

## *Introduction*

Oh, no! Never! No, never!  
You cannot know the kind of passion that burns in my heart!  
—Violetta, act 2, *La Traviata* by Giuseppe Verdi

### *LA TRAVIATA*

The Eoan Group first opera production took place on 10 March 1956 in the Cape Town City Hall with a performance of Giuseppe Verdi's three-act opera *La Traviata*. Produced by Italian émigré Alessandro Rota with Eoan's artistic director, Joseph Manca, conducting the all-white Cape Town Municipal Orchestra, this production was part of the group's First Arts Festival.<sup>1</sup> All tickets for this performance (approximately one thousand seats) were sold out within the first day of booking open to the public.<sup>2</sup> Eight more performances followed before the end of the opening month of March 1956, including a special performance held for government dignitaries on 20 March 1956.<sup>3</sup> The cast included, among others, May Abrahamse and Ruth Goodwin sharing the role of Violetta, Lionel Fourie as Germont, and Ron Thebus as Alfredo; the group's choir and ballet corps sang and danced as Violetta and Alfredo's guests.<sup>4</sup>

Publicity for Eoan's performance of *La Traviata* happened through reviews and other informative articles in most local newspapers and magazines, including the *Cape Times*, the *Cape Argus*, *Die Landstem*, *Die Burger*, the *Sun*, and *Drum* magazine. The reviews were overwhelmingly positive, and Eoan seemed to have made a huge impact on Cape Town's classical music circles. Well-known Afrikaans critic Charlie Weich of *Die Burger* wrote that had he not seen with his own eyes what a coloured opera company

had achieved on the night of 10 March in the City Hall, he would not have believed it. He singled out the voices of May Abrahamse and Lionel Fourie, and the decor and costumes, as outstanding.<sup>5</sup> The critic for the *Cape Argus* was of the opinion that “there must have been real astonishment at the sound and the spectacle of a non-European amateur cast performing Italian opera at a level that would put more than one professional company to shame.”<sup>6</sup> The critic added that the “astonishment is to some extent an admission of failure to realize how far, with guidance, these underprivileged men and women from factories, shops and domestic jobs can travel in the realms of art.”<sup>7</sup> The *Cape Times* described the performance as “an unqualified triumph.”<sup>8</sup>

These reviews were, of course, written by whites for a predominantly white readership; given the state of local politics in the 1950s, it comes as no surprise that these white readers were astonished by this first “all-coloured” rendition of a Western cultural form such as opera. Yet reviews in newspapers that catered to the non-European community, namely the *Sun* and the *Drum*, were similarly positive. The *Sun* reported that “history was most certainly made last Saturday when the Eoan Group staged its most ambitious effort to date with *La Traviata* at the Cape Town City Hall.”<sup>9</sup> The *Drum*’s headline read: “Cape Town’s Eoan Group hits the sky with *La Traviata*.”<sup>10</sup>

The group’s artistic director, Joseph Manca, a South African of Italian descent, was more than delighted by the reception of the production, and on 2 April 1956 he wrote to Harold Rosenthal, then editor of the British opera magazine *Opera*:

This Coloured Premiere of *La Traviata* was the greatest musical success Cape Town has ever witnessed and caused a furore among the local musical circles. Ever since the first night, the whole city has been talking and a special evening was given which was attended by the leading authorities of South Africa—The Governor-General, Members of the Cabinet, Full Diplomatic Corps, Members of Parliament, Senators, etc. etc. History was created in more than one sense. Not only was this the first Coloured performance in the world of a complete Italian Opera, but also all booking records were broken. All performances were “sold out” before the rise of the curtain on opening night. Altogether, nine performances were given, all playing to packed houses, and thousands of people were unable to gain admission. The results have surpassed all expectations.<sup>11</sup>

The event had far-reaching consequences for the functioning of the group. A mind shift took place within the group that changed its character from a

humanitarian organization to one oriented toward Western arts production; this in the absence of an alternative nonracial institution in which the coloured population could explore and present its talents. Some years later, Manca gave his impression of what he thought the performance meant to group members:

The presentation of the Italian Opera *La Traviata*, was the *dawn* of a new era for the Coloured People in their striving for the higher things of life. This introduction into the magical world of opera was the Coloured People's first intimate contact with one of the highest forms of musical art—an unforgettable baptism at whose front new horizons appeared on the educational landscape of the Coloured People's activities while new vistas of beauty were painted on the artistic canvas of their cultural progress.<sup>12</sup>

