

## Project Proposal Application

To be completed by the lead proposed supervisor, with input from the non-HE Partner Organisation.



Arts and  
Humanities  
Research Council

### SECTION 1: PROJECT PROPOSAL AND CASE FOR SUPPORT

Proposed Project Title:	Above and Bey <b>ON</b> d: developing and evaluating new approaches to access for Opera North		
Project Summary: <i>(Maximum 100 words)</i>	Inclusion is core to Arts Council England’s current Let’s Create Strategy and to Opera North’s ambition to build new audiences and sustain existing ones. But captioning opera performances – multi-layered performance texts including music and sung text alongside other modes of communication that include costume, set, lighting, gesture and movement – presents particular challenges in terms of what can be captioned and what is ‘lost in translation’. Building on the company’s sector-leading work on access, this project examines what can and should be captioned and explores how best to do so to support understanding and pleasure for all audiences.		
Host Academic Institution:	Newcastle University		
Name of Non-HE Partner Organisation:	Opera North		
Name of Contact at non-HE Partner Organisation:	Becky Smith (Head of Academic Partnerships)	Email Address:	<a href="mailto:becky.smith@operanorth.co.uk">becky.smith@operanorth.co.uk</a>
Name of Non-HE Partner Organisation <i>(if more than one)</i> :			
Name of Contact at non-HE Partner Organisation:		Email Address:	
Primary AHRC Subject Area:	Drama and Theatre Studies		
Secondary AHRC Subject Area (if <b>Interdisciplinary</b> ):	Interpreting and Translation		
Does the project Include a creative practice component?	YES <input type="checkbox"/>	NO <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
If you have listed two subject areas above, do you consider the project to be interdisciplinary?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	NO <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>

**If Yes, please briefly state why:**

*(Maximum 100 words):*

This research is primarily situated within the closely related disciplines of performance studies and music. However in order to be completed successfully the project will also have to engage with knowledge of the established and emerging modalities of audio-visual translation, and to do so in ways that do not treat these areas as separate disciplines but rather in terms of translation as a dynamic creative practice which can contribute to the aesthetic and meaning-making processes of opera for its producers, performers and audiences. In addition, its findings will draw on, and contribute to, policy in the creative industries.

**Please provide full details of the proposal and make your case for support below:**

*(Maximum 750 words)*

### **Research context**

Opera has long employed interlingual titles to provide audiences with translations of a libretto written in another language and has therefore often been at the forefront of innovation in surtitling and captioning (see for example Orero et al (2019) 'Opera accessibility in the 21st century: new services, new possibilities'). All Opera North (ON) productions sung in a different language have surtitles in English that summarise what is being sung; ON also offers audio-description, captioning and BSL-signed interpretations of performances (sung in English or other languages) to support individual access-focused performances. These usually contain more information about elements of performance than standard interlingual titles. Captioning opera performances – multi-layered performance texts including music and sung text alongside other modes of communication that also include metaphor, symbol, costume, set, lighting, gesture and movement – presents particular challenges in terms of what can be captioned and what is 'lost in translation', either between languages or from performance to captioned text.

### **Research questions**

The project aims to help ON develop its understanding of best practice and the potential for innovation in relation to providing access to opera for all. In seeking to understand and learn from the tensions – and opportunities – in creating captions for a multi-layered operatic performance text, it will explore the following questions:

- What is the existing state of the art in relation to surtitling /captioning in the performing arts? What is ON's practice: how has it evolved and how is it understood by different members of the company from performers to stage technicians?
- What are the principles and objectives that underpin current practice, and what are the benefits and the challenges of those approaches for opera as artform?
- Who are the current and prospective audiences for surtitling and captioning, and what needs do they have?
- How might new modes of providing access support and sustain the company's current and future work in both offline and online contexts?
- How can the models developed through the project be shared as best practice with other companies in the sector?

### **Research methods and timeline of activities**

The studentship will employ a range of research methods, including short-term engagements with ON, access to production development, fieldwork, data collection and desk-based research.

#### **Months 1-12**

- Desk-based research: survey/review literature on the principles and practice of surtitling/captioning/access for the performing arts in the UK and globally.
- Fieldwork: gathering and analysing data on ON's current practices and understandings of access provision; interviews with members of producing and creative teams, focus groups and ethnographic observation.

