

Opera Calling

Arias for All!

Arien für Alle!

<http://www.opera-calling.com/description>

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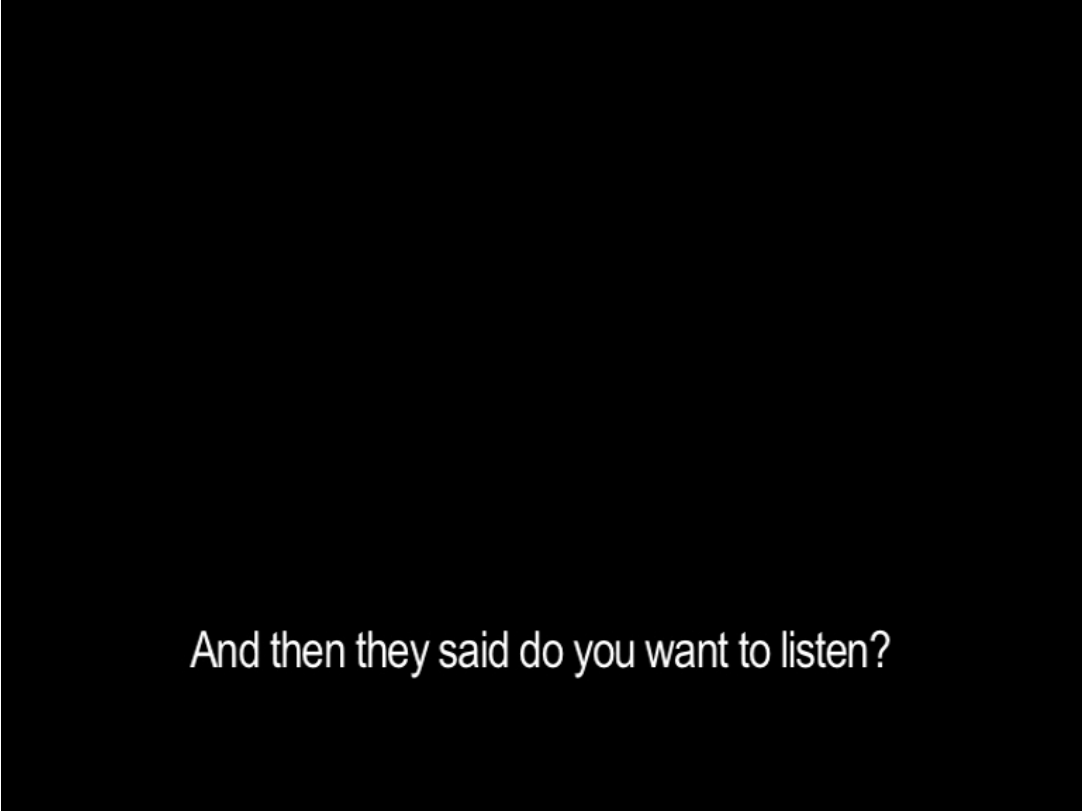
Opera Calling

Brief Introduction


«Opera Calling» – was an artistic intervention into the cultural system of the Zurich Opera. By means of audio-bugs placed within the auditorium of the local opera house, the outside public is given access to the performances on stage. The performances are retransmitted to the public not through broadcasting, but by telephoning each person individually.

During the 3-month duration of the project, a total of 90 hours of live opera performance were delivered to 4363 households.

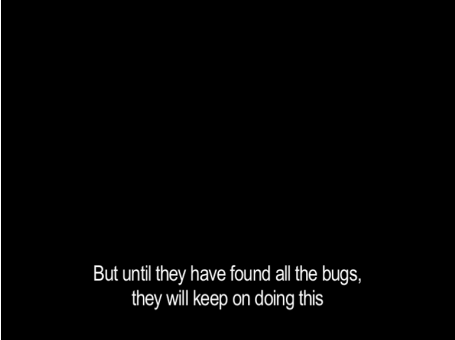
For For Ars Electronica 2009 we propose to exhibit Opera Calling in the form of a video installation. The 8 minute video is a recording of one of the Telefone calls where a family gathers around a Telefone receiver retelling the story of Opera Calling. This video stands for the whole Opera Calling intervention and has become an art piece in its own right. The video loop consists of the unaltered original audio and a black screen with white subtitles. This reduced visual form emphasises the conceptual nature of Opera Calling.