Today it is impossible not to read this interpretation of events as patronizing, politically compromised, and naive. It endorses apartheid themes of Western cultural superiority, cultural homogeneity, and the “civilizing” purposes of apartheid’s separate (read *racial*) cultural development. If Manca is read at face value, opera in South Africa had a civilizing role to play that depended on its status as a European and uncompromisingly unindigenized art (as illustrated by Eoan’s emphasis on performances in “traditional Italian style”).<sup>13</sup> Indeed, not everyone in the coloured community was enthusiastic about Eoan’s success. Two scathing attacks on Eoan’s activities were launched immediately after the performances, illustrating the profound complexities of the politically charged environment in which the group operated. The first was a letter from the South African Coloured People’s Organisation (SACPO), and the second was an anonymous circular distributed on the streets. Both letters expressed dismay to government officials about the Eoan Group’s special performance of *La Traviata*, although a sense of admiration for the group’s achievements was not entirely absent.<sup>14</sup> Alex La Guma, chairman of the SACPO, wrote to Eoan as follows:

Allow us to congratulate you on your magnificent performance of “La Traviata.” You have shown that, given the opportunities, Coloured people can excel in the realms of culture on par with all other peoples.

It has come to our notice, however, that your group arranged a special performance of the opera for “Europeans Only” on Tuesday night 20<sup>th</sup> [of March]. Among those invited were the Cabinet Ministers and Members of Parliament whose attitude towards the Non-Europeans are well known.

It [has been] rumoured for sometime that your group was financially supported by the government through the Coloured Affairs Department. People

can also conclude, therefore, that the Eoan Group supports Apartheid. In fact, the whole idea reminds one of the slave period when the farmers hired Coloureds to perform for them, their masters. Today in the 20th Century we do not recognise the white man as our master. This is the land of our birth and we demand government support for ALL cultural movements. BUT WITHOUT APARTHEID STRINGS.<sup>15</sup>

Manca's politically stilted version of events is also put into perspective by a critical pamphlet that was distributed on the streets:

#### *THE LA TRAVIATA AFFAIR*

We do not share the amazement the columns of the daily press oozed over the recent production of Italian opera by a so-called "all coloured cast." We are not surprised that human beings can sing, dance and act.

However, the undoubted enthusiasm of both the performance and the majority of the audiences for "La Traviata" is an index of the cultural starvation and hunger of the majority of the people, cut off as they are by apartheid and poverty from the best in arts and culture. It is precisely this cultural starvation of the mass of the people that has tricked them into accepting Eoan's "La Traviata" as a step towards their cultural aspirations. In the same way a man driven by a burning thirst will drink at a sewer for the sake of life itself.

The Eoan Group is befouled by an apartheid atmosphere. But the most smarting humiliation to date, was the special performance of "La Traviata" for South African prominent racialists. People who publicly spit in the faces of the artists, who are horrified at the very thought of sitting next to them in the same bus, or even standing in the same que[ue] to buy a stamp, to these the Eoan Group was "thrilled" to give a special place of honour during the performance of La Traviata. To our shame, not one of the artists walked off the stage in protest against this outrageous insult. This sort of thing can only happen when people are so starved of artistic and cultural expression that the opportunity to express themselves artistically becomes all important.<sup>16</sup>

These documents show unequivocally that political resistance to Eoan's operatic activities occurred from the very beginning and, more important, that this resistance was publicized and known to Manca and group members. Notwithstanding the congratulatory letters, positive reviews, and enthusiastic reception by opera-loving Capetonians, these protest letters cut to the heart of issues that in the long run resulted in the group's demise. As illustrated in the pages of this book, throughout the group's existence (starting in 1933) its members subscribed to the ideals and agendas of white domination in one form or another. These included engaging with European cultural

formats such as opera, ballet, and drama; endorsing European culture's "uplifting qualities"; functioning under white management; accepting funds from the apartheid state; assenting to performing for racially segregated audiences; suffering the stifling isolation resulting from apartheid laws; and steadfastly refusing to acknowledge that politics had anything to do with the group's work. These implicit and explicit endorsements of white domination are, in a nutshell, what caused the group's downfall and the branding of its members among their own community as stooges of the apartheid state.<sup>17</sup> And despite Eoan's many opera productions, group members continued to suffer "cultural starvation and hunger" as the system of apartheid undermined the group at every turn. These letters also bring home the seemingly untenable spaces that those who performed with whites had to negotiate in a time when governing structures insisted on racial difference.

