

Fashion Designers at the Opera

Helena Matheopoulos



Thames & Hudson

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HELENA MATHEOPOULOS

With 202 illustrations, 195 in colour



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Helena Matheopoulos is a writer and lecturer on the subjects of fashion and opera, and has been special adviser on several operatic productions. International Editor-at-Large for Greek *Vogue* and a regular contributor to *The Times*, *Gramophone* and *Opera Now*, she has published several books, including *Maestro: Encounters with Conductors of Today*, *Bravo: Today's Tenors*, *Baritones and Basses Discuss Their Roles*, *Diva: Today's Sopranos and Mezzos Discuss Their Art*, *Diva: The New Generation* and *Plácido Domingo: My Roles in Opera*. She lives in London.

Cover

Front: Sketch made by Christian Lacroix for Attilia in Francesco Cavalli's *Eliogabalo* at the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie, Brussels, 2004. Courtesy Christian Lacroix and Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie. Back: Soprano Juliane Banse as Agathe, wearing Viktor & Rolf's 'Bouquet' dress in Robert Wilson's production of Carl Maria von Weber's *Der Freischütz*, Baden-Baden, 2009. Photo Lesley Leslie-Spinks.

p. 1 Sketch made by Christian Lacroix for Helena Matheopoulos of a silk faille dress, overlaid with gold lace and copper lamé, and with velvet belt, designed for Teresa Berganza for the Bastille Day Gala in Paris, 14 July 1989; pp. 2–3 The unnamed woman in Arnold Schoenberg's *Erwartung*, conducted by Claudio Abbado, with costumes by Giorgio Armani, La Scala, Milan, 1980–81; pp. 4–5 Scene from Richard Strauss's *Salome*, produced by Robert Wilson, with costumes by Gianni Versace, La Scala, Milan, 1987; right Renée Fleming in a costume by Christian Lacroix for a gala performance of an act from *La traviata*, Metropolitan Opera, New York, 2009.

First published in the United Kingdom in 2011
by Thames & Hudson Ltd, 181A High Holborn,
London WC1V 7QX

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the
British Library

ISBN 978-0-500-51576-1

Printed and bound in China by C&C Offset Printing Co Ltd

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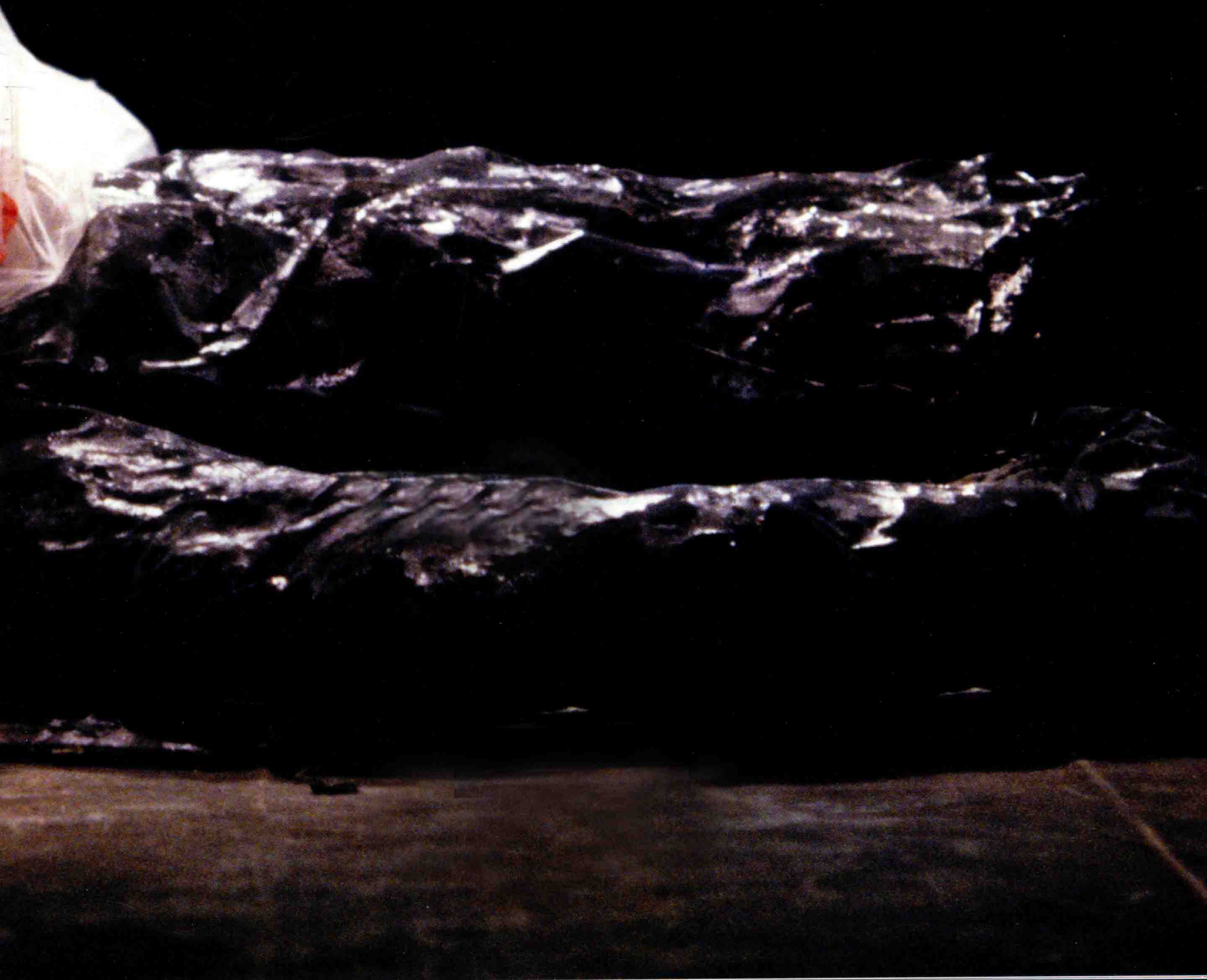




