

## The quest for new digital skills for opera artists and opera companies during the Covid-19 pandemic

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The coronavirus 2019 (Covid-19) pandemic has emerged as a global phenomenon that significantly affects almost all sectors, irrespective of whether they have a well-established economic system. The inception of COVID-19 pandemic has increased and accelerated the demand for opera industry embrace digit technology to continue to produce performances and reach audiences. The brutality of the Covid-19 pandemic has affected most sectors, and opera artists are significantly affected in the Global South. South Africa, among others, is at the receiving end. The Covid-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc and exacerbated the existing vulnerability of opera artists. Opera artists have difficulty obtaining employment and finding funding for performing arts organisations have caused seriously challenged opera artists to survive during the Covid-19 pandemic. This study is aimed to examine the quest for new digital skills for opera artists and opera companies during the Covid-19 pandemic. A qualitative research method was adopted using interviews with opera artists, selected retired opera practitioners and managers of opera companies. In this study, scholarly documents were reviewed to yield trustworthy findings. The findings demonstrate a high demand for opera artists to upgrade their current skills to meet the demand of digital skills. This demand for digital skills is partially attributable to the closed and suspension of live theatre performances due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings also reveal that digital connectivity in the performing arts sector become an essential driver of economic growth. This study concludes by affirming that digital skills are key skills required for resuscitating the opera industry.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, digital skills, economy, opera artists, opera industry

### Introduction

This study highlights that when the first coronavirus case (hereafter Covid-19) was discovered in South Africa on 5 March 2020, the government enforced a 21-day national shutdown that commenced on 26 March to curb the spread of the pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic continues to wreak havoc on the performing arts, and particularly the opera industry. The pandemic affects live performances and disrupts all theatre-based performances. At the inception of the Covid-19 pandemic, opera artists were severely affected by the national lockdown.

Digital transformation in the performing arts industry has emerged as an important phenomenon in academia (Faber, Coetzee & Munro, 2021; Rentschler & Lee, 2021; Vizcaíno-Verdú, Aguaded & Contreras-Pulido, 2021). Digital transformation has replaced live theatrical performances via digital technologies (Li, 2020; Vizcaíno-Verdú, Aguaded & Contreras-Pulido, 2021). The digital transformation has led many performing arts organisations into a new era. This was also echoed by Webb & Layton (2022) who assert that “the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the need to embrace digital ways of producing work and reaching audiences in the hard-hit sectors such as performing arts”.

South Africa’s performing arts industry's need for digital transformation was being discussed by various stakeholders, organisations, scholars, and other relevant entities at the outbreak of the pandemic. Various scholars, stakeholders, and employers asserted that for opera artists to be employable, they require additional skills other than the basic skills such as acting, singing, and sight-reading in the performing arts industry (Pollard & Wilson, 2013; Poole, 2011; Van Zuilenburg, 2012; Yende & Mugovhani, 2021). Yende and Mugovhani (2021) conducted a study on the new skills demanded for opera artists in South Africa. The primary objective of their study was to investigate the curricula versus student job readiness and employability in the performing arts (opera) industry. In other words, Yende and Mugovhani (2021) sought to understand how relevant were performing arts courses to the industry for which the students are trained or produced?

Their study revealed unemployment difficulties due to skills lacked that the majority of performing arts graduates experience. The skills lacked are business (entrepreneurial) skills, marketing skills, and administrative skills, among others (Yende & Mugovhani, 2021). These skills are fundamental for the employability of opera artists and the opera industry (Van Zuilenburg 2012; Yende 2017). However, since the pandemic, these basic digital skills are no longer sufficient to guarantee employability (Webb, 2021; Faber, Coetzee & Munro, 2021; Yende, 2021).