The artistic success of the group's 1956 "Traviata," as former members fondly refer to the opera to this day, set it on a twenty-year course during which this opera became the group's flagship production. Catapulted into the sphere of Cape Town's semiprofessional opera world, the group continued to perform this opera during almost every season it presented. In 1975 "Traviata" was part of the last opera season the group ever staged. The work was also performed on other occasions, such as the group's countrywide tours in 1960 and 1965, its tour to the United Kingdom in 1975, its special appearances in rural towns such as Stellenbosch (in 1962) and Paarl (1971), and its appearance at the South African Republic Festival celebrations of 1966.<sup>18</sup> In 2004, a year after the group's seventieth birthday, Cape Town Opera produced *La Traviata* in Eoan's home, the Joseph Stone Auditorium in Athlone, in commemoration of the contribution the group made to opera production in Cape Town. For this occasion May Abrahamse, who had sung the role of Violetta for Eoan many times and was then seventy-four years old, was cast in the role of Annina.<sup>19</sup>

Although the reasons for the prominence of this opera in Eoan's performance repertoire probably rest on the availability of capable singers within the group and the familiarity that the group and Joseph Manca had with the opera itself, there are poetically tempting similarities between the fate of the leading character, Violetta, and that of the opera section of Eoan during the apartheid era.<sup>20</sup> Being socially and politically of "dubious" standing and living on the fringes of "respectable" (and in the case of Eoan, *white*) society, both the character Violetta and Eoan itself were enchanted by a utopian world for which they sacrificed all they had, were forced by figures of authority to

give up that world, were publicly scorned and humiliated, and had their demise hastened as a result of their choices. Verdi's initial title for this work was *Amore e Morte*: "Love and Death." In 1980, when the group's opera endeavors were finally over, its reputation in its own community was in tatters, so much so that the antiapartheid organization South African Council on Sport (SACOS) declared Eoan a banned organization, a label it endured for decades to come. On the other side of the political divide, members of the group had been treated as second-class citizens by the apartheid state for decades, systematically eroding their personal and artistic aspirations; many in white professional opera circles regarded the capabilities of Eoan's established singers as below par.<sup>21</sup> By 1980 only a few younger singers (among them tenors Ronnie Theys and Keith Timms and soprano Virginia Davids) were given opportunities to perform with the then all-white Cape Performing Arts Board (CAPAB), where they were cast in minor roles or in the chorus.<sup>22</sup> This state of affairs came about gradually as the result of a history of political controversy and compromise, the denial of which was even more damaging.

Eoan's upwardly mobile social aspirations, resulting from its operatic performances, uncannily resemble the "Violetta predicament" of these endeavors. In *La Traviata*, Violetta is regarded as a reprobate whose questionable societal position threatens the purity of the Germont clan. Her marriage to Alfredo is therefore out of the question. Apartheid ideology, likewise, was built on the idea of racial purity, and the threat of contamination was projected by white patriarchy onto the coloured population. White descriptions of coloured identity in apartheid thinking focused on the "impurity of their race," viewing coloureds as a product of miscegenation—for which whites were largely responsible in the first place—that threatened the purity of the white family. Coloureds were also perceived as socially backward and in need of the civilizing qualities of Western culture.<sup>23</sup> During and before apartheid, coloureds were kept in place not only through myriad social conventions, but also by formal legislation, including the Group Areas Act, the Immorality Act, and the Separate Amenities Act.