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*To the memory of Dominique de Borchgrave,
unique, unforgettable – and equally clothesaholic – friend*



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INTRODUCTION

‘It’s called creative tension and it’s what happens when the worlds of opera and fashion collide!’

These words were published in the UK *Sunday Times* newspaper in 1995, a few days before the premiere of *Così fan tutte* that marked Sir Jonathan Miller’s eagerly awaited Covent Garden debut, featuring costumes designed by Giorgio Armani.

This electrifying and rewarding collision has occurred more and more frequently in recent years, with fashion designers *en masse* falling in love with opera. ‘Opera makes your spirit and mind soar... Maybe this is what I should do if I wasn’t already in my dream job!’ enthused John Galiano, who produced some stunning costumes for the celebrated American soprano Renée Fleming to wear at a Metropolitan Opera gala in 2008. Gianni Versace concurred, noting, ‘You can sing with designs on stage.’ He was evidently right, because in 2009 and 2010 alone Tom Ford, Christian Lacroix, Miuccia Prada, Emanuel Ungaro and Viktor & Rolf made successful sorties as costumiers for high-profile operatic productions across the globe.

‘It’s been my experience that fashion designers love designing for the stage and for opera,’ commented Renée Fleming, ‘because we are highly theatrical... I have to remind people that the word “diva” originated with us in the nineteenth century. It just means “goddess”... and who wouldn’t want to dress a goddess?’

However, unlike the long tradition linking fashion with the ballet, dating back to the 1920s and Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, the love affair between fashion and opera is a comparatively recent phenomenon. There was the odd exception in the early twentieth century, with Lucile, for example, designing spectacular costumes in London for *The Merry Widow*. But it was not until 1980 that the collaboration began in earnest, with Karl Lagerfeld producing the costumes for *Les Contes d’Hoffmann* at the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino, and Giorgio Armani for *Erwartung* at La Scala. Two years later, Lagerfeld designed *Les Troyens*, also at La Scala. In 1983 Ottavio and Rosita Missoni created the costumes for a very ‘Scottish’ production of *Lucia di Lammermoor* at La Scala and the Grand Théâtre de Genève. The following year, again for La Scala, Gianni Versace produced designs for *Don Pasquale*. Around the same time, Marc Bohan, then Creative Director of Dior, was designing *Orfeo ed Euridice* in Monte Carlo. Within a few years, Christian Lacroix, one of the most theatrical and operatically erudite of designers, had followed suit with *Carmen* at the Arènes de Nîmes.

