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Citation: Leith, O. (2024). Musicalising the Everyday or Making the Everyday Operatic. (Unpublished Doctoral thesis, Guildhall School of Music & Drama)

This is the supplemental version of the paper.

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VOGUE

THEATRE

With *Last Days*, Kurt Cobain & Balenciaga Shake Up London's Royal Opera House

BY [LIAM HESS](#)

7 October 2022



I'd never paid attention to the first frame of Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" video until Matt Copson, the director of [Last Days](#) – a new opera based on Gus Van Sant's 2005 film loosely charting the final weeks of Kurt Cobain's life, premiering this weekend at London's Royal Opera House – pointed it out to me.

It starts with a foot tapping away in a pair of black Converse Chuck Taylors, in what Copson notes (and further research confirms) is likely one of the earliest examples of product placement in a music video, ever. "The irony is that Kurt Cobain is probably the only figure from that era in music that still holds that kind of pop cultural potency," Copson says. "I mean, who else are you going to walk into a branch of Primark today and see on a T-shirt – but also still genuinely means something?"



Mormon and Housemate (Seumas Begg) Photo: Aidan Zamiri



Groundskeeper and Private Investigator (Sion Goronwy) Photo: Aidan Zamiri

That's a question that Copson, a 30-year-old visual artist who typically trades in freaky and fantastical projections and laser installations, is attempting to unpick via *Last Days*. His primary collaborator on the opera, along with co-director Anna Morrissey, is composer Oliver Leith, whose award-winning, atmospheric chamber pieces written for string quartets and woodwind groups made Leith the inaugural composer-in-residence at the Royal Opera House in 2019.

Copson and Leith never set out to write an opera about Kurt Cobain – nor *have* they actually written an opera about Cobain, it turns out. “Our conversation really started around the tone of it,” says Copson. “We were talking about our mutual interest in mixing extreme banality and the everyday with magic and spectacle, essentially, and we kept returning to this film.” While Van Sant’s *Last Days* has accrued a cult following for its fascinating, forensic study of loneliness, there was something about Blake, Michael Pitt’s Cobain-proxy character, that felt especially ripe for operatic reimagination, even if entirely divested from the celebrity of Cobain himself. “It kept coming up in conversation as we both felt the film really captured the spirit of what we were interested in,” Copson remembers. “It has such a mystery and an intrigue to it. So eventually we were like, *Well, why don’t we just do that?*”



Delivery Driver and Housemate (Mimi Doulton) Photo: Aidan Zamiri

A few emails, a few calls, and a few agent-led back-and-forths later, the rights were theirs, handed over with surprising, total freedom. “Gus was incredibly chill and just said, ‘Go ahead, do whatever you want with it,’” Copson recalls. The next step was to figure out how to translate the narrative structure of *Last Days* into the medium of opera, but still retain its anarchic streak. They quickly realised that while the film’s meandering plot might initially appear an odd template, its chugging, inevitable descent into disaster has all the trappings of a bombastic, wham-bam-let’s-get-to-the-climactic-aria-ma’am Puccini tragedy.

So Copson, Leith, and their co-director Morrissey decided to go big – first, by inviting Agathe Rousselle, the star of the thrillingly transgressive, Palme d’Or-winning body-horror fiesta *Titane*, to play Blake. Rousselle said yes, and spends most of the show mumbling and grumbling her way around the apartment in a furry green coat, while a motley crew of characters played by professional opera singers – Mormon missionaries, a groundskeeper, a DHL delivery guy – drift in and out with Beckettian aimlessness, all singing in radically different vocal registers. “I wanted it to feel like a collapsing, crumbling haunted house, with all these ghoulish vocalists kind of disturbing the journey and the fate of this of this person,” says Copson.



Mormon and Housemate (Kate Howden) Photo: Aidan Zamiri



Housemate (Edmund Danon) Photo: Aidan Zamiri

This collapsing of operatic tradition extends to the costumes, too. With *Last Days* comes both the first time [Balenciaga](#) has partnered on costumes for an opera, and the Royal Opera House's first collaboration with a fashion brand. While Copson had worked with Balenciaga on a prior project, the link-up came about mostly due to the brand's perfect fit with the show's mish-mash of supporting characters. (Is there any other major label, after all, that could realistically outfit Mormons, mall goths, and metalheads in one fell swoop?) "One question I kept thinking about, even if it sounds simple, is what does it really mean to make an opera today? What is the point of it?" Copson says. "And I think part of it was about this sense of maximalism, so costume quickly became a really, really important part of that wider visual world."

Working with the stylist Patrick Welde, Copson dug deep into Balenciaga's back catalogues to outfit each character, but often found the perfect look was closer at hand than they expected. "We scoured through the archives, but interestingly enough, the best things usually came from the most recent collections," Copson says. "It ended up working really well, as I didn't want it to be costume – I wanted it to be something that implicated the present also." Still, Welde's initial mood board was more anthropological, with not a single fashion piece in the mix; instead, it came with close-ups of traditional Mormon braided hair and the ripped and DIY-studded denim of Seattle grunge acolytes of the '90s. "It's funny because when Matt contacted me, I had just made a folder about an apocalyptic sect," Welde says. "When I work on a project, I don't usually pick up fashion images – I prefer to lose myself in all the possibilities, and be more documentary."

For Blake, in lieu of the knits and accessories that defined Cobain's '90s style – the sunglasses, the red-and-black mohair cardigans, the Breton tops and leopard prints – Copson and Welde decided to go a little weirder. Yes, Blake is decked out in Cobain's classic white clout goggles, but also a pink logoed baseball cap, a hooded micro-check shirt, and most strikingly of all, a Grinch-fabulous acid green mohair coat. "There's a nice irony that while everyone else exists in these darker tones of blacks, greys, and whites, the one person who wants to hide away is the most visible on stage, always," says Copson.