Venue-based performances were moved to platforms during the pandemic. Venues such as cinemas, performing arts, live music, museums, and festivals moved to online platforms to meet the audience demands caused by the lockdown (Yende, 2021). Virtual performances and online became necessary for the performing arts industry and for opera artists to keep them operative during the lockdown (Faber, Coetzee & Marth Munro, 2021); Rendell, 2021). Thus,

this study will explore the digital transformation fundamental to ensuring the survival of the opera industry during the pandemic (Faber, Coetzee & Munro, 2021; Rentschler & Lee, 2021).

Demand for digital skills to support online performance soared and skills such as digital marketing, gaming, programming and technological skills for virtual performances and online became essential for opera artists to study (Trubnikova & Tsagareyshvili, 2021; Rambarran, 2021; Yende, 2021). This study was motivated by existing studies highlighting that it is important for opera artists and the opera industry to acquire digital skills as part of their careers (Park, 2021; Yende, 2021). Identified digital skills that contribute to placing artists in a better position to continue performing during the pandemic in the virtual environment are entrepreneurial skills, marketing skills, and administrative skills must be incorporated with digital skills such as digital marketing, video editing, virtual performances, managing online platforms, online streaming, online marketing, social media advertising, monetizing digital platforms, YouTube channel management, and video and sound editing (Yende, 2021; Faber, Coetzee & Munro, 2021). In the discourse of post-pandemic recovery in the opera industry, there is a need to improve digital skills for opera artists.

In light of this, there is necessary to examine the quest for new skills for opera artists during the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, in this study, the researcher focuses on specific questions from the literature on the demand for digital skills for the performing arts industry and opera artists in South Africa.

### **Research questions**

In this study, the researcher developed specific primary research questions that seek answers and give more clarity on the ongoing crisis:

- i. What are the challenges faced by the opera industry with digital skills in South Africa?
- ii. What are the benefits of adapting to online performances for the opera industry?

### **Theoretical framework**

In this analysis, this study employed digital transformation theory to argue that digital technologies are essential in the opera industry for opera artists. Digital technologies are vital instruments to attract new audiences while retaining and increasing the loyalty of the existing audiences (Imran, Shahzad, Butt & Kantola, 2021; Jones, 2016). There are growing conceptual

and theoretical debates concerning the nature of digital skills in the worldwide performing arts industry (Imran et al., 2021). This study's analysis is framed and grounded within the larger question of the importance of acquiring new digital skills in the South African opera industry.

Digital transformation theory examines how digital transformation is experienced, with a specific focus on certain members of the opera industry, and uses the concept of digital technology as a lens through which digital transformation can be understood (Ford & Mandviwalla, 2020; Yende, 2021). Digitisation of the opera industry is crucial for various reasons, including the stability of the theatre (Weinberg, Otten, Orbach, McKenzie, Gil, Chisholm & Basuroy, 2021; Trubnikova & Tsagareyshvili, 2021). Hence, Trubnikova & Tsagareyshvili, 2021:7) states that:

From the point of view of integrating new instruments in the operatic show and using them for promoting the cultural product, the respondents see these instruments as a positive influence on the modern perception of opera.

Digital transformation is a fundamental instrument for improving, promoting and preserving operatic theatre during the Covid-19 pandemic (Ford & Mandviwalla, 2020; Imran et al., 2021). It is inevitable that there is an imperative nexus between digital transformation and online performances to enable the opera industry and opera artists to improve and better their products and services to audiences.

## **Methodology**

### *Research Paradigm and Sampling*

In this article, a qualitative research method was adopted. The participants of this study were monitored for over a year they adapted to digital technologies for their performances. Three types of participants were selected: freelance opera artists, full-time opera artists, and opera company managers (Lichtman, 2012). It is be noticed that full-time opera artists refers to those artists who were paid through the pandemic. Specifically, these types of participants were selected to obtain their perception of digital technologies in relation to online performance in the opera industry and included ten freelance opera artists (with no specified gender and race), ranging from 25 to 41 years; five full-time opera artists; and three managers of opera companies.