By the turn of the millennium, Zandra Rhodes had begun her expansion into the field with costumes for *The Magic Flute* at San Diego. By the end of the 2010 season, Emanuel Ungaro had designed the costumes for two productions – *La Damnation de Faust* and *La clemenza di Tito* – at the Teatro San Carlo in Naples; Viktor & Rolf had been chosen by the director Robert Wilson for his magical staging of *Der Freischütz* at Baden-Baden; Tom Ford, formerly Creative Director of Gucci and now a distinguished film director, had designed the costumes for the world premiere of *The Letter*, based on a novella by Somerset Maugham, at the Santa Fe Opera Festival; and Miuccia Prada had

OPPOSITE Renée Fleming in the title role of the Metropolitan Opera production of Jules Massenet’s *Thaïs*, New York, 2009, with costumes designed by Christian Lacroix.



made her first foray into opera with a production of *Attila* in no less a venue than the Metropolitan Opera in New York. In 2010, meanwhile, Christian Lacroix, who had been a constant presence on the operatic stage for well over a decade, designed a highly acclaimed production of *Agrippina* for the Berlin State Opera, with *Candide* in the pipeline for Berlin, *Aida* for Cologne and *Carmen* for Stockholm. Emanuel Ungaro, meantime, has been preparing *La traviata* for the historic, newly restored Teatro Petruzzelli in Bari.

Opera is undoubtedly the new favourite, among fashion designers both of haute couture and ready to wear. Their involvement with this most 'theatrical' of arts seems to be gaining momentum every year, parallel to their extensive involvement in the pop music industry. But, diva worship apart, what lies behind this new trend? Why, in a fashion world dominated and influenced by 'rock chick chic', are so many designers tempted to the operatic stage, some on a regular and others on a one-off basis? What is the appeal of this magical art form for designers as disparate as Giorgio Armani, who thinks that 'less is more', and the late Gianni Versace, who thought that 'less is a snore'?

The principal reason is the revolution that has radically transformed both fashion and opera and narrowed the borderline between the two worlds. The past quarter-century has seen the steady transformation of fashion into 'costume' in terms of inspiration, and 'shows' in terms of display. Unlike the couture presentations of yesteryear, which aimed to sell real-life clothes to real women, today's fashion shows resemble themed theatrical spectacles and brim with extravagant, 'fantasy' clothes, often indistinguishable from costumes and sometimes not meant to be worn, or even manufactured.

The past forty or so years, meanwhile, have seen the total transformation of opera as an art form. The 'Callas Revolution' turned opera into believable theatre and enabled it to survive and even thrive in an era dominated by cinematic criteria of dramatic credibility by making it attractive to younger audiences. Until the advent of Maria Callas (and directors such as Luchino Visconti and Wieland Wagner), opera was vocally resplendent but usually dramatically ridiculous. The Callas Revolution changed beyond recognition the very nature of operatic interpretation and, through Callas's own transformation into a sylph, the physical appearance of opera singers. Gone are the 'fat ladies' of old, whose looks precluded any serious scenic acting or identification with their roles. In the last thirty years they have been replaced by a new generation of divas – Renée Fleming, Angela Gheorghiu, Susan Graham, Joyce DiDonato, Nina Stemme, Anna Netrebko, Natalie Dessay and Danielle de Niese, to name but a few – who look as beautiful as they sound. They could easily double as film stars, and are thus able to tempt fashion designers to the operatic stage. As John Galliano said of Fleming: 'She is such an inspiring, vibrant, exciting performer! I love the energy and cool she is bringing to opera. Her voice with its whole palette of colours, emotions and tones...made me want to create something bold, vivacious, sensual and capricious.'

It goes without saying, of course, that each designer also has personal reasons for their involvement in opera. Some, such as Christian Lacroix, Emanuel Ungaro and Marc Bohan, were opera lovers from a young age. Others, including Zandra Rhodes, came to it much later and initially accepted the challenge because they appreciated the 'wider canvas' that opera offered compared to fashion. Working in opera allows the designers' creative imaginations a respite from commercial restrictions and enables them to operate on a purely artistic level. This may be why, for example, Lacroix, Lagerfeld and Galliano each agreed to design one act of an opera for Renée Fleming's Metropolitan Opera Gala without being paid a fee, but instead working at cost.