Inherent to apartheid ideology was a degree of fascination with and an equal loathing for the racial other. *La Traviata* dramatizes this tension in the fascination and aversion with which its characters regard Violetta, expressed by both Alfredo and his father, Giorgio, from the first moment of sexual attraction between the protagonists and continuing in the private and public scorning of Violetta and the remorse both Alfredo and his father express

upon her death. In *Mind Your Colour*, Vernon February explores racial stereotyping of the coloured population in Afrikaans literature and illustrates how “one is confronted with a picture ranging from ambiguity and almost near-kinship to total rejection and hatred.”<sup>24</sup>

The simultaneous presence of affinity and rejection that existed between Eoan group members and Manca (and other white custodians of the group) is illustrated in the course of this book. It finds its most obvious manifestation in the story of white patriarchal control over the coloured voice. Manca, throughout his thirty-four years with the group, referred to Eoan members as “my musical children,” minors who were never allowed to grow into equals. The archive clearly illustrates his autocratic management style, in which nothing happened without his consent and no one else was allowed to conduct performances. Former members often spoke of his possessiveness regarding the group and its endeavors, and Manca’s marketing of the group’s performers invariably described them as illiterates who could sing Italian opera. This fascination can also be read in the white operagoing public’s continued support through concert attendance and in the newspaper reviews, which were seldom critical.

Despite this Manca’s paternalistic, autocratic management of the group, many former members gave interviews in which they unapologetically testified to a sense of fulfillment and belonging that participation in Eoan’s productions gave them.<sup>25</sup> Although interviews conducted forty years after an industrious performance career undoubtedly contain a degree of romanticizing of the past, documentation from the Eoan Group Archive also reflects the tremendous commitment and sacrifices that members and management made for the sake of opera, ballet, or anything with which the group engaged. Evidence of the group’s conscious subjugation to authorities and its turning of a blind eye to the implications of that subjugation is similarly present in both the interviews and the archival documentation. Most members felt that their backs were against the wall: if there were no money, there would be no opera. As tenor Gerald Samaai conceded, “We had to take the [government] grant; otherwise we couldn’t have performed anything. [We] knew that should [we] not take it, it’s a slow death.”<sup>26</sup> Yet never during my engagement with any of Eoan’s former members were excuses offered for their desire to sing opera (or dance or act), to develop their talents, or to engage with Western classical formats such as opera. Instead, a sense of pride, albeit injured, accompanied their recollections of these endeavors.



## COLOURED IDENTITY

Terminology with regard to racial categorization and the notion of “coloured identity” is foundational to the narrative of this book and requires some illumination. The categorizing and labeling of human beings along color lines and ethnicity have had a long and painful history, and the extent to which such labeling was utilized as a mechanism of power and control in apartheid South Africa is still particularly alive in the collective memory of people across the world. It is therefore with a sense of trepidation that I, as a white South African who grew up during apartheid, discuss the term *coloured* and pen my take on the history of the Eoan Group. For the sake of historical authenticity, this book uses apartheid terminology, which perpetuates racial categorization up to today. Apart from this terminology, the residue of my privileged background, my predisposition toward the values of Western art and music, and my position of power as a white academic are all ever-present in this book. I realize that quite a different story would be rendered had this account of the Eoan Group been written from an alternative position, such as from a critical interrogation of white power or from a black/nonblack perspective. Furthermore, I cannot but acknowledge that inherent in the use of language lies the writer’s control of the subject of this (hi)story.

The term *coloured* has been in use in South Africa since the nineteenth century to refer to a person of darker skin color who was not European, yet also did not belong to one of the black African tribes of Southern Africa. The term was characterized by a fluidity of meaning, but it became more or less fixed under apartheid law, which used it to group together all South Africans who did not fit into the clear racial categories of white, black, or Indian. In practice, *coloured* came to include a variety of ethnicities and nationalities from diverse social strata, incorporating people of mixed racial descent; indigenous groups such as the San, the Khoi, and the Griqua; descendants of former slaves; and immigrants from China, Malaysia, Indonesia, and St. Helena.<sup>27</sup>

To this day, the social and political identity of this conglomerate remains contested, as individuals either defend or reject the idea of “coloured identity” as a blanket concept. During the height of the apartheid era, activists rejected the use of the term because they regarded it as “an artificial identity imposed by the white supremacist establishment on weak and vulnerable people as part of a divide-and-rule strategy” and referred to themselves as *black* rather than *coloured*.<sup>28</sup> This view renounced apartheid’s generalization



that “colouredness” was chiefly “an in-bred quality that is the automatic product of miscegenation.”<sup>29</sup>

