

Enabling the King(s) of Opera: Institutional Responsibility for Sexual Misconduct

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Abstract

“They’re not going to fire him—they’ll fire me,” young mezzo-soprano Patricia Wulf recalled telling a colleague in 1998, after enduring repeated sexual harassment by Plácido Domingo behind the curtains of Washington Opera. In the wake of #MeToo, some of the opera industry’s most distinguished leaders faced allegations of sexual misconduct from within the operatic community. These survivor narratives were preceded by years of whispered warnings by industry members of known predators, fears and accounts of retaliation, threats, and gaslighting, as well as a lack of confidence in the competency and moral compass of operatic institutions. While some of these men are now facing consequences for their abuses of power, the opera world has yet to fully reckon with the important issue of institutional and structural responsibility for these patterns of behavior. Applying Liz Kelly’s *conductive context* framework to the American opera industry, I examine how institutionalized power and gendered authority contribute to a climate wherein sexual misconduct is enabled, sustained, and protected and (2) how gendered authority and institutionalized power are relatively unencumbered in their (ab)uses of that power. My research reveals the gross (mis)handling of sexual misconduct by the operatic industry, including its protection of and belated accountability for the actions of powerful men, by accentuating the brutal, hegemonic realities of power, oppression, and the cultural cultivation of fear and silence within the industry.

Please note, this article has trigger warnings for discussions of sexual misconduct, assault, and abuse.

“They’re not going to fire him—they’ll fire me,” young mezzo-soprano Patricia Wulf recalled telling a colleague in 1998, after enduring repeated sexual harassment by Plácido Domingo behind the curtains of Washington Opera.¹ Domingo, a renowned Spanish tenor, had just been named artistic director two years prior. “Every time I would walk off stage, he would be in the wings waiting for me,” Wulf recalled in an interview with the Associated Press two decades later. “He would come right up to me, as close as could be, put his face right in my face, lower his voice and say, ‘Patricia, do you have to go home tonight?’”²

In the wake of #MeToo, some of the opera industry’s most distinguished leaders faced allegations of sexual misconduct, harassment, and assault from within the operatic community. These survivor narratives were preceded by years of whispered warnings by industry members of known predators, fears and accounts of retaliation, threats, and gaslighting, as well as a lack of confidence in the competency and moral compass of operatic institutions. While some of these men are now facing consequences for their abuses of power, the opera world has yet to fully reckon with the important issue of institutional and structural responsibility for these patterns of behavior. To demonstrate this phenomenon, my case study interrogates the institutional systems that enabled Plácido Domingo’s behaviors by listening to survivor

¹ To date, Plácido Domingo has not faced charges within a court of law; however, two private investigations (conducted by the Los Angeles Opera and the American Guild of Musical Artists respectively) have deemed the allegations to be credible.

² Jocelyn Gecker, “Women Accuse Opera Legend Domingo of Sexual Harassment,” *Associated Press*, August 13, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/c2d51d690d004992b8cfba3bad827ae9>.

narratives, interrogating institutional statements released by opera companies, and examining the investigative reports on these allegations produced by the Los Angeles Opera and the American Guild of Musical Artists (hereafter referred to as AGMA). My research reveals the gross (mis)handling of sexual misconduct by the operatic industry, including its protection *of* and belated accountability *for* the actions of powerful men, by accentuating the brutal, hegemonic realities of power, oppression, and the cultural cultivation of fear and silence within the industry.³ I proceed with the importance of believing the survivors and presenting their lived experiences as a valid site on which to construct theory, a methodology championed by bell hooks, through which we may begin to understand invisible structures of power and how it manifests in the lived experiences of opera's participants.⁴

Observing Sexual Violence On/Off-Stage

The topic of sexual violence in opera has been a primary object of musicological study since the earliest feminist interventions of the 1990s, which deployed Catherine Clément's literary theory as a means of revealing operatic relationships as catalyzing the deaths of women heroines as inevitable and even desirable conclusions to storylines.⁵ More recently, scholars like Margaret Cormier, Olivia Bloechl, and Laura Watson have re-engaged this topic by interrogating contemporary Regietheater productions that perform sadomasochism, rape, and sexual violence onstage through feminist lenses of care that rearticulate opera's relationship to the realm of the real.⁶ While these works productively address the still-pressing issues of sexuality, power, and gendered violence onstage, they are mostly examinations of *representations* of sexual assault and harassment. They do not confront what it is like to perform these roles onstage, to have to "fall in love" with your abuser every performance, or to fear opening your dressing room door. I argue that it is paramount for musicology to address present-day circumstances and people—a scholarly practice Naomi André has dubbed "engaged musicology."⁷

The viral resurgence of #MeToo in 2017, which built upon decades of Black collective activism, including Professor Anita Hill's 1991 testimony, Tarana Burke's 2006 coining of "me too" as a tool for "empowerment through empathy," and the African American Policy Forum's 2014 #SayHerName

³ Following Tiffany Page, Anna Bull, and Emma Chapman, I use the term "sexual misconduct" to encompass a wide range of sexual behaviors including "sexual harassment, assault, grooming, sexual coercion, invitations, and promised resources in return for sexual access. . . . [Additionally, we] use the term misconduct to signal that this is a matter of professional behavior in the workplace, and to ensure that the focus remains on the responsibility of the staff member, and their employer, for maintaining professional conduct. . . ." Tiffany Page, Anna Bull, and Emma Chapman, "Making Power Visible: 'Slow Activism' to Address Staff Sexual Misconduct in Higher Education," *Violence Against Women* 25, no. 11 (2019): 4, <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10102895>.

⁴ bell hooks, "Theory as Liberatory Practice," in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (Routledge, 1994), 59–75.

⁵ Catherine Clément, *Opera, or, The Undoing of Women* (University of Minnesota Press, 1988). While Clément's school of opera scholarship is largely situated in second-wave feminism, her contributions enabled future scholars to continue expanding opera studies by incorporating newer feminist interventions—be it through the operatic works, their staged performances, their pedagogical implementations within classrooms, and/or the lived experiences of opera's participants both past and present.

⁶ Margaret Cormier, *Rape at the Opera: Staging Sexual Violence* (University of Michigan Press, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.12324662>; Olivia Bloechl, "Survivors' Songs in Opera: What the Vulnerable Voice Can Do," *Women & Music* 25 (2021): 33–54, <https://doi.org/10.1353/wam.2021.0003>; Laura Watson, "Fifty Shades of Bluebeard? Duke Ariane et Barbe-Bleue in the Twenty-First Century," *Twentieth-Century Music* 15, no. 3 (2018): 399–438, <https://doi.org/doi:10.1017/S1478572218000221>.

⁷ Naomi André, *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement* (University of Illinois Press, 2018), 1, <https://doi.org/10.5622/illinois/9780252041921.001.0001>.

campaign, sparked a wave of public outcry within the classical music industry as long-standing, prominent individuals were named for their sexual abuses of power.⁸ Within the American opera world, sexual misconduct accusations have been levied against Plácido Domingo, James Levine (former conductor and music director at the Metropolitan Opera), Stephen Lord (former conductor and music director at Opera Theatre St. Louis and Michigan Opera Theatre), David Daniels (countertenor and former professor at the University of Michigan), Bernard Uzan (former co-director of Florida Grand Opera's Studio Artist program and co-founder of Uzan International Artists), John Copley (former stage director at the Metropolitan Opera), Daniel Lipton (former conductor of Opera Tampa), William Florescu (former general director of Florentine Opera), Matthew Stump (former rising bass-baritone and San Francisco Opera Adler Fellow), among others. While my study highlights the testimonies of the women—mostly young singers—victimized by Domingo, I also want to acknowledge that allegations have been voiced by young men against high-profile industry members like Levine, Lord, and Daniels. Further research interrogating the prevalence of sexual misconduct, its institutionalization, and its impacts on the lived experiences of vulnerable communities within the opera industry—accounting for intersectionality—is vital to understanding and dismantling our systems of oppression.

Plácido Domingo

On August 13, 2019, the Associated Press reported the testimony of eight singers and one dancer who accused Domingo of sexual misconduct spanning from 1988 to the mid-2000s. Of the nine women who came forward, eight requested anonymity as they were still working in the business and feared reprisal, public humiliation, or further harassment.⁹ In response, the Los Angeles Opera, where Domingo had been the general director since 2003, opened an investigation regarding the allegations.¹⁰ In the US, both the Philadelphia Orchestra and San Francisco Opera immediately canceled Domingo's upcoming performances; however, many European houses and orchestras continued their seasons as planned, preferring to wait or in some cases, vocalizing their support of Domingo.¹¹ For example, Salzburg Festival President Helfa Rabl-Stadler defended Domingo in a confirmation statement of his upcoming August 2019 engagement:

⁸ Catharine A. MacKinnon, "Global #MeToo," in *The Routledge Handbook of the Politics of the #MeToo Movement*, ed. Giti Chandra and Irma Erlingsdóttir (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2021), 43, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367809263-5>.

⁹ Gecker, "Women Accuse Opera Legend Domingo of Sexual Harassment." The lone woman who did not request anonymity—Patricia Wulf—was emboldened by the #MeToo movement, and stated, "I'm stepping forward because I hope that it can help other women come forward or be strong enough to say no."

¹⁰ Jocelyn Gecker, "Concerts Canceled, Investigation Opened into Plácido Domingo," *Associated Press*, August 13, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/a5cd53703a9a4d3e80c2b3cf3f0b6376>.

