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# The Sound of Reconstruction

Language Choices in the Repertoire of the  
Antwerp Opera after the Second World War  
(1946–1963)

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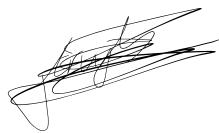
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The undersigned, Amber Truyts, student of the Master program in Digital Text Analysis at the University of Antwerp, declares that this thesis is completely original and exclusively written by herself. For all information and ideas derived from other sources, the undersigned has referred to the original sources, both explicitly and in detail.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Amber Truyts".

# **The Sound of Reconstruction: Language Choices in the Repertoire of the Antwerp Opera after the Second World War (1946-1963)**

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*This thesis investigates how the repertoire of the Antwerp Opera reflected the social and cultural shifts in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. Contributing to the database project of the Opera Ballet Flanders, the study analyzes program leaflets from 1946 to 1963, focusing on the representation of German and Dutch-language productions, composers, and recurring thematic content. The study hypothesized a post-war resurgence of Dutch-language works, a decline of German productions, and the emergence of themes reflecting post-war trauma. Findings reveal that while Dutch-language opera showed a notable upward trend toward the period's end, its overall presence remained limited. German opera, by contrast, maintained a consistently strong presence, swiftly recovering from wartime declines. The repertoire prominently featured universal human experiences surrounding themes like love, death, and power, indicating a preference for emotional continuity and escapism over direct engagement with societal upheavals, aligning with a documented Belgian societal 'silence' surrounding wartime memory. This research highlights the intricate ways linguistic identity, cultural memory, and institutional adaptation intertwined in the post-war era. It demonstrates how the Antwerp Opera navigated Flemish national aspirations alongside practical artistic and commercial considerations to create a new cultural identity after the Second World War.*

## **1. Opera Ballet Flanders**

In the heart of Antwerp, overlooking a lively square and bustling shopping streets, stands the imposing Antwerp Opera. This historic building is one of the city's most significant cultural landmarks, embodying a rich tradition of performing arts and Flemish culture. Opera Ballet Flanders (Opera Ballet Vlaanderen, OBV) is among the largest Flemish cultural institutions, with performance venues in both Antwerp and Ghent. It offers a diverse program of opera, ballet, musical theater, and concerts, balancing classical repertoire with contemporary performances ([Opera Ballet Vlaanderen](#)). This institution plays a central role in the cultural landscape of Flanders, not only through its artistic performances but also through its commitment to international collaboration. These efforts include co-productions with renowned opera houses and participation in global festivals. Additionally, the institution engages the public by offering accessible performances tailored to diverse audiences.

In 2022, Opera Ballet Flanders started a long-term project to document its operatic repertoire in a centralized database. The initiative aims to preserve and make accessible the institution's extensive performance history to provide a valuable resource for researchers and Opera staff. The database is primarily based on information found in the Antwerp Opera's archival records, particularly program leaflets from 1893 to

1981<sup>1</sup>, which are currently housed in the Ghent Opera's multipurpose room, commonly referred to as the 'muziekbibliotheek' ([Allaert 2023](#)).

The project was initiated by Mona Allaert, who digitized and analyzed program leaflets from 1893 to 1934. Her research focused on the influence of the Flemish Movement on the Antwerp Opera's repertoire, particularly concerning the original languages of the performed works. Her analysis revealed a repertoire shaped by nationalist and linguistic aspirations. Dutch-language productions were prominent in the Opera's early years, reflecting political efforts to promote Flemish culture. Despite this initial effort, the repertoire was predominantly German, with Wagner's works alone accounting for over 15% of all performances from 1893 to 1934. His dominance in the repertoire reflects the influence of the Wagnerian model as a means of using culture, in this case opera, to shape national identity<sup>2</sup>. Allaert noted a decline in both German and Dutch works after the First World War and hypothesized that after the Second World War, there may be a resurgence of Dutch productions which could reflect renewed Flemish nationalist sentiment ([Allaert 2023](#)).

Building on Allaert's research, Elisabeth Jansen extended the repertoire database to include performances from 1934 to 1946, focusing on the period of German occupation during the Second World War. Her study analyzes the repertoire of the Antwerp Opera during this time and compares it with that of the Ghent Opera. She found that German-language productions increased significantly until the 1943-1944 season, after which their presence diminished in favor of Italian operas. Conversely, Dutch and French productions, both suppressed during the occupation, experienced a modest resurgence between 1944 and 1946. Although she anticipated a dominant Wagnerian presence, Jansen discovered that Puccini emerged as the most frequently performed composer during the war. She also documented a notable rise in German-language program leaflets, likely linked to propaganda efforts and financial support from the Nazi regime. Jansen suggested that analyzing recurring themes in frequently performed operas in the post-war repertoire could show insights into how performances subtly engaged with or resisted dominant narratives ([Jansen 2024](#)).

Thanks to the pioneering work of Allaert and Jansen, the Antwerp Opera's repertoire from 1893 to 1946 is now well-documented and provides a solid foundation for understanding the institution's repertoire. However, the post-war repertoire remains largely unexplored in academic literature. Existing research has concentrated more on the institutional history of the opera house ([Verbruggen 1965](#); [Pols 1943](#); [Billiet 1918](#)), often emphasizing administrative and organizational developments rather than artistic programming. Performance history has typically been addressed through reviews and journalistic accounts ([Hallemans 1907](#); [Monet 1939](#)), which, while valuable, lack the analytical depth and contextual framing to fully understand the Opera's artistic programming choices. Although the Opera's wartime activity is briefly discussed by scholars such as de Launay ([1983](#)) and van de Vijver ([1990](#)), these studies focus exclusively on the years of German occupation, with little attention given to the immediate post-war period or the long-term effects of the war on the institution's programming and cultural positioning. There has been more research in recent decades on the broader social, political, and cultural aftermath of the Second World War in Belgium. Particularly, they

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<sup>1</sup> Details regarding the materials used and the data collection method for this project are thoroughly discussed in Sections 4.1 and 4.2.

<sup>2</sup> Wauters ([1976](#)) links Wagner's popularity in Antwerp to the rise of Flemish nationalist sentiment and how Peter Benoit, then director of the Antwerp Music Academy, admired Wagner's cultural mission and saw it as aligned with his own efforts to promote a distinct Flemish cultural identity.

focused on the impact of post-war repressive policies targeting collaborators and the persistent taboos surrounding wartime collaboration (Aerts 2018; Van den Braembussche 2002)<sup>3</sup>. These studies underscore how fragmented public discourse and institutional silences have obstructed a comprehensive understanding of the Opera's post-war repertoire. While there has been a gradual and ongoing shift toward more open reflection on this period, the role of cultural institutions, such as the Antwerp Opera, has received little scholarly attention. Addressing this gap is essential for understanding how the arts may have contributed to the reconstruction of public life and cultural identity in the years immediately after the Second World War.

### 1.1 Research Objectives

This thesis investigates how the Antwerp Opera's repertoire from 1946 to 1963 reflects the social and cultural transformations of post-war Antwerp. It specifically explores the role and representation of German and Dutch-language productions and composers within this repertoire. The central research question of this study is: How did the Antwerp Opera's repertoire between 1946 and 1963 reflect the changing post-war Antwerp, particularly in the representation and positioning of German and Dutch productions and composers? Building on the foundational work of the OBV database project, this thesis engages with hypotheses proposed by earlier researchers. Allaert (2023) suggested a potential resurgence of Dutch-language productions in the immediate post-war period, possibly indicating a revived Flemish patriotic sentiment. Jansen (2024) suggested that themes in frequently performed productions may have resonated with or responded to the collective trauma of the occupation. By compiling and analyzing a new dataset within the OBV framework, this study aims to fill a significant gap in the scholarly understanding of the Antwerp Opera's post-war repertoire. Through a quantitative analysis of program leaflets, it examines language usage, production frequency, composer representation, and thematic trends across multiple programming seasons after the Second World War.

## 2. The Antwerp Opera and the Flemish Movement

She was born in struggle; she has always lived in struggle; in struggle she has grown to become one of the foremost factors of our Flemish culture. (Resseler 1941, 5, own translation)

### 2.1 An Introduction to the Flemish Movement

The Flemish Movement emerged in Belgium following its independence in 1830 as a direct response to the dominance of the French language. Despite a significant Dutch-speaking population, French was established as the official language for central administration, effectively marginalizing the Flemish. This decision motivated the formation of the Flemish Movement, whose initial and core objective was to secure official recognition for the Dutch language and to advance the rights of the Dutch-speaking Flemish population (Allaert 2023). Initially, the Movement's efforts concentrated on linguistic equality. French was not merely the language of government; it was ingrained in the political, administrative, military, and even much of the social elite, creating a linguistic hierarchy that disadvantaged the Flemish. The Flemish Movement thus linked the pro-

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<sup>3</sup> This literature is reviewed in detail in Sections 2.3 and 2.4.

motion of the Dutch language to broader democratic principles and the empowerment of the middle class to counter the perceived privilege of the Francophone elite ([Allaert 2023](#)).

However, the Flemish Movement quickly evolved beyond a singular focus on language. It expanded to a broader range of cultural and political objectives. This included actively promoting a distinct Flemish identity through the encouragement of Dutch-language education, Flemish literature, and supporting a wider cultural revival. The Movement understood that true emancipation required not only linguistic recognition but also the elevation of Flemish cultural and societal status within the Belgian state ([Van Velthoven 2007](#)).

## 2.2 The Opera's Debut

The Antwerp Opera was born from the ambitions of the Flemish Movement, which aimed to embed Flemish culture into institutional and artistic life. With crucial backing from the Antwerp City Council, the opera was established not only as an artistic endeavor but also as a tangible expression of cultural pride and nationalist aspirations ([Deene 2005; Wils 1985](#)). Officially founded in 1893 as the Dutch Lyrical Theater (Het Nederlandsch Lyrisch Tooneel), its creation was driven by the efforts of Henry Fountaine, Edward Keurvels, and Peter Benoit ([Allaert 2023](#)).

Benoit, a prominent nationalist and director of the Antwerp Music Academy, was especially influential. He insisted on the importance of the Dutch language in music, arguing that it was essential for promoting an authentically Flemish artistic tradition ([Deene 2005](#)). The founding of the Opera followed the dismissal of the Théâtre Royal Français orchestra in 1890 due to wage disputes. Keurvels swiftly capitalized on this, organizing the new theater's inaugural production; Carl Maria von Weber's *Der Freischütz*, performed in Dutch. This symbolic choice underscored both a cultural affinity with German opera and a conscious break from the prevailing French operatic tradition ([Allaert 2023](#)). More than a nationalist gesture, this move sought to democratize the opera by appealing to the rising Flemish middle class, making high culture more accessible and aligned with local identity ([Van Haelter 2023; Wauters 1976](#)). This was a defining moment in the institution's history, blending artistic innovation with a powerful cultural mission.