Magician (Henry Jenkinson) Photo: Aidan Zamiri

The one thing I can't stop wondering about, though, is what the seamstresses and costumiers that have worked at the Royal Opera House for decades must have thought when [Demna](#)'s floor-length padded parkas, grey sweatpants, and shredded denim were getting adjusted and tended to like the crystal-studded bodices of a prima ballerina. "That building is full of absurdly talented people," says Copson. "They're all absolute masters at what they do. And while I didn't go into there with an agenda to blow it to smithereens, I just wanted to engage with the contemporary. I think there was suspicion at the beginning, but it kind of gave way to excitement from all parties very quickly." As Welde puts it: "They are all magicians!"

Well, at least that's settled. But one question remains: Does Cobain, or Blake, still represent something meaningful in popular culture today – tortured genius, doomed rock star, style icon – or is he just a slogan on a shirt, or the headline-grabbing hook for a new opera? Are his achievements burnished or compromised by asking this question? Is there any way of romanticising him without commodifying him at the same time?

"There's a real tragedy to this icon caught between being a symbol to people, and also being a real person just wandering around a house being like, 'I can't fucking do this anymore,'" says Copson. "But then pop culture just digests itself, regurgitates itself, eats it up, reforms itself... and then it eats itself back up again..."

The New York Times

A Kurt Cobain Opera Examines the Myth, Not the Man

The creators of “Last Days,” an eagerly-anticipated opera about a grunge star’s final days, insist it’s really about how society treats its icons.

By [Alex Marshall](#)

Oct. 7, 2022, 11:46 a.m. ET

LONDON — Onstage at the Royal Opera House here last Friday, the actor Agathe Rousselle pulled a huge, furry green coat over her head as four singers swarmed around her, demanding money and favors.

Rousselle was rehearsing “[Last Days](#),” a new opera in which she plays out the final hours in the life of Blake, a rock star reminiscent of [Kurt Cobain](#), the lead singer of the grunge band Nirvana [who died by suicide in 1994](#). Rousselle was also wearing the style of vintage white sunglasses [Cobain made famous](#).

As Rousselle hid under the coat, the stage manager appeared, carrying a shotgun. That prop remains onstage throughout the opera, reminding the audience of the forthcoming tragedy and the potential cost of fame.

“Last Days,” which premieres on Friday, is one of the most eagerly anticipated new operas in Britain this fall, having long sold out a four-night run. It’s also one of the more unusual, being based on Gus Van Sant’s largely wordless and plot-free 2005 movie “[Last Days](#),” in which a Cobain-like character roams around a country house falling asleep, listening to music and trying to avoid his housemates, manager, a Yellow Pages salesman and two members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

With a libretto written by the artist Matt Copson and the experimental composer Oliver Leith, both first-time opera makers, the show has Rousselle largely mumbling, rather than singing. Her mumbles are then translated for the audience using supertitles.

Choosing a grunge star as the show’s central character may surprise some opera traditionalists, and it could also prove divisive to Nirvana fans. Charles R. Cross, a journalist [who wrote a biography of Kurt Cobain](#), said in a telephone interview that he hated the movie “Last Days,” because it portrayed Cobain as a “depressed, lifeless waif” unable to act for himself. “That was absolutely not who Kurt Cobain was,” Cross said, adding that an opera is likely to further exaggerate that portrait.

Despite the opera’s central character being named Blake, “the only reason people are going to see this is because of Kurt Cobain’s celebrity,” Cross said.

During a break in rehearsals, Copson, who is co-directing the opera with Anna Morrissey, said he thought such critiques misunderstood his show. The opera was not trying to give a take on Cobain’s

life or any answers as to what happened to him, he said, but pose questions like, “What do we as Western culture want from our symbols?”

Cobain was an “archetype” of pop stars who rebel against society, he said, then find their music and style co-opted by mainstream culture, and struggle to cope with the contradictions. “Every few years, we get another,” Copson said, mentioning the rappers [Lil Peep](#), who died in 2017, and [Juice WRLD](#), who died in 2019. Society fetishizes figures who live close to the edge, Copson added. “What do we want by these people?” he asked. “Do we need something to sacrifice every once in a while?”

The idea for making “Last Days” also had little to do with Cobain as a person, said Leith, the Royal Opera House’s composer-in-residence. Leith had wanted to make his first opera, and after meeting Copson, the pair talked about how they both loved finding “mystery and magic” in everyday objects, Leith remembered. “Last Days” became a reference point in those conversations because all Blake’s actions, no matter how mundane, seemed profound given his impending suicide. Even when he eats a bowl of cereal, Copson said, it “feels potent.”

The pair threw around ideas for potential operas that could capture the movie’s mood until Leith suggested simply adapting it. The idea of making an opera with a lead who mumbles was “a slightly worrying prospect,” Leith said. But he and Copson quickly started enjoying how it allowed them to play with opera traditions. Copson said he felt like an outsider “hijacking an institution.”

At the recent rehearsal, the pair’s love of incorporating the mundane was pronounced. One performer, playing a delivery driver trying to get Blake to accept a parcel, repeatedly sang the line, “I just need a signature, please sir.” Later, Rousselle poured herself a bowl of Lucky Charms cereal, and the sounds of pieces hitting the china bowl became a rhythm bouncing around the auditorium.