¹¹ Gecker; Jocelyn Gecker, "The Latest: No Cancellations for Plácido Domingo in Europe," *Associated Press*, August 14, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/aa721487df96447190147c3287d55ec1>; Colleen Barry, "European Theaters Mostly Wait-and-See on Domingo Accusations," *Associated Press*, August 14, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/c896b8217188408da2c9958c776726c4>; "#MeToo: Plácido Domingo ovationné en Europe, lâché aux États-Unis," *France 24*, August 28, 2019, <https://www.france24.com/fr/20190828-affaire-placido-domingo-approche-differente-metoo-europe-etats-unis-femmes-culture>. Global responses to the #MeToo movement vary across cultures regarding allegations within the classical music industry. For instance, the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam terminated its contract with conductor Daniele Gatti shortly after two singers came forward alleging sexual misconduct in a July 26, 2018, issue of *The Washington Post*. Several months later, Gatti was appointed music director of Rome Opera. In December 2018, Gatti was also featured on the cover page of *Classic Voice: Più voce alla grande musica*. Alex Marshall, "Two Star Conductors Faced #MeToo Allegations. Now They're Back," *The New York Times*, December 28, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/28/arts/music/daniele-gatti-charles-dutoit-metoo-orchestra-opera.html>.

I have known Plácido Domingo for more than 25 years. In addition to his artistic competence, I was impressed from the very beginning by his appreciative treatment of all festival employees. I would find it factually wrong and morally irresponsible to make irreversible judgments at this point. . . . had the accusations against him been voiced inside the Festspielhaus in Salzburg, I am sure I would have heard of it.¹²

Here, Rabl-Stadler emphasizes the duration of their relationship and praises Domingo's artistry and charming affability to dismiss the credibility of the survivors. Statements like this are representative of what philosopher Kate Manne describes as *himpathy* or exonerating narratives of sympathy elicited for privileged men about a situation of their own making.¹³

On September 6, 2019, eleven more women came forward with new allegations of sexual misconduct against Domingo.¹⁴ Two days later, AGMA opened its own independent investigation into the allegations.¹⁵ They cited their reasons:

the companies that have begun their own investigations have been unwilling or unable to provide AGMA with sufficient assurances about the scope and timing of their investigations, as well as whether or not the findings will be publicly disclosed or otherwise made available to the Union.¹⁶

By late September, Metropolitan Opera general manager Peter Gelb held a one-hour meeting with chorus and orchestra musicians after they voiced their concerns of working with Domingo in the Met's upcoming production of *Macbeth*. As Gelb put it:

¹² Gecker, "Concerts Canceled, Investigation Opened into Plácido Domingo"; Colleen Barry, "Correction: Plácido Domingo-Europe Story," August 24, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/eaee868d9e7e467ca9f9a29d7c7e289c>. Other individuals who defended Domingo included Italian tenor Andrea Bocelli, tenor José Carreras, soprano Anna Netrebko, soprano Sonya Yoncheva, tenor Javier Camarena, mezzo soprano Teresa Berganza, soprano Davinia Rodríguez, soprano Pilar Jurado, soprano Ainhoa Arteta, mezzo-soprano María José Suárez, and Spanish ballad singer Paloma San Basilio. For their testimonials, see Adriana Gomez Licon, "Singer Andrea Bocelli: 'Absurd' to Shun Opera Legend Domingo," *Associated Press*, November 12, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/8010b4868a48489daec9234da03f9c90>; Barry, "European Theaters Mostly Wait-and-See on Domingo Accusations"; Gecker, "The Latest: No Cancellations for Plácido Domingo in Europe"; "Paloma San Basilio Defends Plácido Domingo: 'He Was Always a Gentleman' - La Provincia," *Spain's News*, 2019, <https://spainsnews.com/paloma-san-basilio-defends-plcido-domingo-he-was-always-a-gentleman-la-provincia/>; "La Soprano Davinia Rodríguez, Sobre Plácido Domingo: 'Jamás He Sentido El Más Mínimo Indicio de Lo Que Se Le Acusa,'" *Europa Press*, August 13, 2019, <https://www.europapress.es/cultura/musica-00129/noticia-soprano-davinia-rodriguez-placido-domingo-jamas-he-sentido-mas-minimo-indicio-le-acusa-20190813183412.html>; "EUROPE - #MeToo"; Francisco Salazar, "José Carreras Defends Plácido Domingo," *Opera Wire*, September 26, 2019, <https://operawire.com/jose-carreras-defends-placido-domingo/>.

¹³ Kate Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 196–205; Ellie Hisama, "Getting to Count," *Music Theory Spectrum* 43 (2021): 349–63.

¹⁴ Jocelyn Gecker and Jocelyn Noveck, "Singer Says Opera's Domingo Harassed Her, Grabbed Her Breast," *Associated Press*, September 7, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/opera-us-news-ap-top-news-music-ca-state-wire-3baf2ccc59144284b227f29eb7d44797>; "The Latest: Dallas Opera Cancels 2020 Domingo Performance," *Associated Press*, September 6, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/b3079c302d2c4662a8481bd42850752f>.

¹⁵ Founded in 1936, AGMA is the labor union representing singers, dancers, and staging staff within the industries of opera, ballet, and concert choral performance in the United States. American Guild of Musical Artists, "About AGMA: History," accessed February 13, 2025, <https://www.musicalartists.org/about-agma/>.

¹⁶ "AGMA Opens Independent Investigation into Allegations Against Plácido Domingo," American Guild of Musical Arts, September 6, 2019, <https://www.musicalartists.org/agma-opens-independent-investigation-into-allegations-against-placido-domingo/>.

we took the allegations very seriously. For some people, allegations are enough to warrant actions, but the Met as an institution does not believe it can take action until there is corroborated evidence, which has so far not been the case.¹⁷

Interestingly, this response is inconsistent with the Met's suspension of its famed conductor, James Levine, amid a torrent of sexual abuse accusations in 2017.¹⁸ Levine was suspended from the Met less than twenty-four hours after three men accused him of sexual misconduct in *The New York Times*. Contrastingly, twenty women had come forward accusing Domingo of sexual misconduct since August 2019, yet this was not enough "corroborated evidence" to justify Domingo's removal from the production. Although there are more nuances within this comparison, I want to specifically emphasize the gendered difference in the Metropolitan Opera's response as perpetuating a culture of sexism and maintaining the continuum of sexual violence against women. When women report sexual misconduct, their credibility is often called into question by media, police, the court of law, and institutional representatives, as seen by the Met's denegation of twenty women's testimonials. Criminologist Jan Jordan calls this the *credibility conundrum*, whereby it is the women's credibility that is always scrutinized, dismissed, minimalized, or disbelieved—not the accused.¹⁹ Twenty-four hours before the opening night of *Macbeth*, Domingo "agreed to withdraw from all future performances at the Met, effective immediately."²⁰

While still actively performing in Europe, Domingo resigned as general director of LA Opera on October 2, 2019.²¹ In December, he received a standing ovation in Milan, followed by sold-out shows in Berlin the next month.²² Domingo's international acclaim and his ability to sell out performances illustrates the social, cultural, and economic capital that houses could continue to gain despite the allegations against him. On February 25, 2020, AGMA announced the results of its investigation in condemning terms, asserting:

¹⁷ Jocelyn Gecker and Jocelyn Noveck, "Opera's Domingo Starts US Performances amid Allegations," *Associated Press*, September 23, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/opera-ap-top-news-music-ca-state-wire-entertainment-7470568db3b64c5483b14141b9992479>.

¹⁸ Michael Cooper, "Met Opera to Investigate James Levine Over Sexual Abuse Accusation," *New York Times*, December 2, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/02/arts/music/james-levine-sexual-misconduct-met-opera.html>; Michael Cooper, "Met Opera Suspends James Levine After New Sexual Abuse Accusations," *New York Times*, December 3, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/03/arts/music/james-levine-met-opera.html>; James B. Stewart and Michael Cooper, "The Met Opera Fired James Levine, Citing Sexual Misconduct. He Was Paid \$3.5 Million," *New York Times*, September 20, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/20/arts/music/met-opera-james-levine.html>; "Statement from the Metropolitan Opera Regarding James Levine" (The Metropolitan Opera, March 12, 2018), <https://www.metopera.org/about/press-releases/statement-from-the-metropolitan-opera-regarding-james-levine/>.

¹⁹ Jan Jordan, *The Word of a Woman? Police, Rape, and Belief* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 1–2, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230511057>.

²⁰ Ronald Blum, "Domingo Withdraws from Met Opera After Harassment Reports," *Associated Press*, September 25, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/001d3a0452ba4fda9dd398a6319943a9>; Maggy Donaldson, "Opera Star Plácido Domingo Withdraws From All Future Met Performances," *International Business Times*, September 24, 2019, <https://www.ibtimes.com/opera-star-placido-domingo-withdraws-all-future-met-performances-2832599>; A. Z. Madonna, "Classical Music Saw a #MeToo Backlash in 2019," *The Boston Globe*, December 19, 2019, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2019/12/19/arts/classical-music-saw-metoo-backlash-2019>.

²¹ Jessica Gelt, "The Last Notes: Plácido Domingo Resigns from L.A. Opera; a Harassment Investigation Continues," *Los Angeles Times*, October 3, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2019-10-02/placido-domingo-resigns-from-la-opera-harassment-allegations>; Anastasia Tsioulcas, "Plácido Domingo Resigns From LA Opera," *NPR*, October 2, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/10/02/766513143/placido-domingo-resigns-from-la-opera>.