## 2.3 The Aftermath of the German Occupation

**2.3.1 Post-War Society and Politics.** The liberation of Belgium in 1944, far from bringing the people peace and quiet, instead started a period of profound political and social upheaval, particularly felt the most in Flanders. This turbulent time became infamously known as the repression, during which the newly re-established Belgian state systematically purged individuals accused of collaborating with the Nazi German occupation forces ([Aerts 2023](#)). The size of this governmental measure was immense: approximately 100,000 individuals faced sanctions, with many enduring public shaming, loss of civil rights, or internment without formal trial, marking a dark chapter in Belgian post-war history ([Aerts 2023](#)).

These institutional actions were not isolated; they were paralleled and often fueled by widespread popular anger, a collective fury that frequently erupted into popular retribution. This took various brutal and often extrajudicial forms, including uncontrolled break-ins of perceived collaborators' homes and businesses, public humiliation rituals where individuals, particularly women, were rid of their hair, and irrational imprisonment in makeshift facilities. This spontaneous but widespread civilian action

highlighted the deep-seated resentment and desire for immediate justice that saturated Belgian society after years of German occupation (Aerts 2018).

Society was undermined by a discourse marked by moral denunciation. Terms such as "incivieken" (civic undesirables), "collaborateurs" (collaborators), and "zwarten"<sup>4</sup> (blacks) became labels of profound disgrace. These labels were not merely descriptive; they carried social stigma and often led to social exclusion (Aerts 2023). These societal divisions extended far beyond individual accountability and casted a long and dark shadow over entire political movements and ideologies.

Flemish nationalism in particular, felt the greatest impact of this societal retribution. The wartime alignment of prominent organizations like the Vlaamsch Nationaal Verbond (VNV), a far-right political party, with the Nazi authorities during the occupation discredited the broader Flemish Movement in the eyes of many (Wouters 2023). Consequently, the stigma of wartime collaboration stained even those within the Flemish Movement who had no fascist sympathies and had genuinely advocated for Flemish cultural or political autonomy through democratic means. These conditions permitted little to no space for neutral or independent nationalist expression, forcing a binary choice that left genuine Flemish nationalists in an impossible position. As a direct result of this fear of retribution, many Flemish people who had previously identified with or supported the movement chose to distance themselves entirely, leading to a significant fragmentation and weakening of its political and cultural influence in the immediate post-war years (Wouters 2023). This severe backlash fundamentally reshaped Flemish identity and its public expression, leaving a lasting legacy of caution and self-censorship (Van den Braembussche 2002).

**2.3.2 Social and Cultural Reintegration.** The process of reintegrating individuals accused of collaboration proved to be a complex and socially hostile undertaking. While a legal rehabilitation process was initiated in the 1950s, gradually restoring civic rights and mitigating some formal sanctions, the profound social stigma associated with collaboration demonstrated remarkable endurance (Aerts 2023). This meant that even after legal means for reintegration were established, the shadow of past accusations continued to affect individuals' lives and complicated their full acceptance back into society.

The consequences of the repression were particularly severe for high-profile individuals, especially those from elite professions or prominent public roles. Such figures faced not only the immediate legal repercussions of their alleged actions but also suffered extensive and long-term damage to their reputation (Aerts 2018). Their public visibility meant their perceived transgressions were magnified, and their downfall served as a highly visible example of the state's and society's resolve to punish collaboration. Even though the repression officially did not discriminate based on social class, its practical effects were undeniably felt most by those in positions of social visibility. Their public lives and reputations were essentially linked to their societal standing, making them more vulnerable to the public shaming and lingering suspicion that characterized the post-war era (Aerts 2018). The pervasive mistrust went beyond personal interactions, creating lasting skepticism towards public institutions including crucial cultural organizations like the Antwerp Opera.

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<sup>4</sup> A direct and deeply pejorative reference to the black uniforms of Flemish fascist militias (Aerts 2023).

**2.3.3 Impact on the Cultural Sector.** Given its status as a leading cultural institution, the Antwerp Opera was inevitably affected by the intense societal divisions. The immediate post-war years were a tough period marked by widespread economic deprivation and material shortages ([Britannica](#)). In an environment where much of the population was solely focused on the immediate necessities of survival and reconstruction, the arts, including opera, were often given a secondary, non-essential status ([Derom 2015](#)).

Adding to these logistical and financial burdens was the ideological scrutiny that cultural institutions faced. Given the strong wartime association with German repertoire, and particularly Richard Wagner, institutions like the Antwerp Opera were compelled to actively distance themselves from certain works and to reorient their programming choices ([Baeck 2015](#)). This strategic shift was not merely an aesthetic or cultural decision; it was aimed at regaining public trust and, crucially, securing renewed state support. Cultural institutions across Flanders adapted by favoring more accessible and politically neutral productions. This often meant a greater emphasis on French and Italian repertoire, which carried fewer immediate political connotations in the post-war Belgian context ([Baeck 2015](#)).

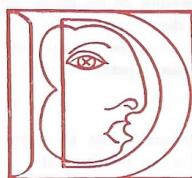
Despite these significant constraints, the Antwerp Opera demonstrated remarkable cultural resilience. Evidence from a program leaflet from the 1946–1947 season (Image 1) reveals that the director, August Baeyens, noted an exceptionally high audience turnout. The prior season drew 102,014 visitors; 1945–1946 saw 236,936 (excluding staff tickets), more than double. This unexpected popularity underscores the institution's ability to maintain public engagement. The continued robust attendance suggests that, for many, the opera offered an escape or a reaffirmation of cultural identity during this tumultuous period. Baeyens' notes further illuminate the Opera's guiding philosophy. Acknowledging past financial struggles stemming from a sole focus on "expensive artistic endeavors" and, conversely, the compromises of "cheap, not to say tasteless" productions, the opera pursued a pragmatic "golden mean". This led the Flemish Opera, like many others, to embrace a more international repertoire. Still, Baeyens supported a gradual return to earlier traditions, naming composers such as Mozart, Beethoven, Wagner, and "the Russians," while stressing the importance of showcasing "work of our own soil."

Het verleden heeft bewezen dat uitsluitelijk zwaar-artistieke betrekkingen de financiële zijde in het donker brachten, en wie offers brengt aan goedkope, om niet te zeggen wansmaak, brengt de artistieke zijde in de schaduw.

In de loop der jaren werd aldus — hier en elders — de gouden middenweg gezocht, en kwam ook onze Vlaamse Opera tot een zogenaamd internationaal repertoire.

We zijn het evenwel eens met diegenen die van mening zijn dat geleidelijk het accent terug moet gelegd worden op het vroegere repertoire van onze Vlaamse Opera: we noemen Mozart, Beethoven, Wagner, de Russen e.a., en, niet te vergeten, het volwaardige werk van eigen bodem.

In deze richting zal dan ook gestreefd worden in de mate van het mogelijk.



E DUBBELE BALANS. Bij het overschouwen van het afgelopen speeljaar zien we de naalden van de dubbele balans: de artistieke en de zakelijke, alles behalve naar het bankroet wijzen.

Beschouwen we eerst de zakelijke, de minderwaardige zijde van dit speeljaar, waarin de leuze „Geld spielt keine Rolle”, niet op de ingang van het gebouw gebeiteld stond.

Deze zijde, die steeds een zware zorg blijft voor die dure kunst die opera-kunst is, is niet het stille drama geworden, dat zich zo dikwijls, na het laatste neerhalen van het doek, heeft afgespeeld.

De belangstelling was groter dan ooit en het rekordcijfer aan bezoekers werd geboekt.

Waar we vorig jaar triomfantelijk het getal 102014 bezoekers konden neerblokken op de omslagzijde van ons propagandaboeke, zo kunnen we tans schrijven dat onze Vlaamse Opera in het speeljaar 1945-1946 aan bezoekers — dienstplaatsen niet meegerekend — zag verschijnen: het getal 236936.

En hoewel het seizoen, tans volle tien maanden, tot in het hart van de

**Image 1** Excerpt of a program leaflet from the beginning of the season 1946-1947.

## 2.4 Revival of the Flemish Movement?

Despite the severe and widespread repression that immediately followed the Second World War, the Flemish Movement, remarkably, experienced a gradual but ultimately significant revival in the subsequent decades. This post-war resurgence, however, did not merely signify a direct continuation of its pre-war nationalist agenda, which had been corrupted by collaboration. Instead, a completely new way of looking at the past emerged, Wouters (2023) calls this a "Flemish-nationalist apologetic memory culture". This new narrative reinterpreted the war's complex past, shifting focus from the controversial collaboration to the perceived injustices of the post-war repression. This move aimed to improve the movement's image and legitimize its renewed political and cultural goals.

**2.4.1 Seeds of Resentment.** The repression following the Second World War left deep and enduring scars, not only on the countless individuals who were directly sanctioned but also across entire communities within Flanders. As Aerts details in his extensive study on the repression, a pervasive and deeply felt conviction began to take root among many Flemish people: a belief that they, or their family members and neighbors, had been unjustly targeted and disproportionately punished by the newly re-established Belgian state (Aerts 2023). This widespread feeling of grievance and perceived victimhood was centered on the concept of the "repression victim" (repressieslachtoffer),

a notion that gained profound cultural and political traction in the post-war decades ([Aerts 2023](#)).

Aerts argues that this emerging concept of the "repression victim" formed the very core of a renewed and strategically re-oriented nationalist discourse in Flanders ([Aerts 2023](#)). Crucially, the emphasis within this evolving narrative decisively shifted away from a critical examination of accountability for wartime choices, such as collaboration with the Nazi occupation, onto perceived injustices committed by the Belgian state. This new discourse claimed that the Belgian state's response to wartime affiliations had been overly harsh, vindictive, or unfairly applied, particularly against the Flemish population whom it claimed suffered disproportionately compared to other regions ([Aerts 2023](#)). The moral denunciation that marked society during the immediate post-liberation period was now countered by a narrative of martyrdom and collective suffering inflicted by the state.

Under this thoroughly revised historical interpretation, individuals once unequivocally labeled as collaborators were gradually re-framed not as outright traitors to the Belgian nation, but instead as misunderstood patriots. Their motivations, though ultimately leading to politically ill-fated allegiances during the occupation, were argued to have stemmed from a sincere cultural loyalty to Flanders, driven by a deeply held desire to protect Flemish identity, advance its interests, or merely ensure the survival of their community during tumultuous times ([Aerts 2023](#)). This re-telling of history slowly but effectively prepared the way for the Flemish Movement to regain societal acceptance and legitimacy. It provided a crucial new, less culpable, and far more sympathetic foundation upon which the movement could begin to rebuild its shattered public image, distance itself from the wartime extremism, and systematically reassert its presence and influence in Belgian political and cultural life ([Aerts 2023](#)).