#### **Months 13-24**

- Desk-based research/fieldwork on the practices of comparable companies to identify best practice solutions to captioning practices beyond text.

- Through embedding within selected ON production ‘pilot/s’, work to trial new approaches and evaluate the outcomes with both ON and audiences.

### Months 25-42

- Continuing to develop work on ON production ‘pilot/s’ as agreed with ON’s artistic planners and producers.
- Writing up a thesis that explores and evaluates new models for access in touring opera and theatre performance.
- Sharing research outcomes with a variety of audiences including developing a best practice toolkit for captioning opera performance.

### Case for support

The studentship emerges from a developing research partnership between ON and NU, rooted in [work](#) that the University’s Humanities Research Institute conducted with ON to understand the importance of research collaborations to and across performing arts organisations. The CDA will be supported by the activities of the NU Performance Research Group and benefit from NU’s commitment to civic engagement, evidenced by its Gold Engage Watermark NCCPE accreditation.

The project is designed to provide **intrinsic benefits** by helping ON fully understand, enhance and extend its innovative work in access provision for its opera audiences, and offers **process benefits** through opportunities to feed learning back into that work through the iterative development and piloting of new methods grounded in an extensive and systematic review of current theory and practice. **Public engagement benefits** will include development of best practice guidelines shared with other companies and performers; the research will also generate a body of reflective critical work that can make an original contribution to debates around access in the arts more generally.

Building on ON’s sector-leading work on access, this project focuses on the question of what can and should be captioned and explores how best to do so to support understanding and pleasure for all audiences. The work will support accessibility – a key focus for ACE’s ‘Let’s Create’ Strategy and its Inclusivity and Relevance Investment Principle – and the development of new audiences unfamiliar with opera, contributing to ON’s future success.

**Provide details of any resources and facilities, including any high cost equipment, fieldwork, training, etc., that may be required to complete the project successfully, and where you will seek these resources (e.g. NBCDTP; partner resources; departmental/school funds). Please include estimated costs:**

*(Maximum 200 words)*

The student will identify training needs in discussion with the supervisory team: within the HaSS Faculty’s Researcher Education and Development programme, modules such as Designing Doctoral Research and the Reflective Researcher Portfolio will develop core skills. Depending on the final project design and existing skills-base, the student may also require training in elite interviewing, facilitation of surveys and focus group conversations and ethnographic observation and the student may seek NBTP funding in support. They will also have access to training opportunities from NU’s Engagement and Place team via events on public engagement skills, policy engagement and evaluation of impact.

The student will be given access to ON’s office space and admin support as well as access to staff and performers via a series of visits timetabled around ON’s activity and seasonal performance cycles. This will enable observation of work practices and discussion with expert practitioners at Opera North and other relevant cultural organisations. Travel to ON’s office and rehearsal spaces will be supported through the CDA enhancement to stipend and via the DTP’s Research Training Support Grants if required. The student will also be able to access PG Support Funds administered in the School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics.

**Outline the arrangements for communication between the non-HE partner organisation and the academic host institution in regard to project management and monitoring academic progress:**

*(Maximum 200 words)*

This CDA emerges from a developing research partnership between ON and NU from 2020 onwards, funded by the University's Humanities Research Institute: a formal ON-NU Steering Group was established in 2022. Existing relationships of trust and communication thus underpin this application to the benefit of the student and project.

The student will meet their academic supervisors monthly at NU and will have frequent (as required) access to their external advisors at ON. An initial induction will introduce them to the ON team and they will be able to work in the organisation's space on an agreed basis, with access to regular mentoring by Gray, Leeks and other ON colleagues as well as freelance practitioners where relevant to the project and to the student's skills and knowledge development.

Deadlines for the student's progress, research and training will be agreed at the project's outset and monitored through full-team meetings every 2-3 months (contact with ON will be more regular in year 1 of the project). Meetings will take place in Newcastle/Leeds/hybrid-online as appropriate to the student's place in the research; ON tours visit Newcastle regularly and whole team supervisions will be arranged to take advantage of those visits.

