland, 1963; Heilbrun, 2001; Burkholder, 2000; Turrini et al., 2008). Opera companies worldwide are assorting their programs choosing among a small set of popular 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century operas with no commitment to 20<sup>th</sup> century operas (Towse, 2003; Boerner, 2004). As a result, the programs of different opera houses increasingly resemble one another (Hoegl, 1995; Pierce, 2000; Heilbrun, 2001; Dowd et al., 2002; Boerner, 2004). The masterpieces of Verdi, Puccini and Bizet build the backbone of opera houses' artistic programs while operas written by 20<sup>th</sup> century composers are only sporadically included in the repertoires (Opera Europa, 2011).

As 20<sup>th</sup> century operas depart significantly from the traditional pre-20<sup>th</sup> century masterpieces that please the taste of a wide audience, programming them in the season is highly risky (Hoegl, 1995; Pierce, 2000; Heilbrun, 2001; Dowd et al., 2002; Boerner, 2004; Jensen & Kim, 2013). Nevertheless, the scarce commitment of opera managers toward modern and contemporary repertoires (Turrini et al., 2008; Poisson De Haro & Normandin, 2009) is anomalous. First of all, opera houses are generally tax-exempt, government-funded organizations and they have an obligation to society to design their programs not only on the basis of the audience's actual tastes (i.e., the box office), but also on the basis of what experts regard as 'good' or 'necessary' for cultivating audience tastes, for future generations of spectators and for the development of the opera field itself (Stigler & Becker, 1977; Cornes & Sandler, 1986). In addition, as shown by previous studies on the attractiveness of programming in the performing arts, different audience segments often have divergent

tastes (Urrutiaguer, 2004; Jensen & Kim; 2013): critics, experts and more adventurous opera lovers, for example, increasingly complain the lack of audacity and originality of opera houses in their artistic choices (Heilbrun, 2001; Jensen & Kim, 2013). This risk aversion and the choice to please the audience taste for opera warhorses might also prevent opera houses from broadening their audience base by attracting heterogeneous audience segments.

Literature has not thoroughly investigated on this phenomenon: the resilience to innovate programs has been linked to the various drivers explaining programming strategies such as the socio-economic traits of the territory where organizations are located (i.e., wealth and education levels of the population). A less-researched antecedent of artistic renewal in this field is the openness to risk of the local community where opera houses are located. Whereas studies have shed light on a local community openness to risk as a breeding ground for the emergence of experimental undertakings (Ylinenpaa, 2009; Carree & Thurik, 2010; Walcott, 2002), no study, so far, has examined whether and how opera houses located in these communities will have more incentives to challenge conservative audience tastes.

Some economic and institutional antecedents such as the amount of private or public funding available to theatres have also been highlighted as important determinants of opera houses' programming strategies (Krebs & Pommerehne, 1995; Pierce, 2000; Assassi, 2007). By deciding the amount of public funding to performing arts organizations and even the criteria for the allocation of these public resources, politicians at the national and local government levels deeply affect performing arts organizations' decisions (Krebs & Pommerehne, 1995; Pierce, 2000). Current research efforts, however, have neglected to examine how changes in the local political coalition in power affect opera houses' programming decisions. Indeed, political forces often are also represented inside performing arts organizations and the rise of a different political coalition with new agenda and policy priorities might also strongly influence opera houses managers decision to renew their

artistic programs. Examining whether political change vs. stability affects opera repertoires provides a more nuanced, fine-grained explanation for the role of politics in opera programming.

In this study, we fill these gaps by adopting a more extensive approach and framework. We analyze how and when the economic and political conditions that shape the external context where an opera house operates affect opera managers' willingness to include 20<sup>th</sup> century works in the repertoire. Specifically, we examine the extent to which modern and contemporary opera programming varies in response to the interaction between economic pressures, local entrepreneurial values (i.e.: openness to risk) and political change. By focusing on modern and contemporary programs we distance our research from studies centered around the antecedents of the generic unconventionality of opera repertoires (Di Maggio & Stenberg, 1985; Pierce, 2000). On the contrary, we definitively draw on previous studies in the arts management literature which see strategic programming in the theatrical field as shaped by the trade-off between avant-garde shows and the classics (Bennett & Kottasz, 2001; Assassi, 2007).

Our theoretical and empirical interest in modern and contemporary music aims at enhancing the understanding of what drives the programming of a specific category in the repertoire which varies dramatically the level of opera unconventionality (Jensen & Kim, 2013). Indeed, modern and contemporary operas violate the widely recognized codes that define what to expect from the operatic genre in a number of different ways (e.g., reliance on atonal and dissonant systems of music expressions, aesthetics of difficulty and non-beauty, intent to scandalize the audience), while opening up new horizons for the development of the field (Lindenberger, 2007). We therefore shed more light on the contextual conditions that may encourage opera houses' managers to sustain artistic innovation in the opera field. We begin by theorizing why the economic and political factors that shape the context where

theatres' managers operate affect their decisions to put 20<sup>th</sup> century operas on stage. We then test our hypotheses by using panel data regression analysis on a sample of 30 opera houses in Italy over five years. Finally, we present and discuss our findings and their implications for research and practice.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

Decisions regarding the assortment of operas or music to program in the season are ultimately in the hands of the opera house's artistic director (DiMaggio & Stenberg, 1985; Peterson, 1986; Alexander, 1996). However, programming decisions are also influenced by different factors such as the global private demand, the level and type of public funding, some traits of the community where the theatre operates like the openness to risk and innovation (Turrini et al., 2008, Castaner & Campos, 2002; Towse, 2001; Turrini, 2006).

### *The global private demand*

Most empirical studies on opera programming have addressed a fundamental issue in performing arts, namely the extent to which audience tastes influence theaters' willingness to offer unconventional repertoires. The increased reliance on audience tastes and box office revenues have led so far to a standardization of opera programming choices (Martorella, 1977; Heilbrun, 2001; Poisson de Haro & Normandin, 2009). This phenomenon might be connected to the continual upward pressure on costs that performing arts organizations experience (Baumol and Bowen, 1966): also opera houses are pushed to compensate for higher costs by excluding undesired atonal operas (like those composed nowadays) which

do not fare well at the box office even when ticket prices are low (Towse, 2003). As its taste patterns and cultural habits are often described as difficult to change and embedded in routines that strongly affect future attendance (Abbé-Decarroux, 1994; Krebs & Pommerehne, 1995), we might think that the pressure from the audience further constraints opera houses' willingness to shift their programming strategies from traditional works to more adventurous modern repertoires. In other words, opera houses directors' disposition toward avant-garde performances challenging the current tastes of the audience will be tempered when the occupancy rate or the box office is playing the tune (Krebs & Pommerehne, 1995; Levy-Garboua & Montmarquette, 1996; Turrini et al., 2008). On these bases we argue that performing arts' managers having experienced high occupancy rates in the past have fewer incentives to change and favor modern and contemporary repertoires (DiMaggio and Stenberg, 1985). For this reason, the following hypothesis can be formulated and tested:

*HP1: The higher an opera house's occupancy rate in the past, the lower the opera house's propensity to modern and contemporary programming strategies in the future.*

Being part of the audience and sharing the same conservative taste, corporate or individual donors typically dislike contemporary music and opera (Fuchs, 1969). The renowned contemporary composer William Schuman lends support to this argument by stating that "timidity in programming concept tends to increase in direct proportion to the percentage of the budget which must be met by voluntary contributions" (Schuman and Stevens, 1979). As a matter of fact, at the end of the 1980s the Metropolitan Opera concentrated its programming decisions on the most popular works, canceling or

postponing 20<sup>th</sup> century masterpieces by Arnold Schoenberg as well as more recently commissioned operas. The exclusion of these new works was not due to their 'lack of quality' but to the private donors' aversion to contemporary works (Fuchs, 1969; Schuman & Stevens, 1979). Literature in the field would therefore suggest that:

*HP2: The higher the percentage of total revenues accounted for by private grants, the lower an opera house's propensity to modern and contemporary programming strategies in the future.*

Traditional studies on programming in the performing arts have also examined the influence of subscribers on performing arts organizations' programming decisions (Martorella, 1977; Hobson, 1983): subscribers hamper artistic prerogatives and push opera houses toward more conservative repertoires and cast selections (Martorella, 1977).