**2.4.2 A New Political Landscape.** The profound grievances stemming from the repression soon translated into organized political action. This process was facilitated by surprisingly early reconciliation efforts, particularly within conservative Catholic networks that initiated dialogues with the ostracized Flemish-nationalist camp as early as 1944. These carefully cultivated alliances ultimately led to the formation of significant new political parties, most notably the establishment of the Volksunie (VU) in 1954. The VU's creation marked a pivotal moment, providing a legitimate and visible platform for a re-emerging Flemish nationalism ([Wouters 2023](#)).

The Volksunie effectively channeled the widespread resentment concerning the perceived injustices of the repression into concrete political demands for cultural and linguistic autonomy ([Wouters 2023](#)). It strategically positioned itself as the unwavering defender of repression victims and, by extension, broader Flemish interests. While the VU deliberately avoided the more radical, often separatist rhetoric associated with its wartime predecessors, it successfully brought Flemish nationalism back into mainstream political discourse ([Wouters 2023](#)). This more moderate approach allowed the party to gain traction and respectability, attracting support from a wider segment of the Flemish population who held nationalist sympathies but rejected the extremist ideologies of the past.

Beyond formal political parties, various cultural associations also played a significant rehabilitative role. Many youth organizations, which had been linked to pre-war nationalist movements and often suffered direct repression themselves, were carefully rebuilt in the immediate years following liberation ([Aerts 2018](#)). These groups provided discreet spaces for socialization, communal memory-sharing, and the gradual re-legitimation of Flemish identity, distinctly separate from its wartime associations.

Through activities highlighting Flemish heritage, language, and culture, these organizations collectively shifted the Flemish Movement's core emphasis (Aerts 2018). This realignment moved it decisively away from its controversial collaborationist past and toward a future increasingly defined by democratic representation, parliamentary engagement, and a focus on legitimate cultural pride and linguistic rights.

**2.4.3 Reclaiming the Narrative.** The post-war resurgence of Flemish nationalism must be contextualized within Belgium's broader, often fragmented, collective memory culture. As scholar van den Braembussche argues, the nation as a whole struggled with coming to terms with its complex and often uncomfortable wartime history (Van den Braembussche 2002). Belgium exhibited a pronounced memory taboo, a profound societal reluctance to openly confront and process the moral ambiguities inherent in the experiences of occupation, resistance, and collaboration. This was not merely a passive forgetting, but an active silencing of certain past events deemed threatening to national unity or collective identity, effectively leaving a significant void in public discourse and a fragmented understanding of the past (Van den Braembussche 2002). It was precisely within this national silence that alternative Flemish nationalist narratives found fertile ground and consequently flourished.

Within this climate of collective amnesia and selective remembrance, Flemish nationalists strategically presented themselves not as the perpetrators of wartime crimes, but rather as the primary victims. This victimhood was dual-layered: they claimed to be victims both of the war itself and, crucially, of the perceived excesses of state repression that followed liberation. This re-framing actively sought to displace historical accountability for collaboration, subtly shifting it onto the shoulders of the Belgian state and its post-war policies. This strategic victim-framing effectively created what some scholars have described as a "cultural counter-memory" (Van den Braembussche 2002), an alternative national story that not only excused past affiliations but subtly, yet persistently, framed Belgium itself as an inherently unjust or even an artificial construct. This narrative claimed that Belgium had historically oppressed or misunderstood the legitimate aspirations of the Flemish, thereby justifying their actions and grievances.

The long-term consequence of this selective memory construction is profoundly complex. On one hand, it undeniably enabled the reintegration and the subsequent resurgence of a once discredited political tradition, allowing Flemish nationalism to regain a measure of legitimacy and political influence within the Belgian political landscape. On the other hand, this strategic re-narration inherently left difficult and deeply uncomfortable questions about complicity, accountability, and the very nature of historical truth largely unanswered. This has contributed to persistent divisions within Belgian society and has complicated a full national reckoning with its wartime past. As scholars such as Aerts and van den Braembussche have both consistently noted, a full and honest reckoning with this complex and often painful legacy remains an ongoing and imperative task, not only for Flemish nationalism as it continues to evolve but also for Belgian society as a whole, as it strives to form a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of its past (Aerts 2018; Van den Braembussche 2002).

### 3. The Translation Problem

Opera is a fundamentally hybrid art form in which language and music are inseparable, yet the nature of their relationship remains the subject of ongoing debate. When operas cross linguistic boundaries, as they frequently do, translators must navigate not only words, but also rhythm, meaning, emotion, and national context. The use of translation

in opera highlights the need to communicate, yet it raises the question: if audiences are not particularly invested in the words, why translate at all?

### 3.1 Translating Opera

Following the Second World War, opera houses across Europe underwent a period of transformation. In Antwerp, this process was influenced by the Flemish Movement, which had long fought for the recognition and use of Dutch in high culture. Consequently, translation into Dutch was more than a practical tool; it became a cultural and political statement affirming linguistic legitimacy and identity. As Desblanche (2021) notes, opera has historically been intertwined with nationalist agendas, and in postwar Flanders, performing operas in Dutch symbolized inclusion and the validation of the Dutch language within elite cultural spaces.

However, translating opera libretti is an inherently challenging task. Abbate and Parker (2012) highlight a paradox: while few opera-goers attend primarily for the libretto, the text remains indispensable to the art form. Translators must balance fidelity to the original meaning with the demands of musical phrasing, timing, and dramatic coherence. Orero and Matamala (2007) call this process “performative translation”, emphasizing that translation in opera prioritizes vocal delivery and rhythmic compatibility over literal word-for-word accuracy. This complexity helps explain why, in the early years of opera, translations were not routinely adopted as standard practice.

Within this context, the Antwerp Opera’s preference for Dutch translations reflected a dual objective: connecting with local audiences and fostering a distinct national operatic culture. Smekens (1968) regarded Dutch-language productions as ideal for ensuring audience comprehension and engagement, though by the 1960s he acknowledged that this ideal was increasingly difficult to realize in practice. Translation also involved certain risks: some critics viewed it as undermining the authenticity or prestige of renowned international works, particularly compared to performances in the original German or Italian. Van Haelter (2023) points out that Dutch translations were sometimes criticized for their literary awkwardness and musical inflexibility, even as they broadened accessibility for local audiences.

This ongoing tension between accessibility and artistic prestige shaped both programming and marketing decisions at the Antwerp Opera. As Smekens (1968) remarked, producing full-scale operas originally composed in Dutch remained a challenge, often seen as the pursuit of an “indestructible idealist,” due to the limited performance prospects for such works.

### 3.2 Tracing Performance Language

Studying translation practices in the Antwerp Opera’s repertoire is complicated by gaps in the archival record. As Allaert (2023) notes, while the original language of an opera can typically be determined through resources such as IMSLP ([International Music Score Library Project](#)), the performed language is often undocumented. Program leaflets frequently omit information about the language used on stage, and titles alone can be misleading: ‘La Traviata’, for instance, might be sung in either Italian or Dutch regardless of how it is listed. In many cases, language choices must be inferred through contextual clues or secondary documentation.

During the German occupation (1940-1944), German-language and bilingual leaflets became increasingly common. Some performances mixed languages on stage, especially during the interwar years and the occupation, when German soloists would

sing in their native language alongside Dutch-speaking choruses. These hybrid performances challenge the idea of linguistic purity and illustrate that translation in opera is often partial, negotiated, and uneven (Jansen 2024). After the war, Dutch regained prominence, but inconsistencies persisted. Leaflets from 1946 to 1963 generally favored Dutch titles and production summaries, but these cannot be taken as definitive proof that the operas were performed in Dutch.

Ultimately, translation in this context should not be viewed as a binary, original versus translated, but rather as a continuum shaped by ideology, repertoire, and institutional resources. Even when undocumented or partial, the presence or absence of translation offers insight into the opera house's orientation toward its audience. In post-war Antwerp, this orientation increasingly reflected the need to reconcile Flemish cultural identity with the international character of opera.

Given these complexities, this thesis adopts the approach used by Allaert (2023) and Jansen (2024), focusing primarily on the original language of the operatic works while noting instances in which translation is explicitly documented or inferred from contextual indicators.<sup>5</sup> While this method is admittedly imperfect, it aligns with established strategies in comparable research and provides a workable framework for analysis.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Materials

The primary materials for this research are program leaflets from the archival collection of the Antwerp Opera, housed in the 'muziekbibliotheek' at the Ghent Opera. The full archive comprises folders or bound volumes for each operatic year from 1893 to 1981. This study focuses on the volumes spanning the years 1946 to 1963, with the endpoint aligning with the final season documented in Verbruggen's *Gedenk-Klanken* (1965).<sup>6</sup>

This section of the archive is organized into 19 bound volumes (Image 2), with each volume typically corresponding to a single operatic season. Notably, the 1959–1960 and 1960–1961 seasons are each divided across two volumes. This is likely due to the inclusion of more extensive supplementary material in the program leaflets, such as advertisements, performer biographies, and promotional content related to upcoming events and performances.

Despite the passage of time and the informal methods of preservation, the collection remains relatively complete for the period under study, with no significant gaps in the chronological record. The program leaflets in these volumes contain detailed information for each performance, including the title, date, cast and role distribution, composer, and various contextual elements. As such, they offer valuable insight into both the operatic repertoire and the institutional history of the Antwerp Opera after the Second World War.

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<sup>5</sup> Indicators of translation include title language or potential translation credits found on program leaflets. On the leaflet studied in this thesis, there are no translation credits present.

<sup>6</sup> As suggested by Tom Swaak, playwright at the Antwerp Opera who supervised my digitization process.



**Image 2** Picture of the bound volumes located in the 'muziekbibliotheek' at Ghent Opera.

#### 4.2 Digitization and Annotation

The digitization process for the program leaflets in this thesis follows the procedures established by Allaert (2023) to maintain consistency in annotation standards. The leaflets were digitized using a ScanTent, a portable scanning device developed by READ-COOP. The ScanTent provides a stable environment for photographing documents with a smartphone and includes built-in lighting, particularly beneficial for program leaflets that vary in texture, reflectivity, or page color (READ-COOP Scantent). The scans were captured using the DocScan mobile application, which automatically detects page edges, corrects perspective distortion, and adjusts contrast to ensure legibility (DocScan). Each program leaflet was photographed individually, including front pages, inserts, and reverse pages. In total, 12,452 scans were produced and digitized for this thesis.

Following digitization, the extracted information was manually entered into a dataset Image 2. Initially, 6 data fields were recorded for each scanned page:

- **Image** contains the file name of the scanned image.
- **Collection** indicated which operatic season the image belongs to.
- **Production** records the title of the performance as it appears on the leaflet. If the leaflet lists multiple performances, they are separated by a '+'.
- **Date** indicates the specific date of the performance. If there are multiple dates on the leaflet, they are separated by ':'.
- **Occasion** notes special events such as galas, guest performances or public celebrations.
- **Leaflet Language**<sup>7</sup> indicates the language used in the body of the leaflet. If multiple languages appear, a ';' separator is added.

