Cambridge Opera Journal, **31**, 1, 118–128 © Cambridge University Press, 2019
doi:10.1017/S0954586719000193

Review Article
Thoroughly Modern Middles

LAURA TUNBRIDGE*

Alexandra Wilson, *Opera in the Jazz Age: Cultural Politics in 1920s Britain*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. 240pp.
Christopher Chowrimootoo, *Middlebrow Modernism: Britten's Operas and the Great Divide*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2018. 244pp.

Young Millie Dilmount arrives in New York City during the jazz age, shingles her hair and looks for a job with a rich, handsome boss she can marry. The musical-film *Thoroughly Modern Millie* (dir. George Roy Hill, Universal, 1967) may have been a spoof of the 1920s but various twists and turns in its plot nonetheless reveal its middlebrow scaffolding. Social aspiration is written into the plot, as is the ambiguity of its signifiers: although Millie (Julie Andrews) falls for the penniless Jimmy Smith (James Fox), she sets her sights on the seemingly more appropriate Trevor Graydon (John Gavin) only to discover that, of course, Jimmy was a millionaire all along. This is a narrative as much about cultural and social as financial capital. Through its 'second-order parody' of racial, ethnic and gender stereotypes, Angelo Pao argues, *Thoroughly Modern Millie* – along with other American musicals – 'has played a significant role in the formation of a national persona'.[1] The middlebrow, though, is not necessarily about identity politics, storylines or style; it is also closely bound with modes of dissemination and their relative costs and, because of that, with questions of class. Indeed, the Broadway musical was (and continues to be) a mainly middle-class affair, from its makers to its consumers, who David Savran points out have long needed 'a good deal of disposable income', given that ticket prices have always outstripped cinema, spoken theatre – and, on occasion, opera.[2]

Disentangling social class, commercial markets and aesthetic signifiers in the world of opera is a complicated affair, especially in twenty-first-century Britain, with the simultaneous decimation of arts funding and education and renewed emphasis on accessibility lending deep irony to the phrase 'free for all'. It is perhaps for these

* Laura Tunbridge, University of Oxford; laura.tunbridge@music.ox.ac.uk
1 Angela C. Pao, 'Green Glass and Emeralds: Citation, Performance, and the Dynamics of Ethnic Parody in *Thoroughly Modern Millie*', *MELUS* 36 (Special issue on Asian American Performance Art) (2011), 35.
2 James O'Leary, 'Broadway Highbrow Discourse and Politics of the American Musical, 1943–1946', PhD diss. (Yale University, 2012); and David Savran, 'Class and Culture', in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*, ed. Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris and Stacy Wolf (New York, 2011; *Oxford Handbooks Online* 2012).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586719000193 Published online by Cambridge University Press

reasons that the middlebrow has had a great deal of musicological attention recently. Outreach agenda mimic the 'cultural uplift' rhetoric of the music appreciation movements of the early twentieth century, which seemed thoroughly modern in their adoption of media technology (radio broadcasts and gramophone recordings in the 1920s, livestreams in the 2010s) and middlebrow in their artistic heurism.

The opening gambit of Alexandra Wilson's *Opera in the Jazz Age: Cultural Politics in 1920s Britain* is that 'Britain has always had an opera problem … In the present day, anti-operatic feeling manifests itself via what can feel like a concerted media campaign to construct the art form as "elitist", an ill-informed and counter-productive cliché that actively dissuades potential audiences from engaging with it' (1). Like the other book under review, Christopher Chowrimootoo's *Middlebrow Modernism: Britten's Operas and the Great Divide*, Wilson is interested in 'the battle of the brows'; the debates around how the nineteenth-century concepts of high- and lowbrow needed to be adapted for modern mass culture, which resulted in the notion of a 'middlebrow' coming into English usage in the 1920s. Both volumes contribute significantly to the understanding of the term's historical meaning. But although there are some methodological similarities in their projects – each is a reception study that serves as a pre-history of present-day attitudes – they pursue alternative interpretative strategies, hinged on the positive and negative valences of the middlebrow.

'At the root of opera's problems in Britain', Wilson argues, 'is the idea of opera as a "thing apart"' (9). During the 1920s, opera was 'no longer quite so readily accepted as popular entertainment but on the other hand it was also not accepted as high art, being repeatedly characterised by the musical intelligentsia as an inferior, bastardised art form' (10). The column inches devoted to operas in newspapers and magazines, as well as specialised publications, is given as proof that opera had not 'retreated from so-called everyday life' (11), even if the interwar period is seen by musicologists and historians as 'something of an operatic wasteland' (13). Wilson states that her study is not about operatic practices or policies but about 'operatic mentalities … with matters of taste, prejudice, stereotype formation, and cultural categorisation' (15). From her chapters on the institutions and individuals involved in opera-making and -observing, a richly textured account emerges of the ways in which opera 'was difficult to pigeonhole'; 'because it was performed and encountered in so many different settings', opera may in fact have been closer to 'the emerging middlebrow than to the highbrow' (209). It is a situation that she ultimately suggests would be a helpful attitude for present companies to adopt: 'Presenting opera as something everyday, restoring its "normality" and arguing persuasively that opera is not "a thing apart", is the strongest tool operatic outreach departments have' (211). Those of us attracted to, or indeed repelled by, the more fantastical or outré aspects of opera may wince at this normalisation of its activities. Yet I think here Wilson's subject is more to do with social rather than artistic practices, a conflation that as her book illustrates is endemic to discourse surrounding the middlebrow.