More recent audience market research has provided empirical evidence that challenges the view of subscribers as innovation-depressing actors (Johnson & Garbarino, 2001; Semenik & Young, 1979). As a matter of fact, subscribers are typically more likely to be hard-core art enthusiasts and better connoisseurs of a given genre than non-subscribers. They also develop higher levels of satisfaction, more trust and stronger commitment toward art organizations regardless of the programming. In particular, Johnson and Garbarino (2001) find that the main motive prompting subscribers to attend performances is their need for educational enrichment (Johnson & Gambarino, 2001). On the basis of the latter arguments, we argue that opera houses with large subscriber bases might be more open to take the risk of program innovation. In fact, they rely on a particular type of 'slack resources' which allow them to make 'unpopular' artistic choices (Castaner & Campos, 2002). Following this line of reasoning, we propose the following hypothesis:

*HP3: The higher the number of subscribers to an opera house in the past, the higher the opera house's propensity to modern and contemporary programming strategies in the future.*

#### *The public funding*

Nowadays, the majority of opera houses would not survive without an extra market funding. Several empirical studies show that national government intervention has a substantial influence in boosting creativity and experimentation in performing arts organizations (Krebs and Pommerehne, 1995; Alexander, 1996; Pierce, 2000; Tajtakova, 2006; Agid & Tarondeau, 2007). Martorella (1977), for instance, argues that European opera houses are able to propose more contemporary works than their American counterparts because of the higher level of public funds they receive from the government. Austen - Smith (1980) provides further support for this argument, showing that subsidies encourage the preservation of more innovative plays in the English theater sector. In addition, Heilbrun (2001) suggests that the higher levels of diversity in operatic repertoires in Canada compared to the U.S. could be due to the higher level of funding the Canadian government provides for opera (Heilbrun, 2001). Similarly, recent empirical findings by O'Hagan and Neligan (2005) have demonstrated that increases in public subsidies have fostered experimentation in German public theaters. Following the above line of reasoning, we thus propose the following hypotheses:

*HP4: The higher the percentage of total revenues accounted for by national grants, the higher an opera house's propensity to modern and contemporary programming strategies in the future.*

By disentangling the effect of national and local government funds on opera houses' programming strategies, we argue further that an increased financial support granted by local policy makers to opera houses will enhance the conservative traits of their repertoires by reducing programmers' willingness to select modern and contemporary operas. As noted by Pierce (2000), local decision makers are likely to display a preference for the popularity of an activity or service which they directly fund. Theatres which are more dependent on local funds are therefore less willing to take the risk of disregarding the preference of the audience and, consequently, losing the financial support of local decision makers. This view of local political involvement is supported by Krebs and Pommerehne (1995), whose study on German performing arts institutions show that politicians often constraint theatres' managers programming decisions by subordinating the allocation of funds to the achievement of objectives such as the maximization of the venue capacity or minimum own revenue. We posit:

*HP5: The higher the percentage of total revenues accounted for by local government grants, the lower an opera house's propensity to modern and contemporary programming strategies in the future.*

Politicians have often been cited as exerting a strong influence on performing arts organizations especially when national or local governments also financially support an organization (Krebs & Pommerehne, 1995). In the case of Italian opera houses this is especially true as Mayors serve by law as chairpersons of opera houses' boards and as legal representatives of these institutions.

We argue that when a newly elected mayor is on the opera house board as chairperson or legal representative of the opera house, modern and contemporary repertoires will be more prominent in artistic directors' programming strategies. At least two rationales support this



argument. First, newly elected local leaders may bring with them electoral coalitions with new agenda and policy priorities that diverge from those of their predecessors (Wolmand et al., 1996). Second, newly elected Mayors often strive to differentiate themselves from incumbent by disrupting the existing equilibrium through creative discovery (Schneider & Teske, 1992). In this respect, they have incentives to undertake policy change that distance themselves from their predecessors whom the electorate has just rejected (Wolman et al., 1996). Political leaders' willingness to alter established policies is therefore contingent on the different phases of their mandates. In the early phases, their willingness to support audacious policy decisions becomes more important than in the last ones. As most of them defeated the incumbents and their rivals by making promises of social and economic change (Aragones et al., 2007), at the beginning of their mandate they face the compelling need to signal their credible commitment to the social development of the local community.

However, as time goes by, politicians become more interested in raising consensus and popularity in order to increase the chances of being re-elected (Krebs & Pommerehne, 1995) or simply to nurture their ambitions to further advance their political career after the end of the mandate (Hain, 1974). As a result, they have more incentives to behave opportunistically by increasing their support for items that are more visible to the electorate (Veiga & Veiga, 2007; Aidt, 2011). On these grounds, we argue that Mayors working for a long time on a territory will be more likely to reinforce current audiences' tastes by supporting opera houses' selection of traditional works. By contrast, when a political change occurs, opera directors have more chances to get unconventional artistic project be accepted and supported by the local political coalition. We argue:

*HP6: The longer the current mayor's tenure, the lower an opera house's propensity to modern and contemporary programming strategies in the future.*

### *The local community openness to risk*

Urban studies have suggested that the presence of a huge number of startup firms in a given area reflects specific traits of the local community, namely its openness to risk and uncertainty (Ylinenpaa, 2009; Carree & Thurik, 2010). A high firm birth rate is a sign of a local community marked by risk-taking people aspiring to innovate, motivated by non-conformity and entrepreneurial attitudes. We expect opera houses' artistic directors exposed to such an entrepreneurial environment to be more likely to pursue the high risk path of programming 20<sup>th</sup> century operas. We argue:

*HP7: The stronger the openness to risk of the local community where an opera house is located, the higher the opera house's propensity to modern and contemporary programming strategies in the future.*

We also argue that when the local community where private donors live or do business is open to risk, private donations may increasingly prompt opera houses to program 20<sup>th</sup> century works. Indeed, if the business community surrounding an entrepreneur or a donor is progressive, reluctance towards avant-garde repertoires will decrease (Castaner and Campos, 2002). Under these conditions, corporate donors encourage opera houses to program modern and contemporary repertoires as a way to signal to their stakeholders (e.g., employees, customers, investors, communities) their innovative-oriented culture and their contribution and active participation in the development and enhancement of the opera

tradition. In this regard, private actors may be attracted by the possibility to signal their efforts to foster innovation in a highly conservative environment. Private funders' commitment to modern and contemporary operas may in fact enhance their image as socially responsible actors who actively support the development of an artistic field which is resistant to change. This, in turn, would give them an opportunity of connecting their brand image with the ideas of creativity. Castaner and Campos (2002) clearly described this phenomenon: corporations often seek to associate themselves to highly distinctive and elitist symbols with the final aim of increasing their visibility in the community and differentiating their brand image from that of other companies.

Drawing on these theoretical arguments and fieldwork evidence, we therefore advance the following hypothesis:

*HP8: In local communities which are more open to risk, the higher the percentage of the opera house's total revenues accounted for by private grants, the higher the opera house's propensity to modern and contemporary programming strategies in the future.*

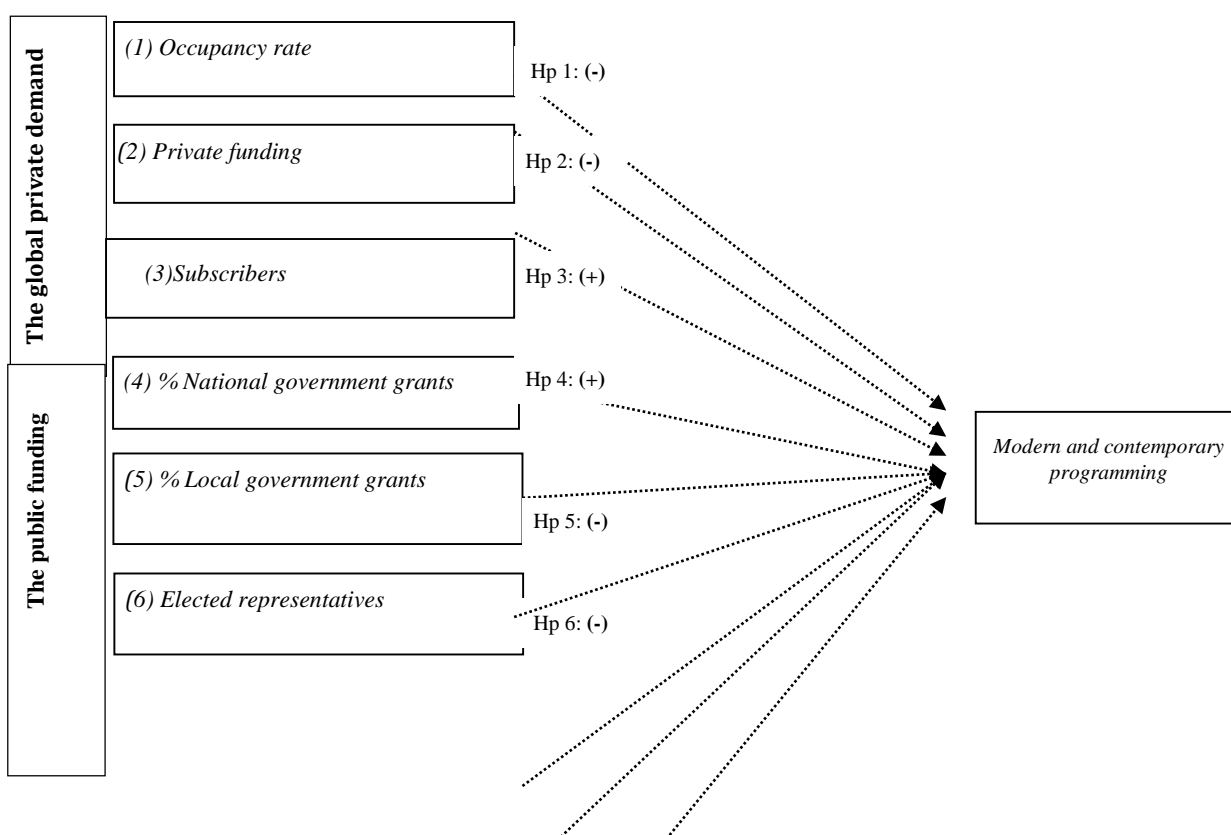
Going one step further, we argue that constraints to the modernization of opera repertoires are also contingent on the extent to which the audience is risk-averse or close to diversity. In this respect, when the local community surrounding the theatre is shaped by individuals with progressive and entrepreneurial traits, theatres' managers will have more incentives to open up the repertoire to operas that challenge conservative tastes. In this scenario, instead of focusing on "what satisfies audiences' tastes", artistic directors might dare to open new artistic horizons, acting as facilitators for the emergence of new tastes.