And then they said do you want to listen?



- But that wasn't a recording?
- No, this is really live



But until they have found all the bugs,
they will keep on doing this

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Project Description

«Opera Calling» – is an artistic intervention into the cultural system of the Zurich Opera. By means of audio-bugs placed within the auditorium of the local opera house, the outside public is given access to the performances on stage. The performances are retransmitted to the public not through broadcasting, but by telephoning each person individually.

From March to June 2007, audio-bugs, hidden in the auditorium, transmitted the performances of the Zurich Opera to randomly selected telephone land-lines in the city of Zurich. In proper style of a home-delivery-service, anyone that picked up their telephone, was able to listen to the on-going opera performances for as long as s/he wanted through a live connection with the audio-bug signal. As soon as the listener would hang up, the telephone-machine would call the next random number. With the use of the telephone for the dissemination of the opera transmissions a virtual auditory space is opened not as blanket coverage (as with broadcasting media) but as a home-delivery service: Every person is individually connected and can eaves-drop at their leisure from the comfort of their living room.

Following Bell's original intention for the application of the telephone, «Opera Calling» makes use of the telephone as a broadcasting media. It revalues this long-forgotten use, revealing how the telephone in its beginnings was just an apparatus uncoupled from specific social use.

The Opera works as a symbol for a closed-circuit cultural operating system which is opened up by connecting it to the a telephone network. By re-distributing the performance-output, normally contained within the physical walls of the Opera House, Opera Calling also asks questions of cultural ownership.

The «Opera Calling» Installation

«Opera Calling» as a performance took place in the virtual space between the Zurich Opera and the homes of the inhabitants surrounding it. The exhibition of the actual telephone-machine (the computer handling the audio-bug-signals and distributing them to home-delivery service) at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich enabled a second level of access to the project: 110 telephones hung from the ceiling of the exhibition space were also wired into the telephone-machine thus representing and displaying the different operations of the virtual performance. The telephones in the installation rang in time with the telephone at peoples homes. When the person at home picked up the phone to hear the transmission of «Opera Calling» (a short intro explaining the project, whereafter the listener would be connected to the bug), then in the installation too, the transmission and anything the listener said would be heard through the telephones. During the day, when there were no stage performances at the opera, the installation played back calls made on previous nights. In the evenings, as soon as a live performance would start at the opera, the telephone machine too would go into LIVE mode: Randomly choosing numbers from the telephone book and playing the transmissions to them. Computer screens in the installation then also displayed the telephone number currently being called and the name of the opera being played.