However, along with the fun – and, of course, the prestige – of being invited to participate in an operatic production, the designers are also confronted by a basic question: how does designing for the stage differ from designing a fashion collection, both technically and conceptually?

One of the first technical lessons that has to be learned is how to ensure that the costumes make an impact from afar, instead of up close, with the focus on detail that is so vital in fashion. This ‘broad brush’ treatment usually involves the designers using fabrics they would never dream of working with when creating couture or ready-to-wear garments. They must also design in a way that allows singers to move freely and keep cool, since the act of singing produces terrific body heat.

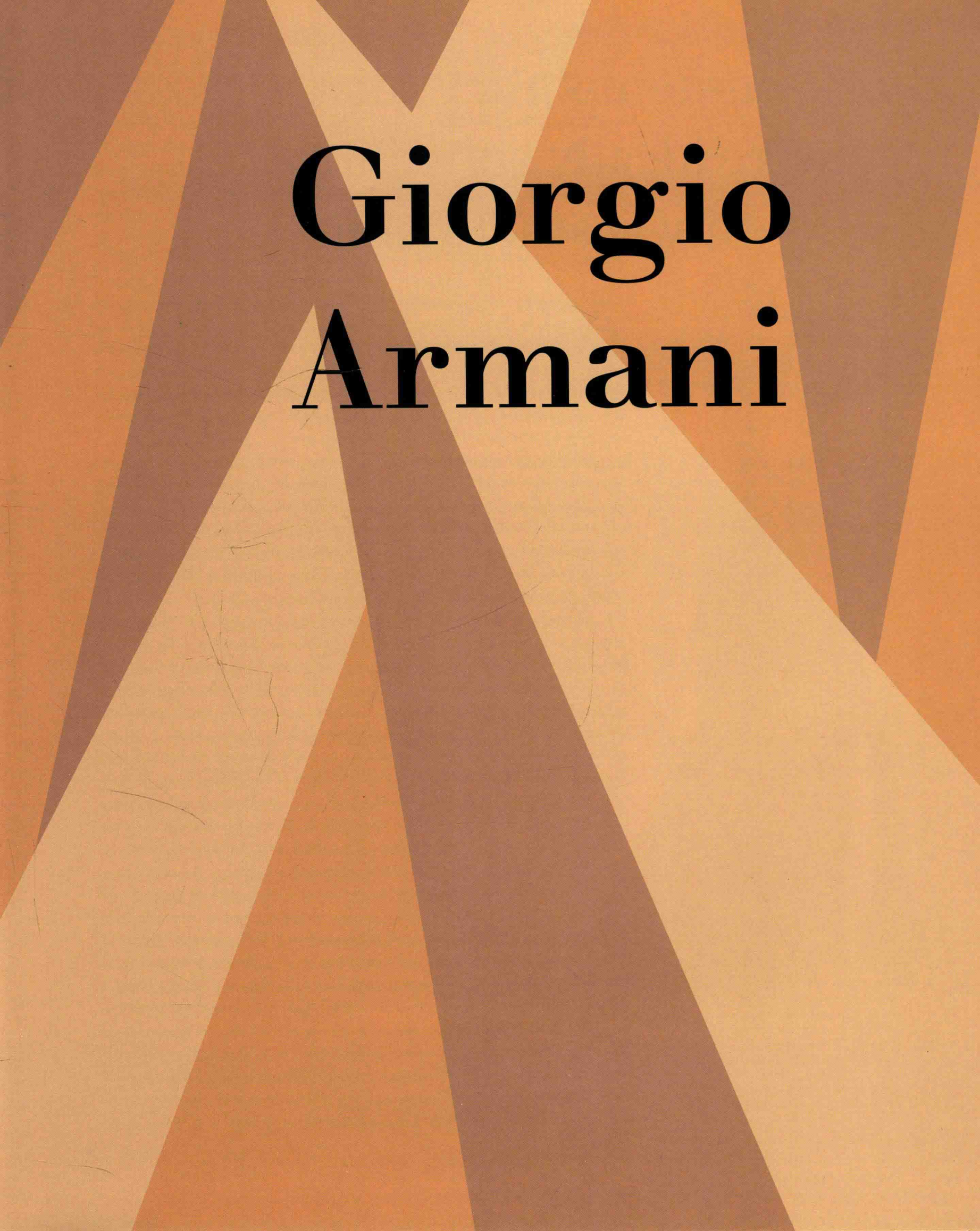
On a conceptual level, one might think that the designers would experience some frustration in their new role. Instead of being the boss – the emperor of a domain over which they are used to reigning supreme – they are now reduced to a supporting role that compels them to subjugate their own will and vision to that of the stage director, whose concept they must interpret in visual terms. Surprisingly, this loss of control seems to hold great appeal for some. As Lacroix comments: ‘In fashion, I used to be the only “captain on board”, with my personal, even selfish approach. But in opera, I never try to act as if I, myself, were the director. I have to accept his view instead of imposing my own. It is he who decides what the concept will be, and I am there to provide illustrations to his imagination. But subordinating my will to the director’s is one of the things I find most rewarding about working in the theatre. I have to be more humble and less egotistical than I used to be as a couturier.’