Most of the performance was set in a dilapidated house, a stark contrast to the glamorous if grunge-influenced outfits designed by Balenciaga. Copson admitted Cobain would probably not have liked being associated with such an expensive fashion house.

Of those involved in the opera, only Rousselle was a Nirvana superfan, Copson said. The actor, who is best known for starring in the horror movie “[Titane](#)” as a woman sexually attracted to cars, said that she first heard the band’s music as a teenager growing up in France. She was bullied at school and one day one of the school’s popular girls threw a CD of Nirvana’s “[Nevermind](#)” at her, sneering, “That’s the kind of thing you weirdo would listen to,” Rousselle recalled. When she got home, she immediately played it. “I lost my mind to it,” she said.

A few years later, Rousselle became obsessed with “Last Days,” too, and so instantly signed up to perform in the opera despite never having attended one herself (last month, Copson and Leith took her to see [a performance of Richard Strauss’s “Salome,”](#) which she hated. “It’s not my thing,” she said).

To prepare for the role, Rousselle said she watched every Nirvana documentary and interview she could find, but still said the opera was not about Cobain, but bigger issues like how “becoming a myth will kill you” and “the absurdity of being famous and wanting to disappear when you’re recognizable to pretty much everyone.” The opera could have been made about Amy Winehouse or Janis Joplin and still made the same points, she added.

At the recent rehearsal, there was more than one moment when Rousselle’s Blake became more than a one-dimensional “archetype” of a doomed musician. Toward the end, Rousselle found herself onstage alone, and sat down by an electric guitar. She turned on an amp and started strumming the distorted chords of a grunge track — the only time such music is heard in the opera.

"I never want to see the sun set," she sang, plaintively. "I've never loved life so much." As she sang to herself, the soprano Patricia Auchterlonie, playing a Blake superfan and dressed just like her, crept across the stage, singing the same words in soaring Italian.

As their voices and musical styles mixed, the cast and crew in the auditorium stood in rapt silence.

AnOther

Last Days, the Subversive Opera Inspired by the Life of Kurt Cobain

Oliver Leith and Matt Copson's unorthodox opera draws from Gus Van Sant's Kurt Cobain biopic, and features overblown costumes by Balenciaga and a starring role from Caroline Polachek

OCTOBER 10, 2022

[Lara Johnson-Wheeler](#)

Oliver Leith and Matt Copson's opera *Last Days* is adapted from [Gus Van Sant](#)'s 2005 film based on the days that pre-empted [Kurt Cobain](#)'s suicide. However, their aim is not to re-tell the story of the grunge icon. Instead, they intend to challenge expectations. "If you come for an opera with Kurt Cobain and Nirvana, you'll be extremely fucking disappointed," Leith says. They distort the telling of the now-canonical story with ethereal sound, abstracting the narrative into a thrillingly subversive opera running for five nights at London's Royal Opera House.

Last Days interweaves art, music, fashion and film to create a truly contemporary moment within opera, a traditionally archaic form. Costuming, created in collaboration with [Balenciaga](#), is both a first for the brand and the theatre. While the backdrop is a painting by Copson, inspired by the work of Max Ernst and John Martin, a neon re-imagining of the forest in Van Sant's film. The lead role is played by French actor Agathe Rousselle and the singer Caroline Polachek, Copson's partner, has contributed an aria, released to time with the first performance.

Leith, currently composer-in-residence at the Royal Opera House, was introduced to Copson through their mutual friend, music producer Danny L Harle. They immediately connected, sharing an interest in "high theatricality with absolute banality intermixed". Leith composed the score to the libretto – the text of an opera – which Copson wrote. Copson, a visual artist, is also directing. This isn't the norm for creating an opera, they explain; neither are experts and the pair are familiarising themselves with operatic tradition as they go. But then again, most of the elements of *Last Days* also move against convention.

For one, Rousselle does not sing in the lead role; rather, Blake (the proxy character for Cobain invented by Van Sant) mumbles. She relies on the impact of her body instead. "We wanted someone that felt feral," says Copson of the lead actor. Anyone who's seen Rousselle's turn in body horror film *Titane*, which won the Palme d'Or at the 2021 Cannes Film Festival, will know what he means. "It was important to me to have someone who didn't sing," says Leith, "to increase the isolation. It raises the more ridiculous question, why the fuck is everything singing?" Onstage, as well as the cast of singers, a telephone rings and a kettle shrieks, adding to the clamour of sound.

Balenciaga's costumes are also not quite costumes but garments selected from recent collections, which develop the look of the piece into overblown realism. A veritable motley crew of roles – groundskeeper, Mormon-turned-party-goers, DHL courier – don shredded denim, XXL logo hoodies and even a floor-length duvet coat in a shape that references Cristóbal Balenciaga's original designs. "[Demna](#) oversees everything that's been on the stage here. It was a really good in-depth conversation. They're interested in archetypes – the 90s, degradation and irony – so it made total sense." Ultimately, Leith and Copson explain, it doesn't really matter whether Rousselle is playing Cobain or Blake or anyone. She's portraying an idea, an archetype, a character embedded in our collective cognisance. "There's a cultural lineage that starts with a figure like Kurt Cobain, and has been disseminated through all kinds of media – tabloids at the time, then into this cult film," says Copson. "It's a mythology that has been created. Our idea of Cobain is infused with something like *Last Days* – that has heightened the iconography of [him]. Primark making smiley face Nirvana T-shirts has done the same."

Nonetheless, taking someone's story and telling it through art is a complex thing, so biographical details often need to be abstracted. Van Sant's film takes this approach, one which has continued into Copson and Leith's process. "Gus wasn't precious, he sent us the script – one page on Microsoft Word – and said, do whatever you like."