Since the official abolishment of apartheid in 1994, coloured identity in South Africa has been the topic of much research, illustrating how identity formation goes far beyond skin color and is shaped by social, cultural, and political factors. Academics have provided historical, political, and social contexts to coloured identity formation in South Africa; documented the history of the coloured population; and debated the situatedness of the use of racial terminology. These authors include, among others, Mohamed Adhikari, Vivian Bickford-Smith, Sylvia Bruinders, Denis-Constant Martin, Roy du Pré, Zimitri Erasmus, Ian Goldin, Wendy Isaac-Martin, Wilmot James, Marie Jorritsma, Gavin Lewis, Carol Muller, Theodore Petrus, Birgit Pickel, Richard van der Ross, and Zoë Wicomb.<sup>30</sup> My aim here is not to repeat that extensive literature, but rather to provide a basic orientation toward the use of terminology as applied in this particular narrative and to highlight some aspects of coloured identity that Eoan’s opera performances bring into critical focus.

According to the historian Mohamed Adhikari, the shaping of coloured identity during the twentieth century was determined by four main issues: the marginalized position of the community in terms of numbers, the intermediate status of coloureds that made them more privileged than Africans but below whites during apartheid, the derogatory connotations that often accompanied the essentialist view of miscegenation as their racial origin, and the aspiration to assimilate into powerful structures.<sup>31</sup> Among other points, he expounds on what he describes as “sensitive issues,” and I highlight some of those here because they are of particular relevance when telling Eoan’s story.<sup>32</sup> Among these are, for instance, the presence of cultural affinities for the West, the desire for assimilation into European culture (read *opera*, *ballet*, and *drama*), European culture’s scope for upward social mobilization, hostility toward Africans, and a consciousness shaped by ambiguities and contradictions.

In the rest of this introduction I show how the Eoan Group exemplified certain features that Adhikari identifies as relating to coloured identity and how these features enlighten the context within which Eoan’s history unfolded. The identification of these features is based on the theory of social constructionism, and it should be kept in mind that they are used here to explore the Eoan Group as the bearer of the culture of a section of the coloured community. The coloured population is by no means homogenous, and

the ideas presented here should not be read as a blanket representation of the coloured community as a whole.

The first feature and, according to Adhikari, the most important element of the identity that dominated coloureds' day-to-day activities, is the state of marginality. Throughout the twentieth century coloureds never exceeded more than 9 percent of South Africa's population. Combined with a heritage of slavery, dispossession, and racial oppression, they chronically lacked the power to negotiate political or economic change for themselves, resulting in a degree of fatalism about their own capability to do so. As their political rights were increasingly eroded from 1948 onward, the only viable option for them was to "bow to white power and work towards incremental improvement in their conditions."<sup>33</sup>

When one explores the story of the Eoan Group through this lens, the group's attitude of cooperation with, and submission to, white management becomes strikingly evident. Although former Eoan members fondly referred to Joseph Manca as a father figure who called them "my musical children," they also reported on the dictatorial way in which he handled the affairs of the group, not taking kindly to resistance from members. Nothing happened without his permission. However, because the group aimed at the "upliftment" of the coloured community, members (consciously or unconsciously) accepted this style of management and believed that through the practice of opera, drama, and ballet, their lives would be improved. Their acceptance and belief accurately illustrate Adhikari's point about the disempowering effects of the condition of marginality over many generations, though this is not to say that the lives of the coloured community did not improve.

Adhikari describes the second characteristic of coloured identity as "a desire to assimilate into the dominant society." He elaborates on this by saying that "this assimilationism was less an impulse for acculturation than a striving on the part of the coloured people for acknowledgment of their worth as individuals and citizens and acceptance as equals or partners by whites."<sup>34</sup> Striking here is Adhikari's qualification that the desire for assimilation on the part of the coloured people was not an impulse toward the adoption or assimilation of white culture (in the case of Eoan, read *opera* and *ballet*), but rather a striving toward acknowledgment or acceptance as equals in white society. This distinction is important in the interpretation of Eoan's story, as the group's pursuit of excellence in performance should, in my view, be read primarily in the context of proving its members' worth as artists, and not as trying to buy into white favor by performing opera and/or ballet. It is

also interesting to note that the performance of opera as such was not the reason the group was rejected by the coloured community; accepting funding from the apartheid state was the unpardonable error in this regard. There is no lack of evidence in the archive to see how thoroughly Eoan's undeniable aspirations toward acknowledgment by whites were thwarted. When the Performing Arts Councils were established in 1963, they provided professional career opportunities for whites only. After this date, many policy documents and much formal correspondence found in the Eoan Group Archive express a deep sense of frustration and bitterness that, despite Eoan's consistent opera production for many years, no provision was made by the government or within white opera circles to acknowledge Eoan Group members' status as professionals.

