



Online Guest Talk

Sarah Fuchs, Syracuse University

**Operatic Illusions**

**Wednesday 16 June | 4:30 p.m.**

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**Registration**

Please register for the talk until Monday, 14 June, via

**[jelena.cupic@uni-graz.at](mailto:jelena.cupic@uni-graz.at)**

You will receive the link to the meeting one day before the talk.

*We work for*  
**tomorrow**

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# Online Guest Talk

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## Operatic Illusions

**Dr. Sarah Fuchs** is Assistant Professor of Music History & Cultures at Syracuse University (NY). Broadly, her research explores how audio-visual technologies shaped operatic culture around the turn of the nineteenth century and how such technologies affect the arts and humanities today.

### Abstract

In 1905–6, the Gaumont cinematographer Alice Guy directed a series of operatic phonoscènes: short silent films that starred—or at least seemed to star—famous French singers acting along to their own phonograph recordings, which exhibitors would later synchronize during screenings. Many of the sound recordings did indeed capture the voices of celebrated singers; most, in fact, were existing commercial recordings chosen for the reputation of their creators. The films themselves, however, featured not famous but fledgling singers—students enrolled in Rose Caron’s

class at the Paris Conservatoire—who lip-synced along to the recordings while acting out the scenes. It should come as no surprise that established opera singers were dismayed to discover that exhibitors (perhaps unwittingly) advertised these phonoscènes as if the images mirrored—rather than just mimicked—the voices, nor that next to none were willing to appear on camera even when asked. After all, early cinema carried none of the cultural prestige of opera, to which the emerging medium turned, at least in part, for artistic legitimization (Altman 2005; Fryer 2005). What does seem striking,



though, is renowned operatic soprano turned Paris Conservatoire professor Rose Caron's enthusiasm for such synchronized sound film experiments, which for her doubled as pedagogical experiments.

Drawing on a wide array of primary sources—including the papers of Caron, Guy, Gaumont, and the Conservatoire; pedagogical writings related to singing and acting; sound recordings; and film stills—this paper investigates what it meant for Caron's pupils to embody—literally—operatic recordings not their own, to attune their lips to other singers' voices, and to fit their bodies into the

shapes implied by others' by then iconic performances. Untangling the practical and pedagogical purposes that gave rise to these operatic illusions reveals something significant about operatic culture under the early Third Republic: the extent to which the French operatic canon—by which I mean not just the works themselves but also the performance practices that had grown up alongside them—disciplined the voices and bodies of rising performers, whether on stage or on screen, and to what end.



## Contact

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