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<sup>7</sup> This column was introduced by Jansen (2024).

Image	Collection	Production	Date	Occasion	Leaflet Language
Scan 2024-02-14 1120-21.jpeg	1946-1947	Othello	28/09/1946	openingsvoorstelling	ned
Scan 2024-02-14 1120-22.jpeg	1946-1947				ned
Scan 2024-02-14 1120-23.jpeg	1946-1947	Traviata	29/09/1946		ned
Scan 2024-02-14 1120-24.jpeg	1946-1947				ned
Scan 2024-02-14 1120-25.jpeg	1946-1947	Faust	29/09/1946		ned
Scan 2024-02-14 1120-26.jpeg	1946-1947				ned
Scan 2024-02-14 1120-27.jpeg	1946-1947				ned
Scan 2024-02-14 1120-28.jpeg	1946-1947	De Vogelhandelaar	01/10/1946	galavoorstelling	ned

Image 3 Sample of the collected dataset (1946-1963)

#### 4.3 Preprocessing the Dataset<sup>8</sup>

After compiling the dataset containing all relevant data from the program leaflets, it was necessary to preprocess the dataset in preparation for computational analysis. The preprocessing largely followed the methods developed by Allaert (2023) and Jansen (2024), ensuring compatibility and comparability with their respective datasets.

One of the initial preprocessing steps involved addressing spelling variations in the titles of the performances. Titles were inconsistently printed, sometimes in Dutch, sometimes in their original language. For example, 'De Barbier van Sevilla' and 'Il Barbiere di Siviglia' both appeared on leaflets to refer to the same production. A mapping dictionary was created to compile these variations under a standardized title, typically based on the most frequently attested variant within the corpus<sup>9</sup>.

Following Allaert's method (2023), special attention was given to multiple-bill performances, which are evenings featuring more than one opera performance. A boolean column was added to indicate whether a given performance was part of such a program.

I further enriched the dataset by adding more metadata to the text file (Meta3) initially compiled by Allaert and later extended by Jansen. I contributed approximately 180 new entries to this metadata file. For each normalized production title, I recorded the original language of the production, the composer's name, the year of the production's world premiere, the original title, and the language of the title as it appeared on the program leaflet. The IMSLP (International Music Score Library Project) served as a primary reference source for these attributions, consistent with the standards established by Allaert.

Additional contextual metadata was then added, including the operatic season in which each performance occurred and the name(s) of the artistic director(s) responsible for programming decisions during that season.

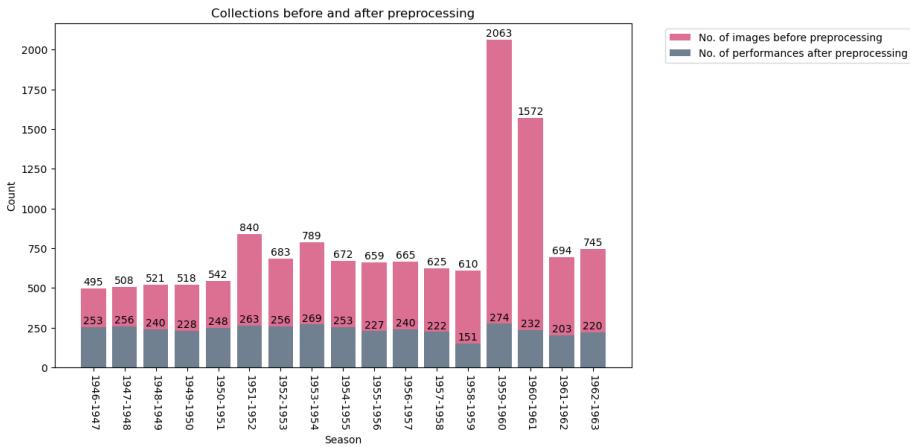
After enriching the dataset, it was cleaned up. Pages that did not contain relevant information for the study, such as blank versos, full-page advertisements, or unrelated inserts, were removed. Potential duplicates, whether due to archival redundancies or scanning errors, were also deleted. All date entries were standardized to a datetime for-

<sup>8</sup> The code for the preprocessing and subsequent analysis is available in the GitHub repository of this thesis: <https://github.com/AmberTruyts/The-Sound-of-Reconstruction>.

<sup>9</sup> To avoid redundancy, if a production was already documented in the Meta3 file, it was not re-added under a different name. Instead, such productions were normalized to a title already present in the Meta3 file, even if that title was not the most frequently used in the current dataset.

mat. In the rare instances where a performance date was missing, a default placeholder of January 1st, 2100, was used to allow for detection and exclusion during analysis.

A comparison of the dataset before and after preprocessing reveals a substantial reduction in noise (Figure 1). Finally, the datasets compiled by Allaert, Jansen, and myself were merged into a single DataFrame. This DataFrame represents the most comprehensive view to date of the Antwerp Opera's programming history from 1893 to 1963.



**Figure 1** Visualization of the dataset before and after preprocessing.

#### 4.4 Hypotheses

This study investigates how the Antwerp Opera's repertoire between 1946 and 1963 interacts with the complex socio-political and cultural shifts in post-war Flanders. During this time of major national reconstruction, the programming choices at the Antwerp Opera are seen not just as reactions to artistic trends or audience tastes, but as reflections of and responses to their complex historical context. Thus, the choices of language, composer, and thematic content within the operatic repertoire offer a unique way to observe societal changes and institutional adaptations.

At the heart of this research is the lasting and complex influence of the Flemish Movement. This movement has always pushed for the strong establishment and promotion of the Dutch language and a unique Flemish cultural identity within Belgium. Also, as mentioned by the director of season 1946-1947 August Baeyens Figure 1, the Opera aims to perform more productions "of their own soil". Because of this historical push, it is expected that the Antwerp Opera's repertoire after the war will show a clear and possibly renewed presence of Dutch-language productions and works by Flemish composers. If such programming choices are present in the repertoire, it would strongly suggest that the Antwerp Opera actively helped to deliberately renew the focus on local heritage and national linguistic pride.

Simultaneously, the strong post-war feelings about Germany, deeply shaped by the traumatic German occupation, are definitely expected to have heavily influenced what productions were chosen to perform. Specifically, it is expected that operas by Richard Wagner, which were once widely performed and seen as symbols of cultural prestige and artistic innovation, will show a clear drop in how often they were performed. Given

Wagner's strong link to German nationalism, his operas likely became politically and culturally controversial right after the war. A measurable decrease in German, and by extension, Wagnerian performances would therefore be a key sign of a wider effort by institutions and society to actively distance Flemish cultural expression from any real or perceived German ties.

Beyond language and national concerns, it is expected the chosen operas in the post-war period to strongly reflect themes relevant to the social climate. These themes could include suffering, redemption, exile, national identity, loss, lasting resilience, and moral conflict. While these themes are always part of opera, their importance is more interesting when seen through the eyes of a society dealing with the lasting effects of occupation. Therefore, the thematic choices in the Opera's post-war repertoire offer a valuable way to understand Flanders during the reconstruction.

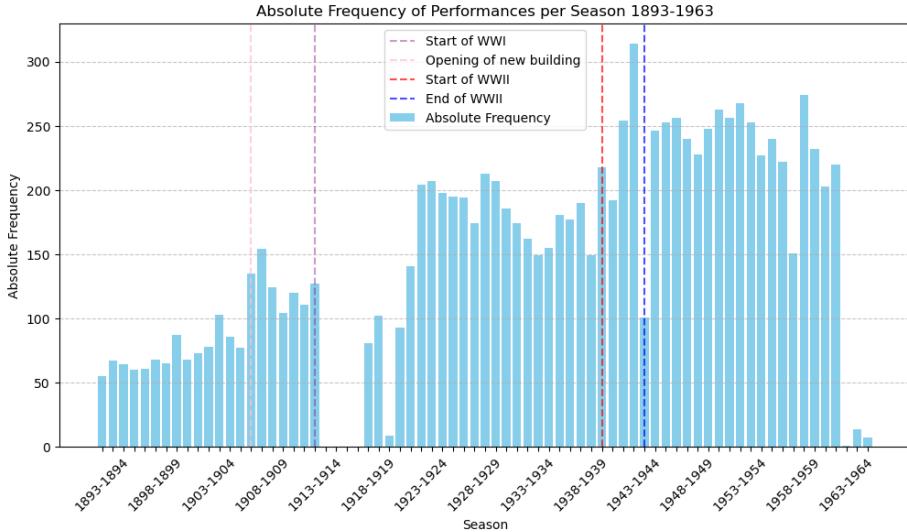
## 5. Results

This chapter tests the previously mentioned hypotheses through a combination of exploratory visualizations and statistical modeling. While the primary focus is on the period from 1946 to 1963, earlier data is included where necessary to provide longer-term contextualization. The analysis builds on the methodologies developed by Allaert (2023) and Jansen (2024), employing time series analysis to trace developments across operatic seasons. Time series methods, commonly used in economics and the social sciences (Palma 2016), are well-suited to identify longitudinal patterns in the Opera's programming and revealing shifts in language use, composer prevalence, and thematic trends over time.

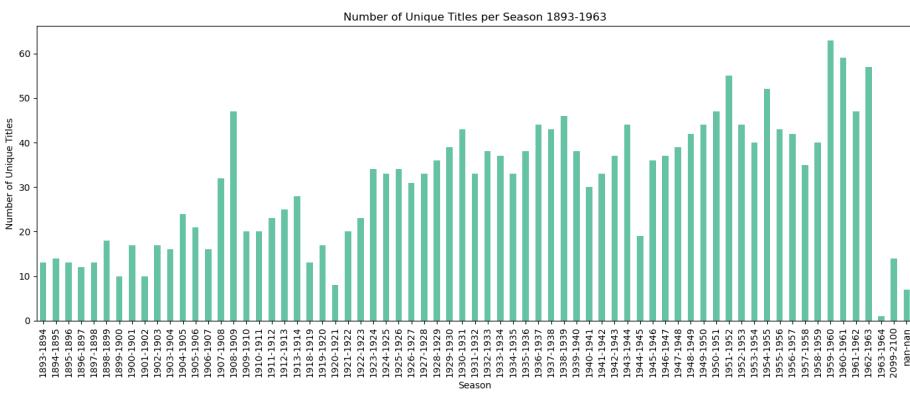
### 5.1 Repertoire Scale and Variety

As illustrated in Figure 2, which tracks the absolute number of performances from 1893 to 1963, a significant increase is evident following the end of the Second World War. After a sharp decline in 1944–1945, when the Opera's performance numbers dropped to near 100, performance numbers recover rapidly. In the period from 1945–1946 through the late 1950s, performance numbers remain consistently high, frequently exceeding 200 per season and sometimes reaching over 250, such as in 1948–1949, 1954–1955, and 1956–1957. A notable decline appears in the 1958–1959 season, about 150 performances, which was when the Opera was under construction through December and January of that season.