For Adhikari, the extreme example of the assimilationist desire manifested itself in the reclassification of some coloured people as whites.<sup>35</sup> Here the case of David Poole springs to mind. Poole received his training as a dancer in District Six, went on to study ballet in England, and enjoyed a career with the Royal Ballet. Being fair skinned, he had himself reclassified in England as white; after he came back to South Africa in 1959, he occupied top positions at the University of Cape Town Ballet School and later at the CAPAB ballet section, until his death in 1991. What is even more striking is that none of the fifty or so former Eoan members who were interviewed for an oral history book project in 2009 expressed any feelings of animosity or anger about this fact. By contrast, the lack of official acknowledgment of the contribution that Eoan made toward the cultivation of opera in the country was a prevalent theme in these interviews.

A third characteristic of coloured identity, which was also a direct result of apartheid policy, was the "intermediate status" of coloured people in the South African racial hierarchy: neither privileged white nor disadvantaged black, but an in-between position of relative privilege.<sup>36</sup> Despite being severely disenfranchised by apartheid, coloureds still enjoyed relative privilege compared to the black African population; they were supported with better schooling, tertiary education, and housing than black South Africans. Coloureds were also exempt from pass laws. Disassociation from the black majority has therefore been a contributory factor to racism in the coloured community. Adhikari states that colouredness is, among other things, marked by "a strong association with Western culture and values in opposition to African equivalents."<sup>37</sup> For the Eoan Group, relative privilege was afforded on various levels. The group received much media attention, and its

performances had a popular following among coloureds and whites. Goodwill and support came from the white population in the form of donations, scholarships, educational support, and other assistance. Funding to help the Eoan Group meet production costs was provided by both the Cape Town municipality and the government's Department of Coloured Affairs (DCA; informally known as the Coloured Affairs Department). Although these contributions were a pittance compared to what, for instance, the state-funded, whites-only opera section of CAPAB received, the amount of these contributions was still more than what black artists received. In 1949 the group was able to purchase a building in District Six with the financial support of the white public as well as the government. In 1969 the pattern repeated itself when Joseph Stone, a white man who supported the group, and the government contributed funds toward the building of the Joseph Stone Auditorium in Athlone.

The fourth and last characteristic that Adhikari mentions is that coloured identity became "the bearer of a range of negative and derogatory connotations," which, he argues, were internalized by coloured people over the course of time.<sup>38</sup> A few examples of how these connotations influenced the group will suffice. Eoan was marketed in the media as a group of musically illiterate and professionally unskilled workers from poor backgrounds who were able to perform Italian opera on a high artistic level. Group members themselves were generally sensitive to these perceptions and felt they were being portrayed in a derogatory manner. Although some group members may have been unskilled and illiterate, many could read notation, and a number had studied at tertiary institutions and become teachers or social workers. During the height of the apartheid era, the Eoan Group was often paraded by government as an example of "how good coloureds can be" in its bid to legitimize the apartheid policy of "separate development."<sup>39</sup> In the end, this condescending praise struck a crippling blow to the Eoan Group, for whom personal excellence came at the price of political compromise.

#### THE EOAN GROUP ARCHIVE

The documents that constitute the Eoan Group Archive are characterized by a diversity of voices and registers that have had an impact on the narrative of this book. During the process of writing I became aware of the dominance of some voices, whereas others had to be read between the lines. The characteris-

tics of the various materials—whether letters, minutes, programs, rehearsal schedules, newspaper reviews found in the archive or sourced at the South African National Library, or interviews with former members conducted from 2008 onward—resulted in shifts in register. Some parts rely more heavily on personal letters, others on newspaper reports, and still others on memories. Throughout this book the archive remains a key informant to this narrative.