Hermeneutically, Chowrimootoo is more suspicious of his sources and less concerned with the everyday workings of operatic practice. Instead, he sets out to complicate 'modernist historiographical models' by reading between the lines of

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mid-century reviews of Britten's operas, which 'praised the works on terms they thought more respectable, while ignoring, erasing or sublimating aesthetic elephants in the room: sentimentality, romanticism, tonality, lyricism, spectacle and the list goes on. Middlebrow ambivalence and duplicity are, in other words, a constant "absent presence" … rarely admitted but easily detected in critical exaggerations, defences, obfuscations, subtractions, and apologies' (20). Rather than 'continuing the mudslinging of twentieth-century polemicists', Chowrimootoo aims to formulate a Foucauldian archaeology of value that might excavate the 'anxieties and strategies' underlying the 'relationship between aesthetic ideals and the everyday exigencies of market society' (27). It is a kind of symptomatic reading that contrasts with Wilson's surface reading – by which I mean the approach, as glossed by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, of examining 'what insists on being looked at rather than what we must train ourselves to see through'[3] – the two books thereby prompting bigger questions about current musicological attitudes towards the writing of history, positivism and polemics.

* * *

During the 1920s, Wilson demonstrates, the 'brows' meant various things to various people, but rarely in an unequivocally positive way. To be a highbrow was to have superior knowledge and taste; to think one had; or to think that others should have. The constitution of a middlebrow, in Wilson's account, was multifarious: 'people who are hoping that some day they will get used to the stuff they ought to like', in *Punch*'s famous formulation, but also cultural omnivores, happy to consume low and high seemingly without concern for the 'great divide' between them. Wilson condones this latter mind-set, 'in that it denotes a certain breadth of taste and allows personal preferences – rather than a deference to cultural hierarchies or critical norms – to dictate cultural choices' (210). In historical terms it would be worth distinguishing between these two types of middlebrow attitudes carefully: while both recognise cultural hierarchies there is a significant difference between what might be characterised as a modern(ist) approach, aspiring to improve one's status through cultural activities, or being happy to pick and choose freely between high and low – which to me seems to belong more to the postmodern or, perhaps more accurately, neoliberal present.

According to Wilson, in 1920s London 'few of the most ascetic highbrows cared for' opera, with publications such as *The Musical Times* preferring to concentrate on 'more serious types of music' (74–6). Organisations such as the British National Opera Company, unsurprisingly, argued instead that 'opera is the best introduction to art' (77). Yet the relationship of opera to the 'brows' was, Wilson argues, 'a thorny one':

> This was an art form that defied straightforward pigeonholing, not only in purely aesthetic terms but also commercially and socially. Furthermore, members of the musical establishment – the cultural gatekeepers who were in the business of assigning labels –

[3] Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, 'Surface Reading: An Introduction', *Representations* 108 (2009), 9; drawing on the locution of Margreta de Grazia and Peter Stallybrass, 'The Materiality of the Shakespearean Text', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 44 (1993), 257.

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> adopted a variety of complicated attitudes towards opera. There were critics of a Modernist mindset who attempted to defend 'serious' music against the challenges issued by the mass media, but opera didn't usually come into their purview, except as an object of sneering contempt. On the other hand there were critics we might label middlebrow who accepted opera's flirtings with mass culture past and present without qualms. In between there were critics who demanded that opera be taken seriously as an art form yet eschewed the snobbery of the most prejudiced highbrows. These figures went to considerable lengths to make the case for opera for all, yet even they occasionally flinched at opera's encounters with cinema or recoiled when it appeared alongside popular ballads on the programmes of celebrity concerts.
>
> Opera occupied a very peculiar position, then: for some sectors of the public it was *too* highbrow, yet in the eyes of some members of the serious musical establishment it was categorically not highbrow *enough*, something that may seem surprising to present-day readers. (5)

This long quotation reveals the key players in Wilson's narrative: the cultural gatekeepers, who include opera impresarios and their companies or houses but are primarily critics, of varying colours; and that always present but ever elusive historical voice, the public. Finally, there is the invocation of the present-day reader, often encouraged by Wilson to make comparisons between the situation of opera in 1920s and its status now. (For example, anxieties about post-war changes in dress codes for those attending the opera are compared to a 2017 opinion piece lambasting opera-goers for their casualwear (56).)

