

The politics of memory and place-making in local opera

The case of the Kymi River Opera

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Introduction¹

Researchers have pointed out the strong links between music and senses of place and identities, in both historical and contemporary contexts (Hudson, 2006, p. 626; Maloney and Schofield, 2019). It is, however, still uncommon to consider opera as a manifestation of such identifications. Instead, opera is perceived as an artform that continues to celebrate ‘disruptive larger-than-life’ heroic figures of the past, as Christopher Small (1998, p. 148) puts it, and is often treated as an elite niche genre with little or no connection to ordinary people’s lives, local places, or sense of identity. This also pertains to Finland, the context of this study; there, according to sociological surveys, opera is generally seen as an elite practice performed in established opera houses (Purhonen, 2014). However, it is also true that tens of new operas are composed every year in Finland and performed in non-traditional venues, and these works often differ radically from their conventional, well-known counterparts from the international classical-romantic repertoire. In the Finnish context, these new operas are often site-specific, which means that they have not been created for places built specifically for performing opera but, for example, for art museums, churches, restaurants, science centres, parks, sports stadiums, shopping malls, courtyards of historical open-air museums, pop-up open-air stages, and forest environments in national parks (Hautsalo, 2018, 2021a, 2021b). Some of them have even been created for boat decks or housing fairs. In addition, there are operas composed particularly for radio or new media, such as different mobile platforms. By performing in non-typical venues and through new mediums, opera in Finland is searching for new audience relationships to replace the ageing generations of more traditional operagoers (Hautsalo, 2021a, 2021b).

In this study we focus on a less known and academically marginalised phenomenon within the Finnish operatic practice, the local opera. During the last twenty years, more than 40 new local operas have been composed in various parts of the country (Hautsalo, 2018). Local operas can be seen as powerful sources for local identity politics, and as embodying ‘the potential to be a vital cultural force in contemporary societies’ (Hautsalo, 2021b). Through the case of the Kymi River Opera, located on the former

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border between Sweden and Russia, we explore the potential of local operas to re-create a sense of place identity through raising awareness of local place history in a time when the historical past is no longer a part of active memory.

Research focus

By engaging with Christopher Small's idea of 'musicking' as 'a political matter in the widest sense' (Small, 1998, p. 13), and drawing on studies of place identity and place memory, we will empirically explore and theorise local opera as an active generator of relationships between and among musical sounds and people situated in the physical and cultural space of musicking (Small, 1998, p. 184). Following Small, we consider opera to be about exploring, affirming, and celebrating relationships with fellow humans and the surrounding world (Small, 1987, p. 56; 1998, pp. 183–184, 212, 218) and generating 'the public image of our most inwardly desired relationships', not just 'showing to us as they might be but actually bringing them into existence for the duration of the performance' (Small, 1987, pp. 69–70, original italics).² Musicking is thus useful for highlighting the power of shared music-making in identity politics, the creation of social relationships, and wellbeing. With this case study, we wish to expand the typical focus of studies on operatic works and opera composers to include operatic musicking and the specific ways in which participants of such musicking relate to musical sounds, to each other, and to the physical context in which they interact (Small, 1998, pp. 183–184). This understanding of musicking also includes the audience, as Small (1999) states:

To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance... It concerns all participation in a musical performance, whether active or passive, whether we like the way it is being done or not, whether we consider it constructive or destructive, sympathetic, or antipathetic (p. 12, italics original).

In particular, we will emphasise the significance of the place of musicking in its historical, social, and material sense, within processes that consciously aim at constructing a sense of collectivity, an often-ignored aspect of Small's ecological theory. Hence, the study highlights the material site and place in musical practice in general (Hudson, 2006) and poses a critique of the idea, typical in music education (Elliott, 1995), that the meaning of a practice is simply guided by tradition, tacit knowledge, and implicit rule-following (for a similar critique, see Schatzki, 2002). Here, 'a place is characterised by having a "location", by being a "locale", and by being marked by a "sense of place"' (Busse et al., 2020, p. 3). We will demonstrate how a place of musicking can be related to the 'politics of memory' and heritage (Odendaal and Westerlund, 2022) and to 'place identity' (Belanche et al., 2021; Lewicka, 2008). With place identity we refer to 'the self-awareness of one's membership to a place related community' (Belanche et al., 2021, p. 242) and to the possibility to use place as 'a means

² The concept of musicking has recently been used, for example, in the Palestinian context to describe a subversive practice of resistance that disrupts symbolic systems that serve to dominate and control marginalised people (Frierson-Campbell and Park, 2016), and when investigating trans-identified contemporary musicians (Drake, 2018) or hospital musicians (Koivisto, 2021).

to distinguish oneself from others' (Lewicka, 2008, p. 211). Accordingly, as we argue in this study, local opera can intensify 'place attachment' and in this way strengthen people's place identity.