The contents of archives are often determined by happenstance, especially in circumstances where archiving as an industry is not highly regarded or where an infrastructure for archiving is largely absent. The Eoan Group Archive is no exception. The paper trail that arrived at the Documentation Centre for Music (DOMUS) at Stellenbosch University in February 2008 covered the period 1955–1989 in varying degrees of detail. Documentation included newspaper articles, a few photographs, minutes of meetings, some programs, annual financial statements, rehearsal schedules, notes, letters, telegrams, and the odd costume—but no recordings. Preliminary sorting filled 105 storage boxes that covered roughly 30 meters of storage space. Despite this large amount of documentation in the archive, the historical chronology is inconsistently represented, with a plethora of information on some periods and significant gaps on others, leaving the researcher the task of searching elsewhere for “missing information” and—when that search proves unsuccessful—to guess, project, or simply acknowledge that there are certain things we just don’t know.

Except for a scrapbook containing newspaper cuttings of the group’s activities from 1944 to 1949 (donated to DOMUS in December 2009), the archive contains no information on the years preceding the group’s first opera production in 1956. The narrative of the first chapter of this book, which deals with that period, was therefore knitted together from newspaper articles, the odd reference to the “past” in later documentation, and interviews with members who were remembering events that took place more than sixty years earlier. Documentation on the period 1956 to 1980 has survived more comprehensively; documents concerning certain important events—for example, the 1956 and 1962 festivals, as well as the 1960 and 1965 countrywide tours—, have been meticulously preserved in files that were transferred to DOMUS in pristine condition. These files provided me with exceptionally rich information as they contained, among other things, almost every letter written or received in connection with these particular events. Because of the availability of personal letters, I had firsthand information on how the group’s activities affected the lives of people on a very personal level.

Much of the Eoan Group Archive bears testimony to the methodical approach of Joseph Manca. Although he became involved with the group in 1943, the earliest documentation from his hand dates from 1955, when Manca started organizing the 1956 Arts Festival. Manca was an accountant by trade, with exceptional organizational skills and a penchant for detail, and was seemingly obsessed with the preservation of documentation, especially during the 1950s and 1960s. Paging through the files that contain the documentation on the arts festivals and the tours, one cannot but sense his conviction that history was being made and that its memory should be preserved for posterity. During the late 1950s he archived many letters and telegrams that were received from group members as well as the public, even if they were critical of the group or of him. Alex la Guma's scathing attack on the group during the 1956 Arts Festival is a highly significant document, and Manca's archiving of it is testimony to an inclusive approach. The contents of the archive in later years, however, portray Manca's increasingly autocratic management style, his diminishing tolerance of criticism, and the concomitant censoring of voices other than his own. The last evidence of a letter from the public that takes a critical stance toward apartheid dates from 1965.<sup>40</sup> From 1966 onward the few documents that do refer to the precarious political and social environment the group functioned in were written by either Manca or Ismail Sydow and illustrate a denial of the gravity of Eoan's day-to-day political environment. The documentation from the 1970s bears no trace of any of the political unrest in which Eoan members lived, worked, and performed. Instead, documents from this time pertain to Manca's never-ending plans and ambitions for the group, discussed in his customary superlatives. Introspection with regard to Eoan's artistic endeavors is similarly hard to find, and the only critical document preserved in the archive is a four-page summary of the problems pertaining to Eoan's 1965 production of Bizet's *Carmen*.<sup>41</sup> Due to Manca's gatekeeping of the archive and the fact that opera was his main interest, documentation of the group's many other activities is less visible.

In November 2008 DOMUS embarked on an oral history book project concerning the Eoan Group that preceded the academic study that makes up this book. The book *Eoan—Our Story* resulted from that project and became available to the public in January 2013. For that project, approximately fifty interviews were conducted during 2009 by former group members in collaboration with academics from the Music Department at Stellenbosch University. These interviews (also on film) documented former group mem-

bers' recollections of opera production during the apartheid years. Although several decades had elapsed between the actual events and the interviews, for many group members these interviews were their first formal opportunity to reflect on a past filled with a passion for the arts yet plagued by complicity, political compromise, and disappointment. These interviews are fertile in displaying the diversity of experience and often contrasting opinions that group members held about the same events, issues, or role players. The interviews have also become a source of material for this book, as they often reflect wisdom gained from hindsight or recall events that have not been recorded elsewhere.

The oral history project also led to many additions to the Eoan Group Archive. Not only did the interviews and the filming of them become part of the archive, but also many interviewees donated personal collections of recordings, photographs, programs, and newspaper articles to the archive.