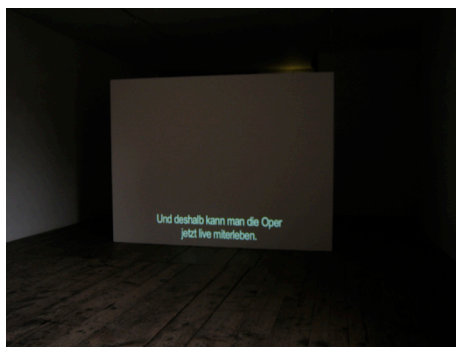
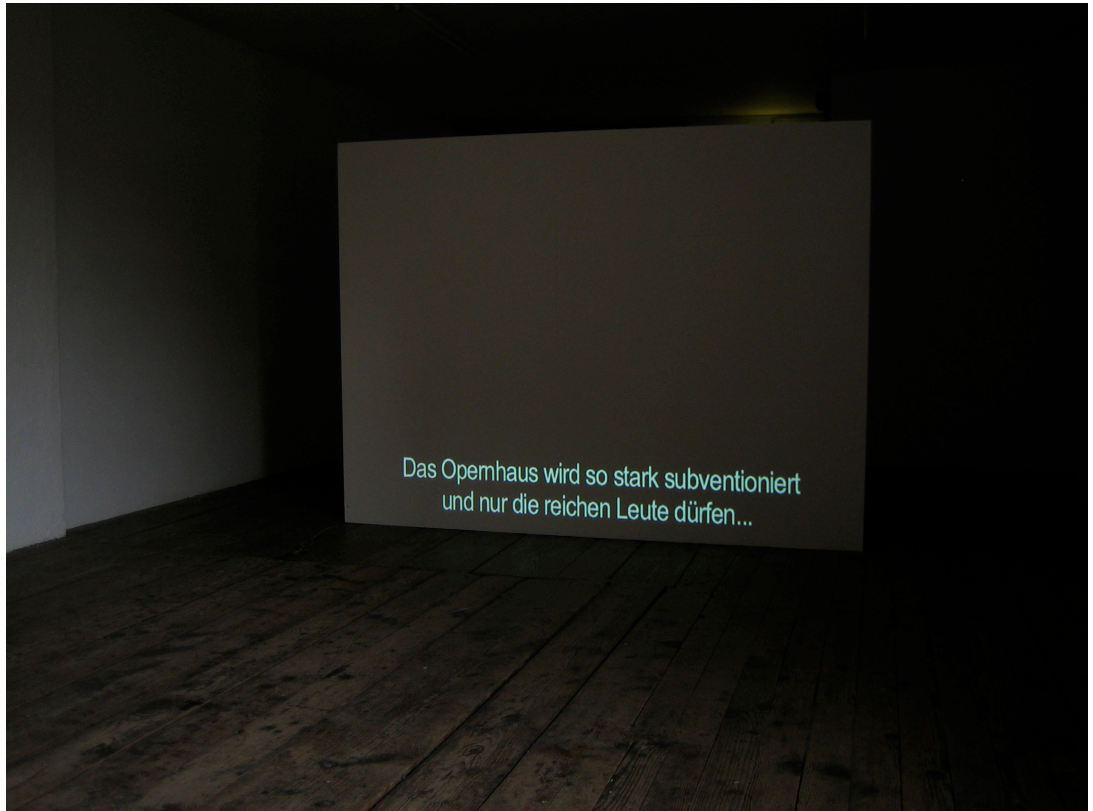
The «Opera Calling» Performance

The project received wide media attention mainly locally, but also internationally. Through this, «Opera Calling» gained a third level of access: People who were randomly called by the telephone machine had sometimes seen the project on television news and – thrilled to have been chosen by the machine – would call other members of the household to the phone, explaining to them the project. In some cases people would sit in groups in front of the telephone, listening to the opera, discussing the transmission, just as people probably had done one hundred years ago with the “Telefon Hirmondo” (see images p.8).

The media also informed the Zurich Opera about the project, by asking for a statement regarding «Opera Calling». After denying any involvement with the project, they sent a letter to both Cabaret Voltaire and !Mediengruppe Bitnik with the order to immediately stop the illegal transmissions and threatening to file a law-suit. There followed a debate in the media over cultural ownership which resulted in a David vs. Goliath style discussion about the flow of cultural subsidisations and cultural ownership. Finally the Zurich Opera decided to tolerate «Opera Calling» as a temporary enhancement of their performance repertoire.

The «Opera Calling» Video Installation

For Ars Electronica 2009 we propose to exhibit Opera Calling in the form of a video installation. The 8 minute video is a recording of one of the Telephone calls where a family gathers around a Telephone receiver retelling the story of Opera Calling. This video stands for the whole Opera Calling intervention and has become an art piece in its own right. The video loop consists of the unaltered original audio and a black screen with white subtitles. This reduced visual form emphasises the conceptual nature of Opera Calling. For the video installation the video is projected on a free standing screen (ratio 4:3, 250cmx187cm). The screen is a wood panel with backings (not unlike film sets in Hollywood). !Mediengruppe Bitnik can provide a video projector for the installation.