**What benefits will there be for the student and the non-HE partner organisation as a result of your collaboration?**

*(Maximum 300 words)*

The student will benefit from:

- a project design that provides a unique opportunity to research key questions of inclusion and access with a sector-leading arts organisation.
- extensive access to Opera North's practice and process and to state-of-the-art thinking on captioning/titling and developing accessible performances.
- dedicated time to undertake in-depth research alongside unique levels of access to rehearsals and performances.
- opportunities to develop, test and reflect on innovative methodologies for titling and access in dialogue with both academics and arts practitioners and in 'real world' performance contexts.
- access to the Opera North Collection (archive) held at the University of Leeds.
- networking opportunities and links to other arts and community organisations in the UK (and internationally) for research and potential future avenues for work.
- opportunities to develop professional engagement and communication skills, in sharing research outcomes with ON staff and audiences.

For ON, this project aligns with their core commitments to ensure diversity and inclusion in their work, develop artistic quality, innovation and repertoire, and engage with their community: all key principles in the Arts Council's new Let's Create strategy. It will provide a reflective critical space to think through the contribution that captioning can make to accessibility for all audiences, while also considering how those captions function as an additional layer of language that interacts with the already multi-layered and multi-modal performance languages of opera production. The project thus supports the company's aim of creative excellence with a commitment to tackling societal and environmental challenges locally, nationally and globally; the best practice guidance/toolkit that will be one of the outcomes of the research will support both ON and other cultural arts organisations in achieving these aims.

**State what financial (if any) or in-kind contribution the non-HE partner organisation will be making over the duration of the award:**

*(Maximum 100 words)*

ON will be making a significant in-kind contribution in the following ways:

- 1) the time of the named ON supervisors: Gray and Leeks, in addition to other ON colleagues e.g. Daoud Al-Janabi, Access Manager at Opera North who will be programming accessible performances - audio described, sign-interpreted, captioned, dementia-friendly and relaxed – across the lifetime of the project.
- 2) ON will be also providing access to office space and induction/administrative support to enable the student's

engagement with the work and creative practices of the company; they will have unique access to the planning, rehearsal and production processes of selected productions.

**Describe the nature of the collaborative arrangement and the activities the student will be undertaking with the non-HE partner organisation:**

*(Maximum 300 words)*

Both NU and ON supervisors have extensive experience of supervising CDA students and working in partnership across academic and professional practice. As a result we have agreed a framework of regular meetings of the entire team at 2-3 month intervals – to allow review of progress against the project plan, provide feedback and agree further steps and targets – and for the student to have access to support and input from academic and performance practice environments as appropriate to the stage of the research.

In parallel with their academic induction at NU the student will undergo an initial induction at ON to introduce them to the ON team, workplace and practice. Through these twin processes a training needs plan will be agreed by the whole supervisory team with the student which may involve introductions to key contacts and freelance practitioners by ON.

During the period of initial desk-based research the student will visit ON regularly. A plan for the pilot activity in years 2 and 3 of the research will be agreed in conjunction with the ON production planning team, which may involve more intensive short-term engagements with ON to enable extended presence through the rehearsal and production processes of the selected agreed productions as well as enabling the student to accompany tours to evaluate different modes and approaches to captioning with audiences. Both NU and ON will provide support for public engagement activity, including consulting and support for development of the best practice toolkit to be shared with other arts organisations.

Throughout, the student will benefit from the expertise of academic and external supervisors and access to university and arts sectors, with strong theoretical and analytical supervision combined with direct engagement with ON as a sector-leading organisation in terms of arts and access.

## SECTION 2: SUPERVISION AND EXTERNAL ADVISORS

Primary (or Co-) Supervisor:	Professor Jo Robinson	School or Department:	School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics
		Email Address:	<a href="mailto:jo.robinson2@newcastle.ac.uk">jo.robinson2@newcastle.ac.uk</a>
Secondary (or Co-) Supervisor:	Professor WN Herbert	School/Department:	School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics
		Email Address:	<a href="mailto:bill.herbert@newcastle.ac.uk">bill.herbert@newcastle.ac.uk</a>
Name of the Advisor based at the non-HE Partner Organisation:	Dominic Gray	Organisation/Institution:	Projects Director, Opera North
		Email Address:	<a href="mailto:dominic.gray@operanorth.co.uk">dominic.gray@operanorth.co.uk</a>
Name of additional internal or external advisor or academic supervisor, if any:	Stuart Leeks	Organisation/Institution:	Editor, Opera North
		Email Address:	<a href="mailto:stuart.leeks@operanorth.co.uk">stuart.leeks@operanorth.co.uk</a>

**Explain how the expertise of the supervisory team and external advisor(s) will allow them to support the proposed project and the selected student:**

*(Maximum 500 words)*

The supervisory team brings together a uniquely qualified group to ensure that the student's needs will be supported.