Theatres' managers might expect the audience which is part of an open-to-risk community to accept the risk of failing to understand performances that disrupt the safe course of existing conventions. This, in turn, might lower the perception of uncertainty connected with the programming of modern and contemporary repertoires, making programmers feel less constrained by the risk of incurring in negative audience reactions. As noted by Payne, (2005; 318) "there is a tension between the perceived safe course of following the herd and the risk of striking an individual line". Under these contextual conditions, we argue, opera houses' artistic directors will be motivated rather than discouraged by their audience to increase the proportion of 20<sup>th</sup> century operas in their repertoires.

Drawing on these theoretical arguments and fieldwork evidence, we therefore advance the following hypothesis:

*HP9: In local communities which are more open to risk, the higher the opera house's occupancy rate in the past, the higher the opera house's propensity to modern and contemporary programming strategies in the future.*

**Figure 1. Conceptual frameworks and hypotheses**



The local community openness to risk	(7) <i>Local community openness to risk</i>	Hp 7: (+)
	(8) <i>Occupancy rate * Local community openness to risk *</i>	Hp 8: (+)
	(9) <i>% Private grants * Local community openness to risk</i>	Hp 9: (+)

## DATA AND METHODS

### *Sample*

We tested the hypotheses in the Italian opera sector from 2006 to 2010. We selected only those opera houses that had data available for the period in question, and we constructed a panel data set containing information on 30 opera houses observed over time. Nowadays opera houses in Italy compose a highly fragmented sector. Our sample includes data on the most important Italian opera institutions which are Lyric Symphonic Foundations (LSFs) and Teatri di Tradizione (TDTs). LSFs, well known for their prestigious traditions, are private foundations located in the largest Italian towns. TDTs operate in medium and small scale cities. Both LSFs and TDTs are largely publicly funded. Data on the opera houses' programming choices, funding mix, number of subscribers and governance structures was collected from specialist yearbooks (*Annuari EDT/CIDIM dell'Opera Lirica in Italia*) which are widely regarded as industry references. Data on the number of cultural events organized within a local territory each year was gathered from the *Annuario dello Spettacolo* published by SIAE (the Italian copyright agency). Data on the length of the mayor's tenure and election years in the period under review (2006 to 2010) was retrieved from the Italian Ministry of the Interior's database on local government elections. Finally, data on the firm birth rate was retrieved from the Chamber of Commerce, and data on the number of inhabitants per Italian city was gathered from Istat, the Italian national institute of statistics.

### *Measures*

To test our hypotheses, we used the following measures:

***Dependent variable:***

*Propensity to modern and contemporary programming strategies*

It measures a theatre's propensity to program 20<sup>th</sup> century works given its annual amount of financial resources. It is calculated dividing the total number of modern and contemporary performance runs by the natural logarithm of the theatre's annual income. As suggested by Moir and Taffler (2004) it is not considered a theatre's main goal to increase its revenues but to create values and be accountable for various stakeholders, especially the audiences and society. In this regard, opera houses' propensity to reinvest their income toward modern and contemporary programs should be considered as a proxy of their ability to accomplish their mission, by contributing to the artistic advancement of the classic music field and to the social development of their local community. The use of the natural logarithm is appropriate in this case because of the large variance of the variable.

Most of existing studies used the conventionality index as a dependent variable in the programmatic models. However, recent studies highlight the importance of moving beyond evaluating the conventionality of art institutions merely with reference to the average conventionality of the entire repertoires. Instead, it is important to distinguish between the different components of the repertoire because they can vary a lot in their degree of conventionality (Jensen & Kim, 2013). Following Heilbrun (2001) and Jensen & Kim (2013), we defined unconventionality as a rupture with consolidated music canons and a shift from traditional to modern and contemporary repertoires (Martorella, 1977; Heilbrun & Gray, 1993; Jensen & Kim, 2013). These repertoires include works by composers whose date of birth is 1881 or later. These composers had therefore developed their adult operatic style in

the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Heilbrun, 2001, Kim and Jensen, 2011). Examples of these composers are Berg, Stravinsky, Korngold, Weill, Glass and Adams.

### *Independent variables:*

Since an opera house's artistic program for year  $t$  is decided in the year before it opens ( $t-1$ ), we believed it was more appropriate to test the effect of certain variables measured in year  $t-1$ , including them in the model as lagged variables. Although opera houses' cast selection may start from three to five years in advanced, the programming decisions are settled and promoted the year before the start of the operatic season. Moreover, over the last years the increased volatility and reduction in government funds assigned to Italian opera houses are hampering their ability to develop artistic programs on a long term basis. In this scenario, programming decisions regarding the assortment of the opera in the repertoire are often taken along the year that precedes the opening of the artistic season. In sum, we postulated that in year  $t-1$  the artistic director decides on the opera mix for year  $t$  on the basis of the information available in year  $t-1$ . By lagging some of the independent variables we also avoided variable endogeneity. Other variables were measured in year  $t$  as these factors can be foreseen at  $t-1$ : this occurs in particular when programming and funding processes are not synchronized like for opera houses, which typically program and commit resources before effectively receiving public contributions for their artistic programs.

*Occupancy rate in year  $t-1$ .* This variable is measured as the average occupancy per opera season and allows us to evaluate the ability of each theater to fill out its capacity by selling



tickets (Cori, 2004). In order to measure the opera house's occupancy rate, we initially computed the average attendance per opera (average number of tickets sold per opera over the year  $t-1$ ). We then measured occupancy per opera, dividing the average attendance per opera by the number of seats in the opera house (i.e., opera house capacity). Finally, we obtained the opera house occupancy rate by summing each opera's occupancy rate in year  $t-1$  and dividing it by the total number of operas offered by the theater in year  $t-1$ .

*Local community openness to risk in year  $t-1$ .* We measure this variable as the number of new firms started up in a given territory each year compared to the total number of firms in that territory.

*Subscribers base in year  $t-1$ .* We measured this variable as the total number of subscribers attending an opera house's performances in year  $t-1$ .

*National and local government funds in year  $t$ .* We measured this variable as the total amount of funds an opera house received from the national and local governments over year  $t$ , divided by the total revenues from ticket sales, public and private funds. This indicator allows us to measure the share of government funding in the total revenues of an opera house.

*Private grants in year  $t$ .* We measured this indicator as the total amount of private funds received by an opera house over year  $t$  divided by the total revenues from ticket sales, public and private funds. This indicator allows us to evaluate the proportion of total revenues accounted for by private grants.

*Length of a mayor's tenure in year  $t-1$ .* We captured the length of the mayor's tenure at  $t-1$  by measuring the number of years the mayor had been in charge as of year  $t-1$ .

### ***Control variables***

We used the *total number of programmed runs* to control for an opera house's program size.

We controlled for *the size of the city* where an opera house is located. The city size is measured as the number of the city's inhabitants per year.

We also controlled for *the wealth of the local territory* measured as the local *gdp* per capita and for *the demand for performing arts on the local territory* measured as the citizens' monthly per capita expenditure for performing arts events.

As managers' longevity may have an impact on the propensity to program modern repertoire, we also controlled for *the length of the artistic director's tenure*.

We also included *theatre and time dummies*.

Table I presents the correlation matrix and descriptive statistics.

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Insert Table I around here

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## RESULTS

Table II presents the fixed-effects ordinary least squares (OLS) regression results. Model 1 (Table II) is a baseline model that contains only the control variables length of the artistic director's mandate, local demand for performing arts events, GDP per capita, city size and program size. In model 2 (Table II) we added occupancy rate, local community openness to risk, subscriber rate, national and local government funding, private funding and length of a mayor tenure as independent variables. In model 3 (Table 3) we computed the interaction between the local community openness to risk and the opera houses' occupancy rate to test the moderating effect predicted in hypothesis 8. In this model we also included the interaction between the local community openness to risk and the proportion of private grants received annually by opera houses to test hypothesis 9.

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Insert Table II around here  
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Hypothesis 1 posits that the more an opera house depends on occupancy rate at year  $t-1$ , the lower its propensity to program contemporary operas in the future. As shown in model 3, the relationship between theaters' occupancy rate in year  $t-1$  and the propensity to program contemporary operas for year  $t$  is negative and significant ( $\beta = -0.264$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). Hypothesis 1

is therefore supported. In Hypothesis 2, we state that the higher the percentage of total revenues accounted for by private grants, the lower the opera houses' willingness to stage contemporary opera. Since the relationship between private grants and our dependent variable is not significant, Hypothesis 2 is not supported. We also hypothesize that the larger the number of subscribers attending an opera house's artistic season, the higher the opera house's propensity to program contemporary operas (Hypothesis 3). Model 3 provides strong support for our argument: the relationship between subscribers and modern and contemporary operas is positive and significant ( $\beta = 0.926, p < 0.01$ ).