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Opera Calling

Project Background

Hacking as Artistic Practice

The point of departure for the development for «Opera Calling» was an on-going investigation into the usefulness of «hacking» as a means for artistic production. In experimental projects, exhibitions, installations and workshops we have repeatedly examined strategies of hacking, exploring their ability to open a system, a media or a cultural environment to a new use, a new public or new forms of interaction.

The term «hacking» originates from a computer background, a «hack» characterising an outstanding achievement in the field of programming. The admiration for a hack well done does not necessarily come from the superior skill in programming it shows, but more often a hack is admired for its simplicity, its intervention in exactly the right spot and its unconventional problem-solving approach.

More generally and uncoupled from its original background, hacking can be understood as an artistic strategy for challenging an existing semiotic regime. By replicating and redeploying codes or regimes, hacking offers project participants a new way of seeing, understanding and (in the best case scenario) interacting with a given system. The already given and the unsaid are the material. As Stanley Aronowitz says about the postmodern thinker: "We deconstruct the 'givenness' to show the cracks that sutures have patched, to demonstrate that what is taken as privileged discourse, is merely a construction that conceals power and self-interest." Much the same can be said about the cultural hacker: Hackers go on to develop events, interventions or projects that demonstrate the critique through a process of appropriating, deconstructing and reinterpreting a given system.

Hack(Def): a clever solution to an interesting problem

In order to put hacking to the test as a means for artistic production, we looked for a short and inspiring definition of «a hack». We came across the perfect definition in a more recent series of books about hacks published by O'Reilly starting in 2003. O'Reilly's «Hacks Series» „reclaims the term „hacking“ for the good guys – innovators who explore and experiment, unearth shortcuts, create useful tools, and come up with fun things to try on their own.“. Since we definitely belong to the „good guys“ and want to „create useful tools and fun things“ it was a perfect match. In the O'Reilly books a hack is defined as a „clever solution to an interesting problem“.

So all we needed now was an interesting problem to which we could then find a clever (artistic) solution.

An interesting problem: The Opera in general and the Zurich Opera in particular

The Opera has played a central role in many societies for several centuries. It not only served as Leitkultur, it also played a specific role in various revolutions: From the French to the Belgian and Italian to the Chinese, the opera has repeatedly proven political brisance. In 1830 for example the performance of Daniel Auber's patriotic opera «La Muette de Portici» engendered a riot that became the signal for the Belgian Revolution, the crowd pouring onto the streets after the performance and taking possession of government buildings.

In Zurich the local opera house has also proven to be politically charged. In 1980, the „Opernhauskrawalle“ (opera riots) expressed a deep dissatisfaction of young people with the amount of public funding invested in high culture, leaving nothing for youth culture. The Opernhauskrawalle were the starting point for two years of ongoing youth riots in Zurich.

Some things have changed since then in the cultural operating system of Zurich, with various institutions engaged in the facilitation of youth and alternative culture. Other things have not: Over 80% of the public money spent on culture in Zurich still goes directly to the Zurich Opera. And although each seat at the opera is subsidized with nearly € 200.-, the cheapest seat you can buy will still cost you around € 25.- with prices going up to € 100.- for a seat with a proper view of the stage.

We had found an interesting cultural operating system to hack, a system funded by public money, where the question of cultural ownership would be a tricky one.

A clever solution: «Opera Calling»

The closed cultural system of the Zurich Opera suited our needs for an interesting problem, a system to hack. The intention of the hack would be an opening-up of this closed-circuit environment to a new use, to a new public in a suitable way. Looking for a media to use as the means for the dissemination of the Zurich Opera, we quickly decided against any broadcasting media (e.g. radio, television). We needed something much more personal, a media that would make the audience personally involved with the opera. The telephone was just the media to use, especially since the idea of broadcasting information and entertainment through the telephone had been one of the first uses of the media after its invention. Bell promoted the idea of the telephone as a central source for transmitting music, news, Sunday sermons to a paying network of wired-up subscribers for a couple of years. The idea was put into practice in Budapest, where for decades from 1893 onwards there was a government-run information system called "Telefon Hirmondo". In Paris there was the "théâtrophone", the first electrical media for the dissemination of cultural content. London had a similar system called the "Electrophone".