"Effect is the most important thing – how should this opera make someone feel?" Copson says. "You're gonna get dragged through, man," Leith responds, grinning. "I mean, it's everything. Scary. Lovely. Bittersweet. Horrible. Beautiful. For an hour and a half." Crucially, it is the knowledge of the death of the central character that is the most important element to the tragedy. "The stakes of everything are heightened by [that] knowledge. If someone takes a sip of water, it's a sip of water *and* they're about to die, so it becomes an interesting sip of water," Copson says. This awareness permeates the experience of watching *Last Days*, right up until the final minutes.

In the opera's third act, the aria performed by Caroline Polachek rings out through a record player. Sung in Italian, as the form usually requires, Polachek's otherworldly voice stretches to operatic heights composed for her by Leith. The lyrics were written by Copson in Italian "via the medium of Google Translate," he confesses. "I heard once you should never write a song that you wouldn't sing to someone on their deathbed," says Polachek, "but that's bullshit. There's a time for everything, although sometimes not enough. Oliver asked me what the highest note I can sing is. But even up on a high F#, skull resonating past the point of cogent thought, my breath is finite, it cannot be sustained. We all know how it ends, just not when."

[Last Days](#) is playing at the Royal Opera House from 7 - 11 October 2022.



‘Kurt Cobain was a walking paradox’: inside the opera about the star’s final days

It has little plot, the dialogue is mumbled, cereal bowls are a big theme, and a fast-talking cattle auctioneer plays his manager. We meet the team behind the Royal Opera House’s daring new show

[Alexis Petridis](#)

Mon 3 Oct 2022 16.56 BST

The stage is dimly lit. Through the gloom, a figure emerges, muttering incomprehensibly. From a distance, the figure vaguely resembles [Kurt Cobain](#) – ragged clothes, dyed dirty-blond hair – a resemblance that increases when they climb a staircase into the stage’s representation of a battered-looking apartment, and put on what looks remarkably like a pair of the white-framed women’s sunglasses so associated with the late Nirvana frontman they’re now colloquially known as “Kurt shades”. A man enters stage right, noisily dragging a leaf rake behind him, and starts singing in a powerful bass voice. This is not a development that goes down well with the figure that looks like Cobain, who hides in a kitchen cupboard.

This is a rehearsal for *Last Days*, the [Royal Opera House](#) production based on Gus Van Sant’s 2005 film about a disaffected rock star called Blake: it was fairly obviously a grim fantasy based on the “missing” five days between Cobain absconding from a rehab facility in Los Angeles and killing himself in an outbuilding of his Seattle home, a period during which his wife, Courtney Love was reduced to hiring a private detective to try to find out where he was.

We asked Gus Van Sant to give us a copy of his film’s script. He sent back a one page document with four red words on it

It’s an intriguing idea. On the one hand, if you were looking to stage a production that might have an appeal beyond the usual audience intrigued by a modern opera (and it’s worth noting that *Last Days* features an aria sung by acclaimed “alternative pop” singer-songwriter Caroline Polachek, formerly of indie band Chairlift) then Cobain would seem like ideal subject matter: he is both a doomed, flawed tragic hero and unequivocally the most iconic figure that rock music has produced in the last 30 years.

On the other, if you were looking for a film to adapt as a theatrical production, *Last Days* seems a deeply unlikely choice. It has no real linear plot (“having a literal ‘I know what happened to Kurt Cobain in his last days’, we’re not going to do that,” says co-director Anna Morrissey) and what dialogue there is is both improvised and pretty desultory. When the opera’s authors, composer Oliver Leith and librettist, art director and co-director Matt Copson contacted [Gus Van Sant](#) to ask his permission for the adaptation, they also asked if he could forward them a copy of the film’s

script. “He sent back a Word document that was one page,” says Copson. “It’s like four red words: sofa, insurance document, something else. But it was lovely, because he also just said, ‘Do your own thing.’”

It’s advice the team behind the opera clearly took to heart: certainly, no one is going to claim *Last Days* as a wilful lunge for lowest common-denominator mainstream appeal. Here, thanks to gender-blind casting, Blake is played by a female actor – Agathe Rousselle, best-known as the lead in Julia Ducournau’s Palme d’Or-winning horror film *Titane*. What little dialogue the character had in the film has vanished: Blake neither sings nor speaks, communicating entirely in the kind of muttering I heard at the rehearsal, although Copson points out: “Those mumbles are subtitled and they give us hints of things throughout.”

Liberties have been taken with the plot as well, to include what Copson calls “literal magic realism”. And the character of Blake’s manager – portrayed in Gus Van Sant’s film by Kim Gordon, the former bassist in Sonic Youth and a friend of Cobain – is played by a Montana-based cattle auctioneer, chanting in the profession’s famous hyperspeed monotone. “He was 17 years old and he didn’t know who Kurt Cobain was, which was very funny,” says Leith, who recorded him for the opera. “He was like, ‘This isn’t an evil opera thing, is it?’ I was like, ‘Well, we don’t know yet.’”

Neither Copson, best-known as a visual artist, nor Leith, a classical and electronic composer whose work has been released by Matthew Herbert’s Accidental label, has ever worked on an opera before: they began writing *Last Days* during the pandemic, although they’re dismissive of the idea that lockdown might have chimed with the film’s theme of isolation. As Copson points out, in the film, Blake actively wants to be alone, but is continually interrupted by everyone from door-to-door salesmen to his record company.

