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Opera Man and the Meeting of 'Tastes'

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Introduction

The introduction of the Super League in 1996 heralded a more commercial era for professional rugby league in the United Kingdom (Meier, 2000). Part of the associated package has been an entertainments programme around games. Initially hesitant following a near disastrous first Super League season, Leeds Rhinos (the brand name adopted by Leeds Rugby League Football Club) have embraced this initiative. An MC introduces a bill that variously includes: the team's mascot, Ronnie the Rhino; a dance team and community dance groups; children's mini rugby; local singers and tribute acts; silly games featuring people from the crowd; presentations of former stars and special appearances (e.g. the Forces). While very deliberately identifying the persistence of some rationalist/modernist dimensions of Super League rugby Denham (2000: p. 289) observes of this development:

Part of the attraction is to sell more than the game by adding entertainment and additional spectacle through cheerleaders, mascots and fireworks. Postmodernism has been seen as reflecting the fragmentation and diversification of culture and, along with it, the breakdown of older categories and binary divisions that have been associated with modern culture, such as high/low...

One of the most successful elements of the wider entertainment package at Leeds' games has been 'Opera Man'. This is the nickname given to John Innes, the classically-trained singer, by the crowd at Headingley Stadium (the home of the Rhinos). Some seem unsurprised by the success of this initiative, but it piqued my curiosity as an unlikely coming-together of two leisure interests. As a fan my initial reaction was similar to what one of my respondents described: "When he first came in you could see in the crowd it was 'You what? An opera guy coming to sing at rugby league?'. And then he became a cult figure ... Who would have thought that rugby league would have been the home for Opera Man?" (Chrissy).

On one of the blog sites Jerry Chicken commented:

"Opera Man" as he has become known to your average rugby league fan who, it has to be said, would in all other circumstances call John Innes and his ilk "big puffs" has introduced the concept of the aria to the sport so much so that the crowd actually sing along with him now, even though they know not the words and simply make the sounds.
<http://jerrychicken.blogspot.co.uk/2007/10/opera-man.html> [last accessed 27th January 2013]

To explore what underlies the apparent success of this Heston Blumenthal recipeⁱ, this paper borrows concepts from Bourdieu (1984).

On Rugby League and Opera

Fans of rugby league are accustomed to having to explain that their sport is NOT rugby union. Rugby league is a physically demanding, not to say brutal sport; a game uninterrupted by line-outs and collapsed scrums. Following the split in 1895 a century of bitterness hardened divisions between the two codes. In more recent years there has been something of a rapprochement, but league and union are still quite distinct in playing style and cultural context. Some of rugby league's main social characteristics are well-documented (e.g. Collins, 1998; Spracklen et al., 2009), particularly in class, geographical and gendered terms. Because of the normalisation of whiteness, however, the ethnic dimension of the game is less often discussed (Long et al., 1997; Spracklen et al., 2009).

As a professional game in this country rugby league remains strongly associated with the (formerly) industrial communities of the North of England; its heartland lies in Cumbria and along the M62 transportation corridor that bisects the main UK landmass, running between Hull on the Eastern coast and Liverpool on the western, and through Leeds and Manchester). Attempts to establish top flight teams in Sheffield, Gateshead, Wales and Paris have all failed, though London and Perpignan both currently host Super League teams and the grass-roots game has been showing healthy growth nationally and internationally.

As Denham (2000: p. 288) observes, sports historians writing about rugby league “[link] sporting values with class configurations and culture”, and in the case of rugby league that means working-class configurations and culture. This is partly because of the communities in which it is located, partly what is taught in schools, partly the perpetuation of the animosity generated by the split over a century ago. It is also an aggressively masculine game, but with a growing number of women's teams and relatively high female support. Despite the hard, macho nature of the sport itself, it is labelled a family game, and families are indeed evident on the terraces and in the stands — a lot of children and many more women than at professional football matches (Long et al., 1995).