Underlying our approach is the sociological notion that, in the contemporary era of prevailing globalisation, ideas, sociality places, and ways of doing things can be lost, as they are no longer used or even remembered (Bailo, 2020). According to Bailo (2020), this need to preserve the past is due to 'the disappearance of the traditional transmission model of cognitive heritage, the vanishing of local though questionable intellectuals, the consequences of internal and external migratory phenomena, [and] the abandonment of traditional communities in favour of the metropolis' (p. 72). Due to this consequential loss of memory, there is thus an increasing need for 'going back to the memory of places' (Bailo, 2020, p. 76), and in this sense for recreating the intangible meanings 'that allow us to feel a sense of belonging' (Anzani, 2020, p. 269). However, this kind of 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1983) is 'a postulate, an expression of desire and a call to mobilise and close ranks, rather than a reality' (Bauman and May, 1990, p. 44); it is, as we argue, an arena for the politics of memory and place-making.

In this study, we search for the meaning of musicking that aims to create an imagined community through intensifying 'place attachment' and 'place making' by asking, like Small (1999): 'What does it mean when this performance takes place at this location, at this time, with these people taking part, both as performers and as listeners?' (p. 13). Accordingly, our research question is: *What does the local opera mean in the specific location and site of the Kymi River, at this specific historical time, for the people who have participated in the processes of production and performances?*

We will answer this question through a qualitative case study (Yin, 2003; Stake, 1995) with the overall aim of generating an in-depth understanding of the events and developments that have taken place during the past ten years in the context of the case. In the interpretive and constructivist theory of meaning, people are seen to have multiple understandings of reality and its meaning for the local community, in which a 'researcher's understanding is co-constructed with that of the participants through their mutual interaction within the research setting and dialogic interaction through researcher-initiated data generation efforts such as interviewing' (Costantino, 2008, p. 119). The study can potentially inform policy development, professional practice, and civic or community action (Thomas, 2021, p. 10).

Local and folk opera: conceptual positioning

The operas produced by The Kymi River Opera are defined here as 'local operas', even though they have been called 'folk operas' by the composer and participating people. Indeed, the terms 'local opera' and 'folk opera' are often used interchangeably, and refer more generally to operas that can be clearly located outside mainstream opera houses. In the literature, folk operas have been related to social structures and political issues, for example in diasporic and post-colonial contexts in Africa (Kasule, 2020), where they have served to recover, valorise, and re-contextualise Ghana's authentic

cultural heritage and to boost national integration and identity (Nii-Dortey, 2015).³ According to Hautsalo (2018, 2021b), however, in the Finnish context local opera can be seen as a sub-genre of folk opera, with some fundamental differences between them: folk operas deal with national-historical events and heroes, the ‘great men’ of the past, or sometimes mythological characters, albeit not specifically linked to a certain place as are local operas, in this way constructing an imagined national community, whereas local operas are typically not supported by any established arts institutions or societies and are rather produced by small ‘pop-up’ organisations created for a particular opera production at a specific time (Hautsalo, 2018, 2021b). Whereas folk opera refers to a variety of operatic styles and types, local opera can be seen as ‘performed in communities in the countryside mostly by non-professional performers, and ... is tightly connected to the history and people of those communities’ (Hautsalo, 2018, p. 31). Hence, according to Hautsalo’s conceptualisation, the place – the context and meaning of the locality – is of particular importance in the definition of local operas. Local operas can also be seen as community art, in the sense that they typically aim ‘to create spaces for inclusive and participatory musical doing’ (Higgins and Willingham, 2017, p. 3).