²² Jocelyn Gecker, "Soul-Searching in Opera World after Tumultuous #MeToo Year," *Associated Press*, December 29, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/ba051f1e1ebe96f403a806c8c8faf740>.

that Mr. Domingo had, in fact, engaged in inappropriate activity, ranging from flirtation to sexual advances, in and outside of the workplace. Many of the witnesses expressed fear of retaliation in the industry as their reason for not coming forward sooner.²³

Domingo's apology was issued later that same day:

I have taken time over the last several months to reflect on the allegations that various colleagues of mine have made against me. I respect that these women finally felt comfortable enough to speak out, and I want them to know that I am truly sorry for the hurt that I caused them. I accept full responsibility for my actions, and I have grown from this experience.²⁴

Two days later, however, Domingo rescinded it. He clarified:

My apology was sincere and heartfelt, to any colleague who I have made to feel uncomfortable, or hurt in any manner, by anything that I have said or done. But I know what I have not done, and I'll deny it again. I have never behaved aggressively toward anyone, and I have never done anything to obstruct or hurt anyone's career.²⁵

By using the phrase, "who I have made to feel uncomfortable," Domingo displaces the responsibility of his actions by shifting the focus onto the survivors' subjective "feelings." This logic allows him to deny the realities and traumas of the survivors by asserting that his reality is the only one that matters. Sexual violence prevention educator Jamie Utt calls this *perpetrator logic*.²⁶ Additionally, Domingo's definition of sexual harassment belies a very narrow, defunct interpretation of what constitutes as sexual harassment, abuse, and rape—the myth that it must always be extremely, physically violent.²⁷ Sociologist Liz Kelly's landmark theory on the continuum of sexual violence accounts for a wide range of men's behaviors used to control women, including abuse, coercion, intimidation, threats of force, and intrusion, all while accounting for gendered power relations and patriarchal entitlement.²⁸

AGMA filed formal union disciplinary charges against Domingo on February 28, 2020.²⁹ On March 3, 2020, Domingo's name was removed from Washington National Opera's young artist program.³⁰ LA Opera announced the conclusion of its investigation deeming all allegations as credible on March 10,

²³ Alicia Cook, "Union Investigation Confirms Allegations Against Plácido Domingo," American Guild of Musical Artists, February 25, 2020, <https://www.musicalartists.org/union-investigation-confirms-allegations-against-placido-domingo/>.

²⁴ Jocelyn Gecker, "US Opera Union Probe Finds Plácido Domingo Abused Power," *Associated Press*, February 25, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/1a8add4db2c4ba38420b7b8b2857ffac>.

²⁵ Jocelyn Gecker and Aritz Parra, "Plácido Domingo Revises Apology, as Spain Drops More Shows," *Associated Press*, February 27, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/entertainment-europe-ap-top-news-music-spain-4244234d1fad5b69276b4824c5a686a6>.

²⁶ Jamie Utt, "Stop Thinking Like a Perpetrator: 4 Ways to Better Support Survivors of Sexual Violence," *Everyday Feminism*, September 2, 2014, <https://everydayfeminism.com/2014/09/stop-thinking-like-a-perpetrator/>.

²⁷ For more information, see: Jan Jordan, *Tackling Rape Culture: Ending Patriarchy* (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003289913>; Jordan, *The Word of a Woman?*; Marianne Hester, Liz Kelly, and Jill Radford, eds., *Women, Violence, and Male Power: Feminist Activism, Research, and Practice* (Open University Press, 1996); Liz Kelly, *Surviving Sexual Violence* (University of Minnesota Press, 1992); Nickie D. Phillips, *Beyond Blurred Lines: Rape Culture in Popular Media* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017); Martha R. Burt, "Cultural Myths and Supports for Rape," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 38, no. 2 (1980): 217–30, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.38.2.217>; Peggy Reeves Sanday, "Rape-Free Versus Rape-Prone: How Culture Makes a Difference," in *Evolution, Gender, and Rape*, ed. Cheryl B. Travis (MIT Press, 2003), 337–61; Marian Meyers, *News Coverage of Violence Against Women: Engendering Blame* (Sage Publications, 1997), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452243832>.

²⁸ Kelly, "The Conducive Context of Violence Against Women and Girls," *Discover Society* (blog), March 1, 2016, <https://archive.discoverociety.org/2016/03/01/>; Kelly, *Surviving Sexual Violence*, 74–96.

²⁹ Alicia Cook, "[Updated] Union Disciplinary Charges Filed Against Plácido Domingo," American Guild of Musical Artists, February 29, 2020, <https://www.musicalartists.org/union-disciplinary-charges-filed-against-placido-domingo/>.

³⁰ Jocelyn Gecker, "Plácido Domingo's Name Removed from Washington Opera Program," *Associated Press*, March 3, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/04d47cc784e1d0855efbeff37fc8c537>.

2020, and ten days later, Domingo resigned as a member of AGMA.³¹ After accepting the Österreichische Musiktheaterpreis, a lifetime achievement award in August 2020, Domingo announced his intentions to clear his name.³² Despite decades of sexual misconduct and abuses of power as well as several high-profile resignations and cancellations, Domingo continues to be an active member within the opera industry while denying any wrongdoing. His 2024–25 calendar lists conducting in India, Oman, Switzerland, and South Africa, as well as singing in Italy, Germany, Spain, Mongolia, Czechia, Greece, Armenia, Romania, Australia, Turkey, Hungary, Austria, Japan, Mexico, Uruguay, France, South Korea, China, Portugal, Venezuela, the UK, and more.³³ It is ominous to see the classical music industry continue to imbue power, privilege, and visibility to men accused of sexual misconduct without actively addressing institutional responsibility for sexual violence. The return of Plácido Domingo, alongside conductors Daniele Gatti and Charles Dutoit, reveals our industry as deeply invested in the normalization of sexism, misogyny, and patriarchal oppression.³⁴ Still, more women are coming forward. In January 2023, a Spanish singer recounted her own past, harrowing experiences of working with Domingo onstage:

Plácido drew near me. He kissed me on the mouth, and it was a kiss that I didn't even see coming so I couldn't dodge out of the way. I did not want to be kissed. The act had ended, the music had stopped, and the curtain was coming down. There was no justification whatsoever.³⁵

Opera Industry: A *Conducive Context*?

Emergent scholarship on sexual violence and the music industry suggests that the pervasive, normalization of sexism, patriarchal entitlement, and stark gendered power relations maps onto Liz Kelly's *conducive context* framework.³⁶ Kelly defines *conducive context* as “spaces in which forms of gendered power and authority and matrices of domination are in play” with insufficient or no external challenges.³⁷ Applying this framework to the American opera industry entails (1) examining how institutionalized power and gendered authority contribute to a climate wherein sexual misconduct is enabled, sustained, and protected and (2) how gendered authority and institutionalized power are relatively unencumbered in their (ab)uses of that power. Although a study surveying the prevalence of sexual misconduct with the American opera industry has yet to be realized, a 2022 survey of 660 UK music professionals reported 66% had experienced workplace discrimination; 78% of that discrimination was perpetrated against

³¹ “LA Opera Independent Investigation: Summary of Findings and Recommendations,” March 10, 2020, <https://www.laopera.org/about-us/press-room/press-releases-and-statements/statement-summary-of-findings/>; Jocelyn Gecker, “Plácido Domingo Resigns from Opera Union, Donates \$500,000,” *Associated Press*, March 20, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/97bb8a44abe3a2d502da5797b0294bb6>.

³² “After Recovering from Virus, Domingo Vows to Clear Name,” *Associated Press*, August 6, 2020, <https://apnews.com/b1c29419dd6621d2c4313d9add073c81>.

³³ Plácido Domingo, “Performances - Plácido Domingo,” accessed February 13, 2025, <https://www.placidodomingo.com/calendar>.

³⁴ Marshall, “Two Star Conductors Faced #MeToo Allegations. Now They're Back”; Madonna, “Classical Music Saw a #MeToo Backlash in 2019.”

³⁵ Sam Jones, “Spanish Singer Is First to Claim Sexual Assault by Plácido Domingo,” *The Guardian*, January 16, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2023/jan/16/spanish-singer-is-first-to-claim-sexual-assault-by-placido-domingo>.

³⁶ Anna Bull, “Classical Music After #MeToo: Is Music Higher Education a ‘Conducive Context’ for Sexual Misconduct?,” in *Higher Music Education and Employability in a Neoliberal World*, ed. Rainer Prokop and Rosa Reitsamer (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2024), 87–100, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350266995>; Melanie McCarry et al., “The Sound of Misogyny: Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence in the Music Industry,” *Journal of Gender-Based Violence* 7, no. 2 (2023): 220–34.

³⁷ Kelly, “The Conducive Context of Violence Against Women and Girls”; Liz Kelly, “A Conducive Context: Trafficking of Persons in Central Asia,” in *Human Trafficking* (Taylor & Francis, 2013), 73–90.

women; 72% was committed by individuals with seniority or influence; 58% was reported as sexual misconduct; and 88% of freelance/self-employed individuals did not report their experiences.³⁸ Combined with the sheer number of allegations against US-based opera professionals, this study demonstrates the role our music institutions play in cultivating a hostile workplace culture that normalizes, invisibilizes, and enables sexual misconduct and discrimination.

Many of the women who came forward against Domingo were singers in the beginning of their careers; arguably, young artists are particularly vulnerable to sexual abuses of power because of their economic precarity.³⁹ American soprano Claudia Friedlander writes:

We're willing to sing for free in order to get experience and exposure, often for organizations that pay the orchestra and production staff. When regional opera companies charge us audition fees in order to pass their cost of doing business on to us, we pay up. . . . We have historically kept silent about the systemic racism, prolific sexual misconduct, and unsafe conditions that plague our industry and our educational institutions.⁴⁰

Friedlander illustrates the irregularity of paid work, instability, inequalities within the music industry, lack of protections, and the fierce competition that drives young artists to accept their own exploitation. Unlike many houses in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland that offer long(er)-term Fest contracts, where singers are hired as salaried employees, receive benefits, paid vacation, and sometimes bonuses, US employment structures for singers are predominantly freelance (non-standard work): short-term project-based contracts or long(er)-term artist residencies (e.g., young artist programs, guest residencies).⁴¹ In addition to having minimal opportunities for stable employment, young singers pursue their careers individually which entails navigating a variety of opera company structures, their individualized policies, and networks alone. Young artists are taught, through training and observation of the industry, that they are replaceable. Intimacy choreographer Chelsea Pace states actors:

say yes for the sake of being “easy to work with” in an attempt to keep their jobs and be hired again. Performers internalize the message that saying yes is staying employed. A performer fearing that a “hard to work with” label might make them say “okay” to being touched in a way that makes them uncomfortable.⁴²

Intense competition leads many singers to accept working conditions and contractual work that they otherwise would not endure. In Sophie Hennekam and Dawn Bennett's study on sexual harassment in creative industries, they argue that these working circumstances are “associated with a higher rate and

³⁸ Kathryn Williams and Vick Bain, *Dignity at Work 2: Discrimination in the Music Sector* (Incorporated Society of Musicians, 2022), 10–20, <https://www.ism.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/02-ISM-Dignity-2-report.pdf>.