In this study, snowball and purposive sampling were used, as all the participants were known by the researcher and located in Western Cape Province and Gauteng Province, where the researcher had easy access (Thorne, 2000).

#### *Data collection interviews*

Data were collected from (1) unstructured, open-ended conversational mask-to-mask interviews with the selected participants (Nakahama, Tyler & Van Lier, 2001); (2) field notes taken during the interviews; (3) reviews of scholarly writings such as journal articles, book chapters, books, and theses were consulted to improve the trustworthiness of the findings. Qualitative data were collected from the interviews, and a thematic analysis was implemented on transcriptions of the interviews to accurately identify emergent themes or topics discussed.

#### *Phenomenology-qualitative*

A phenomenological techniques were used with a qualitative research method for interpreting the meaning of the importance of digital skills for opera artists, freelancers and managers of opera companies who participated in the study (Thorne, 2000; Padgett, 2016). From an epistemological viewpoint, phenomenology is grounded in a paradigm of personal knowledge and subjectivity. The participants' collected perceptions and interpretations led to an in-depth understanding of the motivations and actions of the participants.

#### **Ethical considerations**

In this study, the researcher obtained a necessary ethical approval letter, and the clearance number is **HDC REC04/2021**. In addition, approval was obtained from the ethics committee of the University of Cape Town (Higher Degrees Committee, Faculty Ethics Research Committee). Also, letters of consent were distributed to and signed by all the selected participants in the study. All the participants were informed about the nature and purpose of the study before the mask-to-mask interviews. The participants all participated voluntarily, and the researcher ensured that their privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality were honoured.

#### **Significance of this study**

The Covid-19 pandemic has moved the performance industry online and opera artists require new digital skills to excel online. This study is significant and crucial as it explores the new

skills demanded by the digital technologies in the opera industry for promoting online performances. This study may be a tool for enlightening opera artists and the opera industry to seek ways of acquiring digital skills to ensure that they function during the pandemic. The scholarly literature helped deliver insights on how the traditional live performance can be transitioned online without losing the essence of opera. Furthermore, this study reviews the importance of digital transformation, and its values are justified because it seeks to promote and preserve opera as an art form. Therefore, the study is important as it may lead to new insight into the importance of digital technologies for the preservation endeavour.

## **Findings**

Finally, the findings of this study responded to the two research questions that arose in this study and were all answered using the literature gathered in this study. The research questions are as follows:

- 1) What challenges faced by the opera industry with digital skills in South Africa?
- 2) What are the benefits of adapting to online performances for the opera industry?

The findings are presented in relation to the type of participants' views regarding digital skills challenges and benefits in relation to online performances, namely:

- a) Perceptions of the freelance opera artists
- b) Perceptions of the full-time opera artists
- c) Perceptions of the opera company managers

## **Perceptions of the freelance opera artists on online performances**

Most of the freelancing participants encountered some challenges and identified barriers to the online performances. Participants highlighted that the inception of the online performances came unexpectedly and forced many of them to embrace digital performances. The freelance opera artist participants revealed that they do not have the digital skills to support online performance.

### *Challenges*

Another opera artist highlighted:

Even though online performances are crucial for us as opera singers, however, online performances demand digital skills which most of us do not possess. In that sense, I think problematic and have increased vulnerability.

An opera artist proclaimed:

Our challenges include platforms such as Zoom, and YouTube fatigue that affects our performances and viewers. We had to manage with Zoom and YouTube time lag and employ mobile phones, invention skills and internet disruption.

Most opera artists found it difficult to transition from traditional performances to online performances during the pandemic due to lack of digital skills, and many of them are very frustrated.

### *Benefits*

Opera artists expressed that digital skills are crucial for self-curating or co-curating their work online, creating an opportunity for the agency for artists. The findings indicate that the basic skills that opera artists have are not sufficient to survive the pandemic.

A freelancing opera artist stated:

With the online performances, it is easier for us as artists to sell tickets and generate some revenue for online concerts.