Instead, Oliver says he was drawn to Van Sant’s film partly because of its sound design, in which even the most mundane noises – the rustling of leaves, the creak of a chair – are “raised up” to the same volume as the actors’ voices. It chimes with his own interest in “raising everyday stakes, framing boring stuff as, I don’t know, sublime”. His 2018 piece *good day good day bad day bad day* dealt with daily routines; *Honey Siren*, for which he won a 2020 Ivor Novello award, was based on the ubiquitous urban sound of a siren rushing past.

“Rather than just raising it, as the film does, here it is tuned and utilised,” he says. “The birds actually sing songs, wolves howl but they’re singing in tune. And cereal bowls are a big theme. When someone pours cereal, it’s unnaturally loud and musical. It acts like a zoom on a film. You’re suddenly like, ‘OK, that’s what I’m looking at, that’s what I’m focusing on.’”

For Copson, the draw was the film’s combination of “banality and magic” and the figure of Cobain himself, his continued relevance 28 years after his death. “I think what makes it interesting and, most importantly, what makes it interesting in 2022 – which is very different even to when the film was made – is the relevance and prevalence of this archetype that seems, to me at least, to say something about the contemporary condition we all find ourselves in. You speak to any young person – everyone is on display to a degree that they weren’t before, and there are questions of privacy that come up all the time. The essential idea of, ‘Am I an individual or am I member of society? Can I freely express myself or can I not? What does it even mean to express yourself? What is freedom?’

New operas are mostly just about issues – and that’s the dullest thing

“I think the reason why this archetype, this Kurt figure, remains relevant is because he so heavily demonstrated that paradox. He held so many contradictions within himself. His suicide note says, ‘I love people too much’, then it says, ‘I hate people.’ He’s like a walking paradox, and I think those are really important and beautiful figures for us to grapple with, because it’s an extremity of what I personally feel all the time.”

For all its evident strangeness, its mumbled dialogue and lack of a plot, all three are keen for Last Days to reach a broader audience in a world where opera is seen as a forbidding art form.

“Productions are alienating,” says Oliver. “New operas are mostly just about issues, and that’s the dullest thing – that’s the climate change opera, that’s whatever. It’s too simplistic.”

“I think it should resonate,” says Morrissey of Last Days. “You should feel something. You should feel really moved. I don’t think consensus and agreement is a thing we want en masse, but rather individual understanding or resonance with yourself.”

“I think we’re united on one front,” says Copson. “We’re all like, ‘We just want people to feel and then they’ll gradually find it accessible as a form.’ And that doesn’t mean dumbing it down.”



ROYAL OPERA HOUSE SWAPS GLITZ FOR GRUNGE IN GUS VAN SANT ADAPTATION

As the Royal Opera House readies itself for a grunge adaptation, Richard Godwin asks, why are we so attached to old misconceptions about snobbery in the oeuvre?

[RICHARD GOODWIN](#)

29 SEPTEMBER 2022

Pity the parent of the child who develops an expensive hobby. Football, for example. Ever since Euro 2020, my eight-year-old has been going through school shoes every three weeks. He insists (insists!) that we have Now TV for the Premiership at £30 per month and as a surcharge for Spurs being quite decent these days, we must pay £25 per month for the Champions League on BT Sport. At the time of writing, the only seats available to watch Tottenham live are 'Informal Dining' tickets vs Aston Villa — at £599 a pair.

If only he were into something a little less elitist, a little less arcane, a little more accessible. Like opera. You can get change from a tenner for two tickets to the Royal Opera House. Lovely building. World-class performers. Incredible scenes. You even get to sip a beer while watching them. Opera is civilised like that. 'The only elite thing about opera is how talented the people are who do it,' says Oliver Leith, 32, the company's current composer-in-residence at Covent Garden and, I am delighted to hear, an Enfield boy like me, Enfield not traditionally being a hotbed of high culture. 'Watching the singers rehearse, memorise all the music and movements, emote, understand — it's Olympic levels of ridiculousness. But that's the only elite thing I can think of in opera. The people who work in opera are from the greatest array of backgrounds you could imagine.'

Leith is about to unveil his debut full-length work, *Last Days*. It is as good an example as any of how far actual opera has strayed from the cliché of opera that so many still hold, notably the Conservatives' Dominic Raab, who tried to take the piss out of Labour's Angela Rayner for going to Glyndebourne this summer. The implication? A working-class Northern woman has no business going to the opera unless she is a fraud or a hypocrite or both. Know your place!

Anyway, *Last Days* is an extremely loose adaptation of the 2005 Gus Van Sant film inspired by the death of Kurt Cobain, co-created with the librettist/director Matthew Copson for a cast of eight (tickets from £5, BTW). I will admit when I watched the film, which mostly consists of a Cobain-esque musician named Blake wandering around a house mumbling, I didn't immediately think: whack a few bassoons in there and we've got ourselves an opera! But actually, says Leith, at the story's heart is a highly operatic dynamic. 'The film deals with the everyday. It's about mundanity. But the fact that we know that the musician about mundanity. But the fact that we know that the musician will die at the end really raises the stakes. Every interaction is heightened. And that's a beautiful thing to play with in opera.'

It is not, to be clear, a Kurt Cobain opera. No arias based on 'Territorial Pissings', alas. 'It's more about the Kurt Cobain archetype; he is a person who gets used up by the world. Which is quite operatic.' Van Sant was happy to have them be as loose as they want. Leith makes it sound like a bit of laugh — on the day we speak, he has just finished tuning timpani. 'Honestly, I am having so much fun.' And Leith is part of a generation of composers who enjoy all the meats of our cultural stew, as Homer Simpson once put it. 'I don't really have a genre,' he laughs. 'I've always been flexible in the way I move across things. I work with pop people sometimes. I write in a classical idiom most of the time, but basically I'd work with anyone. I would very happily compose a piece for a metal band.'