³⁹ A 2013 study conducted by the Federation of Entertainment Union in the UK on persons working in the entertainment and media industries found that “women were more vulnerable to bullying and discrimination than men, with 64 percent compared to 49 percent of men. The survey painted a picture of women (and some men) becoming prey to sexual harassment at the beginning of their career, over time they learned to develop strategies to avoid it.” FEU (Federation of Entertainment Union), “A Federation of Entertainment Unions’ Report Examining Bullying, Harassment and Discrimination in the Entertainment and Media Industries,” 2013, 2, <http://writersguild.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/CWC-Report.pdf>.

⁴⁰ Claudia Friedlander, “Opera Culture Is Plagued by a Scarcity Mindset. Our Union Must Stop Perpetuating It,” *The Liberated Voice*, December 16, 2020, <https://www.claudiafriedlander.com/the-liberated-voice/2020/12/agma-scarcity-mindset.html>.

⁴¹ Caitlin Vincent and Amanda Coles, “Unequal Opera-Tunities: Gender Inequality and Non-Standard Work in US Opera Production,” *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal* 43, no. 2 (2024), 269, <https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-03-2023-0071>.

⁴² Chelsea Pace, *Staging Sex: Best Practices, Tools, and Techniques for Theatrical Intimacy* (Routledge, 2020), 8.

greater acceptance of sexualized comments and behaviors, which are the result of power relations within a dependency framework where potential employers hold the decision-making power.”⁴³

Many scholars assert that women working in precarious, irregular employment are far more susceptible to sexual misconduct, especially in men-dominated cultures.⁴⁴ This issue can be intensified by intersectionalities of race, class, sexuality, age, gender, dis/ability, nationhood, body, and other identities. Examining gender inequalities in the key creative roles for eleven US Budget 1 opera companies,⁴⁵ Caitlin Vincent and Amanda Coles argue that women experience systematic gender-based employment disadvantages both horizontally and vertically. From May 2004 to November 2010, men constituted 95% of conductors, 85% of stage directors, 88% of set designers, 85% of lighting designers, 59% of costume designers, and 70% of video/projection designers.⁴⁶ Women and genderqueer artists are consistently underrepresented in the upper echelons of opera’s creative positions; this contributes to opera’s persistent gender inequalities especially regarding gendered power relations within the workplace. Additionally, OPERA America notes that the number of women in general director positions at Budget 1 houses has consistently remained under 10% (represented by only one company) from 1990 to 2020.⁴⁷ The importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and representation in decision-making positions within the opera industry cannot be overstated; diversity aids in challenging modes of privileged authority.⁴⁸

The nontransparent, relational, and informal hiring practices within the opera industry also reinforces gendered power relations. In a 2010 interview of Plácido Domingo discussing how he evaluates Operalia singers’ readiness for his young artist programs, he said:

It could be an exceptional voice that is not quite ready; the person is so young, you say, “Let’s have him or her.” I like to bring them to my school. But I never like to take a person I see who is not enthusiastic about it [*grimaces*]. Or somebody who is not disciplined. Or somebody who is not punctual. Because there are so many other people that can take their places.⁴⁹

Domingo highlights the subjective nature of singer evaluations for contractual work, the informality of recruitment praxis within the industry, and young artists’ replaceability. After noting the singers’ instrument and youth, Domingo’s next criteria for evaluation are personality-based: enthusiastic, disciplined, and punctual. In the opera world, hiring recommendations are often contingent on personal

⁴³ Sophie Hennekam and Dawn Bennett, “Sexual Harassment in the Creative Industries: Tolerance, Culture and the Need for Change: Sexual Harassment in the Creative Industries,” *Gender, Work & Organization* 24, no. 4 (2017), 420, <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12176>.

⁴⁴ Sophie Hennekam, “Towards More Inclusion in the Music Industry,” in *Music as Labour: Inequalities and Activism in the Past and Present*, ed. Dagmar Abfalter and Rosa Reitsamer, 1., Routledge Research in the Creative and Cultural Industries (Routledge, 2022), 190–203; Hennekam and Bennett, “Sexual Harassment in the Creative Industries”; Lindsey Joyce Chamberlain et al., “Sexual Harassment in Organizational Context,” *Work and Occupations* 35, no. 3 (2008): 262–95, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0730888408322008>; Casper Hoedemaekers, “Creative Work and Affect: Social, Political and Fantasmatic Dynamics in the Labour of Musicians,” *Human Relations* 71, no. 10 (2018): 1348–70, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726717741355>.

⁴⁵ OPERA America defines “Budget 1” houses as operating with a \$15 million annual budget or higher. LA Opera and Washington National Opera (WNO), where Domingo held long-standing executive positions, are both classified as Budget 1 houses and are included in the study conducted by Vincent and Coles.

⁴⁶ Vincent and Coles, “Unequal Opera-Tunities,” 273–276.

⁴⁷ OPERA America, “2020 Research: Women in Opera Leadership,” OPERA America, January 15, 2020, <https://www.operaamerica.org/industry-resources/2020/202001/2020-research-women-in-opera-leadership/>.

⁴⁸ For more information, see: Antonio C. Cuyler, *Access, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in Cultural Organizations: Insights from the Careers of Executive Opera Managers of Color in the US* (Routledge, 2021); Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Duke University Press, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822395324>.

⁴⁹ Joshua Jampol, *Living Opera* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 119.

and professional networks, reputation, and visibility. Sociologist Rosalind Gill asserts that informalities in workplace evaluations/hiring practices in freelance work disproportionately affects women, especially in men-dominated cultures.⁵⁰ Vincent and Coles also note that within opera, “these networks are self-referential, self-reinforcing, and homophobic.”⁵¹ Because the opera industry maintains nontransparent hiring structures in a cultural climate where men dominate decision-making positions, young women singers are vulnerable to abuses of power because they fear coming forward might hinder their future employability.

Not only do white cisgender men dominate positions of power within the American opera industry, but the cultural climate reinforces patriarchal modes of authority. The institutionalization of gendered power differentials has been well-documented within the classical music industry and music’s higher education literatures.⁵² In a 2018 “Colloquy on Sexual Violence in Opera,” feminist musicologists Suzanne Cusick and Monica Hershberger stress that “when we stage, perform, or teach that repertory without explicitly engaging its imbrication with sexual and gender violence, we risk unwittingly sustaining a part of its tradition that we now find morally repugnant.”⁵³ The operatic canon teems with the valorization of gendered violence, particularly men harming women.⁵⁴ As Cusick and Hershberger note, this contributes to the normalization and institutionalized perpetuation of rape culture, authorized power, and gendered violence when left unchecked. Compounding this glorification within the operatic canon is the continued predominance of performing dead white cis men composers’ operas. The canon participates in the normalization of sexism, racism, classism, ableism, and patriarchal oppression, which in turn helps foster a working environment that harms vulnerable members of marginalized communities. We must question

⁵⁰ Rosalind Gill, “Cool, Creative and Egalitarian? Exploring Gender in Project-Based New Media Work in Euro,” *Information, Communication & Society* 5, no. 1 (2002), 82–83, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691180110117668>.

⁵¹ Vincent and Coles, “Unequal Opera-Tunities,” 270.

⁵² Anna Bull, *Power Relations and Hierarchies in Higher Music Education Institutions*, Research Report (University of York, September 10, 2021), <https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/178369/>; Anna Bull, “Gendering the Middle Classes: The Construction of Conductors’ Authority in Youth Classical Musics,” *The Sociological Review* 64 (2016): 855–71, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12426>; Bull, “Classical Music After #MeToo Is Music Higher Education a ‘Conducive Context’ for Sexual Misconduct?”; Anna Bull, Christina Scharff, and Laudan Nooshin, eds., *Voices for Change in the Classical Music Profession: New Ideas for Tackling Inequalities and Exclusions* (Oxford University Press, 2023); Christina Scharff, “From «Not Me» to «Me Too»: Exploring the Trickle-Down Effects of Neoliberal Feminism,” *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, no. 4 (2019): 667–91; Christina Scharff, “Explaining Inequalities in the Classical Music Profession,” *ONCurating: Gender Relations in New Music* 47 (2020): 16–25; Christina Scharff, *Gender, Subjectivity and Cultural Work: The Classical Music Profession*, Routledge Research in Gender and Society 59 (Routledge, 2019); Christina Scharff, “Blowing Your Own Trumpet: Exploring the Gendered Dynamics of Self-Promotion in the Classical Music Profession,” *The Sociological Review* 63, no. 1 (2015): 97–112, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12243>; Hennekam and Bennett, “Sexual Harassment in the Creative Industries”; Dagmar Abfalter and Rosa Reitsamer, eds., *Music as Labour: Inequalities and Activism in the Past and Present*, 1., Routledge Research in the Creative and Cultural Industries (Routledge, 2022); Rainer Prokop and Rosa Reitsamer, eds., *Higher Music Education and Employability in a Neoliberal World*, 1st ed. (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2024); Christopher Dromey and Julia Haferkorn, *The Classical Music Industry*, Routledge Research in Creative and Cultural Industries Management (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020).