As with community arts initiatives in general, inclusive participation is also characteristic of the Kymi River Opera. Internationally, the importance of community participation in operatic works was recognised already in the 1950s by Benjamin Britten in the UK (Wiegold and Kenyon, 2015). Recently, such opera productions have been reported, for instance, by Harries (2020), who describes *Create an Opera!* at Theatre Delicatessen studios in London in 2017–2020 as a safe, inclusive environment for experimentation in writing, composition, and collaborative opera performance without a script. The collaborative, non-hierarchical, experimental opera production was meant to work against the often stereotypical, exclusive, and elitist professional opera practices. Harries lists similar attempts to produce local opera in the UK and the Netherlands, including the community engagement and educational schemes of large opera houses such as the Royal Opera House, the English National Opera, and Opera North. Indeed, Lowerson (2005) argues that ‘amateur operatics’ often cross the ‘middle-class and middlebrow’ boundaries, as their repertoires mix experiment with conservatism. For instance, the Kuala Lumpur City Opera (KLCO) in Malaysia has since its foundation in 2012 been able to increase local interest in opera by introducing a more communal way of presenting lower-cost operatic productions through support from local communities and a professional-amateur approach (Loo and Yap, 2020).

In Finland, besides a study on the Nivala local opera (Hannula, 2012) and Hautsalo’s (2018, 2021b) interview studies with a Finnish local opera composer who combined opera composing with his work as a Lutheran church cantor, little is known about the socio-cultural motivations behind local operas. Hautsalo’s studies illustrate how opera productions were a way for the cantor to bring local concerns, even collective grief, under the umbrella of church musicking, and how local opera work might change the general attitudes towards opera and afford people positive experiences by increasing

³ In Papua New Guinea, folk opera has been used to promote sexual health (Haseman et al., 2014).

their self-esteem and sense of belonging. Importantly, the ethos of the Kymi River Opera does not arise from concerns of opera being elitist and in need of democratic reconstruction; rather, opera is the chosen dramatic format and name for their participatory musicking with an interest in reconstructing local identity within a specific place.

Research approach

The case of the Kymi River Opera

The Kymi River Opera, located in the Kymenlaakso region in south-eastern Finland, was chosen for this study because of the community's active and ongoing involvement with local opera productions over the past ten years. The community has produced four local operas from 2011 to 2022, with each production being performed several times over several summers. The operas were initiated and composed by an ethno-musicologist, Jouni Sjöblom, who was born and still lives and works in the region. All four opera productions, *The War of Gustavus* (Kustaan sota, 2011), *In the Days of Alexander II* (Aleksanterin II:n aikaan, 2018), *Petter Lax* (2021), and *The Paper Maker* (Paperimylläri, 2022), were specifically composed for the people of the Kymenlaakso region and were performed in three different open-air venues near the Kymi river. Historically, the region is known as a border area where many battles between the two then-great powers of Sweden and Russia were fought from the 17th century to the beginning of the 19th century. In a similar way as many other local operas, the Kymi River Opera uses this historical past not only as a setting but as its main source for local identity construction.

Each of the four opera productions has involved approximately 50–120 local people in different roles and tasks. The production's operatic structures are built around a collaboration between several local choirs that the composer of the operas regularly conducts. The musicians in the orchestra are folk musicians who have a long history of working together with the composer, and the soloists are either choir singers or active members of the local summer theatre. The composer is primarily responsible for the libretto and the musical parts and their setting; however, a division of labour is applied in the productions as a whole. Although the productions are based on voluntary work, the local funders, such as the cultural foundation established by the paper mill in Kymi, provide significant support for the activities. The city of Kouvola is also an important collaborator and financial supporter. In this sense, the Kymi River Opera is an emerging and continuously growing phenomenon.

The structure of the operas is traditional in the sense that they have acts and scenes, songs and spoken parts, like in the *Singspiel* or song-play tradition, in which the songs follow one after another, often without any musico-thematic connection. In the Kymi River Opera the composer occasionally uses Finnish folk tunes, however often with new lyrics. Furthermore, the composer emphasises the importance of using the regional dialect instead of the official Finnish language in the opera librettos.