Perhaps this is why famous operatic directors tend to speak positively about fashion designers as costumiers. Vincent Boussard said of his longstanding collaboration with Lacroix, ‘He is always after something new, something different. He transforms my concept and makes it stronger.’ Robert Wilson’s verdict on his experience of working with Viktor & Rolf was that ‘they brought their own world to my world. The choice of materials was their own invention and a great complement to my scenic elements.’ Wilson’s memory of the late, much-lamented Gianni Versace is that he was ‘a perfectionist, who paid meticulous attention to detail and whose artistic integrity was matched by his openmindedness. With him, you truly felt part of a team. I would have loved to have worked with him again. I think he would have been brilliant for *Aida*, and also a sensational designer for *Lulu*.’ Pierre Audi was similarly impressed by his collaboration with Miuccia Prada on the Metropolitan Opera’s *Attila*: ‘Her work is musical and innovative in its simplicity and power. It combines the right degree of poetry and meaning, which opera needs to thrive on if it is to survive the twenty-first century.’

Singers also tend to be enthusiastic about having their costumes created by fashion designers. As Renée Fleming noted: ‘I sewed my prom dress, so I can really appreciate what they are doing. When you see the degree of imagination and talent that these [designers] have brought to these costumes, it becomes obvious why they are who they are. It’s a different level. The thing that stands out is the imagination – there is a fantasy that is quite extraordinary....’

The verdict of opera-house managements has been equally positive. Each time a collaboration with a major designer is announced, an enormous ‘buzz’ is created, not only among opera lovers, but also among a wider audience who may never before have set foot in an opera house, and also among the media, and this in turn attracts celebrities. Everybody benefits. The only question now is: who’s next?





Giorgio Armani

'Stark, contemporary sets were ideally suited to my aesthetic concepts'

According to Nicholas Payne, Opera Director of the Royal Opera House at the time of Covent Garden's famous collaborations with two of the world's top fashion designers, 'Very few opera directors have ever been brave or humble enough to link their ego with that of an equally famous name to theirs. John Cox did it for his production of Richard Strauss's *Capriccio* [he invited Gianni Versace to design the costumes], and Jonathan Miller did it when he persuaded Giorgio Armani to provide the clothes for his 1995 production of Mozart's *Così fan tutte*.'

In both cases, the designers in question were not just well-known; they were world-wide household names. The moment each collaboration was announced, the news caused, to quote a local newspaper, 'as much interest as the birth of a new diva'. Audiences flocked to Covent Garden, and subsequent press coverage eclipsed the usual reviews in the arts pages of national newspapers. The premiere, which was attended by a starry audience, and the party that was hosted by Armani after a later performance, filled the gossip columns of the tabloid press and glossy magazines for weeks.

Armani's only previous foray onto the operatic stage had been to provide a stunning dress for the heroine of Schoenberg's one-act monodrama, *Erwartung*, produced at La Scala in 1980–81 (see pp. 2–3). His collaboration with the Royal Opera came about as the result of a brainwave on the part of Jonathan Miller, who, after directing scores of acclaimed productions at the English National Opera and worldwide, was finally making his debut at Covent Garden. Miller would almost certainly never have agreed to direct a revival of an old production of *Così fan tutte*, but the Royal Opera had virtually no budget for a new production. When, over a lunch with Miller, Payne mentioned the figure available – barely £30,000 for both sets and costumes – he half-expected no for an answer. But, to his surprise and relief, after a pause for reflection, Miller accepted, 'provided he was allowed to design and practically build the sets himself in our technical department' – which he eventually did, with the aid of five assistants.