**Jo Robinson** has extensive experience of interdisciplinary collaborations with external partners, including work on making theatre accessible with Red Earth Theatre Company as PI of the AHRC/EPSRC Next Generation of Immersive Experiences project, 'Integrated Immersive Inclusiveness: trialling immersive technologies in the creation of inclusive and integrated theatre for deaf audiences' and the follow-on project 'Making Accessibility Accessible'. She has supervised 12 PhD students to successful completion, including four AHRC CDA/CDP students in collaboration with Nottingham Playhouse Roundabout, New Perspectives Theatre Company, the British Library and Oxford Lieder.

**WN Herbert** has expertise in libretti, literary translation, and contemporary poetry. A Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, he has supervised 13 PhD students to completion (eight AHRC-funded). A librettist since his 1996 collaboration with jazz composer Keith Morris, Herbert's partnerships include productions with Evangelia Rigaki for Tête à Tête's opera festival (2008-2010). In 2013, their Irish Arts Council-funded opera, 'AntiMidas: Bankers in Hades', was performed in Dublin's Beckett Theatre. Subsequently, they worked on 'The Pregnant Box', a street opera (2014); 'While the World Misbehaves the Baby Must Hide in the Beehive' (2018), for RIAM Percussion Ensemble; and 'Lost Ships List', performed by Ria Georgiadis and Sven Birch in Vienna and Copenhagen (2018-20). His work in collaborative translation includes translations from Bulgarian (*A Balkan Exchange*, 2017), Chinese (*Jade Ladder*, 2012), Somali (*So At One With You*, 2018) and Farsi (*The Kindly Interrogator*, 2021). He is co-author of a forthcoming study, *Collaborative Poetry Translation: the PoetTrio Method* (Routledge, 2023).

For ON, **Dominic Gray**, Projects Director since 2001, brings experience of leading the Company's work in the fields of

new commissions and collaborations, research, and cross-sector partnerships. Opera North Projects is an award-winning commissioning body, whose productions have been seen at the Southbank, the RSC, Ars Electronica, Latitude Festival and the National Centre for Performing Arts in Mumbai. Gray sits on the Newcastle University Humanities and Social Sciences (HaSS) Research Institutes Advisory Board, the Civic University Network Steering Group, and was a REF Impact Assessor for REF 2014 and 2020. He previously also sat on the AHRC Advisory Board, the RCUK Public Engagement with Research Advisory Panel, and the AHRC-funded Translating Cultures Research Programme. He has been a co-supervisor of three Collaborative Doctoral Awards (CDA) and supported PhD students from the North-West Collaborative Doctoral Training Partnership (NWDTP), White Rose College of the Arts & Humanities (WRoCAH) and XR Stories (University of York).

The second ON advisor, **Stuart Leeks**, writes on theatre and opera. He has been Editor at Opera North since September 2010. This work has included editing and co-ordinating opera and concert programmes. He has also hosted and delivered numerous pre-performance talks, on composers such as Handel, Mozart and Janáček. In addition, he has written more than 150 articles and interviews for theatre and opera programmes at venues across the UK and in the West End.



### SECTION 3: RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT

**Please provide details about the research environment the selected student will be joining and its suitability:**

*(Maximum 500 words)*

The School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics has a lively research culture to which academic staff, graduate students and distinguished visiting speakers contribute. There is a significant drama specialism that includes theatre and performance scholars Dr Helen Freshwater, Dr Rosalind Haslett and Dr Kate Craddock; literature scholars with research specialisms in theatre and performance, including Professor Kate Chedgzoy, Dr James Harriman-Smith, Dr Kate De Rycker, Dr James Cummings and Dr Emma Whipday, an early modern scholar and playwright; writers Professor Jacob Polley and Professor Preti Taneja who have written for radio and the stage and playwrights Dr Zoe Cooper and Andrew Thompson. The School has strong links with local arts institutions and theatre companies including New Writing North, Arts Council England, Northern Stage, Alphabetti, Cap-a-Pie and Live Theatre: we regularly collaborate with them on research, impact and engagement projects.