In «Opera Calling» this discarded use of the telephone is revalued: re-evaluating and celebrating long forgotten technologies and uses by putting them back into practice permit a new and more thorough understanding of the cultural systems they generate.

The «Opera Calling» How-To

Difficulty: Moderately challenging

You've always wondered why there was no connection between opera and open access? You've always dreamed of sharing your love of arias with the whole town? Tired of having to dress up every time you want to see a performance in the opera? Would you love to go to the opera **every** night, but don't have the necessary cash?

With «Opera Calling» you can learn **how to hack the opera in 10 easy steps**. You'll never have to spend another night away from the comfort of your home AND still not miss one single performance!

The Bug

- * STEP 1: Build an Audio-Bug or buy one in your local spy gear shop
- * STEP 2: Make sure the bug has a power source that will last a while (battery pack)
- * STEP 3: Take part in a guided tour of your local opera house (the more people, the easier for you to sneak off on your own, so bring a few friends)
- * STEP 4: Check the back stage parts and the auditorium for a good spot to leave the bug (if you find a good hidden spot near a wall socket, grab it!)
- * STEP 5: Place the bug

The telephone machine

- * STEP 6: Connect the receiving end of the bug to a computer
- * STEP 7: Programm your computer to call other peoples home phones (all the people listed in your local phone book, your friends) as soon as it receives an opera performance through the bug.
- * STEP 8: Record a short announcement message. Play this message prior to connecting to the live feed with the opera

Join the performance

- * STEP 9: Print schedules of the dates and times your machine will be dealing out opera home-deliveries
- * STEP 10: Distribute the schedules to people and locations you want to call. Get people to stay at home on opera nights!

Things You'll Need

- * Bug with good battery pack
- * An Opera House near you
- * Computer
- * Telephone Book of your town / city

Opera Calling

Aujourd'hui spectacle à la maison: Performance Schedule

Performance Schedule «Opera Calling» (excerpt)