The data

The study is based on a purposive sample (Creswell, 2009) of eight participants in the Kymi River Opera. The data consists of semi-structured interviews conducted by Hautsalo as well as direct observations of opera rehearsals and performances and a few email conversations. Eight interviews were used in the study, three of which were with the composer, one with a chorus member, one with a musician in the opera ensemble, one with a representative of the city, one with a local entrepreneur, and one with two representatives of the funder. All of the interviews were conducted in the Finnish language and varied from 30 to 90 minutes. The data was generated in five parts in 2019, the first three during the rehearsals of the third opera, *In the Days of Alexander II*, and the rest after the premiere. The interviews included questions on topics such as the interviewee's role in the local opera production (singer, director, musician, etc.), the reasons for their participation in the local operas and relationship with opera in general, what that involvement meant for the interviewee personally, and how they perceived the meanings of the production to the community.

Ethics

All interviewees signed the consent form, and, with one exception, allowed their identity to be revealed. Since the data includes details that can reveal the interviewee's identity, the study was conducted using only the remaining eight interviews. The research adheres to the ethical regulations of the University of the Arts Helsinki, as well as those outlined by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity.

Data analysis

The aim of our qualitative analysis of the transcribed interviews and other material (e.g. programme notes, hand-outs, newspaper articles) was to gain contextual, in-depth knowledge about the Kymi River Opera and to explore the key characteristics and meanings of the case (Stake, 1995). The theoretical framework of musicking guides the abductively conducted analysis (Yin, 2003; Stake, 1995), while potential issues for the exploration (Stake, 1995) were extrapolated against studies on cultural heritage (Sivula, 2010), place identity, and place memory, as well as Hautsalo's earlier research on the Finnish operatic scene. The analysis proceeded by the two authors comparing together the perspectives of the differently positioned interviewees, and by searching for similarities and differences between their views through memo-writing and memo-sorting. The individual memos of the two authors were constantly compared and discussed in relation to the literature.

Findings

The discovered patterns created the canvas against which the interpretations were made and resulted in the identification of three thematic areas characterising the meanings of musicking in and through the Kymi River Opera: 1) Construction of a new local identity through place-making and local history-writing; 2) Equal possibility for participation; and 3) Integration of cultural politics and educational goals.

1. Construction of a new local identity through place-making and local history-writing

Musicking as place-making

The first Kymi River Opera production was initiated some years after the merger of several municipalities in the region around the city of Kouvola in 2009. This situation is not unique in Finland, as in the recent past many small municipalities have been forced to merge into larger governmental units and thus have ‘disappeared from the map’ (Sivula, 2010, p. 21). According to the Finnish historian Anna Sivula (2010, pp. 26–29), the consequential loss of identity has in many places been replaced by various concrete ‘processes of cultural heritage’ that aim to create a sense of local identity through craft and historical representations, as well as to identify the traces of the historical past that the local people believe have the potential to connect them symbolically. In this way, the symbolic, imagined community becomes strengthened through the traces of the past. According to Sivula (2010), these traces can be material and tangible, such as an abandoned municipal hall, or intangible, such as the story of the first settlers of the village (pp. 27–29). In the case of the Kymi River Opera, these historical traces are related not just to the topics of the opera but also to the concrete buildings and local sites that were once politically important, as well as to the individual stories that were created and tied to past political events at the sites, and which are depicted in the storylines of the operas.

The need for a new local identity was justified by the interviewees in how they had previously recognized the Kymi River region as insignificant in relation to the national narrative, despite its important political past before Finland’s independence. The composer of the operas complains: ‘The reputation of the Kymi region is rather neutral, so that there is not much to grab on to.’ However, it was only after the sense of loss of regional identity took concrete local form that this lack of cultural characteristics became a collective problem:

It was precisely after the municipal merger that all efforts for one’s own village were lost. And it also preceded other things, such as the closing of schools. We have now found here a kind of meaningful way to channel the need to create the community. With this [opera] we found a really good recipe. (Local cultural entrepreneur)

While the opera stories were set in the historical context of the Kymi region, the composer chose a micro-historical approach to localise the national Grand Narrative of past wars, which typically excludes regional details. The first opera, *The War of Gustavus* (2015), was set in the period when the Swedish King Gustavus III started the Russo-Swedish War (1788–1790) against his cousin Catherine II of Russia (Catherine the Great), and when the Kymi river functioned as the border between the two countries. The performance venue of *The War of Gustavus* was on the riverbank stage of Anjala Manor in Anjalankoski village, where some of the actual events of the war took place. In the opera, as in reality, the cousin rulers Gustavus III and Catherine II met in Hamina, the nearest coastal garrison city, in the summer of 1783. This is the

international frame for the events in the opera, in which a local pair of young lovers live on the opposite banks and political territories of the Kymi River.