⁵³ Suzanne G. Cusick and Monica A. Hershberger, eds., “Colloquy: Sexual Violence in Opera: Scholarship, Pedagogy, and Production as Resistance,” *Journal of American Musicological Society* 71, no. 1 (2018), 217, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jams.2018.71.1.213>.

⁵⁴ Cormier, *Rape at the Opera*; Anna Bull, *Class, Control, and Classical Music* (Oxford University Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190844356.001.0001>; Caitlin Vincent, “Staging a Loose Canon: Scripture, Tradition, and Embedded Exclusion in Opera Production,” in *Voices for Change in the Classical Music Profession: New Ideas for Tackling Inequalities and Exclusions*, ed. Anna Bull, Christina Scharff, and Laudan Nooshin (Oxford University Press, 2023), 102–11, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197601211.003.0009>; Kassandra L. Hartford, “Beyond the Trigger Warning: Teaching Operas That Depict Sexual Violence,” *Journal of Music History Pedagogy* 7, no. 1 (2016): 19–34; Bonnie Gordon, “Why We Matter,” *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 19, no. 1 (2015): 116–24, <https://doi.org/10.1353/wam.2015.0012>; Marcia J. Citron, *Gender and the Musical Canon* (Cambridge University Press, 1993); Clément, *Opera, or, The Undoing of Women*.

the implicit and explicit messages we are (re)producing on stage, within the classroom, and within the industry.

Institutionalized authority also manifests in classical music's veneration of the work and composer.⁵⁵ For opera, this reverence is also extended to directors and conductors. All three roles harbor associations with the creative "genius" archetype, whose construction is historically masculine and white coded.⁵⁶ Directors and conductors often hold executive leadership roles in US operatic institutions, giving them decision-making power over the employability of singers. While actively singing and conducting non-standard work around the world, Plácido Domingo held dual executive positions at the Washington National Opera (WNO) (artistic director from 1996–2002; general director from 2003–2011) and LA Opera (artistic director from 2001–2003; general director from 2004–2019). Within classical music, artistic prowess of the "great-man myth" is often used to justify the erasure of transgressions. Reporter A. Z. Madonna says:

Of all the myths and cliches that persist about classical music, the king of them is that liking it, listening to it, or being good at playing it automatically makes you a better person, as if our darkest impulses can be somehow obliterated by its Apollonian beam. And in its composers, conductors, and teachers, classical music continues to lean hard on the great-man myth—they are almost always men, our master Maestros—and brush aside any inconveniences in their biographies, such as sexism or Nazism.⁵⁷

The special protections afforded to the "great-man myth" and the "artistic genius" within classical music functions to separate the art from the artist, by subsuming and effacing their ethical and moral offenses for the greatness of their art. The reverent valuation ascribed to the operatic score and privileged professions, alongside the domination of white cis men in these positions of authority, participates in maintaining a cultural climate where gendered power relations and institutionalized authority prevail.

The blurring of sexual misconduct, work, and sexualization within the opera industry contributes to institutionalized modes of authority and gendered power relations. As American soprano Lauren Flanigan explains, "the problem is so much bigger than Plácido Domingo. It's the whole environment. Almost every rehearsal I was ever in was sexualized—literally every rehearsal."⁵⁸ Within rehearsal spaces, unchallenged, sexualized comments and behaviors foster an environment that tacitly condones and participates in the normalization and acceptance of sexism as a social norm within the industry. This acceptance leads to decreased reporting of sexual misconduct because people mistake "implicit support for the explicit acceptance of sexual behaviors."⁵⁹ Psychologists Prentice and Miller refer to this

⁵⁵ Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*, rev. ed (Oxford University Press, 2007), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195324785.001.0001>; Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (Indiana University Press, 1989), <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350926790>.

⁵⁶ Diana L. Miller, "Gender and the Artist Archetype: Understanding Gender Inequality in Artistic Careers," *Sociology Compass* 10, no. 2 (2016): 119–31, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12350>; Tia DeNora, *Beethoven and the Construction of Genius: Musical Politics in Vienna, 1792–1803* (University of California Press, 1997), <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520920156>; Vincent and Coles, "Unequal Opera-Tunities," 270.

⁵⁷ Madonna, "Classical Music Saw a #MeToo Backlash in 2019."

⁵⁸ "#MeToo Uncovers Sexual Misconduct in Opera, Performers Remain Fearful," *Fox40*, December 29, 2019, <https://fox40.com/news/national-and-world-news/metoo-uncovers-sexual-misconduct-in-opera-performers-remain-fearful/>; in Antonio Cuyler's *Access, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Cultural Organizations*, he interviewed Torrie Allen, former artistic director for Anchorage Opera, as well as vocalist and composer Linda Jackson, then-managing director of Connecticut Opera, who both attested to negotiating shocking levels of sexual harassment. Antonio C. Cuyler, *Access, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in Cultural Organizations*, 55–63.

⁵⁹ Hennekam and Bennett, "Sexual Harassment in the Creative Industries," 429.

socialization phenomenon as pluralistic ignorance.⁶⁰ Many of the women's testimonies against Domingo emphasize a cultural climate where sexism and sexualized commentary and behaviors are recognized as commonplace. For example, an anonymous Spanish soprano attested that Domingo's behavior was well-known in the industry and women were specifically warned, "don't get in a lift with Plácido Domingo."⁶¹ Through experiences such as these, young singers learn and observe what is considered "acceptable" behavior within the industry. Hennekam and Bennett posit that when women are in spaces where sexual harassment is tolerated, they are more likely to accept it as normal.⁶² This learned normalization and invisibilization of sexual misconduct contributes to authorized and gendered hierarchies of power.

Moreover, opera's working spaces often necessitate close physical contact between other opera singers, directors, coaches, voice teachers, stage personnel/technicians, make-up artists, and costumers. Of significance is the staging of intimacy, specifically. As musicologist Margaret Cormier states:

Singers are frequently asked to improvise scenes of intimacy in rehearsal with few if any guidelines given to ensure that all parties are comfortable and safe. This carelessness of approach and lack of oversight is not always harmful, but it can be a perfect storm for harassment and hostile work environments. It is not an exaggeration to say that every woman in the industry I have asked has a story about a time they felt uncomfortable or unsafe in a rehearsal room due to a director's approach to representing intimacy.⁶³

As a former opera singer, I can attest to negotiating directorial approaches to the staging of intimacy in which I felt uncomfortable and powerless to advocate for my own personal boundaries. When directorial approaches ignore power dynamics within the rehearsal space, it opens the door to potential abuses of power. Hennekam and Bennett contend that "intensely physical work can obscure the line between work and sexual harassment, and ambiguities between institutional policy and practice may leave workers unsure of which behaviors should be considered sexual harassment."⁶⁴ Within opera's working spaces, ambiguities of sexualization, work, and sexual misconduct merge in invisible ways that often reinforce power relations and institutionalized authority.

Turning now to Liz Kelly's second criteria for a *conducive context*, my case study on Plácido Domingo explores how gendered authority and institutionalized power within the American opera industry are subject to limited external challenges—and as I will argue, insufficient internal challenges as well. So, to what extent was Domingo's decades-long pattern of abusing power enabled by institutions and power structures? When institutions release statements about their role, in what way do they claim and disclaim responsibility? How did the sociocultural environment within these institutions and their structural policies not only enable his behavior, but protect and help sustain it? I argue that power dynamics, hierarchies within the institution, and hegemonic acceptance of sexism and sexual misconduct, coupled with structural prerogatives to perpetuate a culture of silence and fear, make operatic institutions culpable for the sexual abuses of power by prominent individuals in the industry.

⁶⁰ Deborah A. Prentice and Dale T. Miller, "Pluralistic Ignorance and the Perpetuation of Social Norms by Unwitting Actors," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 28 (1996): 161–209, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601\(08\)60238-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(08)60238-5); Jonathon R. B. Halbesleben, "The Role of Pluralistic Ignorance in the Reporting of Sexual Harassment," *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 31, no. 3 (2009): 210–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01973530903058284>.

⁶¹ Jones, "Spanish Singer Is First to Claim Sexual Assault by Plácido Domingo."

⁶² Hennekam and Bennett, "Sexual Harassment in the Creative Industries," 428.

⁶³ Cormier, *Rape at the Opera*, 145.

⁶⁴ Hennekam and Bennett, "Sexual Harassment in the Creative Industries," 421.

The King of Opera's Star Power

Many of the women's testimonies against Domingo underscore the sociocultural normalization of his behavior within the industry and how opera management casually dismissed, minimized, or ignored those abuses to protect him, and in turn, protect the institution. A mezzo-soprano who worked at LA Opera explains, "there is an oral tradition of warning women against Plácido Domingo." She had been told to avoid interacting with him at all costs and never be alone with him. Singers and administrators would simply "smile and shrug . . . everybody would see me running around to avoid him and laugh it off. That's how everybody dealt with Plácido."⁶⁵ For Domingo's continued behaviors to receive no reprimand, no censure, no serious weight, and remain relatively unimpeded necessitates a cultural acceptance of men's sexual violence against women. This environment serves as a cover for Domingo because his behaviors are tolerated as "harmless," "normal," and "laughable" by those around him—effectively invisibilizing sexual misconduct. Feminist scholar Karen Boyle asserts that "it has become something of a cliché of stories about celebrity abusers to note that they hid "in plain sight," that is, that they—and those around them—publicly acknowledged aspects of their abusive behavior, providing the conducive context in which it could flourish."⁶⁶

Domingo's star power and the economic capital opera companies could garner may have hindered their motivation to see/act on his abuses of power. Crowned "King of Opera" by *Newsweek* in 1982, Domingo's household-name status in the US was cultivated through his operatic performances, recordings, television features, paid promotional appearances, conducting, outreach, philanthropy, as well as his public visibility.⁶⁷ On the eve of the FIFA World Cup soccer games in 1990, tenors Domingo, Luciano Pavarotti, José Carreras and conductor Zubin Mehta performed a charity concert that birthed The Three Tenors and was viewed by millions around the world. The concert's album won the Grammy Award for Best Classical Vocal Performance in 1991 and remains one of the best-selling classical albums (10.5 million sales) to date.⁶⁸ As ethnomusicologist Timothy Taylor argues in *Music and Capitalism*, the latter half of the twentieth century saw an increased reliance on stars in cultural productions.⁶⁹ Domingo's ability to sell out performances highlights the economic assurance that opera houses could rely on in unstable markets for revenue. Unlike Europe, where arts organizations receive substantial governmental support, US federal funding of the arts is limited. Arts administrator Michael Kaiser notes that American government support (federal, state, and local) for the arts plummeted 31% in inflation-adjusted dollars between 1992 and 2012.⁷⁰ Instead, US opera houses are supported by ticket sales, fundraising, grants, merchandising, and donors (individual, corporate, and foundation). American opera companies are financially accountable to their boards, shareholders, and donors such that "if the donors are unhappy, the not-so-veiled threat goes, then the organization could be in danger of insolvency."⁷¹ Domingo's name on

⁶⁵ Gecker, "Women Accuse Opera Legend Domingo of Sexual Harassment."