Hypothesis 4 suggests that the higher the percentage of total revenues accounted for by national grants, the higher the opera houses' willingness to stage contemporary operas. In contrast, Hypothesis 5 posits that the higher the percentage of total revenues attributable to local government grants, the lower the opera houses' propensity to stage contemporary operas. As shown in Table II, national government funds have a negative and significant impact on our dependent variable (national government funds:  $\beta = -0.509, p < 0.05$ ). The effect of local government funds on opera houses' propensity to modern and contemporary programming strategies is negative and slightly significant ( $\beta = -0.372, p < 0.10$ ). Therefore, we cannot verify Hypothesis 4, while our analysis supports Hypothesis 5. Hypothesis 6 considers the extent to which the local government's political stability (i.e., length of tenure of the current mayor) influences modern and contemporary programming strategies. Model 3 shows that, indeed, the longer the tenure of the mayor, the lower the opera houses' propensity to program 20<sup>th</sup> century operas ( $\beta = -0.204, p < 0.05$ ).

Hypothesis 7 suggests that the stronger the openness to risk of the community where an opera house is located, the higher the opera house's propensity to modern and contemporary programming strategies in the future. Model 3 fails to support this hypothesis: the relationship between the local community openness to risk and opera

houses' propensity to 20<sup>th</sup> century opera programming is negative and significant ( $\beta = -0.323, p < 0.05$ ). In hypothesis 8, however, we predict that the openness to risk of the community where an opera house is located positively moderates the effect of an opera house's past occupancy rate on its propensity to program modern and contemporary operas in the future. In model 3 the interaction effect between the local community openness to risk and opera houses' occupancy rate is positive and significant ( $\beta = 0.278; p < 0.01$ ), offering support for hypothesis 8. Hypothesis 9 posits that the openness to risk of the local community where an opera house is located positively moderates the effect of private funding on opera houses' propensity to program modern and contemporary operas. As can be noted, in model 3 (Table II) the interaction effect between the local community openness to risk and the proportion of private grants received annually by opera houses is not significant. Therefore hypothesis 9 is not supported.

## CONCLUSIONS:

In this paper, we have investigated constraints and drivers affecting the decision to introduce modern and contemporary operas. We have built our conceptual framework looking at opera houses as organizations which are subjected to different stakeholders' pressures affecting their programming decision making process. We found that when opera houses highly rely on the audience pressure they are less inclined to stage contemporary operas. In this situation they fear that innovation might lead to a loss in audience consensus and a decrease in ticket office's revenues compromising their economic sustainability. The voice of the audience temper the artistic urge toward innovation. Although this result are in line with background literature, our findings also suggest that this constraining effect is positively moderated by specific traits of the local community where the theatre is located.

Specifically, when theatres are immersed in dynamic entrepreneurial environments marked by the presence of risk-taking individuals, the market support received by a theatre in the past will foster rather than obstacle theatres' managers propensity to program modern and contemporary operas.

One might expect benevolent politicians to balance the negative effects of audience pressure by heavily subsidizing theatres, incentivizing the scheduling of modern operas. On the contrary, our study casts some shadows about the effectiveness of public funding: neither national nor local government funding stimulates the programming of modern and contemporary repertoires. There might be a contingent reason behind this result: national grants in Italy are allocated largely on the basis of production costs, which encourages opera houses to stage operas with large numbers of performers (singers, dancers, mimes, etc.) and penalizes smaller productions (which is often the case in contemporary performances). However as local government funding encourages program conventionality as well it seems that public funding magnify the pressure by the audience to favor tradition over artistic renewal (Pierce, 2000; Krebs & Pommerehne, 1995). In this scenario, only political turnover and changes in the governing coalition provide either an incentive or the opportunity for opera houses' directors to engage in risk-taking behaviors and to bear the risk of ending the season with lower occupancy. Conversely enhanced political stability in a given territory prompts opera houses to exhibit more conservative behavior in their programming decisions: the longer a Mayor has governed the city (and chaired the board of the opera house), the lower the opera house's inclination toward modernity in programming. Opera houses' directors should therefore take advantage of the opportunities that spring up from the temporal dynamics of politics. Under conditions of political renewal theatres' managers have a leeway to enhance the proactive component of their programming by affirming their aesthetic intuitions and artistic values. In general terms, the parallel between political

change/stability and artistic renewal/conservatism appears quite promising for future research in this field.

The results of this study suggest also some important managerial implications for theatres. In fact our empirical findings show that theaters with large subscriber bases are also more likely to program contemporary works. In this respect, the development of relationship marketing instruments designed to enlarge the subscriber base may help create a balance between financial health and innovation objectives. As a matter of fact, subscribers provide a stable source of income and at the same time encourage opera houses to program contemporary works.

Our findings may also be useful for policy makers in highlighting the lack of effectiveness of public subsidies aiming at fostering innovation. It is beyond the scope of our research to study if and how opera houses can counteract conservative forces through audience education strategies. However, we strongly believe that policies devoted to this aim might be better effective in driving and nurturing innovation. Future studies should examine the effect of different types of educational programs on audiences' willingness to appreciate experimental programs and on artistic directors' openness to risk taking programming decisions.

Due to a lack of available data we were not able to incorporate the average price per performance as a control variable in the model. We believe future studies should take into account the extent to which lowering the prices of modern and contemporary operas may increase the demand for them, thus functioning as an incentive for opera programmers to shift their programming decisions toward 20th century repertoires.





**Table. 2 Correlation matrix and descriptive statistic**  
Correlation coefficients and level of significance: † $p < .10$

	Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1	Modern opera programming	0.211	0.317	1												
2	Subscriber base	137.428	178.401	0.518†	1											
3	Openness to risk	0.380	0.177	0.194†	0.215†	1										
4	Length of the mayor's tenure	2.3	1.902	-0.135	-0.005	0.038	1									
5	National funding	0.380	0.177	0.056	0.321†	0.117	-0.068	1								
6	Local funding	0.374	0.191	-0.168†	-0.364†	-0.132	0.014	-0.740†	1							
7	Private funding	0.108	0.100	0.042	-0.011	-0.018	-0.008	-0.322†	-0.192†	1						
8	Occupancy	0.748	0.138	0.107	0.436†	0.067	-0.029	0.193†	-0.260†	0.039	1					
9	GDP per capita	2.766	5.684	0.275†	0.085	0.079	-0.058	0.032	-0.309†	0.366†	-0.023	1				
10	Length of the artistic director's tenure	5.48	5.23	-0.177†	-0.281†	-0.165†	-0.009	-0.277†	0.360†	-0.096	-0.144†	-0.137†	1			
11	Local demand for performing arts	36.10	51.04	0.530†	0.519†	0.566†	0.046	0.204†	-0.330†	0.067	0.211†	0.354†	-0.268†	1		
12	City Size	368,784	537,082	0.411†	0.433†	0.548†	0.029	0.229†	-0.216†	-0.024	0.144†	0.150†	-0.289†	0.875†	1	
13	Total reruns	28.72	24.24	0.564†	0.803†	0.340†	0.052	0.333†	-0.404†	0.065	0.332†	0.216†	-0.412†	0.736†	0.656† 0.565†	1

**Table II. Model estimation**

	<i>Dependent variable: modern and contemporary programming</i>		
	<b>Model 1</b>	<b>Model 2</b>	<b>Model 3</b>
<i>Independent variables</i>			
Occupancy rate	-	-0.248* (-2.13)	-0.264* (-2.35)
Local community openness to risk	-	-0.277† (-1.85)	-0.323* (-2.19)
Occupancy rate * local community openness to risk	-	-	0.278** (3.03)
Subscriber rate	-	0.816* (2.57)	0.926** (3.00)
National government funding	-	-0.461* (-2.10)	-0.509* (-2.41)
Local government funding	-	-0.303 (-1.41)	-0.372† (-1.79)
Private funding	-	-0.138 (-0.68)	-0.239 (-1.19)
Private funding * local community openness to risk	-	-	0.066 (0.58)
Length of a mayor tenure	-	-0.179* (-2.21)	-0.204* (-2.58)
<i>Control variables</i>			
Length of the artistic director's mandate	0.068 (0.34)	0.032 (0.16)	0.050 (0.25)
Local demand for performing arts events	1.701 (1.59)	1.282 (1.19)	0.199 (0.18)
GDP per capita	0.335 ( 0.73 )	0.170 (0.36)	0.001 (0.01)
City Size	0.014 (0.04)	0.723 (1.50)	0.845† (1.78)
Program size	0.414 (1.33)	0.343 (1.09)	0.360 (1.19)
<i>Time dummies</i>	<i>Included</i>	<i>Included</i>	<i>Included</i>
<i>Constant</i>	-5.568 (-1.23)	-6.194 (-1.30)	-2.770 (-0.59)
<i>No. of observations</i>	143	143	143
<i>Adj. R-squared</i>	0.298	0.396	0.442
<i>F test</i>	2.63***	3.02***	3.33***

Significance:

\*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; † $p < .10$ ; t-statistic in parentheses

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**How God and King Affect our Musical Tastes:  
Shedding Light on Religiosity, Political Convictions and Taste Cultivation  
as drivers of Eclectic vs. Voracious Music Preferences**

## INTRODUCTION

Sociological studies on cultural consumption have commonly defined cultural omnivorousness as a consumer's openness to enjoy different forms of culture (Peterson, 2005; Peterson and Kern, 1996; Peterson, 1997; Peterson, 1992; Warde et al., 1999). Starting from the seminal study of Peterson and Kern (1996) this stream of research has emphasized that cultural consumers, especially those from the upper social classes, have become more omnivorous than in the past. The interpretation of the omnivorousness theoretical construct, however, remains quite controversial. Two slightly different conceptions of cultural

omnivorousness can be identified. The first highlights the cumulative property of cultural consumption: the more people consume certain specific cultural goods, the more likely they are to become involved in other forms of cultural consumption. In this sense, cultural omnivorousness could be better labeled as cultural voracity (Katz-Gerro and Sullivan, 2010). The second conception, instead, highlights the eclectic dimension of cultural omnivorousness. Here, omnivorousness deals more with the variety of tastes people express than with the quantity of cultural goods they consume (Coulangeon, 2003). Whether focused on voracious or eclectic consumption patterns, studies on omnivorousness have mainly focused on the effect of socio-demographic factors such as age, status and education on the development of omnivorous cultural tastes (Van Eijck, 2001; Warde and Gayo-Cal, 2009, Garía-Alvarez, Katz-Gerro and Sintas, 2007; Bryson, 1996; Ollivier, 2008). By contrast, the investigation of *whether* and *how* “soft” factors such as taste cultivation, political and religious convictions influence omnivorousness is still largely unexplored (North and Hargreaves, 2007; Roose and Vander Stichele, 2010).

We therefore examine how taste cultivation and the strength of an individual’s political interest and religious beliefs affect the formation of voracious *vs.* eclectic cultural tastes. Focusing specifically on the development of omnivorous music preferences, we explore how these factors influence the number of music genres individuals like (*voraciousness*) as well as the degree of diversification of their music taste (*eclecticism*). First, we argue that politically-interested individuals are more propense to develop voracious music tastes: voraciousness enables them to express their personal self-efficacy by building an image of time-pressured individuals which becomes a new form of distinction based on the value of a multi-tasking and active lifestyle (Sullivan and Katz-Gerro, 2007). Second, we argue that individuals with strong religious convictions will be more open to appreciate a diversified set of music genres because the contacts with both highbrow and “sacred” as well as lowbrow and “profane”

music forms confer them new opportunities to nurture their spirituality. Third, we contend that while the familiar music habit of attending concerts may stimulate individuals' appetite for a huge number of cultural experiences, the practice of attending music classes facilitates the development of an eclectic music taste by fostering individuals' effort to broaden the pool of knowledge required to appreciate a variety of music genres.

This study contributes to move the discussion on the determinants of taste voraciousness and eclecticism ahead by shedding better light on the profiles of voracious and eclectic omnivora. Previous studies show that these cultural consumers exhibit similar socio-demographic traits such as age, education and social class (Warde and Gayo-Cal, 2009; Coulangeon, 2003; Van Eijck, 2000; Van Eijck et al., 2001). We add to these studies that religiosity, politics and taste cultivation drive the distinction between the profiles of voracious and eclectic omnivora. Moreover, instead of focusing on the formation of cultural tastes in general, our study revolves around the determinants of eclectic and voracious music tastes through an analysis of the music preferences of an Italian opera audience. Indeed, studies on the audience of classical music and opera audience are rare, and even those made, are rather qualitative, than empirical.

We develop and test hypotheses drawing on a survey research method. Data were obtained from a survey of the opera audience profile of *Maggio Musicale Fiorentino*, one of the most famous Italian operatic institution. Our main findings show that the strength of an individual's religious beliefs and political interests differentially influence voraciousness and eclecticism. Specifically, voracious omnivora have strong political convictions while politics does not seem to affect the taste of the eclectic omnivora, whose profile is instead characterized by deeply rooted religious convictions that result in a greater tolerance of diversity. This partially contradicts previous studies that associate politics with freedom to cross boundaries and religion with the preservation of traditional boundaries that limit an



individual's self-expression (Garia-Alvarez, Katz-Gerro and Sintas, 2007; Peterson, 2005). In addition, we also show that taste cultivation differentially affects the development of eclectic and voracious music tastes in such a way that the familiar music habit of attending concerts may stimulate individuals' appreciation for a huge number of cultural experiences contributing to the formation of voracious taste patterns while the practice of attending music classes inhibits rather than facilitates the development of an eclectic taste.

This study has implications for the management of opera houses' artistic offer and for the development of their marketing strategies. Shedding light on unexplored determinants of an opera audience music tastes such as religiosity, political convictions and taste cultivation may enable opera houses' directors and marketing professionals to develop ad hoc performances, educational activities and marketing strategies aimed at strengthening their relationships with different audience segments. As individual characteristics are at the basis of their propensity to be loyal to performing arts organizations, unveiling the distinctive individual traits of voracious and eclectic audiences may enable opera managers to differentiate their loyalty-building policies according to the personal characteristics of the attendees (Guillon, 2011). In addition, understanding which factors influence the eclecticism and voraciousness of their audiences' tastes and why these music taste patterns are desirable may encourage opera houses to create activities that foster a dialogue between opera and other music forms which are rooted in different cultural traditions. This in turn may create forms of social inclusion which can help opera houses to broaden their audience base by attracting people from various social classes and cultural milieux.

The study is structured as follows. We begin by providing a review of the theoretical and empirical literature on the profile of eclectic and voracious omnivora, before theorizing why the strength of an individual's political and religious beliefs as well as her taste cultivation shape the development of voracious and eclectic music taste patterns. We then present the

main findings of our study and discuss the profile of voracious vs. eclectic opera audiences as well as the determinants of their tastes for different music genres. We end our study by describing its main implications for arts management research and practice, examining limitations, and making suggestions for future research.

## **OMNIVOROUSNESS AS TASTE VORACIOUSNESS VS. ECLECTICISM**

Sociological research demonstrates that music taste mostly depends on an individual's socio economic and demographic background. The debate which still determines this field of interest, is between Pierre Bourdieu's "univore thesis" and Richard A. Peterson's "omnivore thesis". Bourdieu's studies show that individuals at the top of the social hierarchy have highbrow cultural tastes, so they listen only to the most sophisticated musical genres (e.g., classical music and opera). On the contrary, individuals from middle - or low social strata, have a more popular cultural taste, so for instance, they listen to country or folk music (Bourdieu, 1984;1983). On these grounds people's tastes constitute in some way the symbolic dimension of the 'class struggle,' because the sphere of taste is organized hierarchically in line with a 'highbrow/lowbrow' opposition.

Bourdieu's thesis has been repeatedly criticized, but the most important antithesis is that of Richard A. Peterson. As Peterson points out, individuals from upper social strata have

become more culturally omnivorous than in the past. Omnivorous cultural consumers are therefore open to different kind of music rather than simply limit themselves to few highbrow music genres (Peterson, 1992). This hypothesis, systematized in an article by Richard Peterson and Peter Simkus on the musical tastes of contemporary Americans (Peterson and Simkus, 1992), is based on the idea that the main social distinction today is a matter of cultural diversity rather than one of highbrow or lowbrow taste. As a matter of fact, since the publication of the Peterson and Simkus article, studies in North America and Europe have suggested that (Peterson and Kern, 1996; Bryson, 1996; Van Eijck, 2001; Coulangeon, 2003) cultural elites tend to be increasingly characterized by the scope and variety of their music tastes whereas the working classes tend to be rather more univorous.

In another paper, Peterson (1996) explains the causes of this change in tastes. The emergence of this omnivorous taste pattern has been linked to broader societal changes during the second half of last century (Peterson and Kern, 1996). More particularly, it has been pointed out that the rapid development of the leisure industry and the booming of the mass media, together with the democratisation of the educational system, resulted in a serious decrease in impact and legitimacy of the fine arts among the post-war generations.

Coulangeon (2003) has contributed to moving the discussion on cultural omnivorousness ahead, shedding light on two different conceptions of this construct. The first highlights the cumulative property of cultural consumption. It is a well-established fact that cultural consumption tends to display addictive characteristics. The more people consume certain specific cultural goods, the more likely they are to become involved in other forms of cultural consumption. Indeed, current surveys of cultural consumption show that people who read a lot of books also buy records and watch DVDs, etc. In this sense, cultural omnivorousness could be better labeled as cultural voracity (Katz-Gerro and Sullivan, 2010). Voraciousness has been described as a culturally active leisure style, an insatiable consumer

behavior and a dynamic cultural consumption (Sullivan and Katz-Gerro, 2007). The second conception, instead, emphasizes the taste eclecticism dimension of cultural omnivorousness. Here, omnivorousness deals more with the variety of tastes people express than with the quantity of cultural goods they consume.