One of the opera artists said:

As freelancing opera singers, in today's real-world Covid-19 pandemic, digital technologies are important for crucial to continue with our small concerts via online platforms.

Some participants perceive online performances as a saving platform as their income comes from online performances. Most freelancer opera artists agreed that adapting to digital technologies is important.

## **Perceptions of full-time opera artists of online performances**

### *Challenges*

The full-time opera artists agreed that the collapse of the live theatre industry affected artists and the various artists who work alongside them. This includes everyone from sound engineers, stage managers, directors, and equipment companies. Venues were also affected as they could not continue maintaining the premises and the staff they employ. Practitioners stated that during the first national lockdown, many artists globally could not get into a theatre for rehearsals. During the height of the coronavirus crisis in South Africa, it became noticeable that there is a significant gap between established opera artists and freelancing opera artists. Most freelancing opera artists across the globe continue to be vulnerable as the Covid-19 continues to wreak devastating havoc in the industry.

One of the practitioners alleged:

But online performance is not uncomplicated. For instance, in wealthier countries, where internet access, data and electricity are abundant and affordable, online performances are successful. However, in developing countries such as South Africa online performance comes at a much higher cost – and increased vulnerability and inequality.

While another practitioner stated:

In South Africa, online performance is difficult for all artists and companies as we are facing a high level of electricity and internet connectivity issues that frustrate the online performances.

### *Benefits*

Practitioner A also revealed:

Opera companies that have turned into digital platforms were and are able to continue with the performances and attract new audiences through the online market.

Practitioner B stated:

As digital performance is transforming the world of arts, there is a necessity for South African opera industry embrace the digital performances to have a successful future.



Equal to the challenges that the South African opera industry is currently experiencing, digital performances was perceived as a major tool for opera industry worldwide. It is inevitable that the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the need for South African opera industry to embrace the digital performances to keep the industry alive.

### **Perceptions of opera company managers of online performances**

Participants generally pointed out that connectivity as a main issue for their companies in the industry, and they all agreed that online performance is difficult in South Africa. The managers of the opera companies described digital performance as a demanding method for their companies and due to the lack of proper digital skills their companies are at risk of closure.

#### *Connectivity*

Manager A of the opera company explained:

I think switching to online performances for us as opera companies have been difficult due to internet connectivity but at the same time effective as we can attract new audiences as well as increase the constant ones.

Manager B of the opera company described:

Our participation as the company was greatly affected by issues like loadshedding and internet lagging. The technical problems like troubled sound due to pressure on the internet software was common during our online performances.

#### *Lacking digital skills*

Manager C of the opera company explained:

I think a challenge with online streaming performances for opera companies is the demand for new digital skills that cause serious threats in our functioning and not to mention the issue of electricity and the high cost of data.

Another manager of the opera company said:

Digital performances require extensive digital skills and due to the lack of these digital skills, our companies are battling to function successful.

Based on the above quotations, there is a need for opera companies to assist their staff members to update their digital skills for digital performances in the industry. This was affirmed by Webb & Layton (2022) who point out that digital skills in the performing arts industry are fundamental and game-changer for the industry.

### *Benefits*

Opera company managers highlighted that their companies expanded geographically and attracted new audiences successfully. Opera company managers are aware that online performances are crucial for their operations.

One of the managers of opera companies stated:

I think it is clear that online performance has become a key driver for the growth of the industry of performing arts, in the particular opera industry.

Another manager of the opera company pointed out:

I believe that online performance are essential in the opera industry and demand digital skills to ensure that online performance succeed in the industry.

### **Data acquired from existing literature**

What are the challenges faced by the opera industry with online performances in South Africa?