⁶⁶ Karen Boyle, *#MeToo, Weinstein and Feminism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 78, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-28243-1>.

⁶⁷ Plácido Domingo, "Newsweek Crowns Domingo 'The King of Opera,'" accessed February 13, 2025, <https://www.placidodomingo.com/newsweek-crowns-domingo-the-king-of-opera>; Michael M. Kaiser, *Curtains? The Future of the Arts in America* (Brandeis University Press, 2015), 40–41, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv102bdhf>.

⁶⁸ "Best-Selling Album of Classical Music," Guinness World Records, accessed September 20, 2024, <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/70135-best-selling-album-of-classical-music.html>; Plácido Domingo, "Timeline - Plácido Domingo," accessed February 13, 2025, <https://www.placidodomingo.com/timeline>.

⁶⁹ Timothy D. Taylor, *Music and Capitalism: A History of the Present*, Big Issues in Music (University of Chicago Press, 2016), 51, <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226312026.001.0001>.

⁷⁰ Kaiser, *Curtains?*, 31.

⁷¹ Kaiser, *Curtains?*, 24.

a production generates revenue in a manner that is unmatched by any of the young singers who came forward against him. Thus, the economic incentives to hire Domingo and support his reputation and star status reflect an institutionalized exchange of capital that serves to protect both the institution's economic interests and those they deem valuable to them.

The enduring endemic of star worship combined with institutionalized authority privileges those in positions of power a shield from criticism, a means of evading accountability, a network of institutionalized support, and an aura of legitimacy that is not afforded to others. In 1998, a 27-year-old singer met Domingo at a rehearsal at LA Opera. He immediately began calling her at home saying, "I'm going to talk to you as the future artistic director of the company" and discussed possible roles for her, then he would lower his voice and say, 'Now I'm going to talk to you as Plácido.'" During one of his frequent, uninvited visits to her dressing room, he leaned forward to kiss her on the cheek and placed a hand on her breast. The young singer recalled, "I was totally intimidated and felt like saying no to him would be saying no to God. How do you say no to God?" Later Domingo coerced her to his apartment for champagne to celebrate their performance. In that moment, she had "a feeling of impending doom [that] I wasn't going to have an opera career if I didn't give in. I felt like prey. I felt like I was being hunted by him."⁷² By 1998, Domingo had been LA Opera's artistic advisor since the 1980s, and as he himself stated, would soon be "the future artistic director of the company." He had sung at the Barcelona Summer Olympics (1992), won Spain's Premio Príncipe de Asturias (1991), and had been named artistic director of WNO (1996). In sociologist Anna Bull's examination of higher education music institutions, she recognizes that relations of power are shaped by inequalities of age, gender, expertise, charisma, and institutional role.⁷³ Thirty years the young woman's senior, Domingo wielded significantly higher levels of cultural and symbolic capital. His knowledge of the industry, international acclaim, and institutional role as LA Opera's future artistic director drastically heightened the power imbalances between the two singers, exhibited by her reference to Domingo as "God" and herself as "prey."⁷⁴ Domingo's ability to enter her dressing room, repeatedly and unbidden, demonstrates the privileging of institutional spaces. Her dressing room was not hers as he could enter it *whenever he wanted*. As Bull argues, hierarchies work to create a shared understanding of who is deemed valuable and who is not within an institution.⁷⁵ These invisible institutional structures of power relations reinforce a system that allows for continued abuses of power.

Opera companies and powerful actors within the industry also have a responsibility to critically respond to allegations of sexual misconduct that account for invisibilized power relations and institutionalized authority. In the immediate aftermath of the accusations levied against Domingo, few US opera administrators publicly expressed their opinions; contrastingly, a significant number of opera singers and public figures from around the world did come forward in his defense. One of the most vocal advocates was pop opera singer Andrea Bocelli, who contends that it is essential to differentiate the artist from their art. He is "still appalled at what happened to this incredible artist," adding, "there have been in

⁷² Gecker, "Women Accuse Opera Legend Domingo of Sexual Harassment."

⁷³ Bull, *Power Relations and Hierarchies in Higher Music Education Institutions*, 4.

⁷⁴ Patricia Wulf spoke of Domingo in similar terms: "you have to understand that when a man that powerful—he is almost like God in my business . . . you also think as soon as you walk away and get away, 'Did I just ruin my career?'" Gecker, "Women Accuse Opera Legend Domingo of Sexual Harassment."

⁷⁵ Bull, *Power Relations and Hierarchies in Higher Music Education Institutions*, 2–3.

the past many artists who had dubious morality.”⁷⁶ Creative media and journalism scholar Stefania Marghitu terms the call to separate the art from the artist *auteur apologism*. She argues it “pervades as a power dynamic in popular discourse, ultimately resisting and obfuscating any reckoning for the male genius-artist accused of abuse.”⁷⁷ Bocelli engages *auteur apologism* to rationalize Domingo’s alleged misconduct, burying it under Domingo’s esteemed position as an “incredible artist.” Additionally, this logic undermines the necessity for accountability regarding any alleged wrongdoings because it aligns with an established history of doing so in the music industry already. Moreover, Bocelli’s defense of Domingo also functions as form of *himpathy*.⁷⁸ For example, he continues, “Tomorrow a lady can just come up and say, ‘Andrea Bocelli molested me 10 years ago,’ and from that day on, no one wants to sing with me anymore; the opera houses won’t call me anymore. This is absurd.”⁷⁹ Bocelli defends Domingo against allegations of misconduct by challenging the reliability of the women’s testimonies and expressing concern (and sympathy) over what he perceives as a testimonial injustice directed at men who believe they are entitled to certain privileges of presumed credibility within a patriarchal framework. This manifestation of misogyny serves to safeguard powerful men from losing their positions of authority. Taking into consideration the relationship between often-overlooked power dynamics, institutionalized authority, and allegations of sexual misconduct, opera companies and influential figures bear a responsibility to critically engage with the weaponization of *auteur apologism* and *himpathy*.

The Act of Silencing

Institutional efforts to regulate knowledge and narratives surrounding sexual misconduct by legally suppressing information adversely affect survivors, potential victims, and the broader industry as a whole. The same day AGMA released its investigative report, information leaked about a closed-door negotiation. AGMA leaders had been negotiating an agreement calling for Domingo to pay the union a \$500,000 fine, issue a public apology, take mandatory sexual harassment training, and agree to an 18-month suspension from the union, “premised on AGMA’s promise to maintain confidentiality over the details” of the investigation.⁸⁰ Researchers Tiffany Page, Anna Bull, and Emma Chapman, all co-founders of the 1752 Group,⁸¹ argue that non-disclosure agreements “inhibit public knowledge and media reporting of such incidents, and rather than protecting employees or students or fulfilling legal data protection requirements, NDAs appear to be used to protect an institution’s reputation.”⁸² The near commitment of AGMA to uphold confidentiality regarding the specifics of Domingo’s sexual misconduct may have inadvertently restricted their capacity to share valuable insights with other opera companies, employees, industry professionals, and researchers concerning the ways in which Domingo exploited his authority, hindering our understanding of how to prevent these (ab)uses of power in the future. Furthermore, Domingo’s prominence and his capacity to transition between non-standard work suggest that there are

⁷⁶ David Walsh, “Opera Singer Plácido Domingo Defends Himself Against Sexual Harassment Allegations,” *World Socialist Web Site*, December 5, 2019, <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2019/12/05/domi-d05.html>.

⁷⁷ Stefania Marghitu, “‘It’s Just Art’: Auteur Apologism in the Post-Weinstein Era,” *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 3 (2018), 492, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1456158>.

⁷⁸ Manne, *Down Girl*, 196–205.

⁷⁹ Walsh, “Opera Singer Plácido Domingo Defends Himself Against Sexual Harassment Allegations.”

⁸⁰ Jocelyn Gecker, “Plácido Domingo Apology Prompts New Accuser to Step Forward,” *Associated Press*, February 25, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/f3130ff6f371134a8e626e82e45509d0>.

⁸¹ The 1752 Group is a UK-based research and advocacy organization combatting sexual misconduct in higher education.