As stated by Peterson himself, omnivorousness is the shift “from intellectual snobbism, (.....), based on the glorification of arts and the contempt of popular entertainment, (.....) to a cultural capital that appears increasingly as a willingness to appreciate the aesthetic of a wide variety of cultural forms, including not only the arts, but also a wide range of folk and popular forms of expression” (Peterson, 2004). The eclectic model also emphasizes a specific trait of the concept of omnivorousness which cannot only be regarded as an addictive phenomena but also as the ability to appreciate a variety of tastes which in turn requires a specific ability to overcome the cultural and aesthetic boundaries between various genres and various repertoires.

Studies on voracious and eclectic cultural consumption agree in depicting both voracious and eclectic omnivora as young and highly educated, possessing economic, and cultural capital. The effect of age on the voracious and eclectic omnivorousness is well-documented in the literature. Studies by Schulze (1993) and Van Eijck (2000) described younger cultural consumers as having a marked interests toward both high and popular of culture as he detected a different attitude to life amongst the younger age groups. Unlike the older age groups, their lifestyle is in fact highly focused on self-experience and self-development via their participation to a large number of distinct activities (Warde and Gayo -Cal, 2009; Coulangeon, 2003; Van Eijck, 2000).

In addition, studies on the profile of cultural consumers have considered the socialization process that takes place at schools and family as having a dominant influence on both voracious and eclectic omnivorousness (Lahire, 2003; Van Eijck, 1999; Coulangeon, 2003). As

individuals with a higher qualification have broader social networks compared with people with lower education levels, they have more chances to interact with people from different social circles. As a result, they have access to a broad cultural knowledge that stems from the diversity of social ties that compose their social system of relationships (Van Eijck, 2001). A diversified web of relationships confers individuals a form of multi-cultural capital which in turn increases both the breadth and the quantity of the cultural activities they are engaged in (Coulangeon and Lemel, 2007). Not only education exposes individuals to a variety of cultural activities, it also increases an individual's cultural tolerance, contributing to the formation of a cosmopolitan cultural taste (Lipset, 1960) that encourages individuals to cross the categorical boundaries between high and popular cultural activities. Within this perspective Bryson (1996) noted that education significantly decreases exclusiveness in musical tastes: individuals with high levels of education display more tolerant musical tastes compared with those with lower levels of education.

While sociological studies on cultural consumption have mainly focused the attention on the effect of socio-demographic variables on the development of omnivorous cultural tastes, whether and how political convictions, religiosity and taste cultivation affect omnivorousness is still controversial. Shifting the focus from the socio demographic to the soft determinants of cultural omnivorousness we now examine how politics, religiosity and taste cultivation affect the formation of eclectic vs. voracious music preferences.

### **How political convictions and religiosity affect the development of voracious vs. eclectic music tastes**

Music has been used throughout history to express all kind of political views such as democracy, anarchism and racism. Politically-interested individuals leverage their music

preferences as a vehicle to express their opinions. Indeed, the consumption of specific music genres has been mainly depicted as a way for individuals with strong political convictions to express dissent, anti-establishment and rebellious attitudes or political activism. For example, hip-hop and rap have been created by poor urban black in the 1970s to manifest dissatisfaction about poor opportunities of life (Rose, 1994). Rock music and punk have often been described as antiestablishment and rebellious political attitudes. Eyerman and Jamison (1998, p.141) depicted rock music as a revolutionary quest for liberation. Jazz and folk challenge the mainstream culture and its ethics (Asma, 1997). Political messages are embedded in opera, classic music and musicals as well, as these genres embody a sense of civic activism. What these studies all have in common is their focus on music as a vehicle for politically interested individuals to promote their ideals (DeNora; 2000; Frith, 1981; North and Hargreaves, 1999).

If the taste for specific music genres conveys information about an individual political view, the appreciation for a huge number of music forms confers politically interested individuals enhanced opportunities to “brand” their image in a way that foster the acceptance of their ideas (Verba et al., 1997; Scammell, 2007). In this regard, individuals with strong political convictions have more chances of having their ideas being accepted if they exhibit a more active lifestyle: music preferences, like other cultural tastes become therefore a conduit for the expression of a positive activism that is essentially a new form of distinction. As well expressed by Verba et al. (1997) “to the extent that citizen activity provides a critical channel for the communication of citizen preferences, those who are less active pay a price in terms of representation. Public officials hear less about-and, therefore, presumably pay less attention to-their concerns, preferences, and needs with the result that the democratic ideal of equal governmental responsiveness to all is potentially compromised. ...Differences in citizen activity reflect what is essentially the free exercise of

taste, a desire to spend one's leisure in pursuits other than politics-for example, at the opera, before a television screen, under a beach umbrella, or in church-then..."

We argue that politically-interested individuals are willing to develop voracious music preferences to exhibit the possession of specific skills and resources such as personal self-efficacy, fast life tempo and knowledge (Sullivan and Katz-Gerro, 2007). These characteristics are in fact crucial to improve the positive reception of their political convictions and to enhance their ability to convince others through the positive branding of their images (Verba et al., 1997). Studies on cultural voraciousness suggest that voraciousness not only indicates an individual's insatiable appetite for multiple leisure activities (Campbell, 1967; Swidler, 1986) but it is also the expression of a polychronic, multi-tasking lifestyle that it is typical of individuals who are able to take the lead, who are very busy but can still maximise their time to achieve personal and professional objectives (Sullivan and Katz-Gerro, 2007). Voraciousness is therefore a way for politically-interested individuals to mark their distinctiveness: it is a form of status marker and cultural boundary that relies on time-pressuredness and active lifestyles as a new form of distinction (Sullivan and Katz-Gerro, 2007) that enables to seduce audiences and raise consensus around political ideals.

Therefore we argue:

*Hypothesis 1. The stronger an individual's political interest, the higher her propensity to be a voracious omnivorous.*

We argue that the strenght of an individual's religious belief can influence her music tastes as well. Bourdieu did not pay much attention to religion, but he did hold that art

appreciation demands playful seriousness that is unlikely among religious individuals who are unwilling to set aside moral criteria when evaluating works of art. This argument has been confirmed by Katz-Gerro, Raz and Yaish (2007) whose study on how religiosity affects cultural consumption in Israel shows a negative relationship between religiosity and cultural consumption explained by the fact that membership in a religious group sets limit on cultural participation in Israel. These findings reflect a general tendency of people following the precepts of fundamentalist Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism to limit their patterns of consumption in line with a set of strongly felt religious convictions.

By contrast, a more recent cross-country study by Katz-Gerro and Meier Jaeger (2012) offers a new perspective on the role of religiosity in cultural consumption. Specifically, this study suggests that religiosity is positively related with cultural consumption and that the strength of religious beliefs does not hamper individuals' participation in culture activities. In a similar vein, North and Hargreaves (2007) show that religious individuals display a preference for a wide range of music forms including classic music, musicals, country and even the most problematic music forms (e.g., rock and heavy metal). These studies highlight a positive relationship between religiosity and omnivorousness even after controlling for education, age and other socio-demographic variables. As noted by Katz-Gerro and Meier Jaeger (2012) religious individuals have a broad network of contacts that support the diversity of their consumption patterns. Individuals with a high sense of religiosity are generally active in different forms of social participation such as voluntary association membership (Katz-Gerro and Meier Jaeger; Ruiter and De Graaf, 2006) that may give them opportunities to enter in contact with other individuals with different music traditions and preferences.

We argue that religious individuals are inclined to develop an eclectic music taste. Indeed the diversified network of relationships that characterizes their profile allows them to



nurture their spirituality by entering in contacts with both highbrow and lowbrow music experiences. The connection between music and spirituality has a long tradition and the consumption of both high and popular music forms has been related to an individual's search for spirituality. Within this perspective, studies in the sociology of music support the existence of a positive connection between spirituality and different forms of music including the most popular and even controversial genres (North and Hargreaves; 2007; Detweiler and Taylor, 1964). On the one hand a sense of religiosity is embedded in much of highbrow classic music tradition including the dramatic grandeur of the symphonic masses of Mozart, Beethoven and Haydn. Religious values also stem from Italian opera as well: many libretti of roman operas have been written by Popes and a huge number of Puccini's and Verdi's operas are entrenched with religious beliefs (Rosselli, 2000). On the other hand, spaces for spirituality can also been found within the boundaries of popular music forms. Detweiler and Taylor (1964) argue that "God shines through even the most debased cultural pop products". These authors connect the rise of pop music forms to the most provocative, exciting expression of legitimate spiritual yearning. In this respect, they depict pop culture as a "refreshing, alternative route to god in the 20<sup>th</sup> century" and as "something profane that connect to the devil but also to a strong sincere spirituality". For example, they noted that even Eminem and his rap music can offer new strategies to search for god: indeed, Eminem's film "8 Miles", includes some surprisingly inspiring and spiritual undertones.

We hypothesize that individuals with strong religious beliefs are more open to appreciate a variety of music forms. The development of an eclectic music taste enables them to increase their understanding of a diversified set of music experience which flourished in different cultural milieux and reflect a variety of routes to connect with god and make sense of life. Moreover, a taste for music, just like a taste for the spiritual, needs to be developed. The development of a taste for different music forms requires an individual's time and efforts

to learn and prepare herself to access a variety of music forms, expanding her current knowledge about music while increasing the utility of accessing different types of music forms in the future (Turrini, O'Hare and Borgonovi, 2010). We argue that individuals who are strongly motivated by a strong sense of spirituality have a higher propensity to dedicate time and efforts to this process.

