

**Review: Kate Bailey (curator), *Diva* [Exhibition] (London,
Victoria and Albert Museum, June 2023 – April 2024)**

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STAGED BETWEEN 24 JUNE 2023 AND 10 APRIL 2024 at the renowned V&A, the museum of art, design, and performance, *Diva* is an exhibition that explores the evolving concept of the diva through times. This theme is addressed through a diverse array of captivating, iconic figures who have either embraced or challenged the traditional conventions of diva over time. Curated by the V&A's art historian Kate Bailey, the exhibition aims to expansively depict what it means to be a diva, thereby presenting a wide range of figures, from silent movie stars and sirens of the big screen to the icons of Hollywood's Hall of fame, and from opera goddesses and Victorian opera singers to the queens of pop music and today's global megastars. These figures are celebrated in all their glory through the showcase of over 250 objects drawn from the V&A collection and loans from across the world. Exhibits span photography, documents, personal objects, video clips, musical tracks, and, above all, iconoclastic costumes. Equipped with bluetooth-enabled headsets that deliver a curated selection of music, visitors navigate the exhibition accompanied by songs that correspond to specific displays, exhibits, or text panels they encounter.

The narrative unfolds over two centuries in two acts. The first provides historical context for the evolution of the *Diva*, spotlighting the stage and screening goddesses who have become icons in popular culture. The second act celebrates contemporary divas, examining how modern performers have redefined the archetype and utilised their platforms for social and political advocacy. It delves into the challenges they face, including backlash, and the risks taken to contest the status quo. The journey also explores themes of women's empowerment and modern diva's navigation of celebrity

culture, artistic excellence, exceptional talent, influence, media scrutiny, and the balance of public and private life.


From the perspective of the museum practice, the exhibition—devised by BAFTA-winning video designer Tal Rosner—adopts a theatrical staging approach and integrates music examples with items of material culture. This model, which was first introduced with the landmark *David Bowie Is* in 2013, has proven to be highly successful. Since then, the museum has continued to embrace and develop the genre. Each year, it seeks to effectively capitalise on its success by unveiling a new exhibition that embodies the style, which is marked by a theatrical presentation of the narrative, invariably accompanied by a sonic layer. While subsequent exhibitions such as *Pink Floyd: Their Mortal Remains* (2017) and *Opera: Passion, Power and Politics* (2017/18) have honed the genre with greater enhancement, the more recent *Diva* seems to rely predominantly on its extensive collection of remarkable costumes and on the emotive power of music to draw interest. The approach adopted, while visually compelling, falls short in offering the deeper analytical insight necessary to fully engage with the subject matter. Indeed, the narrative appears to take a backseat to the visuals, lacking a visitor-centric perspective that could be enriched by examining, for instance, humanity's need for the figure of divas and the social functions they serve. As to the soundtrack, the Bluetooth-enabled headset provided a pleasurable and often nostalgic listening experience, featuring music by artists discussed in the narrative. Comprised of 78 songs, this sonic narrative is designed by the world-leading sound designer Gareth Fry and delivered by Tonwelt's new headset system which includes ambisonics, a 360-degree surround sound. As guests explore the pathway, the headset triggers iconic songs by individual divas. However, upon examining the exhibit's panels and labels, I noticed a lack of information regarding these songs, including the more basic information such as their titles and artist's names. When I asked the staff, they confirmed the absence of displays offering this information within the exhibition. Exceptions include an initial label indicating that, throughout the exhibition, visitors will be hearing key performances and tracks that have shaped the diva's evolution. Additionally, some commentary on Bellini's aria from 1831 opera *Norma* is provided, which has significantly impacted the development of the diva concept. At the exhibition entrance, there was also a QR Code that directed visitors to a playlist, allowing them to contribute by adding their own selections.

Along with the exhibition layout, the display and arrangement of objects and images, as well as their illumination, the sound experience sets in motion a rhetorical discourse that calls for reflection, and which is the subject of my critical review. In detail, which sound conceptualisations underpin the curatorial choices made? What meaning-making inferences result from the adopted strategies? Firstly, the evident absence of basic information about the songs speaks itself volumes about the curators' views. The absence of songs titles and artist names, a fundamental curatorial detail, effectively reduces the pieces to a nearly decorative status. This is heightened by the fact that each set of

Hollywood clips was clearly described with a specific label. Moving forward, I propose to examine the communicative role of the sonic layer through the lens of the rhetorical figures. Indeed, the meanings of these songs extend beyond the songs themselves: a song's function differs when played in a live concert compared to when it is featured in a museum. Furthermore, within a museum setting, the interpretation of musical tracks also hinges on the form adopted for their presentation. Typically, objects in a museum are interpreted as *artefacts* or aesthetic *pieces of art*, thus being activated as *synecdoche* or *metaphor*, respectively. Synecdoche is a rhetorical figure in which a part stands for the whole from which it was taken; metaphor, in turn, is a figure of speech where one thing stands for another based on similarity.

The presentation of each song through the Bluetooth-enabled headset suggests a curatorial intent to exhibit them as artefacts, synecdochically symbolizing diva culture within Western society. This interpretation hinges on the premise that 'diva' is a key concept uniting various material and immaterial objects into a cohesive narrative. However, the absence of detailed explanatory information undermines their possible role as artefacts of Western cultural dynamics. Displaying musical tracks as artefacts assumes that the museum offers revealing insights into their originating society by unpacking their cultural significance. Conversely, the *Diva* exhibition's sound component is presented in a manner that primarily promotes the appreciation of both erudite and popular music as art forms capable of eliciting aesthetical admiration and emotional engagement. In this sense, the songs take on a metaphorical tole, embodying a collective concept of art. However, it should be explicitly noted that the chosen selection of songs mirrors the curator's aesthetic judgement, thereby acting as a metaphor for his/her aesthetic choices.

As a way of summarising, advanced technology equips museums with sophisticated devices that transform sound into a fully realised medium for constructing exhibitions. However, there remains a gap to bridge before curators can fully leverage this technology to create narratives that are not only scientifically sound but also richly informative, moving beyond the use of sound solely for immersive experiences.

Alcina Cortez is a researcher, curator, and producer of exhibitions. She served at Expo'98 (1998), and at Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in Portugal (2001-11). She studied piano, cello and composition, graduated in Musicology (1992), took postgraduate courses in Popular Music Studies (2011) and Acoustic and Sound Studies (2019), and obtained her MCs (2014) and her PhD (2022) in Ethnomusicology/Museum Studies. Her research explores the intricate relationship between humans and exhibited sound in museums, delving into the nuances of perception, sensation, and the complex processes of creating meaning. Her insights have culminated in a book and multiple articles featured in journals such as *Popular Music*, *Sound Studies* and *Curator*, *The Museum Journal*. Additionally, she presides as Chair of the International Conference *Sound in Museums*, leading discussions at the nexus of auditory experience and cultural display, and is the corresponding editor of the upcoming *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Sound in Museums* (to be released in 2026). ORCID  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1921-9048>.