⁸² Page, Bull, and Chapman, “Making Power Visible,” 10.

minimal repercussions for his actions if information remains suppressed within institutional frameworks. We are witnessing this reality in real time as Domingo continues to receive accolades and contractual work in the industry. To this day, neither AGMA nor LA Opera have disclosed their full reports to the public.⁸³

Operatic institutions also benefit from effective cultural silencing mechanisms that impede sexual misconduct survivors from disclosing their experiences. In 1999, 20-year-old soprano Luz del Alba Rubio was hired to perform at WNO by her childhood idol, Plácido Domingo. However, the then-artistic director started incessantly calling her late at night and kissing her “too close to her lips.” One night, he invited her to his apartment under the pretext that they would review a video of her singing. He began kissing her and she pushed him away saying, “Maestro, I cannot do this.” Rubio confirmed that she was never hired again to work at WNO, and the roles Domingo promised her never actualized.⁸⁴ While both AGMA’s and LA Opera’s investigations did not uncover evidence of a quid pro quo arrangement, many accounts from survivors attest to Domingo’s use of offering future job opportunities, career development, and occupational advice as means to isolate them.⁸⁵ In the 2018 and 2022 reports conducted by the Incorporated Society of Musicians, over 75% of participants chose not to disclose their experiences of sexual misconduct. Their foremost reasons included concerns about job security and future employability, fear of not being taken seriously, and the widespread normalization of such behavior within the industry’s culture.⁸⁶ In a field where success is predicated on patronage, generational wealth, and personal connections as much as artistry, Domingo’s capacity to offer future opportunities sows significant pressure for many survivors, ensuring their silence through a fear of repercussions. Moreover, Domingo’s public image and philanthropic efforts endear him to audiences and the operatic community; the persona he cultivates stands in stark contrast to his sexual misconduct both within and outside the workplace, thereby undermining the credibility of survivors who dare to come forward. Domingo founded Operalia, an internationally recognized annual voice competition designed to help start the careers of many young opera singers in 1993. He also features on family-oriented television programs like *Sesame Street* (alongside Muppet opera star Plácido Domingo), *The Cosby Show*, *Dora the Explorer*, as well as *The David Letterman Show*, *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*, *The Simpsons*, and *Dancing with the Stars*.⁸⁷ Domingo’s public persona as a family-oriented philanthropist who supports emerging singers and his institutionalized authority serve as cultural barriers that discourage survivors from sharing their experiences.

Operatic institutions profited from a culture of silence that enabled them to assert legal ignorance and, consequently, deny accountability. Washington Opera, where Domingo reigned as artistic director and later general director from 1996–2011, issued a statement saying it has “zero tolerance” for harassment but did not receive any “documented complaints” about Domingo’s behavior during his 15 years at the

⁸³ I am not advocating for the full disclosure of survivor’s names and identities, as their anonymity is vital for their protection.

⁸⁴ Gecker, “Plácido Domingo Apology Prompts New Accuser to Step Forward.”

⁸⁵ Gecker and Noveck, “Singer Says Opera’s Domingo Harassed Her, Grabbed Her Breast”; Gecker, “Women Accuse Opera Legend Domingo of Sexual Harassment.” The summary of LA Opera’s investigation statement confirmed: “Gibson Dunn interviewed numerous individuals involved in the casting process at LA Opera. Based on those and other interviews, Gibson Dunn found no evidence that Mr. Domingo ever engaged in a quid pro quo or retaliated against any woman by not casting or otherwise hiring her at LA Opera, especially since casting and other hiring decisions are complex, performance-specific and determined by multiple people.” “LA Opera Independent Investigation: Summary of Findings and Recommendations.”

⁸⁶ Incorporated Society of Musicians, *Dignity at Work: A Survey of Discrimination in the Music Sector* (Incorporated Society of Musicians, 2018), https://www.ism.org/images/images/ISM_Dignity-at-work-April-2018.pdf; Williams and Bain, *Dignity at Work 2: Discrimination in the Music Sector*.

⁸⁷ Plácido Domingo, “Plácido Everywhere in Popular Culture,” accessed February 13, 2025, <https://www.placidodomingo.com/placido-everywhere>.

company.⁸⁸ After merging with Washington National Opera in 2011, the Kennedy Center “did not receive any documented complaints about Mr. Domingo’s behavior prior to WNO’s affiliation with the Kennedy Center, and we have not received any since then.”⁸⁹ After being asked if AGMA was aware of Domingo’s behavior, national executive director Leonard Egert stated, “AGMA did not receive complaints from its members prior to the recent news report.”⁹⁰ Language, here, is key. Because no formal complaints were ever documented, operatic institutions could legally claim their innocence and evade responsibility for their (in)actions. Here, the dearth of complaints acts as a shielding mechanism for institutions to justify their ignorance of the problem. In Susan Oman and Anna Bull’s examination of higher education policies regarding sexual misconduct, they argue that institutions “have created bodies of knowledge that systematically foreground evidence that the [institution] is policy compliant, but that exclude lack of care.”⁹¹ Several anonymous individuals who worked in the costume department of LA Opera confirmed that Domingo’s backstage behavior was common knowledge and that management had been aware of it for years. One employee said, “I was told by my direct boss that they avoided sending any sort of attractive young woman into a fitting with him because of his behavior.”⁹² Couched in the language of protection, the boss’s warning operates as an evasive measure to limit damage to Domingo and the institution through their inaction of never filing a formal complaint. And as Ahmed argues:

how a complaint is treated is also about how those who abuse power are not made responsible for abuses of power; how a complaint is treated is how abuse itself is minimized or reduced and made the responsibility of the abused, as if abuse would just disappear if those who are abused did not let it appear.⁹³

John Shortell, head of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion for UK Musicians’ Union, explains “one of the things we struggle with is that some organizations who we contact about reports of sexual harassment will not tackle higher-profile people that they employ; they just don’t want to hear it and the problem isn’t dealt with.”⁹⁴ These narratives highlight the lacuna between institutional responses released to the public and their internal policy frameworks regarding sexual misconduct. As Oman and Bull note, institutional structures often lack accessible, care-policy processes, are unwilling to enact institutional policy changes, and occasionally, actively block individuals from reporting.⁹⁵ By continually working with, promoting, and condoning authority to Domingo, despite his known proclivities, operatic companies show that they value Domingo’s social, cultural, economic, and symbolic capital more than any of these young women.

⁸⁸ David Salazar, “Washington National Opera Makes Statement Regarding Plácido Domingo Investigation,” *Opera Wire*, February 25, 2020, <https://operawire.com/washington-national-opera-makes-statement-regarding-placido-domingo-investigation/>.

⁸⁹ Gecker, “Concerts Canceled, Investigation Opened into Plácido Domingo.”

⁹⁰ Jocelyn Gecker and Jocelyn Noveck, “LA Opera Declines Details on Plácido Domingo Investigation,” *Associated Press*, August 17, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/66e44ca08daf4b799a4c29758a0920dc>.

⁹¹ Susan Oman and Anna Bull, “Joining Up Well-Being and Sexual Misconduct Data and Policy in HE: ‘To Stand in the Gap’ as a Feminist Approach,” *The Sociological Review* 70, no. 1 (2022), 26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00380261211049024>.

⁹² Gecker and Noveck, “Singer Says Opera’s Domingo Harassed Her, Grabbed Her Breast.”

⁹³ Sara Ahmed, “A Complaint Biography,” *Biography* 42, no. 3 (2019): 518, <https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2019.0057>.

⁹⁴ John Shortell, “‘A Community of 30,000 Musicians Behind You’: An Interview with John Shortell from the UK Musicians’ Union,” in *Voices for Change in the Classical Music Profession: New Ideas for Tackling Inequalities and Exclusions*, ed. Anna Bull, Christina Scharff, and Laudan Nooshin (Oxford University Press, 2023), 292, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197601211.003.0027>.

⁹⁵ Oman and Bull, “Joining Up Well-Being and Sexual Misconduct Data and Policy in HE,” 31.

In the Dominion of Fear and Silence

Domingo's abuses of power are also enabled by strategic inefficiencies within opera's workplace structures, like those found in Human Resource (HR) policies. In "A Complaint Biography," a preliminary investigation into the performativity of diversity policy-making processes in higher education, Sara Ahmed argues:

if a complaint is made, it tends to be treated as potential damage, as that which could damage the reputation of an individual or an organization. There is often a concerted effort to stop a complaint from going through the system or to stop a complaint from getting out.⁹⁶

A costume employee, who described narrowly avoiding a kiss on the lips, said she reported it to a supervisor who told her to *avoid being alone* with Domingo; no further action was taken.⁹⁷ This is representative of a complaint falling "into the gap"—a process through which there are many planned failure points.⁹⁸ While supervisors and management may experience uncertainty in addressing allegations of sexual misconduct, the insufficient understanding of HR policies, the absence of transparency regarding complaint processes, the procedural ambiguities in continuing to communicate with survivors once a complaint is filed, and the prevailing cultural acceptance of sexualized behaviors and remarks contribute to the consistent underreporting of sexual misconduct in the opera industry.⁹⁹ In LA Opera's investigative report:

Gibson Dunn found that, while management took complaints of sexual harassment seriously and addressed each one in some manner, the structure, process, and documentation relating to sexual harassment in earlier years had been too informal and at times inconsistent. They found several flaws in the manner in which LA Opera implemented its policies, procedures, and communications regarding sexual harassment.¹⁰⁰

The informalities and inconsistencies that Gibson Dunn emphasize reflect what Ahmed describes as "strategic inefficiencies" and "non-performative" systems which claim to support zero-tolerance policy for sexual misconduct and other duties of care, yet merely perpetuate the existing status quo in protection of the institution.¹⁰¹ It becomes evident that without a fundamental restructuring of these systems and a genuine commitment to accountability, the cycle of abuse and silence within the opera industry is likely to persist.

Limited US governance regarding sexual misconduct aids in perpetuating abuses of power, a problem exacerbated especially in industries characterized by institutionalized authority and stark gendered power relations, like the opera world. Importantly, the federal law on discrimination has a 180-day (300-day with an extension) statute of limitations for Title VII and Title IX claims.¹⁰² This is too short. The statute of limitations expires long before survivors have time to process their traumas or post-traumatic stresses.