A comparable trend can be observed in the variety of titles presented, shown in Figure 3. Following wartime disruptions, the number of unique production titles drops in 1944–1945. From 1945–1946 onward, the number of unique titles per season remains consistently high, typically ranging between 40 and 60. The highest value is recorded in the 1959–1960 season, with over 60 unique titles. Throughout the 1950s, most seasons feature more than 40 distinct works, continuing the high levels first reached in the interwar period.



**Figure 2** The absolute frequency of performances per season 1893-1963



**Figure 3** The absolute frequency of unique production titles over seasons 1893-1963

## 5.2 Language Use Over Time

**5.2.1 Distribution of Performance Languages.** An examination of the absolute number of performances by language from 1946 to 1963 reveals several distinct patterns, as detailed in Table 2 and Table 3 and visualized in Figure 4 and Figure 5.

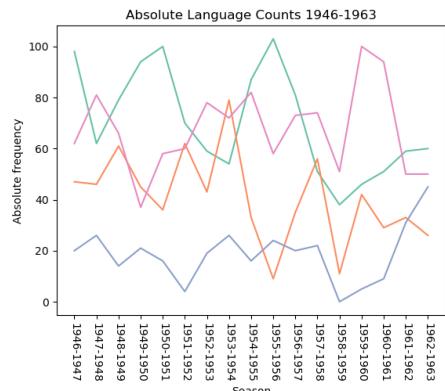
Dutch-language opera remained relatively limited in absolute terms within this period. In 1946–1947, there were 20 performances (9%). Numbers fluctuated, reaching a low of 4 performances (2%) in 1951–1952 and 0 performances in 1958–1959. However, a notable upward trend emerged toward the end of the period, culminating in 34 performances (19%) in 1962–1963.

German opera maintained a consistently substantial presence. After the wartime dip, it quickly rebounded to 79 performances (35%) in 1945–1946 and 98 performances

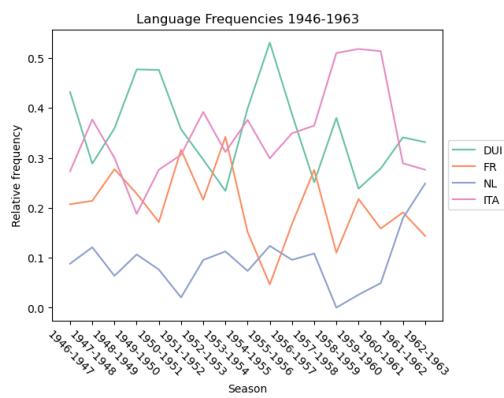
(44%) in 1946–1947. Performance numbers showed considerable fluctuation but remained consistently high throughout the period, with notable peaks including 99 performances (45%) in 1950–1951 and 103 performances (49%) in 1955–1956. By the 1962–1963 season, German performances stood at 56 (31%).

Italian opera maintained a strong and growing presence throughout this period. It began with 62 performances (28%) in 1945–1946 and 56 performances (25%) in 1946–1947. Numbers showed a consistent increase, rising steadily to a peak of 96 performances (38%) in 1959–1960 and 85 performances (42%) in 1960–1961. This consistent growth underscores the enduring popularity of Italian opera in the post-war repertoire. By 1962–1963, Italian performances were 45 (25%).

French opera displayed greater volatility. After 60 performances (27%) in 1945–1946, it saw a slight dip to 47 performances (21%) in 1946–1947. Performances then rose to a high of 71 (33%) in 1953–1954, but subsequently experienced a sharp decline, at times falling to single digits, such as 9 performances (4%) in 1955–1956 and 11 performances (10%) in 1958–1959. By 1962–1963, French performances were 26 (14%).



**Figure 4** The absolute counts of languages in performances 1946–1963



**Figure 5** The relative counts of languages in performances 1946–1963

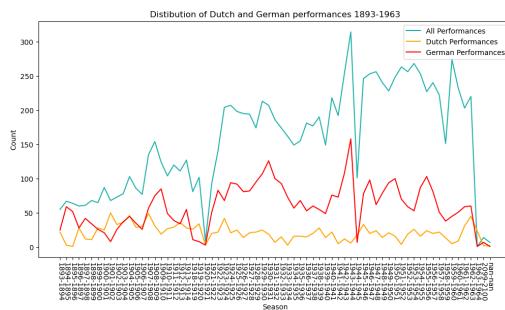
**5.2.2 Dutch and German Language Use in Performances.** An in-depth analysis of Dutch and German language use in performances from 1946 to 1963 could show some interesting details, with data presented in Table 2 and visually represented in Figure 6 and Figure 7.

Dutch-language performances exhibited distinct patterns across the decades. In the earliest seasons, from 1893, Dutch performances often represented a significant portion, with percentages frequently between 40% and 50% and absolute numbers generally ranging from 20 to over 60. A sharp decline is visible around the period of the First World War, with figures dropping significantly. During the interwar period (1918–1939), Dutch performances generally remained at lower levels, with absolute numbers often below 30 and percentages frequently under 20%. Notable lows include 3 performances (2%) in 1933–1934 and 7 performances (4%) in 1931–1932. This trend continued into the Second World War, though a slight increase was observed in 1944–1945 with 18 performances (19%).

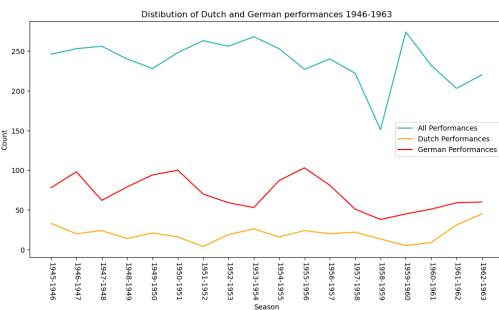
In the post-war period (1946–1963), Dutch performance numbers fluctuated. They ranged from 0 performances in 1958–1959 to a high of 34 performances (19%) in 1962–1963. Specific increases were observed in the 1949–1950 season (21 performances, 10%) and a more substantial rise in 1955–1956 (24 performances, 11%). The 1961–1962 (25 performances, 14%) and 1962–1963 seasons (34 performances, 19%) marked the highest proportional shares for Dutch-language repertoire in this specific post-war period.

German-language performances demonstrated periods of strong presence and recovery throughout the full timeline. In the initial years from 1893, German opera had a comparatively smaller share, often below 20% of total performances. However, a significant rise occurred in the early 1920s, with percentages frequently exceeding 50% and absolute numbers reaching high levels, such as 82 performances (59%) in 1922–1923 and 128 performances (61%) in 1930–1931. This strong presence continued into the war years, peaking at 158 performances (61%) in 1943–1944. A sharp decline is evident in 1944–1945, with only 6 performances (6%).

Post-war (1946–1963), German opera quickly rebounded. In 1946–1947, there were 98 performances (44%). While fluctuating, German performances maintained a substantial proportion, with a notable peak of 99 performances (45%) in 1950–1951. The 1955–1956 season recorded the highest absolute count of German performances within this post-war period, with 103 performances (49%). Although a decline was observed towards the end of the period, with 38 performances (31%) in 1958–1959, German opera still represented a significant portion of the repertoire, concluding with 56 performances (31%) in 1962–1963.



**Figure 6** The distribution of Dutch and German performances 1893–1963



**Figure 7** The distribution of Dutch and German performances 1946–1963

**5.2.3 Predicting Dutch-Language Performances.** To quantitatively assess the factors influencing the use of Dutch in the Antwerp Opera's repertoire between 1946 and 1963, Generalized Linear Models (GLMs) were employed. This approach adapted the methodology developed by Allaert (Allaert 2023) for the post-war period. Logistic regression, from the binomial family with a logit link function, was used to analyze the relationship between predictor variables and binary outcomes. The dependent variables were binary: Dutch (1) or not Dutch (0) for the original language of the performance, and Dutch (1) or not Dutch (0) for the language of the production titles as written on the leaflets.

A multivariate model was initiated using the following predictor variables:

- **Season** modeled as an ordered factor
- **Occasion** categorical, distinguishing regular season performances from special events
- **Directors** categorical, reflecting changes in artistic leadership
- **Multiple.Bill** binary, indicating whether a production was part of a multiple bill
- **Original.Premiere** categorical, denoting whether the production was performed for the first time in the Opera

The 'drop1()' function, as utilized by Allaert, was employed to remove non-significant predictors. Directors consistently showed no significant explanatory power and was therefore removed from both models. Consequently, the final models included "Season", "Occasion", "Multiple.Bill", and "Original.Premiere" as predictors, used without interactions. This resulted in two distinct models: one estimating the likelihood of Dutch performances and another estimating the likelihood of Dutch titles in each operatic season. The code for this section was based on Allaert's methodology, which in turn derived from work by Kestemont ([Allaert 2023](#); [Kestemont 2022](#)). Each predictor was explored through marginalized main effect plots.

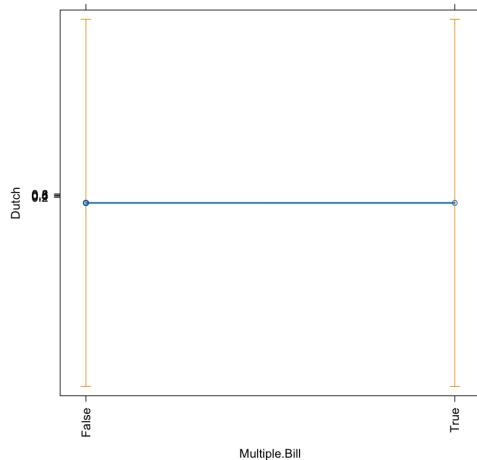
The effect of multiple bills on the likelihood of Dutch performances is presented in Figure 8. For performances not part of a multiple bill, it's likely they'll be Dutch, while for performances included in a multiple bill, it's also likely, but perhaps slightly less so. The confidence intervals for these two categories exhibit overlap, suggesting the difference isn't definitively significant.

Figure 11 illustrates the predicted probability of Dutch titles on leaflets based on their multiple bill status. For titles not associated with a multiple bill, it's likely they'll be Dutch. Conversely, for titles associated with a multiple bill, it's more likely they'll be Dutch, with a noticeable increase in probability. The confidence intervals for these categories show clear separation, indicating a more distinct difference.

Figure 10 displays the predicted probability of Dutch-language performances per season. It's generally likely that performances were in Dutch across most seasons. However, a discernible dip means it was unlikely around the 1958–1959 season, followed by a slight increase, making it more likely towards the end of the period. The confidence intervals are relatively wide throughout this period.