The study revealed that opera industry worldwide has been experiencing several challenges in producing and reaching audiences during the pandemic. These challenges are attributed to the lack of digital skills such as digital marketing, gaming, programming, video and sound editing skills which are essential for producing online content and reaching audiences during the pandemic (Webb & Layton, 2022; Trubnikova & Tsagareyshvili, 2021; Yende, 2021). It is inevitable that this dispensation has forced opera artists to learn new digital skills to survive in the digital era. In South Africa, the inadequate electricity supply, lack of equipment and financial support for online performance were the major contributor to the challenges faced by opera industry (Yende, 2021).

What are the benefits of adapting to online performances for the opera industry?

The benefits of online performances are that opera companies find new audiences, subscribers, and regular followers. New opportunities to perform are presented for opera artists, especially freelancers, improving the artists' financial security during the pandemic (Yende, 2021). Online performances could mitigate ongoing challenges experienced by opera artists, and in

particular freelancers. Online performances have replaced theatrical live performances and benefitted many opera companies during the pandemic. Through digital technologies, opera companies attracted new audiences across the country (Trubnikova & Tsagareyshvili, 2021).

## **Discussion**

This study explored and examined need for online digital skills for opera artists and opera companies during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa. The pandemic caused live venues to close and survival of artists depends on their ability to transition to online performances. This study argued that online performances in the opera industry became a fundamental instrument for the financial sustainability of opera industry. Online performances brought significant challenges in the industry, demanding that opera artists and opera companies possess digital skills. This study also agreed that entrepreneurial skills, marketing skills, and administrative skills are crucial. However, these digital skills are no longer sufficient as the industry is forced to adapt to online digital technologies. This study's findings demonstrate a high demand for opera artists and opera companies to upgrade their skills to digital skills related to online performances. The findings of this study reveal the importance of the digital skills for both opera artists and opera companies as a key factor for effective operation in the era Covid-19 (Trubnikova & Tsagareyshvili, 2021; Faber, Coetzee & Munro, 2021). Opera artists and opera companies' success during the pandemic relies fundamentally on online performances.

This study describes the challenges faced by opera artists required to transition to online performances. Opera artists and opera companies must develop digital skills that are essential for online performances. The findings of this study show that digital technologies are a vital and fundamental aspect that will improve the sustainability challenges currently faced by South African opera. Digital transformation theory promotes digital skills (that would set a foundation for online performances, concerts and streams), and digital marketing (that is necessary for the preservation of the opera industry).

Trubnikova and Tsagareyshvili's (2021) findings are corroborated by this study's findings regarding the necessity for digital skills for opera artists and companies. The skills will provide additional opportunities for taking advantage of online digital technology for performing. In turn, these opportunities can grow the opera industry and provide ongoing employment for opera artists.

## Recommendations

Based on these findings and reflecting on this study, the following recommendations:

- Opera artists and opera companies must equip themselves with the digital skills that are game-changers in the performing arts, improving the quality and effectiveness of online performances.
- Opera companies must adopt online performances, preserving the integrity of operatic theatre.
- Opera companies must adapt to digital technologies to attract new audiences and preserve the existing ones.
- Government, policymakers, and other relevant stakeholders must develop new funding policies and programmes that will assist opera artists and companies acquire digital skills relevant to online performances.

## Conclusion

This study examines the importance of digital skills for South African opera artists and companies during the Covid-19 pandemic. This study recognised that learning and developing digital skills, such as digital marketing, video and sound editing, will assist opera artists and opera companies in selling tickets and generating revenue for online concerts. This study also recognised that online performances are gradually replacing the traditional way of performances.

The approach and analysis of this study were informed by the researcher view that digital transformation and online performances will grow the South African opera industry through effective functioning and sustainability. Imran et al.'s (2021) digital transformation theory provided a framework for analysis. This study explored the importance of adapting to and acquiring digital skills as factors that contribute to income sources. This study argued that online skills, digitally-relevant marketing skills, and video and sound editing are necessary for both opera artists and opera companies. The opera industry's live performances have all but ceased due to the lockdowns related to the Covid-19 pandemic. Digital skills are key skills in the opera industry for resuscitating the opera industry financially through online performances.

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