⁹⁶ Ahmed, "A Complaint Biography," 515.

⁹⁷ Gecker and Noveck, "Singer Says Opera's Domingo Harassed Her, Grabbed Her Breast."

⁹⁸ Oman and Bull, "Joining Up Well-Being and Sexual Misconduct Data and Policy in HE," 30–31.

⁹⁹ Ahmed has written extensively on the serious problem regarding the inaccessibility of complaint policies. For more information, see Sara Ahmed, "Strategic Inefficiency," *Feminist Killjoys* (blog), December 20, 2018, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2018/12/20/strategic-inefficiency/>; Ahmed, "A Complaint Biography"; Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!* (Duke University Press, 2021); Ahmed, *On Being Included*.

¹⁰⁰ "LA Opera Independent Investigation: Summary of Findings and Recommendations."

¹⁰¹ Ahmed, *Complaint!*, 91–97; Ahmed, "Strategic Inefficiency."

¹⁰² US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, "Time Limits For Filing A Charge," accessed September 24, 2024, <https://www.eeoc.gov/time-limits-filing-charge>.

Additionally, most investigations are conducted “in-house.” As US legal scholar Catharine MacKinnon argues:

Processes for investigating and interrogating sexual violation in most settings remain within the chain of command of the institution that is, in essence, or sees itself as, being investigated, rather than being independent. In any other setting, this would be called corruption. Transparency is not the usual rule here. Secrecy is, protecting organisational brand. In any other context this would be understood as a cover-up.¹⁰³

MacKinnon critiques the legal and procedural frameworks established for the investigation of sexual misconduct, highlighting the inherent conflicts of interest that arise when institutions are permitted to conduct self-examinations. Contrastingly, both LA Opera and AGMA opened independent investigations regarding the allegations against Domingo; this helps to remove potential power imbalances and biases within these processes. Because, as MacKinnon aptly points out, the conflation of investigative authority with institutional governance fosters an environment where transparency is sacrificed for the sake of organizational reputation, effectively enabling a culture of secrecy and potential cover-ups. This systemic issue necessitates a reevaluation of both legal frameworks and institutional practices to ensure that survivors are cared for and supported.

US governmental policies regarding non-profit organizations also offer minimal external challenge to institutionalized authority and patriarchal entitlement concerning sexual misconduct in the opera industry. Sexual harassment, as defined by the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), is considered unlawful when it creates a hostile working environment or in cases of quid pro quo. However, sexual misconduct often manifests in forms that do not meet the legal criteria yet still warrant organizational intervention. In their research on sexual harassment in the US nonprofit organization sector, public administration researchers Yinglin Ma and Erynn Beaton and political science scholar Abhishek Bhati argue:

Because employers are legally obligated to provide a safe workplace, the EEOC recommends that all organizations adopt a policy that prohibits harassment. In nonprofits, it is the combined responsibility of the executive staff and board to develop and implement such a policy. However, it is the board's governance task to formally adopt a policy and hold the organization accountable to it.¹⁰⁴

Importantly, most opera houses in the US are classified as 501(c)(3) non-profit organizations (NPOs). Washington National Opera and LA Opera have been registered NPOs since 1958 and 1960, respectively. As Ma et al. argue, the EEOC only *recommends* that NPOs establish policies on sexual misconduct within their organizations; it cannot legally enforce it. Instead, the power to orchestrate and enact these policies resides with the board and executive members within these companies.¹⁰⁵ As the 1752 Group argue, “it is often the case that institutions act only when forced, for example through media attention or legal challenges, or when incentivized by funding and leadership from sector organizations.”¹⁰⁶ Increasing governance pressures, incentivization, and external demands like the #MeToo movement aid in holding opera’s leadership and executive boards accountable to developing and enacting policies on sexual

¹⁰³ MacKinnon, “Global #MeToo,” 45.

¹⁰⁴ Yinglin Ma, Erynn E. Beaton, and Abhishek Bhati, “Sexual Harassment Policies in Nonprofits,” *Nonprofit Management and Leadership* 33, no. 2 (2022): 412, <https://doi.org/10.1002/nml.21526>.

¹⁰⁵ Ma, Beaton, and Bhati, 412–413.

¹⁰⁶ Page, Bull, and Chapman, “Making Power Visible,” 12.

misconduct within the industry. For example, the Sarbanes-Oxley Act (2002) added three written governance clauses affecting NPOs: whistleblower, conflict-of-interest, and document retention policies.¹⁰⁷ Accounting experts Gregory Saxton and Daniel Neely saw an increase in the adoption of these policies in the NPO sector since 2002.¹⁰⁸ We need a clause requiring sexual misconduct policies too. The lack of legal enforcement mechanisms for NPOs indicates a gap in accountability that perpetuates a culture of silence and complicity regarding sexual misconduct.

AGMA also plays an integral role in providing external challenges to abuses of power in the opera industry; moving forward, AGMA is actively positioning itself as a counterforce to opera companies' (in)actions regarding sexual misconduct. AGMA established their sexual harassment policy and confidential reporting system in May 2015. The services they offer include

reviewing allegations; interviewing witnesses; accompanying members on interviews; reviewing contract language and applicable protections; contacting management; filing grievances; negotiating settlements; referring members to legal experts and ensuring that members receive appropriate counseling.¹⁰⁹

In 2018, they enhanced their employer harassment policies through collective bargaining agreements with signatory companies, mandating the inclusion of anti-harassment training and the establishment of sexual misconduct policies and practices.¹¹⁰ For instance, a new clause in their Guest Artist Agreement stipulates that signatory companies must furnish artists with the organizations' sexual misconduct policies and provide guidance on whom to contact for filing a complaint.¹¹¹ While this represents progress, AGMA's influence is constrained by the limited number of signatory companies and its membership base. The United States is home to more than 150 opera houses, yet only 32 of these are recognized as signatory companies.¹¹² Additionally, emerging artists are often not yet members of AGMA, which means they lack access to the union's resources, policies, and protections. Increasing the number of signatory companies and in turn encouraging young artists to join the union earlier in their careers will enhance the collective power to address unethical behaviors and foster a culture of accountability.

It's Not Over: Taking Responsibility

While Domingo's actions are his responsibility, operatic institutions share in the blame for structurally enabling his behavior and protecting it behind a veil of silence, fear, control, and opacity. And after decades of exposés recounting sexual abuse within the classical music industry and years of purposefully hidden knowledges of known predators, we cannot trust the outpouring of institutional

¹⁰⁷ While the Sarbanes-Oxley Act was primarily designed to enhance accountability and transparency in publicly traded companies following significant financial scandals, its implications extend to NPOs.

¹⁰⁸ Gregory D. Saxton and Daniel G. Neely, "The Relationship Between Sarbanes-Oxley Policies and Donor Advisories in Nonprofit Organizations," *Journal of Business Ethics* 158, no. 2 (2019): 349, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-018-3843-0>.

¹⁰⁹ American Guild of Musical Artists, "AGMA Is Committed to Stamping Out Sexual Harassment in Opera, Dance and Choral Concert Fields—American Guild of Musical Artists," July 23, 2018, <https://www.musicalartists.org/agma-committed-stamping-out-sexual-harassment-opera-dance-choral-concert-fields/>.

¹¹⁰ American Guild of Musical Artists, "AGMA Anti-Sexual Harassment Policy," accessed February 13, 2025, <http://musicalartists.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/AGMA-AntiSexual-Harassment-Policy-FINAL3.29.2021.pdf>.

¹¹¹ American Guild of Musical Artists, "AGMA Is Committed to Stamping Out Sexual Harassment in Opera, Dance and Choral Concert Fields—American Guild of Musical Artists."

¹¹² American Guild of Musical Artists, "Signatories—American Guild of Musical Artists," accessed September 25, 2024, <https://www.musicalartists.org/about-agma/signatories/>.

pledges promising “zero tolerance” and other neoliberal performances of care. Turning to feminist radical care and collective action, we—as a society—must stretch outside the bounds of institutional frameworks. Combatting sexual misconduct in the UK’s higher education systems, the 1752 Group propose a multi-faceted approach to activism. They advocate for localized grassroots activism, institutionalized activism, professional lobbying, direct action, and community-based strategies to foster change and counteract institutional resistances to confronting sexual misconduct.¹¹³ Regarding institutions, they caution:

The presence of an ‘institutional solution’ can, in this way, have the impact of closing down discussion. By contrast, we are aiming for sector guidelines and policy that are informed by research and by the survivor experience, and this takes time. Solutions will also need to change over time, and this might mean, for example, that policy needs to be updated on a yearly basis, or that complaints procedures should be regularly audited to identify blockages to reporting.¹¹⁴

Institutional change, much like sociocultural change, takes time. And as scholarship on sexual misconduct and its prevention continues expanding, it becomes essential to regularly revise and update institutional policies and continue to act on them. Visibilizing power structures, gendered relations, and institutionalized authority is essential to combatting sexual misconduct and changing the opera industry’s *conducive context*. Researchers suggest implementing sexual misconduct training and education, ensuring accountability for institutions and perpetrators, employing intimacy choreographers, promoting DEI initiatives, and achieving diverse representation in decision-making roles within opera houses. They also advocate for encouraging bystander intervention, supporting survivors in coming forward by providing a safe, supportive space, facilitating reporting processes while maintaining an open communication with survivors, actively pursuing investigations while accounting for power relations and institutionalized authority, enhancing transparency, providing care, and actively listening to marginalized communities within the opera industry. But until these institutions can dismantle their systems of oppression, they are culpable for the sexual abuses of power by authorized men in the industry.

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¹¹³ Page, Bull, and Chapman, “Making Power Visible,” 2–3.

¹¹⁴ Page, Bull, and Chapman, “Making Power Visible,” 11–12.

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