Musicians have evolved — and so have audiences. Those who have grown up in the streaming era tend not to recognise distinctions and hierarchies once considered immovable. The American composer Nico Muhly has staged an opera about catfishing at the English National Opera and written songs with Björk; Bryce Dessner, guitarist in The National, composes chamber music and produces records for Taylor Swift. And is a figure such as Anna Meredith electronic or classical, or does anyone actually give a damn? Still, it might surprise you that the largest audience segment by decade at the Royal Opera House is 20-29-year-olds. And sure, young people benefit from subsidised tickets (£30 Glyndebourne tickets are available to under-30s, too, if you can get someone to give you a lift). But it shouldn't be so surprising that culture evolves with its audience.

In any case, in recent years London classical fans have been abundantly served. There is the Grimeborn opera season at the Arcola Theatre in Hackney, and Shadwell Opera in the old East End, in addition to the surprisingly cheap Holland Park season. There have been chamber recitals at superclub Fabric as well as Bold Tendencies, which features an annual season of classical, dance and opera in the former multi-storey carpark in Peckham. Its 2022 programme has seen Stockhausen, Aphex Twin and, on a recent spellbinding late summer evening, Rachmaninoff's *Piano Concerto No 2* performed by pianist Jeneba Kanneh-Mason with the Philharmonia. I was in the audience for that one — it was magnificent. I had the palpable sense of watching a human being doing one of the most impressive things our species has learnt to do and without breaking a sweat. Every note was felt. The fact it was performed in a car park, at sunset, with trains hissing and cars beeping and a crowd that genuinely looked quite a lot like the streets around it — well, it's the sort of alchemy that everyone in the arts wants.

'That's something we wanted to embrace in our programme this year,' says Hannah Barry, the curator of the series. 'In the last 15 to 20 years or so these words like "immersive" and "experiential" have come up a lot in the arts. But in the end, if something is very pure or extreme, it immerses you in that world — and no one needs to tell you that it's going to, that's the intention, it just does.' She, too, is deeply bored by conversations about who is allowed to like Monteverdi. What she puts on is dictated by what she thinks would be cool in that space. There has been ballet this season; next year, she is thinking about wheeling in a church organ. 'Somehow it computed in my mind: "Wouldn't it be wild to do an organ programme next year? And to put the organ at the bottom of the ramp?"' The point is, she says, that it could be exciting for any number of reasons: organs are loud, the music is weird, there is a new generation of excellent organists apparently, it is 'fundamentally architectural music' and so it will attract different people. 'It doesn't have to be about young people. Some people come because they're on a date, others are with their family. It's lovely if you've got one friend you go to these things with all the time, but what's really nice is to go

to different things for different reasons with different people.'

A point rather lost on the Raabs of this world. And with recent culture secretaries generally seeing it as their mission to destroy as much British culture as they possibly can, the future for classical

musicians looks pretty bleak. It feels doubtful that the BBC's five orchestras can survive the licence-fee freeze. There are dark rumours of BBC3 disappearing just as audience numbers soar. The business of making a living as a working musician is becoming ever harder, as Rayner clearly perceived. She later revealed she went to Glyndebourne at the invitation of a neighbour, a violinist.

And opera crowds are far from the cliché. Okay, there are some down in the £250 seats, where you will occasionally see Michael Gove, but upstairs it's mostly just people who are properly into the music. Like Binker Golding, the heavily tattooed jazz saxophonist, who has been a regular at Covent Garden ever since he paid £3 to see Richard Jones's seminal production of Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* (a banger) back in 2004. 'I was around a bunch of people who were quite similar to me: in their late teens or early 20s, either heavily into music or musicians themselves. And there was a real sense of community up there. That whole experience of the evening was what got me hooked. If the productions are that good, if it's a composer I like, what have I got to lose?' He reckons he has been over 100 times now and still prefers sitting right up at the top. 'I just don't believe in individuals restricting themselves as far as the arts are concerned because of class,' he says. 'And perhaps there are people in that building who didn't feel I should be there? I mean: I literally don't care. I'm going whether you like it or not. I just took that opportunity, I never waited for permission.' It's there if you want it.

From Richard Nixon to Kurt Cobain, operas about real people are thriving

'Last Days', the Royal Opera's world premiere, draws on the life of the late Nirvana frontman

Hugh Morris 10 HOURS AGO

Relevance is a perennial concern for the opera world, and the new season at London's Royal Opera House — with three operas on contemporary history — seems to be placing it at the top of its agenda. Making their house debut are *History of the Present*, which marks the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement; *Least Like the Other*, a portrait of Rosemary Kennedy, the younger sister of John F Kennedy; and *Last Days*, Oliver Leith and Matt Copson's adaptation of a film based on the final few days of Nirvana lead singer Kurt Cobain.

Framing an opera about a living or recently dead figure raises important problems for its creators. How can it explore figures that audiences already know and have strong opinions about? And how does it deal with subjects who have the power to fight back?

Last Days proposes one answer: blur everything in sight, thus avoiding the concerns of history altogether. "If you're expecting it to be a Kurt Cobain opera, you'll be extremely disappointed," says Leith, a London-based composer who grew up with Nirvana records. "There's no grunge." He has opted instead for music that captures a sense of the beautified everyday, where every instrument — strings and saws, kettles and kettledrums — can sing (or at least, rustle at pitch).