By contrast, opera is associated with the cultural elite. A public consultation exercise on the arts generally found that while ‘the public’ valued the arts, for the most part they saw what was being publicly funded as ‘not for us’ (Opinion Leader, 2007). The Taking Part survey (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2012) does record as many as 3.9 per cent of the adult population as having attended opera or operetta in the past 12 months. Just as rugby league may not be quite the strong preserve of the working class it used to be, opera may have a broader appeal than its popular image suggests. However in the ESRC project on cultural capital and social inclusion, opera was identified at one end of the spectrum when cultural space was mapped using multiple correspondence analysis (Silva et al., 2009). It is not just the class-based cultural space of opera-going itself that is significant here, but how opera is regarded by the working classes just identified as providing the participatory and fan base for rugby league. One of the respondents in the current study referred to people thinking it was “just fat women in Viking hats”. Nonetheless, when John Innes brings his form of opera to Rhinos' matches he is given an exuberant receptionⁱⁱ.

Taste cultures

Taste is the basis of all that one has — people and things — and all that one is for others, whereby one classifies oneself and is classified by others. (Bourdieu, 1984: p. 56)

While Bourdieu might not recognise the representation offered here of his (1979/1984) work in which he analysed the social space of lifestyles, cultural capital can be understood as being derived from various sources such as knowledge, intellect, style and learned behaviour. Its possessor both understands the codes and conventions of cultural forms and is able to demonstrate competence in using them. Cultural capital then has a value. Writing about French society in the 1960s, Bourdieu suggested that just as with property those with cultural capital gain in relation to those without. Moreover cultural capital circulates through society and is accumulated in a similar way to financial capital. Clearly this is not independent of people's dispositions (Bennett et al., 2009). So associated with that set of principles, taste is a socially constructed product and the way it is closely aligned with social class makes it a cultural product bestowing power. Bourdieu (1984: p. 466) maintains that these systems of taste "...support the division of labour ... or the division of the work of domination ... as if to give them the appearance of naturalness ... [giving] a sense of one's place". Yet as both Bourdieu and Marx recognise, people act as agents to help produce their meanings.

That direct class link has been questioned by many since, as people allegedly became more open to diversity and Peterson (1992) identified 'omnivores' with more eclectic tastes. However, Warde et al. (2007) have suggested that omnivorousness is itself class based with the more affluent expanding their tastes to consume other areas of culture, but still their "command of consecrated culture remains a token of distinction which probably still operates effectively as a form of cultural capital" (p. 160). They derive their data from an ESRC project on culture, class and distinction in modern UK (Bennett et al., 2009). While they insisted that they found the notion of class habitus unhelpful, they still agreed with Bourdieu that "cultural proclivities are closely associated with social class" (Bennett et al., 2009: p. 251). The shift in emphasis is in line with the kind of expanding tastes already noted:

Few activities are monopolised by the working class. Indeed, those which might have been a monopoly in the past — some forms of sport, spectatorship and gambling, tastes in popular music, membership of social clubs — have been encroached upon by a middle class fortified by a sense that an openness to diversity is noble. (Bennett et al., 2009: p. 252)

The Rhinos Project

The research reported here was not a questionnaire survey, but a series of detailed interviews with 22 fans between July and October 2012, conducted in venues convenient for them. As such the research project was not about what percentages of fans did or did not think about certain things but an exploration of the feelings and relationships underlying the significance of Opera Man. Fans were recruited for interview inside and outside the stadium, on the street, in the pub, in response to a club email, and through personal referrals. Some of those approached said 'no',

some said 'yes' but then avoided making arrangements to be interviewed, and an interview with a 23rd person was discarded because it turned out she had only been to the ground once. There were 12 men and 10 women, aged 18–72, including some with disabilities. Only one was from the Black and minority ethnic communities, but given the whiteness of rugby league crowds this is entirely unsurprising. The research participants were in a wide range of occupations and from different parts of Leeds and beyond. As different types of fan can be associated with different parts of the stadium care was taken to ensure that research participants came from all parts.

A pilot interview was used to check the form and content of the semi-structured interviews that lasted 25-45 minutes, were recorded and transcribed. Further feedback came from a presentation of preliminary findings to a meeting of the fans' forum run by Leeds Rugby and tended to confirm the messages conveyed by those interviewed. The whole is set within the context of extensive observation and informal conversations.