The second opera, *In the Days of Alexander II* (2018), was set in a later period when the region, like the whole country that today is known as Finland, had become a part of Russia (The Grand Duchy of Finland, 1809–1917), and the reformist and progressive Russian Emperor Alexander II (1818–1881) was in power. The opera tells about the time when larger-scale reforms, such as constructing a telegraph line and railways, also affected the region of Kymi. The main character in the opera is Johan David, later nicknamed ‘The Prince of Jaala’, an actual historical person from the area and the illegitimate child of a poor maid. He nevertheless ended up a high-ranking officer in the Russian army. The story echoes the historical events in the region, for example, Alexander II’s first visit to Finland in 1856 and his decision to build a Russian garrison in the neighbourhood, the founding of the first elementary school, the sufferings of the famine years (1867–1868), and the early stages of the railway project. The finale of the opera introduces the completion of the bridge over the Kymi River, which symbolically connected the local people that had previously been living in hostile neighbouring countries.

The third opera, *Petter Lax* (2021), was named after the composer’s ancestor, who lived near the Kymi River between 1770 and 1854 and who experienced the Russo-Swedish War in person. The concrete site of the opera was in the neighbourhood of the historical Petter Lax, where he first worked at the Swedish customs office at the border river and later as a tenant farmer of the local manor. Petter Lax became a local hero after he warned the inhabitants of the village of the Russian troops whom he saw crossing the river and approaching the settlement, which belonged to Sweden. Sjöblom’s fourth opera, *The Paper Maker* (2022), talks about the industrialisation of Kymenlaakso and the harnessing of hydropower for wood processing in the region in the 19th century. The main character of the opera is Robert Erolin (1865–1953), who worked in a local paper mill for more than 70 years. The opera was composed in honour of the paper mill’s 150th anniversary, and the paper mill also financed the making of the opera.

The overall collective actions of the operas ritualise the meaning of the past, however in chosen, specific places that become an important part of the meaning-making for the opera participants and a continual ‘process of becoming’ (Hudson, 2006, p. 627). Small (1998) analysed the significance of such sites and buildings for musicking, arguing that these spaces dramatise and make visible certain types of relationships that are brought into existence, either consciously or unconsciously, to model or enact ideal human relationships as those taking part imagine them to be. Whilst the relationships associated with the sites and buildings are not ‘the total meaning of the event, being only one strand of the immensely complex web of relationships that is the performance’, according to Small, ‘they do establish some general limits, or parameters, for those relationships which can be, and are, brought into existence every time a musical performance takes place there’ (Small, 1998, p. 27). In the Kymi River Opera this potential for creating new meanings and strengthening the sense of local identity is sought for through the reconstructed traces of the historical past and the re-ritualisation of places in and

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through musicking. In other words, ‘place’ as such is constituted in and through operatic musicking that integrates the historical storyline in the music making and the ensembles of material objects, people, and systems of social relationships, so that ‘the tangible and the intangible aspects of heritage become inseparable’ (Maloney and Schofield, 2021, p. 5).

The logic that the Kymi River Opera uses has also been identified by Maria Lewicka (2008), who states that physical features of places are ‘cues to the place’s history’ and that awareness of a place’s history can intensify emotional place attachment, as ‘bonds to people develop with places’ (p. 211). According to Lewicka, ‘places have their own unique identity, independent of any single group of inhabitants’ so that ‘place identity and place memory as phenomena’ can be separated from national, ethnic, or other group identities or memories (p. 213).

From national history-writing to local history-writing

The four operas highlight the Kymi river region either as ‘a borderland region’ between two political great powers before the nation of Finland was formed, or during the later time when the people of the region were being united by the concrete material advances encouraged by the then occupying country, Russia. The municipal coordinator for cultural education in the region explained:

This region of south-eastern Finland has been a borderland area, as the Kymi river has been the border between Sweden and Russia. [These operas] generate a new city, as we are now a merged municipality city, and a lot of people participate [in the operas] from all parts of the region. (Municipal coordinator for cultural education)

According to her, the local operas have become a way to change the regional reputation through ‘rewriting history’ and highlighting the significance of the region in past political events:

[Through the operas] these historical stories have become true. Maybe there is some fiction in them too, but certainly their power is in the way the stories relate to us, ourselves, and our environment.