For postgraduate students specifically, the research environment within the School/University is well resourced. A dedicated member of the School Professional Services team oversees PGR business. The Postgraduate Suite includes workspace and IT facilities, as well as providing a collective home for the School's PGRs which supports their self-organisation as a community, including reading groups and social events.

ON also provides a research rich environment for the student: beyond the named supervisors ON practitioners offer a wide-range of expertise across opera, classical music, arts & cultural management, music education, community engagement and theatre production which add value and insight to both the scholarly and practice communities in which this research is located. The diverse audiences, relationships, venues and platforms that ON can access will help ensure that the project's research can be applied and disseminated to inspire and maximise impact. Held by the University of Leeds Special Collections, the [Opera North Collection](#) (archive) was established in response to the recognition of a need to preserve material relating to opera and musicals staged by the company as a reflection of the operatic art form and the way it has connected with and responded to society since 1978: this will be a key resource for the student and project.

At NU the CDA student will be encouraged to join the new Performance Research Group, an interdisciplinary community of performance researchers gathered from across the University, including colleagues in Sociology, Geography, Architecture and Business. The three Faculty research institutes – including the Institute of Creative Arts Practice and the Humanities Research Institute – share a concern to recognise, record and evaluate the contribution that cultural organisations make to audiences and wider communities, and will provide a sustaining interdisciplinary context for the project team and student. Beyond NU, the training opportunities offered by the Northern Bridge consortium, the opportunities to connect with students in other disciplines working on related issues, and the presence at other universities in the DTP (notably Northumbria and QUB) of colleagues with pertinent research expertise, means that the wider research environment is an excellent fit for this project.

## SECTION 4: PERSON SPECIFICATION

**In the event that your application is successful we would like to advertise the award on the Northern Bridge Consortium website as soon as possible following the announcement of the results. We'd therefore be grateful if you could complete the following Person Specification.**

<b>For further information about this Collaborative Doctoral Award and to submit an expression of interest, please contact:</b>		
<b>Lead Supervisor (or alternative Contact)</b>	Professor Jo Robinson	<b>Email:</b> <a href="mailto:jo.robinson2@newcastle.ac.uk">jo.robinson2@newcastle.ac.uk</a>
<b>Expressions of interest must be received no later than (dd/mm/yy):</b>		1 February 2024
<b>Expressions of interest should be accompanied by the following documentation (e.g. 2 page CV; personal statement):</b>		Expression of interest to include 1-page project proposal (which should outline your interest in and motivation for the project); 2-page CV; copy degree certificates and transcripts of marks.
<b>Interviews for shortlisted candidates are expected to take place: (e.g. Week Commencing dd/mm/yy)</b>		Weeks commencing 11 or 18 February 2024

### PERSON SPECIFICATION

***Note applicants must also meet the criteria for the acceptance on a doctoral programme as set out by the host institution's Postgraduate Admissions Service.***

<b>Education and Professional Qualifications</b>	Essential Criteria	Meets Newcastle University's PhD entry requirements.  <b>N.B.</b> We welcome applicants with an interest in accessibility and inclusion in the creative arts, and recognise that such candidates may come from a wide variety of disciplinary backgrounds.
	Desirable Criteria	
<b>Research and Impact Experience and Training</b>	Essential Criteria	Strong project proposal Willingness to engage with academic and non-academic audiences
	Desirable Criteria	Experience of working with non-academic partners on research/impact
<b>Professional Practice and Job-related Experience</b>	Essential Criteria	Excellent oral and written communication skills with the ability to communicate with a wide range of different audiences Excellent organisational and time management skills, with the ability to prioritise workload and work to deadlines
	Desirable Criteria	Experience relevant to the project
<b>Interpersonal Skills</b>	Essential Criteria	Ability to work independently as well as part of a team
	Desirable Criteria	

<b>Other Factors</b>	Essential Criteria	Meets UKRI eligibility requirements
	Desirable Criteria	