March 2007

Friday, 09.03.07, 19:00-21:30

La Bohème – Puccini (Première)
In Italian

Sunday, 11.03.07, 19:00-22:30

Le Nozze di Figaro – Mozart (Première)
In Italian

Tuesday, 13.03.07, 19:00-22:30

Le Nozze di Figaro – Mozart
In Italian

Wednesday, 14.03.07, 19:30-23:00

Die Zauberflöte – Mozart (Première)
In German

Thursday, 15.03.07, 19:00-22:30

Le Nozze di Figaro – Mozart
In Italian

Friday, 16.03.07, 18:30-22:45

Der Rosenkavalier – R. Strauss (Première)
In German

Saturday, 17.03.07, 19:00-22:30

Die Zauberflöte – Mozart
In German

Sunday, 18.03.07, 14:00-18:15

Der Rosenkavalier – R. Strauss
In German

Tuesday, 20.03.07, 19:00-22:00

Il Barbiere di Siviglia – Rossini (Première)
In Italian

Friday, 23.03.07, 19:00-22:30

Die Zauberflöte – Mozart
In German

Saturday, 24.03.07, 19:30-22:30

Il Barbiere di Siviglia – Rossini
In Italian

Sunday, 25.03.07, 14:00-18:15

Der Rosenkavalier – R. Strauss
In German

Wednesday, 28.03.07, 19:00-22:30

Die Zauberflöte – Mozart
In German

Thursday, 29.03.07, 18:00-23:15

Parsifal – Wagner (Première)
In German

Friday, 30.03.07, 19:30-22:30

Il Barbiere di Siviglia – Rossini
In Italian

Saturday, 31.03.07, 17:00-22:15

Parsifal – Wagner
In German

April 2007

Sunday, 01.04.07, 13:00-16:30

Le Nozze di Figaro – Mozart
In Italian

Tuesday, 03.04.07, 19:00-22:30

Le Nozze di Figaro – Mozart
In Italian

Thursday, 05.04.07, 18:00-23:15

Parsifal – Wagner
In German

Saturday, 07.04.07, 19:00-22:30

Le Nozze di Figaro – Mozart
In Italian

Monday, 09.04.07, 19:30-22:20

La Traviata – Verdi (Première)
In Italian

Wednesday, 11.04.07, 19:00-21:50

La Traviata – Verdi
In Italian

Thursday, 12.04.07, 18:00-23:15

Parsifal – Wagner
In German

Saturday, 14.04.07, 19:30-22:20

La Traviata – Verdi
In Italian

Sunday, 15.04.07, 14:00-19:15

Parsifal – Wagner
In German

Thursday, 19.04.07, 19:00-21:50

La Traviata – Verdi
In Italian

Sunday, 22.04.07, 19:00-22:00

L' Italiana in Algeri – Rossini (Première)
In Italian

Tuesday, 24.04.07, 19:30-22:30

L' Italiana in Algeri – Rossini
In Italian

Wednesday, 25.04.07, 19:00-22:30

Faust – Gounod (Première)
In French

Friday, 27.04.07, 19:30-22:30

L' Italiana in Algeri – Rossini
In Italian

Saturday, 28.04.07, 19:00-22:30

Faust – Gounod
In French

Opera Calling

Exhibitions

2008

«Shifting Identities»

group exhibition, Kunsthaus, Zürich (CH) (Jun 6 – Aug 31 2008)

«Swiss Art Awards»

Messehalle 3, Basel, Switzerland (Jun 3 – Jun 8 2008)

2007

«SHIFT-Festival»

group exhibition, Basel, Switzerland (Oct 25 – Oct 28 2007)

«They call it Reality»

group exhibition, Hartware MedienKunstVerein, Dortmund, Germany (Oct 6 – Oct 21 2007)

«25 Years»

group exhibition – Opera Calling Miniature, Foundation Binz39, Zürich, Switzerland (Jun 6 – Jul 23 2007)

«Opera Calling»

Cabaret Voltaire, Zürich, Switzerland (Mar 9 – May 26)

Opera Calling

Statistics

Total calls:.....4363
Total calls busy or failed:.....1515
Total calls duration:.....90:11:12
Longest call:.....00:57:08
Shortest call:.....00:00:01
Average call duration:.....00:01:54

New Bitnik members:.....1

Opera Calling

Further Information enclosed

DVD containig Opera Calling Video Installation Video (8:55)

DVD Opera Calling documentation video (4:29)