The composer sought material for the operas from local written histories, historical exhibitions, oral stories of local people, and the archived diaries of soldiers who had participated in the wars, as well as by investigating his own family history in the region. He has also written a novel on the historical figure of the third opera, Petter Lax. In addition, a local historian, the local museum, and the local section of the University of Helsinki history department have collaborated in creating the stories of the operas and providing historical material.

The historical groundwork that serves as the backbone of the operas creates the potential connection to the participants’ personal histories. Some of the interviewees identified these connections between the opera and their own family’s past. As the interviewed choir singer said:

My father is from Sippola, and I am from the Kymenlaakso region. My grandfather came from Russia, and my grandmother’s family from Germany, in the 18th century. They

settled here in Northern Iitti, and experienced these stories that we now perform. These opera topics have sort of gotten under my skin, and they mean a lot to me.

My whole family comes to see them. (Choir singer)

In this personal sense, the opera performances approximate what has been called sites of memory, 'lieux de mémoire' (Nora, 1989): not the real environments of memory, but places and sites of memory where people engage in public activity to collectively express their awareness of the past (Winter, 2010, p. 312).

2. Equal possibility for participation

A central principle of the Kymi River Opera is that all volunteers can participate in some way. In other words, 'heritage emerges as something not exclusive but inclusive' (Maloney and Schofield, 2021, p. 5). The general 'handymen' who build the stages can also be opera choir singers, whereas other volunteer groups jointly take care of the coffee service during the intermissions. The costumes are made by participating women, or students at the local polytechnic school. The participants' ages range from approximately 10 to 90 years, and in general the ethos is that everyone is, as Small (1998) would say, born capable of musicking (p. 207). The composer explains his view of the musical heterogeneity of the people who participate in the performances:

When one works with amateurs one needs to think a lot about how they can do it, and whether they experience it as meaningful or not. When composing for amateurs, one must also draw the quality bar somewhere.

I always check what the best register is for the soloist, and I always think about how the lyrics support the singing ... It is important to be able to make the group work together even when we know that one is singing better than the other. (Composer)

The composer recognises the generating cultural power of the opera productions, and how people continue to participate despite their ageing:

This local opera has built a creative community around itself. In fact, all these collaborations around the productions have convinced me that we need these kinds of shared stories now [...] Some of our participants are really old, close to ninety years, and they still want to be included and sing [...] It is interesting to notice that the young people that are in our productions have also started performing in the local youth theatre productions, or in the circus. (Composer)

The fact that the performers are neighbours and friends lowers the threshold for participation:

People are a bit prejudiced, saying 'I will not go to see an opera'. But once they have come, many return several times and the next year again. For instance, some of them wrote in the local newspaper column that the performance was perfect. (Choir singer)

The continuity of the activities is an important factor in the dedication of the participants. Here, the interviewed choir singer explains how she first joined the opera by accident together with five other singers of her choir, and how her passion grew after retirement, when she could invest more time in the opera productions:

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I do not have a very good singing voice. Just kind of ordinary. I could never imagine singing real opera. But this kind of opera and choir music is what I can do, and what I enjoy. I can easily sing in tune in these[...] I have never even visited a normal opera, so I don't really have a relationship to opera as such. But I like to throw myself into it. I love to act and even sometimes play the fool [...] We are all, after all, quite ordinary choir singers, who normally stand stiff and just sing. But I think we have advanced a great deal after people have had the courage to plunge in. (Choir singer)

Hence, the operas provide an alternative way of life as the people involved would like to live it, and, as one of the interviewees put it, a 'recipe' for how to construct ideal relationships and symbolic community. According to Small (1996), the real power of musicking lies indeed 'not in listening to or looking at the finished work' but 'in the act of creation itself' (p. 218). The generative power of the Kymi River Opera can be seen as a projection of these ideal relationships and social order, and, as Small (2011) writes, 'a projection of ourselves, our identities as we think we are, or would like to be, or would like to be thought of as being' (p. xi).