From the 22 participants, two women in their thirties indicated that they did not like Opera Man. "I'm not a big fan of the opera" (Dawn); "What's the point?" (Emily). Dawn also suggested it just did not go with the game and thought it was "way out of our league". Interestingly, at the fans forum the only person who did not like him was also a woman in her thirties. All the other participants were quite different, being very positive about Opera Man: "Over the years I've certainly come to love opera man" (Chrissy); "the best act that comes on at Headingley by far" (Lauren). One respondent even said he was the only part of the entertainment package that she liked: "I don't like the pre-match entertainment apart from Opera Man — I love him" (Jean). And Bob went from "I don't mind" to "I quite like" to "he's very good actually".

Respondents confirmed what I had observed at the ground: that John Innes has established a strong rapport with the crowd. They attributed this to:

- a) his persona — passionate; confident; sings with emotion;
- b) his approach — entertains; interacts with Ronnie and the dancers; invites the crowd to get involved; 'fun';
- c) his choice of material — familiar; things people can latch onto quickly; just good songs

He was also liked because "it's not like typical opera because he don't sing in Latin or whatever" (Joanne). Well, probably not in Latin but he sings Volari, O Sole Mio and of course Nessun Dorma. But the perception is all part of the myth-making and brings him closer to the crowd.

The creation myth

Like all good myths there is some confusion over its beginning. The club have been unable to provide a definitive statement of when and how it all began. Fans suggested five years ago? Six? Eight? Ten? More? It is not just the timing, but the occasion that is confused. It was at a cup final / a local derby / against Wigan or Saints. Whenever it was, most presumed that Leeds had won so he became a good luck symbol, a talisman. Joanne suggested: "Could have been the Grand Final we won and he were singing 'We are the Champions' at the end". According to the Daily Record (22nd August 2008) he did sing that at the 2004 Final, but before the game — i.e. not for any team in particular. But that does not fit the myth so well. Sandra

continues: “I bet that was the first time. Did he come to the home game after that? Can’t remember. It’s like he’s always been there.”

Even the Chief Executive was unable to provide the answer. His interest was clear — “I’m not sure when it was, but when the crowd react like that you know you’ve got something right”. To make respondents feel better about not knowing I sometimes mentioned that even the Chief Executive did not know and one person responded: “I bet he knows how much he pays him though”. There’s a knowingness among the crowd that this is a commercial enterprise, but as astute operations have delivered a successful team and an enjoyable events package, that is fine.

That it occurs in the mists of time allows people to invent their own creation myth, which serves to heighten the phenomenon of ‘Opera Man’. It allows them to possess something they have had a part in shaping; something shaped to meet their own desires.

Function and purpose

First and foremost in the eyes of research participants, the role of Opera Man is to entertain. But in doing so he also serves to involve the crowd and make them feel they are contributing. The fans want to be part of the occasion and Opera Man encourages them to get involved. Jim commented: “It’s interaction again because the crowd sway left to right and I’ve seen them with their lighters lit, mobile phones up and that kind of thing... just clicked”. Opera Man’s function is to build the anticipation, ‘ramp-up’ the atmosphere and bring the crowd noise to a crescendo as the teams appear for the start of the game. Having joined in the singing the next step is to roar on the team right from the kick-off. As Joanne explained: “He’s there to get everybody riled-up — that’s what he wants, that’s his job done”. And according to Sandra: “At the end you cheer and clap because the next thing is the team coming out, it’s the anticipation”. Importantly he encourages interaction. Even though the fans do not know the words when he presents the microphone to the South Standⁱⁱⁱ they respond: “You can sort of fit your own words to that music” (Joe).

Despite the need identified to find a new audience for opera (Kolb, 2005) fans do not view it as an attempt to convert them to opera. Two interviewees did go frequently to the Grand to see/hear opera and two others had been to live performances, but this either pre-dated or was reported as happening independently from Opera Man’s performances at Headingley: hearing Opera Man had not prompted people to buy opera tickets. As Dan wryly observed: “You’ve got to be quite passionate about opera to want to go and watch one”. However, as Bas noted: “Some people who wouldn’t go to classical music of any sort think ‘yeah I can cope with that amount — I can sing along with it a bit in my own little way’. You can really belt it out can’t you. I sing along with it and get about three words right I think.”