## THIS BOOK

The main objective of this book is to narrate an intimate institutional history of Eoan, a story fraught with complicity, political compromise, and disappointment, thus illuminating the predicament of “coloured opera” in the apartheid era. The text is interspersed with reflective detours on political, cultural, and social contexts in which the group operated; biographical details of dominant figures in the group; the repertoire the group performed; and discussions of the way opera became the undoing of the group in the apartheid setting. Although the group offered many other activities—such as ballet, drama, ballroom dancing, elocution, literacy classes, and after-school care centers for children—these are referred to only where relevant to the main theme of opera production. Accounts of the group's contribution to, for instance, ballet and drama productions, and the historical role the group played in these industries in the larger Cape Town area, remain in the background and are yet to be documented.

Chapter 1 deals with the twenty-five years that preceded Eoan's first opera performance, a period during which the group consolidated its existence as a cultural and welfare organization in District Six and other coloured residential areas in the Cape Peninsula. This period saw the drafting of the group's constitution, which set the tone for how management, operational policy, and the group's stance on politics were to influence opera production and



human resources within the group in later years. Special attention is given to the trajectory along which the Eoan Group choir developed into an amateur opera company. Chapters 2 and 3 deal with the group's opera productions between 1956 and 1963, which in hindsight proved to be artistically their best years. At the time, the idea of a coloured opera group that produced Verdi operas continued to mesmerize Cape Town's white audiences and situated the group in the center of Cape Town's Western art music activities. Eoan was indeed the first "non-European" group in South Africa to formally and consistently produce opera on a semiprofessional level. A sense of excitement and wonder is palpable throughout this time, not only in documentation on the reception of the group, but also in the many artifacts in the Eoan Group Archive that document the internal operations of the group.

Chapter 4 covers the latter half of the 1960s, a time during which the group consolidated its reputation as an opera company, not only in Cape Town but also elsewhere in the country. The chapter illustrates how operatic activities were pursued with immense energy and dedication as members sacrificed time, family relations, and job opportunities to be able to participate in opera production. During this time they remained hopeful that acknowledgment as professional artists on a par with their white counterparts would be forthcoming. This period, however, also saw the tightening grip of apartheid starting to take its toll as the system relentlessly continued to foil the group's aspirations.

Chapter 5 illustrates the gradual stifling of Eoan's opera productions in the 1970s. After being moved out to Athlone on the Cape Flats, the group was effectively exiled from the central position it used to occupy with regard to cultural activities such as opera and ballet in the city of Cape Town. At the same time, the detrimental effects of the group's political compromise on the support it had enjoyed within the coloured community took on serious proportions. The underlying theme of this chapter is the increasing isolation (artistic and otherwise) that the group experienced and the ebbing away of willpower and creative energy that resulted in the cessation of operatic activities. The Postscript brings the book to a close by briefly contemplating why Eoan has thus far not been celebrated in the public domain and what the legacy of the group may be. A list of Eoan's music productions and the 1973 version of the Eoan Group Constitution are included as appendixes.

In 2018 the Eoan Group turned eighty-five years old, becoming the oldest organization of its kind in the coloured community of Cape Town. Throughout this period the group has had a constitution that defines its role

as a cultural and welfare organization for the coloured community. Although opera overshadowed its activities and public profile from the 1950s through the 1970s, the group has always offered a range of other activities, such as literacy classes, children's centers, ballet classes, choral activities, and drama classes, run by branches of the organization located all over the Cape Peninsula. Opera was just one of many activities that the group participated in; after that died down, the group continued with ballet and drama, as well as other humanitarian activities, albeit on a much smaller scale. However, as a consequence of accepting funds from the apartheid government for opera production, the group became politically suspect in a way that to this day has proven difficult to overcome, even long after Eoan ceased applying for government funds. Today the Eoan Group still functions as a dance company and ballet school.

There are many former members and supporters who remember the group's opera performances and have long hoped for a revival of the group's extraordinary past. This has never happened, however, and the reasons are not difficult to find. Eoan performed opera during the apartheid era because coloureds were barred from performing opera with whites. With the transition to a democratic South Africa, the need for a separate opera company based on racial grounds has (fortunately) become obsolete. It is ironic, however, that the most difficult of circumstances led to the most extraordinary of opera performances.