Rehearsal image of Agathe Rouselle as Blake in 'Last Days' © Camilla Greenwell

That saturation of singing things adds to the estrangement felt by the central character, Blake, who can only mumble. “There’s a kind of Brechtian alienation going on there,” Copson says, “which is already there in opera as a form. You have to buy into the idea of everyone singing.” Leith adds: “Blake is like a first-time opera visitor, asking, ‘What the fuck is going on?’” He’s clearly intrigued, though, as later the guitarist strums through his favourite song in the world — an Italian aria, obviously.

Part of *Last Days*’ abstraction derives from its source. Gus Van Sant’s art-house film of the same name from 2005 avoids conventional storytelling, focusing instead on the everyday movements of central character Blake as he stumbles confusedly through his daily life. The canonical understanding of Cobain’s final days — involving an escape from rehab in Los Angeles, a return to his native Seattle, the acquisition of a shotgun and his eventual suicide — is only referenced on occasion. “Our interest was not in it as a Kurt Cobain biopic,” Leith says of the film. “It was in its tone, and its everydayness.”

The trend for operas that deal with contemporary historical settings really began with John Adams’s 1987 *Nixon in China*. Why the sudden change? Opera had approached near-contemporary subjects and settings for years — think of the rough-and-ready Paris of Puccini’s *La bohème* — but none as immediately relevant as this. For Adams and director Peter Sellars, exploring the mythology of America’s contemporary history chimed with seeing operatic archetypes in everyday life. “As Americans, we’re obsessed with our president, because that person embodies our national psyche,” Adams said in 2011.



Robert Brubaker as Mao and James Maddalena as Nixon in John Adams's 'Nixon in China' © Alamy Stock Photo

Aside from dramatic concerns, there's a noticeable box office draw for contemporary historical operas — *Last Days* has sold out its run this year, as did Mark-Anthony Turnage's *Anna Nicole*, about former Playboy model Anna Nicole Smith, and *Nixon* has become one of Adams's most reprised stage works. Drawing on popular culture as a route into deeper questions helps opera houses avoid accusations of stuffiness.

In *Nixon*, Adams balances artistic invention and messing with characters known to the audience by deliberately choosing some less-public events. Nixon's visit to China in 1972 was dubbed the media event of the century, but Alice Goodman's libretto was able to pit the well-publicised events — the touchdown of the presidential aircraft, the trip to the Peking Opera — with the bits the media didn't see, leading to touching moments such as the scene in Act Three as Nixon and Mao reminisce from their beds about their experiences. Drama leans further into myth.

Where Leith and Copson aim for detachment and Adams opts for mythologising, Turnage zoomed in on his subject in 2011's *Anna Nicole*. "The trouble with a lot of operatic subjects is their distance from today," Turnage said ahead of the premiere. "I'm not against using myth or history, and obviously I'm aware that both can have relevance to me and to now. But in reality, it hardly ever grabs me like that."



Amanda Roocroft as Margaret, Duchess of Argyll in Thomas Adès's 'Powder Her Face' © Elliott Franks/eyevine

The tale of Anna Nicole Smith is certainly striking: it is a classic operatic plot of rise and demise, of money, sex, pathetic tragedy and a scandalous marriage, with farce aplenty. Yet with it comes empathy towards the characters caught up in her whirlwind life. It's a far cry from Thomas Adès's frosty depiction of the comparably scandalous Margaret, Duchess of Argyll and her coterie in *Powder Her Face*, but both pieces provoke via their salaciousness.

While Smith is dealt an even hand by Turnage and Richard Thomas's libretto, critical barbs are reserved for the media. In the original production, dancers wearing TV-camera headaddresses followed Anna Nicole around incessantly, pointing directly to the media attention that contributed to her downfall.

The knowledge of the death of a central character is what carries both *Anna Nicole* and *Last Days*. But what happens when the subject is still very much alive? While following the dimensions of musical rather than opera, *Jerry Springer: The Opera* is the most infamous example of the consequences of fictionalising the present; its full-hearted embrace of profanity and irreverence towards religion led to performances being picketed by religious groups around the UK, and its 2005 BBC broadcast elicited nearly 50,000 complaints, then a record number.



Rod Gilfry and Eva-Maria Westbroek in Mark-Anthony Turnage's 'Anna Nicole' © Corbis via Getty Images

Co-writer Stewart Lee, interviewing Springer in 2003, found his subject surprisingly unflustered by the show. The chat-show host “is a fictionalised character”, said Springer, “and I’ve worked pretty hard at developing this persona in *The Jerry Springer Show* that would not be me so that I could keep this separation in my life, yet this persona has been going on for 13 years.” Even when drawing directly on reality, then, there is still a heavy element of fiction and myth.

With these operas, “relevance” is a Trojan horse: although they have familiar settings, they determinedly avoid purely factual recreations of historical figures and moments. What intrigues is exactly how they obscure the literal, how recent events pass through blurry, mythical, surreal and hyper-real lenses and in turn reveal the dramas’ own truths. The Metropolitan Opera’s programme notes called *Nixon* “a media event about a media event” and there’s an element of that in all these operas — where the subject is less important than the strange space between us and them.