Rimmer (2012: p. 312) writes about the links between musical experience and values among young people living on an inner city estate:

... musical experience and associated activity generally reflected a series of attitudes and values widely held within this community — many of which bore resonances of its formerly industrial working-class culture (i.e. of pride in

one's roots, a valuation of physicality/strength/ toughness, solidarity and mutual support social gatherings characterised by hedonic release)...

Opera Man may be a classical singer, but this is an embodied experience that is being used to celebrate a shared appreciation of the roots of rugby league, moulded by physicality, strength and toughness.

Possession / Identification

Opera Man's acceptance owes something to the continuing ripples from Pavarotti at Italia 90, and the more recent success of acts like Il Divo and Only Men Aloud. "The Three Tenors were popular and now to say, 'Oh we've got our own tenor you know', is part of it" (Bas). However, there is clearly more to it than that as fans do not identify with other classical singers in the same way. Mick explained:

They brought another lad in, I can't remember what his name was now, but he wasn't quite as good as Opera Man... he's an international singer, but he just wasn't quite as good. I've seen him at some other ground before, singing, I think it was at one final he was there, and obviously they tried to create that same atmosphere with a different singer, and it doesn't quite work.

This theme was echoed by others:

If they get that other opera singer, who's good, it's not the same. It's not Opera Man. It's like he's ours and you can sing if you like, but you're not as good as Opera Man. Opera Man is Opera Man and he's the one who gets all the applause." (Joanne)

Sandra continued: "It's like we've claimed him and he's ours, and when he wasn't there he was quite sadly missed." It is evident the fans feel quite possessive about him: "He's become part of Leeds now, part of the South Stand culture, the kind of entertainment they like" (John). "He's claimed the mantle of the Rhinos crowd's opera singer" (Jim). Fans accept him as part of Leeds Rhinos precisely because other clubs do not have him: it puts Leeds one up over Wigan and the other teams. In other words, they are claiming a cultural capital that advantages them in comparison with other (sports) clubs.

Omnivores?

My dilemma about why working-class rugby league fans like middle-class opera would be a non-issue if rugby league had been colonised by omnivorous middle classes so that the composition of the rugby league crowd had changed and become middle class. This, after all, has been suggested for football crowds as admission prices have soared (Williams and Neatrou, 2002; Wagg, 2004), though Fawbert (2011) argues it is more complicated than that with many modern jobs (e.g. working in a call centre) classified as 'white collar' being essentially the same in class terms as traditional working-class occupations, and further that many people now in middle-class occupations were brought up as working-class. Certainly there were some middle-class people in my sample, but unfortunately in rugby league we lack the data to make a judgement as to whether or not there has been such a change.

There was recognition that as the big city club the fan base of Leeds is probably more diverse and, according to Andrew, even includes some intellectuals and students!

An alternative explanation would be that the working classes are becoming more omnivorous themselves. Opera is certainly not as unfamiliar to the fans as I initially portrayed it. The two who went to Opera North were unusual; most had no direct experience of it as an art form. However, there were some who had popular opera on CDs or MP3 players, others heard it on the radio and others were aware of it being around even if that was only in the form of TV advertisements (Daisy: "You call it opera, we call it advert music"), and one couple from having lived next door to a singing teacher. So the music was not quite as alien to fans as might first be assumed: "He's singing opera, but the music that's coming out is not what they would have thought was opera, so that's maybe why they like him so much because he's singing music that they know but not as opera" (Daisy).

Although some went to opera, the fans' enjoyment of Opera Man had not prompted them to go to a stage show (what Jim referred to as 'hardcore opera'). It still didn't feel like their thing. Context is all; listening to a bit of opera with your mates at the rugby is a very different proposition from 'going to the opera' where you might presume the audience are nothing like you. Some clearly felt alienated by what they perceived to be a cultural distance between them and "the dickie bows" with their "£150 tickets at Covent Garden" (Dave). The fans are happy to consume 'opera' in what is 'their' environment, where they share cultural capital, but do not want to feel out of place among those who routinely attend formal venues. Hence, it was not unusual for fans to draw a distinction between listening to opera music and going to the opera. Joanne: "If you went to see him at a stage show you can't join in. You just have to sit there quietly and clap at the right points... I don't think people see him as a classical singer — he's there as an entertainer". Jim enthused about the Headingley experience: "That's the beauty of it really it's that you don't need to know the words, nobody's judging you at all. You know you're just there to have a good time and join in and that's all part of it. Anybody can join in and away you go."