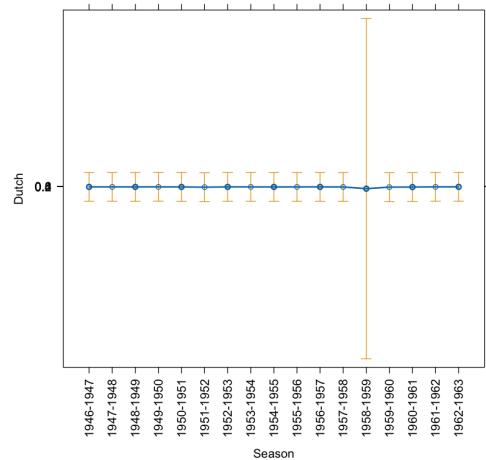
Figure 13 illustrates the predicted probability of Dutch titles on leaflets per season. Similar to Dutch-language performances, it was mostly likely for titles to be Dutch. A decrease means it was unlikely in the 1958–1959 season, with a subsequent rise, making it more likely by the end of the study period. The confidence intervals for this predictor are also relatively wide.

Effect of Multiple Bill on occurrence of Dutch performance (1946-1963)



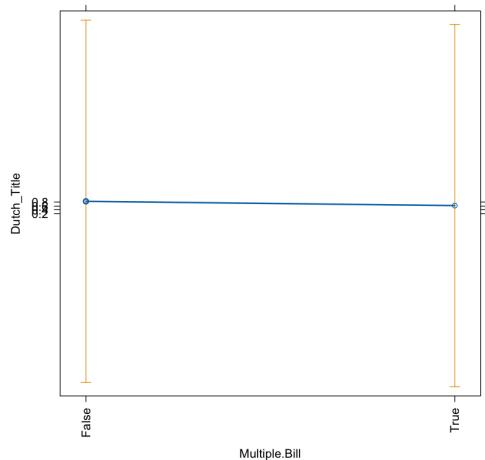
**Figure 8** The effect of multiple bill on occurrence of Dutch performances (1946-1963)

Effect of Season on occurrence of Dutch performance (1946-1963)



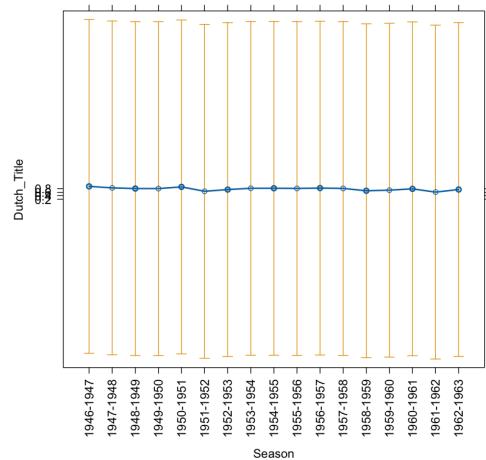
**Figure 10** The effect of season on occurrence of Dutch performances (1946-1963)

Effect of Multiple Bill on occurrence of Dutch titles (1946-1963)



**Figure 11** The effect of multiple bill on occurrence of Dutch titles (1946-1963)

Effect of Season on occurrence of Dutch titles (1946-1963)



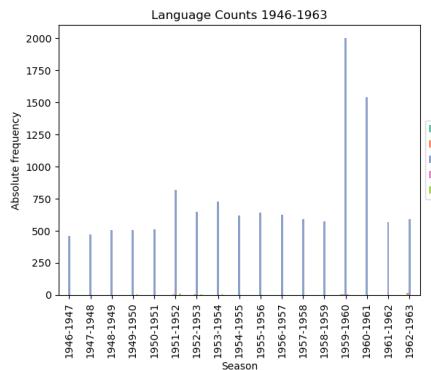
**Figure 13** The effect of season on occurrence of Dutch titles (1946-1963)

**5.2.4 Languages Choices in Program Leaflets.** In this section the distribution of languages used in program leaflets from 1946 to 1963 is shown, looking at both the absolute and relative frequencies of Dutch, French, and English content.

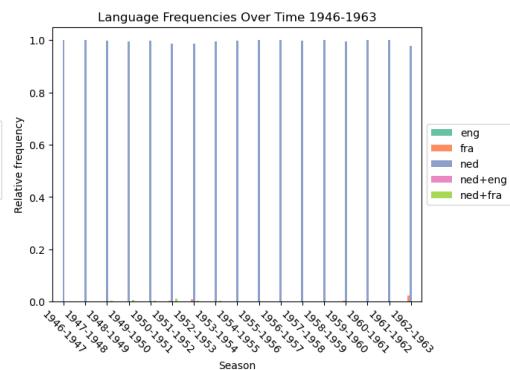
Figure 14 illustrates the absolute frequency of language usage across 1946-1963. Dutch ("ned") consistently shows the highest absolute frequency of content pages each season. Across the observed seasons, the absolute frequency of Dutch ranges from approximately 500 pages to over 1000 pages per season. French ("fra") appears in notably

smaller quantities and in select seasons. For instance, French content is visible in seasons such as 1946–1947, 1950–1951, and particularly around 1954–1955, where its absolute frequency reaches a peak of approximately 100 pages before declining. English ("eng") content is present in extremely low absolute frequencies, with negligible visibility across the period.

Figure 15 presents the relative frequency of leaflet languages by season. In every season from 1946–1947 to 1962–1963, Dutch comprises nearly 100% of the leaflet content, consistently represented by a line at or very close to the 100% mark. French consistently accounts for a very small percentage, typically at or near 0%, with minimal increases in select years, such as around 1954–1955, where its relative share is barely perceptible above 0%. English content consistently accounts for 0% of the leaflet content throughout the entire 1946–1963 period, as indicated by its line remaining at the bottom of the graph. Despite their minimal presence, both English and French are noted in this paragraph because they do appear in the leaflets, even if in very small quantities.



**Figure 14** The absolute distribution of language on program leaflets (1946-1963)



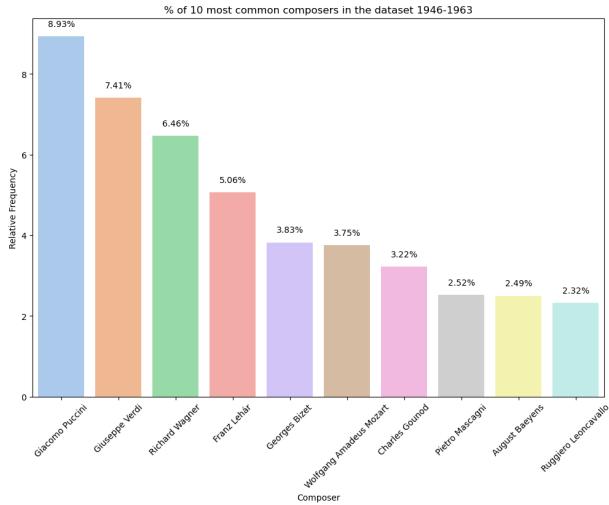
**Figure 15** The relative distribution of language on program leaflets (1946-1963)

### 5.3 Composer Trends and Representation

**5.3.1 Leading Composers in the Repertoire.** Figure 12 presents the most frequently performed composers in the Antwerp Opera's repertoire from 1946 to 1963, based on the relative frequency of performances. The detailed counts and percentages for individual works by these composers are provided in Table 1.

Giacomo Puccini is the most frequently performed composer during this period, with his works accounting for 369 performances, representing 9% of all performances. Giuseppe Verdi's compositions rank second, accounting for 306 performances, which constitutes 7% of the total performances. Richard Wagner ranks third, with 267 performances attributed to his compositions, comprising 6% of the repertoire. Franz Lehár's works were performed 209 times, making up 5% of performances. Georges Bizet's compositions were performed 158 times (4%), and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's works were performed 155 times (4%). Charles Gounod's work was performed 133 times (3%). Pietro Mascagni's compositions accounted for 104 performances (2%).

August Baeyens's work was performed 103 times (2%). Ruggiero Leoncavallo's compositions were performed 96 times (2%). Other Flemish composers, such as Jan Blockx and Emiel Hullebroeck, do not appear in this list of the top 10 most frequently performed composers during this period.

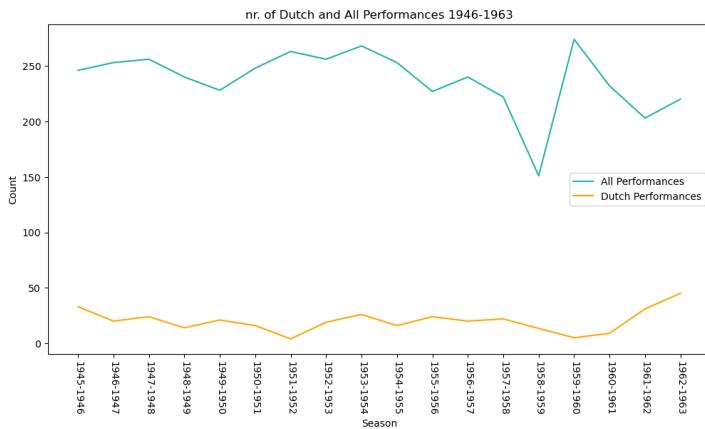


**Figure 16** The 10 most frequent composers from 1946 to 1963

**5.3.2 Representation of Flemish Composers in the Repertoire.** The presence of Flemish composers in the Antwerp Opera's repertoire between 1946 and 1963 will now be examined. All Dutch-language performances in the dataset are by Flemish composers; therefore, the "Dutch Performances" trend, as detailed in Table 2 and depicted in Figure 17, serves as a direct indicator for their representation.

As illustrated in Figure 17, Flemish composers constituted a specific share of the repertoire in the immediate post-war years. In the 1946–1947 season, they accounted for 9% of performances, which was followed by a decline to 6% in 1948–1949 and a low of 2% in 1951–1952.

From the mid-1950s, a period of increasing share of Flemish repertoire is observed, leading into the early 1960s. By the 1961–1962 season, performances of Flemish works increased to 14%, and further to 19% in the 1962–1963 season. These represent the highest proportional shares for Flemish works observed during this 1946–1963 study period.