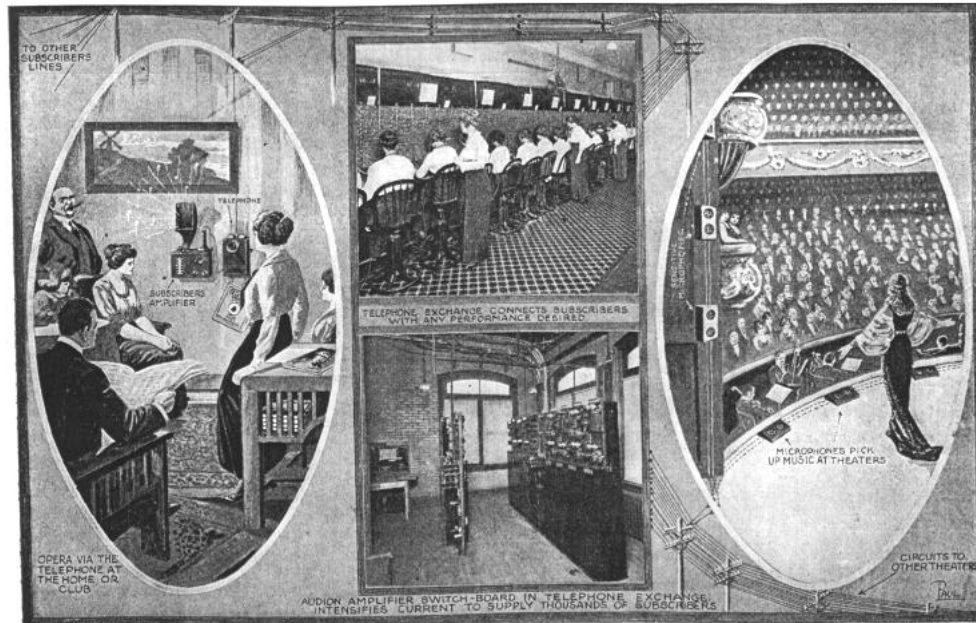
Data CD with more materials enclosed

- * selected images
- * this PDF for printing

you can also find documentation material online at: <http://www.opera-calling.com/description>

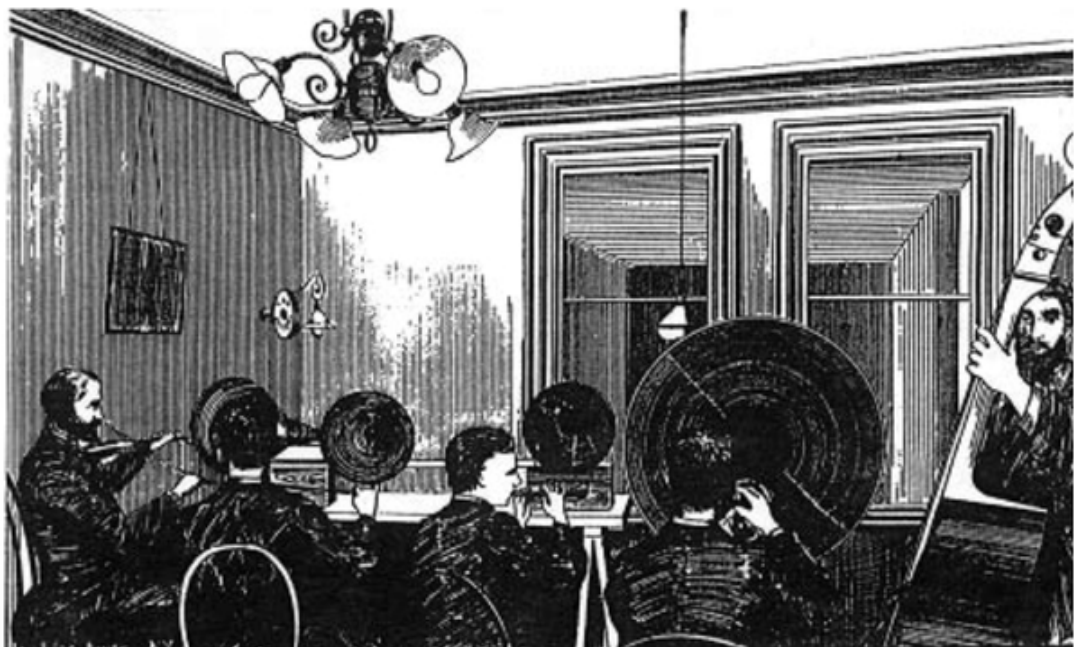
Opera Calling

Aujourd'hui spectacle à la maison



Copyright, 1919, by E. P. Co.

Due to the invention of the Audion, it is now feasible from a technical standpoint to connect to one stage as many as fifty thousand telephone subscribers, all of which can listen simultaneously to our great opera stars. The invention of the loud talking telephone also has made it possible for the entire family to hear the music as pictured above.



An orchestra playing to a long distance telephone concert; transmission from New York to Newton/MA,

Source: Scientific American, February 28, 1891, p. 130.

Opera Calling

Bugging the Zurich Opera



Opera Calling

Bugging the Zurich Opera (cont.)



Opera Calling

Teletext - Press Coverage

"Cultural assault" on Zurich Opera: Alexander Perreira resists illegal wiretapping