Miller had directed several 'classic' productions of Mozart operas, set in their proper period (including his landmark staging of *Le nozze di Figaro* at the 1990 Vienna Festival), but for *Così fan tutte* he wanted a modern staging that would bring home the relevance of this sparkling 'comedy' for every age. '*Così* is a timeless story,' he says. 'It doesn't happen anywhere in particular; it happens everywhere. And that's what I wanted to put across in this production.' On the subject of the opera's themes, he adds, 'In my view, the piece is not about fidelity. It's about identity, about disguise or, if you like, the danger of disguise. At the back of my mind was a story my mother wrote at the end of the war about how differently people behaved the moment they were in uniform. Disguised people become someone else and do things they wouldn't normally do.... In the process, they may even discover they *are* someone else, someone different from the person they thought they were.'

OPPOSITE Sketch of a dress from the 1997 Emporio Armani collection, used in the revival of Jonathan Miller's production of Mozart's *Così fan tutte* at Covent Garden. When the production first opened, in 1995, Miller and the Royal Opera House team chose Armani designs because they wanted to feature 'clothes' rather than 'costumes' in their modern-day production.

While *Le nozze di Figaro* was based on the most scandalous play of its day, Beaumarchais's *La folle journée, ou Le mariage de Figaro*, *Così fan tutte* was an original invented story. As Nicholas Payne notes, 'In this particular case, a modern production seems almost truer to its spirit than setting it in period sets and costumes.' Having decided on this point of view, and bearing in mind the non-existent budget, the team thought, why not have the cast wear real clothes rather than specially designed costumes? Miller suggested asking a well-known fashion house, such as Armani (he passed the Emporio Armani boutique on his way to the opera house), if they would be interested in supplying the clothes. After all, a Covent Garden production would be good promotion for them, so they might consider giving the clothes to the Royal Opera for free.

So Armani was approached, and, as Payne recalls, quite a complicated negotiation ensued because, of course, a successful fashion house has a bevy of publicity, management and marketing people, all intent on protecting 'The Master' and all trying to drive a hard bargain. Naturally, what they wanted was for Armani to design a special range of costumes for the production. Eventually, Payne felt he had to come completely clean with them. 'I said, "Look, if we were to commission a whole set of costumes from you it would cost a lot of money, which we don't have. We've come to you *because* we have no money. On the other hand, Armani's 1995 ready-to-wear collection will receive a huge promotion by appearing on the Covent Garden stage, which you can capitalize on in any way you wish." So eventually the publicity, management and marketing people took the proposal to Armani himself and he said yes, he would do it.'

Armani accepted because he felt that Miller's concept of a modern *Così* in a contemporary setting was in tune with his own design philosophy and style. 'Jonathan Miller and Covent Garden wanted my clothes because they consider them a symbol of contemporary fashion. I don't "do" opera, because operatic productions tend to be in period costumes far removed from modern clothes. I wouldn't be capable of designing an operatic equivalent of *Les liaisons dangereuses*, for instance. But Jonathan Miller wanted to do something modern, elegant, with lots of atmosphere and poetry. I felt inspired by him. It was a pleasure to work with a great director – and one who was so well dressed! The stark, contemporary sets of his production were ideally suited to my aesthetic concepts.'

The main set evoked a photographer's studio – a place that Miller finds inspirational because of its 'white, space-like infinity'. This happened to recall Armani's own pristine, white, seventeenth-century palazzo in Milan, housing his business and design headquarters, his apartment on the top floor, and a tailor-made swimming pool in the basement. It was to this palazzo that Miller strolled for his first meeting with the designer. When Miller arrived, he unthinkingly threw his raincoat down on the sofa. Armani's staff, aware that their obsessively tidy master could not tolerate even a stray hair out of place (he allegedly dictates the number of centimetres between the clothes hangers in his shops), froze and assumed that the collaboration was doomed before it had started. But, as luck would have it, one of Armani's adored Siamese cats saw fit to leap onto the raincoat and, having approved it as a perfect resting place, settled down to a loud purr. As soon as Armani entered the room, he pronounced himself enchanted by the pretty sight, to general sighs of relief....

In the event, the two masters of their arts worked very well together. 'I believe in Jonathan Miller's genius,' declared Armani at the time, while Miller