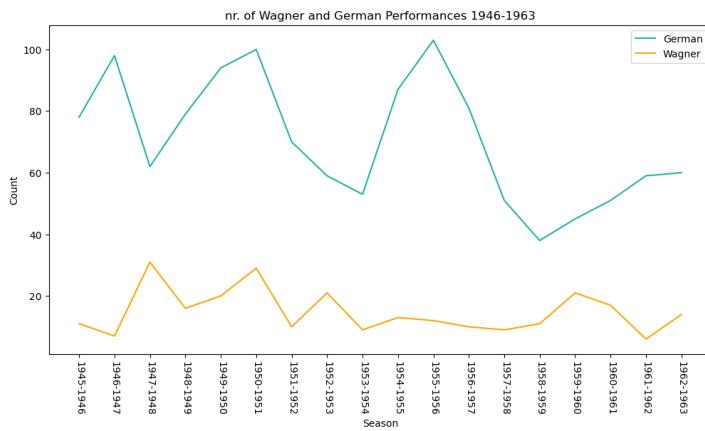
**Figure 17** The distribution of productions by Flemish composers from 1946 to 1963

**5.3.3 Wagner's Presence in the Repertoire.** While Wagner ranked third overall in terms of performance share (see Section 5.3.1), a season-by-season analysis of his presence is presented in Figure 14.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, Wagner's presence was observed with approximately 10 to 15 performances in the 1946–1947 season. A sharp increase occurred in 1947–1948, reaching approximately 30 to 35 performances.

Beginning in the early 1950s, Wagner's representation generally showed lower numbers, typically fluctuating between 10 and 20 performances per season. Notably, some seasons recorded no Wagner performances, specifically 1951–1952 and 1958–1959.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Wagner's works experienced a period of increased performances, with numbers rising to approximately 15 to 20 performances per season by 1961–1962 and 1962–1963.



**Figure 18** The distribution of Wagner and German performances from 1946 to 1963

## 5.4 Thematic Analysis

**5.4.1 Text Extraction and Analysis: Tesseract.** This section outlines the methodological process used for text extraction and thematic analysis. As libretto descriptions of frequently performed productions were not available in a machine-readable format, Optical Character Recognition (OCR) was employed to digitize content from program leaflets. OCR was conducted using Tesseract, an open-source OCR engine, implemented via a framework developed by Sara Budts. This tool processes scanned image files (in jpg format) and converts them into plain-text documents.

The procedure involved defining input and output directories, iterating through each image file, and applying language-specific settings (e.g., lang="nld" for Dutch) to ensure accurate recognition. The result was a structured corpus of individual .txt files, each corresponding to a scanned program leaflet, which served as the foundation for thematic analysis.

Following OCR, a coding scheme was applied to identify recurring themes within the libretto descriptions. These ten thematic categories were inductively developed and defined by me, a process consistent with established methodologies in thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). The categories are defined as follows:

- **Love** encompasses all forms of affection and emotional attachment, including romantic relationships, familial bonds (e.g., parental, filial, sibling), platonic friendships, and acts of selfless devotion.
- **Death** refers to the physical end of life, instances of mortality, and the experience of loss. It includes depictions of dying, mourning, concepts of an afterlife, threats of death, and acts of suicide.
- **Power** addresses the dynamics of authority, influence, and control. This includes political power (e.g., governance, rebellion), social power (e.g., class structures, manipulation), individual strength of will, military might, and the struggle for dominance.
- **Identity** explores the development and understanding of self and one's social position. This category includes themes of self-discovery, establishing social roles, experiences of belonging or alienation, character changes, the search for personal truth, and conflicts between individual desires and societal expectations.
- **Justice** concerns the principles and application of fairness and moral rectitude. This includes legal processes (e.g., trials, retribution), moral rectifications, equity within society, and the restoration of balance. It also covers themes of vengeance, forgiveness, and the consequences of unjust actions.
- **Nostalgia** involves a sentimental longing for a past period or idealized memories. This includes a desire to return to a previous state of being or the romanticizing of historical times, places, or relationships.
- **War** pertains directly to armed conflict and its direct consequences. This includes depictions of military engagements, the experiences of combatants and civilians, the immediate aftermath of hostilities (e.g., devastation, trauma), the origins and outcomes of conflict, and efforts toward peace.
- **Fate** explores the concept of predetermined destiny or an unavoidable sequence of events. This includes divine or external influences on human actions, prophecies, a sense of inevitability in character arcs, and the struggle against or acceptance of one's destiny.
- **Treason** involves acts of betrayal, disloyalty, or subversion against a collective entity. This includes treachery against a nation, ruler, or community, clandestine acts against established authority, and personal betrayals with significant public implications.
- **Madness** refers to conditions of significant psychological instability, irrationality, or severe emotional disturbance. This category includes depictions of delusions, hallucinations, mental breakdown, social isolation due to mental state, and the impact of psychological conditions on character and plot.

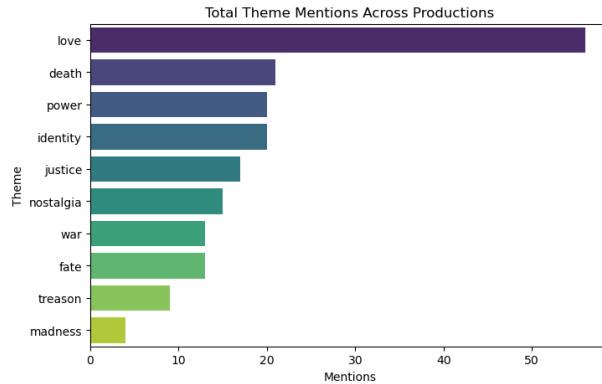
These thematic tags were applied consistently to the OCR-processed libretti of the 25 most frequently staged productions.

**5.4.2 Recurrent Themes.** This analysis presents an overview of the most frequently occurring themes identified in the libretto descriptions of the 25 most frequently staged productions at the Antwerp Opera between 1946 and 1963.

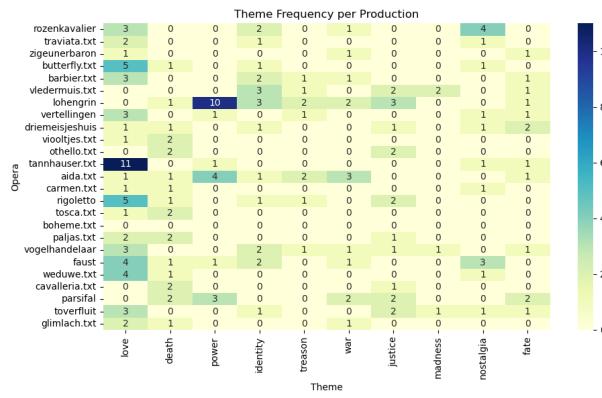
Figure 19 displays the aggregate number of mentions for each theme across all analyzed productions. Love is the theme with the highest number of mentions, followed by death and power. Identity and justice also appear with a higher frequency than nostalgia, war, and fate. Treason and madness are the themes with the fewest mentions.

To supplement this summary, Figure 20 presents a heatmap that visualizes thematic frequency by production. Each row represents a single opera, and each column corresponds to one of the ten thematic categories. The shading indicates the relative number of mentions per theme within each production.

Observations from the heatmap include that productions such as *Tannhäuser* (64 performances) and *Lohengrin* (51 performances) show higher concentrations of specific themes, indicated by darker shading for categories like love, death, power, and fate. Other productions, including *Madame Butterfly* (112 performances) and *Rigoletto* (72 performances), exhibit varied thematic presence with moderate frequencies across several categories. Operas such as *Bohème* (117 performances) and *Cavalleria Rusticana* (98 performances) are associated with a more focused thematic presence based on the selected tags, with high intensity primarily in themes like love and death.



**Figure 19** Total Theme Mentions Across Productions



**Figure 20** Theme Frequency per Production

## **6. Discussion**

This discussion contextualizes the findings on language choices and thematic presence in the Antwerp Opera's repertoire from 1946 to 1963. It critically engages with the methodological framework established by Allaert (2023) and the historical continuations by Jansen (2024), as well as the broader literature reviewed previously. By linking the post-war period to earlier phases of the opera's history, a more comprehensive understanding of its evolving linguistic and artistic landscape emerges.

### **6.1 The Representation of Dutch Productions**

The limited presence of Dutch-language operas in the Antwerp Opera's repertoire between 1946 and 1963 reflects broader sociolinguistic and political dynamics in post-war Flanders. Although the Flemish Movement was gaining cultural and political influence during this time, Dutch remained underrepresented in elite cultural institutions. Opera houses, in particular, continued to favor French and German works (Baeck 2015). This was not merely a matter of artistic convention, but also reflected fundamental power asymmetries and struggles over identity within Belgium's linguistically divided society. French maintained its status as the language of the political and cultural elite.

The data show a small but noticeable increase in Dutch-language performances in the early 1960s. This suggests a possible change in institutional policy or audience interest, and may mark the beginning of a shift toward greater inclusion of Dutch. While still limited in number, these performances raise important questions: did they signal a real revival of Flemish cultural expression, or were they temporary responses to external pressure? Extending this research into the 1970s and 1980s could help clarify whether Dutch-language opera continued to grow and how cultural prestige evolved over time.

The absence of Dutch-language works in the post-war period likely repressed the emergence of a strong and lasting Flemish operatic tradition. Despite the Flemish Movement's advocacy for Dutch as central to regional identity, the opera's programming decisions clearly illustrate a gap between these stated goals and actual practice. This situation demonstrates the extent to which cultural production is intertwined with political and social tensions. In the specific case of the Antwerp Opera, repertoire choices were not merely artistic judgments; they were associated with ongoing societal debates about identity and belonging within a linguistically divided context.

### **6.2 The Distribution of German Productions and Wagner**

The sustained prominence of German operatic works in the Antwerp repertoire is especially noteworthy given the recent experience of German occupation and the associated societal trauma. The post-war period was marked by complex emotions towards Germany: while the occupation left deep scars, German operatic tradition remained a vital and prestigious part of the European musical canon.

German operas, particularly those by Wagner and Strauss, held an established artistic authority, and their continued performance can be seen as an affirmation of cultural continuity beyond the post-war divisions. However, this artistic choice also reveals an implicit societal mechanism of selective memory. The Antwerp Opera's decision to maintain German works in its repertoire may thus be read as a cultural form of compartmentalization, wherein artistic heritage was preserved while confronting or acknowledging the recent traumatic history was avoided.

This phenomenon raises important questions about the role of cultural institutions in shaping collective memory. Rather than serving as sites for critical reflection or engagement with political realities, opera houses in post-war Flanders functioned as spaces of aesthetic escapism and emotional reprieve. The persistence of German operas despite the political climate suggests a complex negotiation between artistic integrity, audience expectations, and societal readiness to face history. This also points to a broader European pattern in the post-war years, where cultural rebuilding often involved re-establishing pre-war artistic canons while sidelining the immediacy of political trauma.

### 6.3 Recurrent Themes in the Post-War Repertoire

The thematic trends of the operatic repertoire during this period further emphasize the conservative cultural role of the Antwerp Opera. The repertoire largely favored grand tragic, romantic, and mythological narratives that conveyed timeless human emotions and universal conflicts, rather than directly engaging with the pressing social and political realities of post-war Flanders.