Alternatively, as Jean said: "It's not opera they like, it's Opera Man". Ironically, the appreciation of rugby league fans for this form of opera may increase rather than decrease the cultural capital of the opera-going classes who can appreciate 'the real thing'.

Symbolic value

In fans' eyes the symbolic value of John Innes lies in making Leeds distinctive; other clubs may have dancing girls and mascots, but only Leeds has Opera Man. Moreover, his presence also serves to differentiate rugby league from football: "It lets people know it's not just thugs that go to rugby. Families can go and people with different tastes — it's not just your stereotypes" (Joanne). The Rugby Football League (RFL, the governing body) promotes the idea of 'a family game'. The clubs have been happy to adopt that in marketing the product and the fans willingly and enthusiastically subscribe to it. That notion was linked repeatedly by research participants with the importance of the arts and entertainment programme providing something for all the family. More trenchant views notwithstanding, elements that

individual respondents did not favour were commonly accepted in recognition that they might appeal to others.

Conclusions

When I first started going it used to make the hair stand-up on the back of my neck when he sang Nessun Dorma. (John)

Bennett et al. (2009) emphasise that many aspects of cultural life are shared by people who inhabit diverse social positions. They observe that “contemporary cultural advantage is pursued not through cultivating exclusive forms — of snobbishness of modernist abstraction — but through the capacity to link, bridge and span diverse and proliferating cultural worlds” (p. 253). That seems very like what is happening at Headingley. Yet what we see at Headingley is not going to compromise the command of consecrated culture being a token of distinction.

Rather as with the science fiction catch phrase, “It's life, Jim, but not as we know it” (widely thought to be from Star Trek, but in fact from the song Star Trekkin in 1987), what we witness at Headingley ‘is opera, Jim, but not as we know it’. Bob’s view was that: “I don’t think anybody’s that naive to think it’s bringing it to a new audience [though that is just what John Innes implies on his web site], but these are good tunes that people can relate to”. Dave’s interpretation is that: “It’s opera for people who don’t like Opera”. As already discussed, there is no evidence to suggest that John Innes’ appearances at Headingley have resulted in the sale of more opera tickets.

When Featherstone (1991: p. 7) was writing about the emergence of postmodernism in the arts and culture he observed:

...the effacement of the boundary between art and everyday life; the collapse of the hierarchical between high and mass/popular culture; a stylistic promiscuity favouring eclecticism and the mixing of codes; parody, pastiche, irony, playfulness and the celebration of the surface ‘depthlessness’ of culture...

There are strong resonances here with what has been observed at Headingley; it would seem to be a clear example of post-modern hybridisation. Elite culture has met working-class culture and produced a distinct form of entertainment. Moreover fans’ songs now use tunes from opera and I have to have a sneaking regard for whoever put to the tune of Volari the rhyming couplet, “He’s from Australia / He’s gonna murder ya” to greet/celebrate one of the players.

Of course the match is what people go to see, but the fans felt that, given the other things competing for their leisure time and money, it needed to be an ‘event’ and the entertainment package certainly contributes to that. Some of the entertainment may not be of a high standard but by creating a distinctive atmosphere it serves to differentiate rugby league from football, and the value of that is considerable, not just in commercial terms (Meier, 2000), but in affirming identity. The value of Opera Man lies in the myth that he and the fans have co-produced, in his functional contribution

to the match day atmosphere and in the symbolic value that marks Leeds Rhinos as different.

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Notes

ⁱ For overseas readers, Heston Blumenthal is a British chef renowned for combining apparently mismatched ingredients.

ⁱⁱ For those who have not experienced this an indication of what it is like is provided on the web – see, for example: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rctx3saypBM>

ⁱⁱⁱ The South Stand is where the hardcore support goes, directly opposite respectable Leeds in the North Stand.