We argue:

*Hypothesis 2: The higher an individual's sense of religiosity, the higher her willingness to be an eclectic omnivorous.*

### **How taste cultivation affects the development of voracious vs. eclectic music tastes**

Cultural tastes are not given a priori but typically acquired through a long learning process and they can be modified through exposure (Gray, 1998). In this respect, cultural consumption tends to display addictive characteristics (Turrini, 2006) which reflect a virtuous cycle: the exposure to one artistic experience stimulates the development of greater artistic knowledge that, in turn, increases the addiction toward other artistic forms. Although both participation in formal music classes and attendance at music concerts during childhood nurture an individual's appetite for different cultural experiences, we argue that these forms of exposure differentially affect the development of voracious vs. eclectic taste patterns.

First, we contend that the greater cultural capital that individuals who attended music performances in their childhood have accumulated drives the development of a voracious

music taste. Indeed, exhibiting an appreciation for a huge quantity of music forms may emphasize their membership to a high status group which in turn enables them to perpetuate a higher social standing by signaling their culturally active life style. Indeed, Weber (1968) posits that the concept of lifestyle (*Lebensführung*) plays a decisive role in determining whether a person belongs to a certain status group or not. Bourdieu (1984) demonstrates that the lifestyles of different status groups indeed mark clear boundaries between groups according to differences in their cultural and material capital. We argue that individuals who have accumulated music capital during their childhood through a high frequency of attendance at music performances have incentives to maintain their distinctiveness by leveraging voracious taste patterns as a status marker.

Second, we argue that individuals' participation in formal music classes during childhood fosters their appreciation of a diversified set of music forms which contributes to the formation of an eclectic taste. The reason is that music education and learning experiences broadens the pool of knowledge that is required to understand and appreciate a variety of music genres (Graham, 2008). In this respect, people who took music classes are especially likely to be eclectic omnivora because the deep understanding of a specific music form nurtures their curiosity toward new forms of music knowledge that leads them to cross the boundaries between different genres.

We argue:

*Hypothesis 3a: The higher an individual's frequency of attendance at music concerts during her childhood, the higher her propensity to be a voracious omnivorous.*

*Hypothesis 3b: Individuals who have taken formal music classes in their childhood have a higher propensity to be eclectic omnivora compared with individuals who have not taken formal music classes in their childhood.*

## **METHODS**

### ***Sample***

This study draws on data obtained from a survey of the opera audience profile of the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino, one of the most famous Italian operatic institutions. This survey includes data from 675 respondents who were asked to fill out a questionnaire distributed during the intervals of 5 opera performances at Maggio Musicale Fiorentino, one of the most famous Italian operatic institutions. As we considered only those questionnaires that were completed fully by participants, our final sample results in 400 observations.

Information was obtained from respondents on their music preferences, their political and religious convictions, their taste cultivation (e.g., music practice and performance attendance during childhood) and their socio demographic profiles (e.g., gender, age and education).

### ***Measures***

*Dependent variables: eclectic vs. voracious music preferences*

To collect information about respondents' music preferences we provided them with a list of ten different music genres from sophisticated to popular ones (classical music, opera, soundtrack or musical, jazz, rock, folk, pop, electro or dance; world music and urban music). They were asked to rank them from 1 (do not like at all) to 7 (like very much). To measure their propensity to be *voracious omnivora* we counted the number of music genres they assigned a score from 5 (like) to 7 (like very much). On average, participants to our survey indicated a preference for 3 music genres (Table 1).

An individual appreciation for a huge number of genres does not necessarily imply an openness to appreciate music forms with different degrees of "popularity" vs. "highbrowness" (*taste eclecticism*). We operationalized the extent to which an individual is open to appreciate a diversified set of music forms by using the inverse of the herfindahl index. This index captures the degree to which a respondent's music taste is equally distributed among highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow genres rather than concentrated on one of these categories. The index varies from 0 to 1 where 0 corresponds to the minimum level of diversification while 1 is the maximum level of diversification. The average degree of diversification of our respondents' music taste is 0.59 (Table 1).

*Independent variables: strenght of political convictions, religiosity and taste cultivation*

We gathered information about *the strenght of respondents' political convictions* by asking them to rank their interest toward politics from 1 (not interest at all) to 7 (very much). Similarly we asked them to express their *religiosity* from 1 (atheist) to 7 (deeply devout). Table 1 shows that on average our respondents assigned a score of 5 to the strenght of their political interest in politics and a score of 4 to their religiosity (on a scale from 1 to 7).

As for *taste cultivation*, we collected information about whether respondents took *formal*

*music classes during childhood* and we encoded this information as a dummy variable that takes value of 1 if the respondent attended musical courses in her childhood and 0 otherwise. We also requested them to indicate the *frequency of attendance at music performance in their family or origin* and we operationalized this information as a continuous variable that goes from 1 (never attended) to 5 (very often). As shown in table 1 respondents declared a modest frequency of attendance at music concerts in their family of origin while more than a half of them participated in formal music classes during their childhood.

#### *Control variables:*

We also gathered socio-demographic information about our survey participants including their gender, age, education and size of the city where they live. We encoded these information as follows:

*Age:* a continuous variable ranging from 10 to 87. The average age of our survey participant is 47.

*Education level:* a categorical variable with three levels: elementary school or middle school (diploma or equivalent), college or higher education, bachelor's degree, master's degree or doctoral degree. Our survey participants are, on average, highly educated. More than a half of them have a university or post university degree (Table 1).

*Sex:* a categorical variable that takes value 1 if the respondent is a woman or 0 otherwise.

*Size of the city where the respondent lives:* a categorical variable that was coded with four levels: metropolitan (1.012.180 or more inhabitants), urban (from 50.000 to 1.012.180 inhabitants) and small area (below 50.000 inhabitants). As shown in table 1 most of our survey participants come from metropolitan area (65%).

*Political orientation*: a categorical variable with four groups: extreme left (*far-left politics*), left, right and extreme right (*far-right politics*). A left wing political orientation is the most diffused among our respondents (Table 1).

The correlation matrix is reported in Table 2. Although the independent and control variables reported in Table II are only weakly correlated, we developed a variance inflation factor (VIF) between the explanatory variables.

Since none of the independent variables have VIF values greater than 10 (the average VIF value is equal to 1.42), we do not find evidence of multicollinearity (Hair et al., 1995).

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Insert Table I around here

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## RESULTS

Table III presents the regression results. Model 1 examines the effect of the control variable on taste voraciousness while model 3 is an examination of the impact of the control variables on taste eclecticism. In Model 2 and in Model 4 (Table III) we added the strenght of an individual political and religious convictions, her frequency of attendance at music performances in her childhood and her participation to formal music classes as independent

variables and we explore their effect on the development of a voracious music taste (Model 2) and on the formation of an eclectic taste (Model 4). As our models contains count variables, we estimated them with a robust poisson regression.

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 Insert Table III around here  
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In Model 1 none of the control variables has a significant impact on taste voraciousness apart from age. Older survey participants are less propense to be voracious omnivora compared with younger ones ( $\beta = -0.008, p < .001$ ). Model 2 shows that the strenght of an individual political convictions positively affects taste voraciousness ( $\beta = 0.047, p < .05$ ). This supports the argument that a strong political interest contributes to the formation of a voracious music taste, confirming what we predicted in our hypothesis 1. While participation in formal music classes during one's childhood does not have any role in the development of a voracious taste, the frequency of music performance attendance in her family of origin positively affects the formation of a voracious taste pattern ( $\beta = 0.108, p < .001$ ), providing support to our hypothesis 3a.

In model 3 we reported the effect of the control variables on the formation of eclectic music tastes. Taste eclecticism is higher for young and highly educated individuals. Age is negatively and significantly related to taste eclecticism ( $\beta = -0.002, p < .001$ ). At the same time, people with a higher level of education (university degree) exhibit a stronger taste eclecticism compared with people with a lower educational level ( $\beta = 0.050, p < .01$ ).



In Model 4 we added the strenght of an individual political and religious convictions, the frequency of attendance at music performance in her family of origin and her participation in formal music classes as independent variables in order to test hypotheses 2 and 3*b*. Both models 3 and 4 have been estimated with a robust linear regression. In model 4 the higher the strenght of an individual's religious convictions, the higher the eclecticism of her music taste ( $\beta = 0.007, p < .01$ ). This supports our hypothesis that religious individuals have a higher propensity to be eclectic omnivorous. Finally, participation in formal music classes during one's childhood negatively affects the formation of an eclectic music taste ( $\beta = -0.027; p < 0.05$ ) while music performance attendance in the family of origin does not influence taste eclecticism. Thus, 3*b* is not confirmed.

## CONCLUSION:

Our objective in this article was to understand how religiosity, political convictions and taste cultivation influence the formation of voracious *vs.* eclectic music tastes. We explore this relationship within the context of the Italian opera scene, exploring *whether* and *how* an opera audience penchant for voracious *vs.* eclectic music preferences is shaped by specific lifestyle traits such as the strenght of their religious and political beliefs as well as their exposure to music in their childhood.