3. Integration of cultural politics and educational goals

The potential for purposefully generated place identity lies behind the various collaborators' support for the opera productions, and the recognized potential of the opera productions to 'convey fragments of history' that can be of value in the present day (Anzani, 2020, p. 270). The local operas not only support the wider politics of memory in the region, but also create it by conveying historical information and arousing curiosity, and in this way increasing motivation to discover a place's forgotten past (Lewicka, 2008).

The conscious use of the generative power of the opera productions can be seen in how the Kymi River Opera has become a part of the merged city coalition's official policy and activities. According to the coordinator for cultural education, the city of Kouvola is 'a forerunner' in cultural education, where an expanded process of opera is integrated into other activities. She says that the city buys over 100 tickets for each opera performance to be given to various targeted groups, such as older and young people, who would not otherwise be able or willing to participate. They organise transportation options so that older people can participate in the performances, and support intergenerational participation together with local schools by buying tickets for upper secondary school pupils to come to the performance with their guardians:

This is part of the agreement through which we can achieve cultural impact and at the same time support the art production, as well as take care that the production is accessible to as many groups as possible. (Coordinator for cultural education)

Consequently, the Kymi River Opera has become an educational arena that has also changed history education in the region's schools, by including micro-historical details of the region in the known national narrative of the country's past:

So many men said that they will not participate in an opera, but then when they heard what it meant they changed their mind. And there were, for instance, whole school classes

that came to see *The War of Gustavus*, since they were studying precisely that historical period. (Representative of funder)

All in all, the Kymi River Opera has developed a holistic approach that starts from the characteristics of the place, using its historical past as a mnemonic aid for generating new place memory and place identity. It develops the strengths of the many local choirs and joins forces with the municipality and funding partners. However, despite the municipal involvement and the role of the official planning office of the region, and the local financial support, the approach is more ‘bottom-up’ as opposed to ‘top-down’, due to the original founding by a single individual and the level of voluntary involvement by local people.

Discussion

We have analysed the meanings that the interviewed participants of the Kymi River Opera ascribe to the local opera productions. The Kymi River Opera ritualises the place of memory, which encourages the people to have a relationship to the past of the region and to co-memorise and interpret the past, as well as renew their awareness of this past (Sivula, 2010, p. 29). The operatic musicking has in this way started to play a unique and intentionally created role in ‘the production of place’ (Hudson, 2006, p. 627). The musicking integrates intangible and tangible traces of the past through an ongoing process of redefining the history that the community has chosen to be remembered (see also Sivula, 2010, p. 33). In this way, the Kymi River Opera has become an arena for the operatic craft that the local people can experience as strengthening their symbolic local identity, as well as serving as a site of memory that connects the participants through an artistic ritual (Nora, 1989, p. 29). The case illustrates at a local level ‘the increased value of place’ that is ‘based on the need to belong not to “society” in the abstract, but to somewhere in particular’ (Bauman, 2001, p. 111). This kind of conscious redefinition of history has influenced history teaching in basic education and serves the city’s goal to enhance inclusive, intergenerational cultural resources. As researchers argue, sites of memory are needed in today’s society, which is in a transitional stage during which the national memory has been retreating from its collective identity, and in which the connection to a lived, group- and nation-specific, identity-forming past has been broken (e.g. Erll, 2011, p. 23; Sivula, 2010). As Astrid Erll (2011) argues, ‘sites of memory function as a sort of artificial placeholder for the no longer existent, natural collective memory’ (p. 23).

Hence, the Kymi River Opera provides an interesting alternative for national or ethnicity-based community identities. For instance, Tiina Lammervo (2009) discovered that local and small group identities were increasingly important to the second- and third-generation Finns in Australia, rather than some lost national identity or a new nation-related identity. Although this study cannot answer the question of who remains outside the activities of the Kymi River Opera, as Beatrix Busse et al. (2020) argue, the idea of an intentionally constructed local identity ‘presupposes belonging and participation and only works if actors are participants in a market of symbolic values. If they lack the possibility of exchange, they remain outside’ (p. 5). Moreover, although the

interviewees did not describe what the ‘lost local or regional identity’ might have been like, it was clear that the merger into larger governmental units created a real and experienced sense of loss of identity and a new need for proactive work in this respect. Stemming from this motivation, the study illustrates how a local opera need not be an isolated occurrence but can grow from a one-man initiative into a more governmentally recognised process that benefits the whole region far beyond its cast of musical performers. In a more general sense, the case illustrates how local operas can have multiple meanings and relevance in contemporary life and society. A local opera production can be seen ‘as an educative process in the sense that those who “music” learn new things of themselves and of the contexts in which they “music”’, as Odendaal and colleagues (2014, p. 163) write when elaborating on Small’s ‘musicking’.