This thematic conservatism served multiple functions. On the one hand, it provided audiences with familiar narratives that offered emotional stability and continuity in a time of uncertainty and social reconstruction. On the other, it reflected a societal preference for repression and forgetting, consistent with the broader political climate of post-war Belgium. The repression of collaborationist legacies and the contested nature of Flemish identity, as documented by Aerts, created an environment where cultural expressions steered clear of provocative themes <sup>aerts2018,aerts2023</sup>.

Moreover, the opera's focus on mythic and romantic themes can be interpreted as a form of cultural escapism, enabling audiences to experience catharsis without confronting the immediate wounds of war and political division. This avoidance of contemporary social critique in favor of universal themes suggests that the opera house functioned not only as an artistic institution but also as a site of social negotiation, where trauma was sublimated rather than addressed. The thematic conservatism thus reflects the complex interplay between art, memory, and politics in a society struggling to redefine itself after profound upheaval.

It is important to note that this analysis represents a preliminary examination of thematic trends. A more in-depth study is necessary to fully substantiate these conclusions. Future research could benefit from a longitudinal analysis of thematic shifts over time or detailed case studies of particularly popular productions, which would provide a more nuanced understanding of the Antwerp Opera's cultural role in the post-war period.

## 7. Conclusion

This study examined the repertoire of the Antwerp Opera between 1946 and 1963, situating these artistic choices within the complicated sociopolitical landscape of post-war Flanders. The analysis demonstrated a repertoire predominantly featuring German-language operas, concurrently revealing a significantly low representation of Dutch-language works. This linguistic imbalance, far from being a mere continuation of artistic tradition, is argued to reflect deeper sociolinguistic dynamics. German operatic works consistently maintained their cultural prestige, even after the recent experience of occupation, while Dutch remained conspicuously marginalized within elite cultural institutions. These patterns align seamlessly with broader historical processes, notably the

societal repression of collaborationist legacies and the continued reassertion of Flemish identity in public and cultural life. The initially limited presence of Dutch-language productions in the immediate post-war years, followed by a modest yet discernible increase in the 1950s and early 1960s, precisely mirrors the evolving political trajectory of the Flemish Movement during this period.

Thematic analysis of the repertoire further underscored the inherently conservative orientation of the institution. The Antwerp Opera largely eschewed works that directly engaged with contemporary political or social issues, opting instead for narratives centered on universal themes such as love, death, and power. This thematic preference suggests that the opera functioned as a site for emotional continuity and cultural stability, rather than serving as a platform for critical engagement with the often uncomfortable realities of post-war society. The pronounced inclination towards mythological, romantic, and tragic narratives likely offered audiences a potent form of cultural escapism, thereby contributing to a broader societal pattern of avoiding difficult questions pertaining to collective memory, identity formation, and historical responsibility.

Collectively, these findings strongly suggest that the Antwerp Opera aimed to preserve established artistic traditions but also to shape how post-war Flemish society processed and negotiated its recent past. Its programming choices thus provide an example of how cultural institutions, even through seemingly aesthetic decisions, can significantly contribute to the complex negotiation of collective memory.

Several promising avenues exist for future research. A comparative analysis including other Belgian opera houses or cultural institutions during the same period could illuminate regional divergences in the management of cultural memory and identity<sup>10</sup>. Furthermore, an examination of audience reception, through press reviews, correspondence, and internal institutional documents, would offer interesting insights into how operatic programming was interpreted by the public and what specific social functions it fulfilled. Finally, extending this research beyond 1963 would allow for a more comprehensive tracing of the evolving position of the Dutch language and Flemish identity within operatic institutions throughout the later half of the 20th century.

This study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the Antwerp Opera's complex role in post-war cultural life. By analyzing repertoire choices in direct relation to language politics and thematic focus, it demonstrates that the institution was far more than merely an artistic venue; it was an active and influential participant in the broader cultural and political dynamics that defined post-war Flanders.

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<sup>10</sup> Like Jansen 2024 did before in her study on the repertoire during the German occupation.

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## 1. Appendix

Composer	Normalized Title	Count	Percentage
Giacomo Puccini	Bohème	117	2.73
Giacomo Puccini	Gianni Schicchi	18	0.42
Giacomo Puccini	Het Meisje uit de Far-West	4	0.09
Giacomo Puccini	Madame Butterfly	112	2.62
Giacomo Puccini	Manon Lescaut	11	0.26
Giacomo Puccini	Tosca	85	1.99
Giacomo Puccini	Turadot	17	0.40
Giacomo Puccini	Zuster Angelica	5	0.12
Guiseppe Verdi	Aïda	54	1.26
Guiseppe Verdi	De Macht van het Noodlot	10	0.23
Guiseppe Verdi	De Troubadour	25	0.58
Guiseppe Verdi	Don Carlos	18	0.42
Guiseppe Verdi	Het Gemaskerd Bal	12	0.28
Guiseppe Verdi	Rigoletto	72	1.68
Guiseppe Verdi	Traviata	115	2.69
Richard Wagner	De Meesterzangers van Nurenberg	10	0.23
Richard Wagner	De Vliegende Hollander	30	0.70
Richard Wagner	De Walkure	26	0.61
Richard Wagner	Godendeemstering	2	0.05
Richard Wagner	Godenschemering	3	0.07
Richard Wagner	Het Rijngoud	23	0.54
Richard Wagner	Lohengrin	51	1.19
Richard Wagner	Parsifal	41	0.96
Richard Wagner	Siegfried	5	0.12
Richard Wagner	Tannhauser	64	1.50
Richard Wagner	Tristan en Isolde	12	0.28
Franz Lehár	De Graaf van Luxemburg	30	0.70
Franz Lehár	De Lustige Weduwe	54	1.26
Franz Lehár	De Tsarewitsch	11	0.26
Franz Lehár	Frederika	16	0.37
Franz Lehár	Het Land van den Glimlach	93	2.17
Franz Lehár	Paganini	5	0.12
Georges Bizet	Carmen	123	2.87
Georges Bizet	De Parelvisschers	35	0.82
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart	Ballet-Suite	18	0.42
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart	Cosi fan Tutte	5	0.12
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart	De Ontvoering uit het Serail	20	0.47
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart	Don Giovanni	33	0.77
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart	Een Kleine Nachtmuziek	10	0.23
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart	Figaro's Bruiloft	16	0.37
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart	Idomeneo	7	0.16
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart	Tooverfluit	46	1.07
Charles Gounod	Faust	133	3.11
Pietro Mascagni	Cavalleria Rusticana	98	2.29
Pietro Mascagni	Iris	6	0.14
August Baeyens	Zwarte Viooltjes	103	2.41
Ruggiero Leoncavallo	Paljas	96	2.24

**Table 1**

Counts and Percentages of the works for the top 10 composers from 1946-1963.

Collection	Performances_Dutch	Percentage_Dutch	Performances_German	Percentage_German
1918-1919	26	32.91	11	13.92
1919-1920	34	32.69	8	7.69
1921-1922	23	22.55	54	52.94
1922-1923	22	15.71	82	58.57
1923-1924	43	20.19	71	33.33
1924-1925	21	10.14	93	44.93
1925-1926	25	12.56	94	47.24
1926-1927	14	7.22	80	41.24
1927-1928	21	10.82	82	42.27
1928-1929	22	12.87	94	54.97
1929-1930	25	11.74	105	49.30
1930-1931	19	9.09	128	61.24
1931-1932	7	3.74	101	54.01
1932-1933	15	8.67	92	53.18
1933-1934	3	1.97	71	46.71
1934-1935	16	11.68	58	42.34
1935-1936	16	11.68	68	49.64
1936-1937	13	8.97	52	35.86
1937-1938	19	12.34	58	37.66
1938-1939	28	17.39	55	34.16
1939-1940	12	9.60	49	39.20
1940-1941	22	10.33	75	35.21
1941-1942	5	2.89	74	42.77
1942-1943	10	4.52	108	48.87
1943/1944	6	2.32	158	61.00
1944/1945	18	18.56	6	6.19
1945/1946	28	12.56	79	35.43
1946-1947	20	9.05	98	44.34
1947-1948	21	9.46	62	27.93
1948-1949	14	6.22	79	35.11
1949-1950	21	9.63	94	43.12
1950-1951	16	7.27	99	45.00
1951-1952	4	1.58	70	27.67
1952-1953	19	8.12	59	25.21
1953-1954	26	12.21	54	25.35
1954-1955	12	5.88	87	42.65
1955-1956	24	11.43	103	49.05
1956-1957	20	9.80	81	39.71
1957-1958	22	11.52	51	26.70
1958-1959	0	0.00	38	30.89
1959-1960	5	1.98	46	18.25
1960-1961	9	4.43	51	25.12
1961-1962	25	14.45	54	31.21
1962-1963	34	18.78	56	30.94

**Table 2**

Number of performances and percentages for Dutch and German.

Collection	Performances_Italian	Percentage_Italian	Performances_French	Percentage_French
1918-1919	4	5.06	35	44.30
1919-1920	14	13.46	43	41.35
1921-1922	4	3.92	11	10.78
1922-1923	5	3.57	15	10.71
1923-1924	9	4.23	26	12.21
1924-1925	17	8.21	21	10.14
1925-1926	0	0.00	25	12.56
1926-1927	0	0.00	44	22.68
1927-1928	0	0.00	31	15.98
1928-1929	1	0.58	25	14.62
1929-1930	23	10.80	33	15.49
1930-1931	4	1.91	29	13.88
1931-1932	16	8.56	39	20.86
1932-1933	10	5.78	26	15.03
1933-1934	39	25.66	26	15.03
1934-1935	23	16.79	33	17.11
1935-1936	38	27.74	8	24.09
1936-1937	55	37.93	34	5.84
1937-1938	41	26.62	37	23.45
1938-1939	48	29.81	32	24.03
1939-1940	35	28.00	37	19.88
1940-1941	66	30.99	39	29.60
1941-1942	52	30.06	30	18.31
1942-1943	73	33.03	30	17.34
1943/1944	61	23.55	34	13.57
1944/1945	40	41.24	33	34.02
1945/1946	62	27.80	60	26.90
1946-1947	56	25.34	47	21.27
1947-1948	65	29.28	46	20.72
1948-1949	56	24.89	59	26.22
1949-1950	37	16.97	45	20.64
1950-1951	58	26.36	36	16.36
1951-1952	60	23.71	60	23.72
1952-1953	67	28.63	43	18.38
1953-1954	62	29.11	71	33.33
1954-1955	76	37.25	33	16.18
1955-1956	58	27.62	9	4.29
1956-1957	63	30.88	35	17.16
1957-1958	63	32.98	56	29.32
1958-1959	51	41.46	11	9.94
1959-1960	96	38.10	36	14.29
1960-1961	85	41.87	29	14.29
1961-1962	48	27.75	33	19.08
1962-1963	45	24.86	26	14.36

**Table 3**

Number of performances and percentages for French and Italian.