First, we found that the strenght of an individual political passion positively affects the development of voracious music tastes: politically interested individuals exhibit an appreciation for a huge number of music forms as a way of branding their image and conveying the external perception of self efficacy. Branding their image through voraciousness may in fact enhance their ability to persuade other people of the value and feasibility of their political ideals and make their opinions being heard and accepted by

public officials (Scammell, 2007). In opposition to what one would expect, the strength of an individual's political convictions does not affect taste eclecticism. This is mostly related to the fact that the relationship between political beliefs and taste eclecticism may be influenced by other factors that we have not analysed in this study such as the characteristics of the local contexts that surround a politically active individual. As a matter of fact, a local context characterized by political aggressiveness and historical divisions among opposite political parties may create barriers among social groups which obstructs the development of inclusive taste patterns and make individuals become culturally intolerant. Under these conditions, a symbolic exclusiveness in music taste would be used purposely to raise social and symbolic boundaries between social groups.

Second our results also show that religiosity seems to foster an individual's openness to cultural diversity. Religious individuals are more likely to make effort and spend time to broaden their music taste because an increased understanding of different music genres allows them to expand the repertoire of strategies to nurture their spirituality. This stems from the fact that highbrow and lowbrow music forms offer religious individuals different ways to search for god and make sense of life. Religiosity is therefore connected to an individual's tolerance and openness to appreciate music forms that are rooted in distinct tradition and cultural milieux.

Finally, we found that attendance at music performance during one's childhood positively contributes to the development of voracious omnivorousness while music practice does not play any role in developing voracious taste patterns. The development of a familiar music habit may therefore foster an individual's appreciation for many music genres. Surprisingly, our findings show that music practice hampers rather than facilitates the development of taste eclecticism.

This study has implications for the marketing management of opera houses. First, understanding the profile of voracious vs. eclectic consumers enables opera houses to improve their loyalty strategies. As individuals' characteristics determine their loyalty to performing arts organizations, shedding light on the distinctive traits of voracious and eclectic audiences may enable opera managers to create ad hoc loyalty-building strategies while promoting them differently among different audiences. Shedding light on the taste eclecticism and voraciousness of individuals with different dispositions toward religion and politics may encourage opera houses to differentially target these audience segments. By leveraging the quantity and the variety of performances offered through subscription packages, opera houses have the opportunities to adapt their offering to the preferences of religious and politically interested cultural consumers.

A further implication of our findings is that by developing cultural policies aimed at attracting families and children access opera houses, as other performing arts organizations, may contribute to the formation of voracious individuals, insatiably addicted to a lot of music experience. By contrast, by providing children with learning experiences and music classes they would probably obstruct rather than facilitate the formation of eclectic tastes. This shows the difficulties of Italian music institutions to enhance young people's willingness to cross music boundaries and to encourage their willingness to invest time and efforts to improve their understanding of unfamiliar music styles. Broadening their audiences' tastes would require opera houses as well as other music institutions to make more efforts to foster young people's awareness and appreciation for various genres by encouraging their deep understanding of the cultural settings in which different music styles and forms have flourished and diffused. This would contribute to build bridges between highbrow and popular music experiences which in turn may open new opportunities for

classic music institutions to leverage cultural diversity as a driver for the attraction of new audience segments.

**Table I. Descriptive Statistics**

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>
<i>Dependent Variables:</i>				
Voraciousness (Avg. # of music genres an individual likes)	3.00	1.90	0	10
Eclecticism (Avg. taste diversification)	0.59	0.72	0.37	0.66
<i>Independent Variables:</i>				
Religiosity (On a scale from 1 to 7)	3.77	2.29	1	7
Strenght of political interests (On a scale from 1 to 7)	4.85	1.58	1	7
Attendance at music performances during childhood (On a scale from 1 to 5 "Sometimes").	2.84	1.23	1	5
Participation in formal music classes	0.50	0.51	0	1
<i>Control Variables:</i>				
Age	47	18	10	87
<i>Political Orientation</i>				
• Extreme Left – Far Left	0.06	0.24	0	1
• Left	0.57	0.49	0	1
• Centre	0.18	0.38	0	1
• Right	0.11	0.30	0	1
• Extreme Right	0.08	0.27	0	1
<i>Sex</i>				
• Female	0.51	0.50	0	1
• Male	0.48	0.50	0	1
<i>Education</i>				
• Middle School or lower	0.08	0.28	0	1
• High School	0.29	0.45	0	1

• University	0.44	0.49	0	1
• Post University	0.18	0.38	0	1
<i>City Size</i>				
• Metropolitan	0.65	0.47	0	1
• Urban	0.14	0.34	0	1
• Small area	0.20	0.40	0	1

**Table II. Correlation Matrix**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
1 Voraciousness	1																
2 Eclecticism	0.377†	1															
3 Music_classes	0.100†	0.004	1														
4 Attendance	0.221†	0.051	0.228†	1													
5 Religiosity	0.0490	0.118†	0.006	0.071	1												
6 Pol. interest	-0.00929	-0.066	-0.035	0.004	-0.086	1											
7 University	-0.0442	0.006	-0.015	-0.015	-0.118†	0.128†	1										
8 High School	-0.0374	-0.007	-0.088	0.007	0.060	-0.0453	-0.580†	1									
9 Post Univ	-0.00971	-0.065	0.056	0.005	0.027	0.092	-0.406†	-0.296†	1								
10 Metropolitan	0.002	0.021	0.018	0.089	-0.012	0.040	0.014	-0.047	0.009	1							
11 Medium-small	0.056	-0.032	0.083	-0.051	0.0118	-0.035	0.025	-0.022	0.015	-0.545†	1						
12 Age	-0.268†	-0.371†	-0.265†	-0.084	0.028	0.296†	0.173†	-0.072	0.081	0.073	-0.104†	1					
13 Female	-0.037	0.0383	0.017	0.173†	0.1315†	-0.109†	0.026	-0.030	0.092†	0.018	-0.045	0.022	1				
14 Left	-0.0526	-0.0337	0.0111	-0.022	-0.271†	0.150†	0.008	0.035	0.033	0.028	-0.062	0.016	0.012	1			
15 Extreme left	0.0903†	0.0219	0.012	0.020	-0.067	0.117†	0.087†	-0.109†	0.032	0.028	0.008	-0.025	-0.066	-0.125	1		
16 Centre	-0.029	0.045	-0.014	0.024	0.239†	-0.126†	0.060	-0.094	-0.025	0.075	-0.046	0.128†	0.132†	-0.545†	-0.125†	1	
17 Right	0.015	0.004	-0.108	-0.032	0.181†	-0.066	-0.063	0.019	0.007	-0.133†	0.000	0.001	-0.055	-0.142†	-0.090†	-0.142†	1

Significance:

† $p < .10$ .

**Table III. Model Estimation.**  
**The effect of religiosity, political convictions and taste cultivation**  
**on taste voraciousness and eclecticism**

	Dependent Variables			
	Voraciousness		Eclecticism	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<i>Independent Variables</i>				
Religiosity	-	0.009 (0.71)	-	0.007** (3.04)
Political Engagement	-	0.047* (2.35)	-	0.004 (1.14)
Performance attendance in the family of origin	-	0.108*** (4.51)	-	0.000 (0.06)
Participation in formal music classes	-	-0.022 (-0.35)	-	-0.027* (-2.14)
<i>Control Variables</i>				
High School (a)	-0.086 (-0.85)	0.123 (1.24)	0.033† (1.80)	0.025 (1.40)
University (a)	-0.028 (-0.29)	0.063 (0.67)	0.050** (2.84)	0.050** (2.85)
Post University (a)	-0.017 (-0.15)	-0.062 (-0.54)	0.030 (1.37)	0.027 (1.24)
Metropolitan area (b)	0.069 (0.90)	0.045 (0.60)	0.005 (0.38)	0.007 (0.55)
Medium-small area (b)	0.086 (0.74)	0.102 (0.90)	-0.021 (-0.98)	-0.019 (-0.91)
Age	- 0.008***	-0.009*** (-5.37)	- 0.002***	- 0.003***
Woman (c)	0.001 (0.02)	-0.041 (-0.68)	0.002 (0.22)	0.000 (0.03)
Left political party (d)	-0.001 (0.01)	-0.014 (-0.14)	0.029 (1.34)	0.029 (1.32)
Extreme Left political party (d)	0.191 (1.17)	0.135 (0.85)	0.036 (1.16)	0.032 (1.03)
Centre (d)	0.014 (0.12)	0.005 (0.04)	0.058* (2.36)	0.048† (1.93)
Right (d)	0.062 (0.48)	0.052 (0.41)	0.039 (1.54)	0.024 (0.92)
Constant	1.44*** (9.94)	0.966*** (5.29)	- 0.468***	- 0.483***
No. of observations	400	400	400	400
Degrees of Freedom	11	15	11	15
Wald $\chi^2$	44.99***		86.31***	106.63***

Significance:

\*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; † $p < .10$ ; t-statistic in parenthesis

(a) Reference category: Middle School or Lower; (b) Reference category: small area; (c) Reference category: man;

(d) Reference categories: Right

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