One may still wonder why such productions as the Kymi River Opera are called operas – or folk operas as some of the interviewees did – and why are they not called song plays, since the label ‘opera’, as several of the interviewees mentioned, already creates prejudice and requires persuasion. Like the so-called elite opera, the Kymi River Opera can perhaps still be seen as celebrating past ‘larger-than-life’ heroic figures (Small, 1998, p. 148), with the difference that these heroic figures are ordinary people who happened to live in the region during its historically important periods. The musicking also still serves the political purposes that were evident in the early days of opera (e.g., Cohen, 2017). Moreover, since opera in general can be seen as carrying political and hence public messages, the choice of topic is indeed important. As Rietbergen (2010, p. 202) writes about the political nature of opera:

Since time immemorial, themes taken from history have been used to convey contemporary political messages. So, political opera, too, mostly took its subject matter from the past, whether it was biblical, classical, or in a more narrow sense, European-historical (p. 197) ... [G]iven its ideological potential, one might assume that the theme of conquest would be a preferred vehicle for a political message, whether the opera’s patron was a private-public person such as a ruler, or the state – the nation, even – that wanted to influence the audience’s cultural-political notions.

A central aspect of the operas produced at the Kymi River Opera is that they are produced using local resources, which become part and parcel of the experienced quality, namely a sense of ownership and locality of identity, drawing on the past to overcome the sense of national insignificance that has been assumed by the region and its people. Given that researchers outside of music have already identified this need to take action to fight against the loss of a sense of belonging – of memory of places – local operas can be seen as embodying the potential for such cultural-political work in today’s society.

Conclusion

This study has explored what a local opera can mean for the participating people: how local opera in the specific location of the Kymi River in Finland, at this specific historical time, has become an arena for the politics of memory and place-making after a municipal merger in the 1990s and the consequential experienced loss of local identity.

The Kymi River Opera has become an ongoing inquiry for the local people into the potential meanings of the place and rewriting its history. This rewriting does not recreate the nationalist grand narrative of historical events but reconstructs and re-imagines everyday stories of local people who were, or who can be imagined having been, involved in the historically significant past events of the region. Hence, contemporary local operas can be seen as embodying the potential for local and regional identity construction by becoming an arena for public commemoration in times of loss of memory of places. Such politics of memory in operatic musicking provides meanings, not simply related to musical repertoire and its qualities but to place-making in a particular location, at a particular time, for the people taking part, whether performing or listening. Hence, we agree with Hudson (2006), who argues that ‘there is no doubt that music – in both its production and consumption – can be an important influence in shaping the typically hybrid identities of people and places, of engendering a sense of place and deep attachment to place’ (p. 633). In this way, local opera can be musicking *par excellence* in much the same way as early opera, in which, as Small (1998) points out, the impulse was the ‘desire to represent developing relationships onstage’ (p. 148). This requires, however, the expansion of the traditional musicological perspective of opera from its dominant focus on the relationships between the artistic materials of the opera towards the relationships constructed between places, people, and the intertwined local identity politics.

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Abstract

This case study on the Kymi River Opera in south-eastern Finland, at the former border between Sweden and Russia, explores the potential of local operas to re-create a sense of place identity in a contemporary society in which people often seek to reconstruct identity through place memory. By engaging with Christopher Small's (1998) idea of 'musicking' and drawing on studies of place identity and place memory, the study focuses on how a local opera can strive towards new identity constructions through revitalising the forgotten local, historical past. Based on a purposive sample, the data consists of semi-structured interviews and direct observation of the participants of the Kymi River Opera. Three thematic areas on the meanings of the opera, as conveyed by the participants, were identified in the abductive qualitative analysis: 1) Construction of a new place memory; 2) Equal possibility for participation; and 3) Integration of cultural politics and educational goals. The findings show the political nature of local opera in describing how the Kymi River Opera has become an arena for the politics of memory and place-making after a municipal merger in the 1990s had resulted in a sense of loss of local identity.

Keywords: local opera, opera, Finland, musicking, place identity, place memory, place-making

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