‘Last Days’, October 7-11, [roh.org.uk](https://www.roh.org.uk)

THE TIMES

Caroline Polachek: my day with the diva

Hidden on a Bedford industrial estate, the maximalist pop star has been rehearsing for her tour. Ed Potton gets invited behind the scenes

Caroline Polachek: "I am drawn to Romantic-era stuff — French and Russian"

[Ed Potton](#)

Friday February 17 2023, 12.01am, The Times

One of Caroline Polachek's team wondered recently if she was "the only artist ever to be played on Radio 1, 2, 3 and 6". There certainly aren't many musicians whose choruses appeal to pop kids, whose artiness turns on hipsters and whose technique keeps classical buffs happy. The American singer-songwriter has co-written a track, *No Angel*, for Beyoncé and supported Dua Lipa, and her shimmeringly funky *Bunny Is a Rider* was named the song of 2021 by the influential music website Pitchfork. Despite only sporadic training, Polachek's vivid soprano wins over the most demanding critics. Last year she recorded an aria for the opera *Last Days* at the Royal Opera House that my colleague Richard Morrison, who is not inclined to give free passes to moonlighting pop stars, described as "heartbreakingly freighted with nostalgia and elegy".

It could be a bit anticlimactic, then, to be encountering her on an industrial estate near Bedford. Yet in a vast, dark hangar, magic is happening as Polachek and her Anglo-American crew rehearse the music, lighting and choreography for her European tour. They have invited me to watch, which rarely happens. "No one gets to see this side," she says. "They just see the polished bit." Dry ice billows and the volcano-themed stage set glows as they run through the songs from her excellent new album, *Desire, I Want to Turn into You*.

I'm given headphones so I can hear Polachek, 37, chatting with her producers. A micromanager who edits her own videos, she has an impressive eye and ear for detail. She addresses her backing singer: "If you turn to the left you're catching the light in a more flattering way." A large clock ticks down to the first number. "Can I get more of the clock in my ear please? I wanna get hyped and nervous," Polachek says.

The clock reaches zero and the band launch into *Welcome to My Island*, the synth-pop swooner that will open her shows. "Desire, I want to turn into you," she sings, raising her fist like a boxer. The album titled after that line is a bonkers maximalist epic in which bagpipes and Spanish guitars jostle with cutting-edge electronica. I love the fact that there is a song, *Fly to You*, that features Grimes and Dido, the princess of leftfield and a doyenne of the mainstream.

"I also love that," Polachek says during a break for lunch. Dido "understood that it was a surprising pairing for people", while the hyperactive, helium-voiced Grimes "really does sound like that in the studio". Polachek recorded with the Canadian artist "in her bedroom on a very starry night in LA, jacked up on some extreme triple-strength cold brew". She has met Elon Musk, with whom Grimes has a son, X, but doesn't want to talk about Musk, worrying, perhaps wisely, that "the interview might become about him".

Polachek was in a "destructive and wild" mood when she decided on the title *Desire, I Want to Turn into You*, she says. "It wasn't until a year and a half later that I started really thinking about what the

f*** it means. It could mean I want to turn into desire itself, that force of will that moves us all through the world. It could also mean I want to turn into the object of my desire, which is kind of an insane thing to say to someone: you love them so much you want to become them. And then the third meaning is quite physical: I want to be held by you. I felt like those three contradictory meanings really worked with the tenderness and stupidity and profundity that's all happening in parallel on this album."

Who cares if it doesn't all make sense? Nor does much of the music by her heroines, Björk and Fiona Apple. "Understanding is overrated," Polachek says. A touchstone for this project was the work of Pedro Almodóvar. "He manages to so humanely situate so many contradictions — his films emboldened me to feel I could do this. We have this idea that every album must be a concept album because it gives people a very specific framework for understanding something. This is distinctly not a concept album."

What it is, she says, is "a catharsis", tackling at least two deaths, including that of her father in 2020 after contracting Covid. She has said that "saying goodbye to him over FaceTime was one of the most painful experiences of my life". A former professor at Princeton and Columbia universities, he hadn't always approved of her adventures in pop. Another song, *I Believe*, has a striking line about being "not alone under a sky of vultures". When I mention it, Polachek starts crying. She tells me it's about Sophie, the Scottish musician and friend of hers who died in 2021 after falling from a building in Athens. The vulture line is "about legacy, how people swoop in to pick off pieces of what you leave behind".

Brought up in Connecticut, Polachek lives between Los Angeles and London, the home of her boyfriend, the British artist Matt Copson, who co-directed *Last Days* and some of her videos. She has no problem working with a partner, she says. "In some ways the spirit of creative collaboration kind of defines a relationship. We have this amazing kind of symbiotic setup where he brings me on to do audio on his stuff."

She is a trained artist herself, having spent a year studying at the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts in Brussels before moving to the University of Colorado and, when that "wasn't challenging enough", transferring to New York University. It was around this time that her art-pop band Chairlift took off, going from the Brooklyn warehouse scene to international success when their song *Bruises* was featured in an iPod advert. "I hadn't slept for about three days and I was between final exams," she says. "I was, like, 'OK, I'm seeing some Apple products, but my song is playing.' It didn't make any sense. And then my whole life changed very fast."

Chairlift disbanded in 2017 and she went solo and on to even greater things, such as *Bunny Is a Rider*, a song about unavailability. "That's the main modern fantasy, isn't it?" she says. Thanks to social media, "we've never been more accessible, but unavailability is such a part of flirtation and romance. I love the Anne Carson definition of the erotic," she adds, referring to the Canadian poet and academic. "There has to be a boundary of some kind."

Polachek would love to do more classical singing, she says, being "heavily drawn to Romantic-era stuff, especially French and Russian. The really sad stuff. I'm not such a fan of the Italian, bosomy stuff." Being an operatic diva ties in with her description of her album as "bratty". The record explores the idea of "total entitlement and being irrational at the same time, something that you're not allowed to do. And what is a diva if not irrational and entitled?" A pause. "But the diva is also deserving."