From La Bohème to La Wally: How Status Affects the Unconventionality of Opera Repertoires

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Abstract

In this paper, we examine how organizational status affects nonconformity in the Italian opera field where the tension between divergent institutional logics threatens the position of high status organizations while opening opportunities for upward status mobility. Data on 42 Italian opera houses' repertoires from 2004 to 2011 show that middle status theaters are in the best position to increase the unconventionality of their artistic programs. This also holds true when the risk of delegitimation that stems from nonconformity is so high to compromise the external perception of opera houses' identities: middle status theatres are more willing than their higher and lower status counterparts to raise the unconventionality of hybrid operas that blur the boundaries between established categorization systems and potentially dilute their identities. Differentiation opportunities and potential for status advancement are strong incentives for middle status theatres to embrace the high-risk path of unconventional hybridity. Keywords: status, nonconformity/unconventionality, category, identity, opera and arts.

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