What, though, is the opera at the centre of Wilson's project? In part, it is the people and institutions that perform and listen to it; it is also – though as she admits, to a much lesser extent – about the repertoire, to which only one chapter of seven is devoted. Although not spelt out in the quote above, the critics 'of a Modernist mindset' who are said to have dismissed opera did not necessarily mean all opera: they usually meant grand opera. Wagner was in a special category for he was 'not so much an opera composer as a great symphonic writer who took the wrong turning', explained Harvey Grace in the *Yorkshire Post* (142); moreover, as a correspondent to the same newspaper argued, 'Wagner's later music had paved the way for two different types of "music without melody": Modernism and jazz' (143). Richard Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier* enjoyed some popularity in post-war London because of its ability to appeal to the 'mezzo'-, high- and lowbrows, but *Salome* and *Elektra* were considered too violent, salacious and cacophonous (145–6). *Tosca* was said by *Musical Opinion*'s critic 'Figaro' to be unsuited to British artists, as it 'calls for qualities which do not even get a sporting chance of development in a land of fogs, gloom and early closing' (139), but Puccini generally was more easily 'situated … somewhere in the middlebrow' because of his 'appeal to women and the middle classes; the domestic settings of many of his operas; and the constant refrain that he was a composer who knew his own limitations and pandered to conventional tastes' (139). The operatic middlebrow, however, was not simply a story of Italianate vs German opera.[4] Rutland Boughton's

[4] Although Gounod's *Faust* was a constant presence on stage and there were performances of Charpentier and Offenbach, there are few mentions of Debussy in the book, save for the novelty

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The Immortal Hour, composed in 1914, ran for almost 400 performances in London in the early 1920s (25). Boughton – acknowledged by Wilson as 'one of the few really successful British opera composers of the era' (99) – nevertheless was apparently dismayed by the popularity of his work, particularly among upper-class women, believing that it meant his opera had become merely a trifling distraction for the rich.

Much is determined – or at least suggested – by the venues in which opera was encountered. Wilson examines the differences between the opera houses in London, with great significance being given to the Old Vic, fêted for its cheap tickets, lack of dress code, eschewal of the star system in favour of a repertory cast, and at least initially solid working-class audiences (34 and 63).[5] Celebrity concerts are also discussed at length, including an appraisal of programming practices that provides helpful perspective on how opera was encountered beyond the theatrical stage as well as changes in attitudes towards different kinds of repertoires and singers. The disdain highbrow critics expressed towards a prima donna's 'propensity for singing showy arias' from the 'then highly unfashionable *bel canto*' was intensified by their promotional antics and, still worse, the crowd's irreverence for proper concert behaviour (177). The appeal of foreign, or at least exotically named, singers, was considered problematic for the usual xenophobic reasons, leading Wilson to explore national identity in light of opera, which seemed to be defined in Britain (how else but) through three Ss: sport, schooling and the sincerity of those who believed in opera's value.

Wilson also gives the example of performances of operatic excerpts outside traditional performance venues, such as those given by the Carl Rosa Company on the third floor of the Lyons' Corner House on Coventry Street, London, in October 1923. Although she explains that each performance was given 'three times daily on a specially constructed stage', it is not revealed precisely what was being sung (according to the *Daily Express*, they were 'miniature operas' – *Faust*, *Rigoletto* and *Il Trovatore* in the first week – limited by the licence to six performers only (the names listed for the first cast were all Anglophone)).[6] More than repertoire, Wilson's interest is in how

of his *Prodigal Son* being done by the British National Opera Company (128). *Pelléas et Mélisande* had its British premiere at Covent Garden in 1909; Jann Pasler discusses the cultural and class politics of the opera's Parisian reception in '*Pelléas* and Power: Forces behind the Reception of Debussy's Opera', *19th-Century Music* 10 (1987), 243–64; there were performances in 1920s Britain, including in translation, that raise intriguing questions about the relationship between modern opera and the middlebrow (one such production took place in Birmingham, which *The Musical Times* described as 'a great city which is probably outside the ken of aesthetic Paris'); 'C.', '*Pelléas* and the B.N.O.C.', *The Musical Times* 65 (1 July 1924), 648.

[5] Although there are gestures towards the operatic world outside of the capital, there is little information about the provinces or touring companies beyond passing references, with the exception of the British National Opera Company, which makes several appearances (on occasion, claims made on behalf of the BNOC about audiences, or about the popularity or otherwise of various productions and venues, could usefully have been contextualised by reference to financial holdings where they exist; as it stands there is a dependence on journalistic reports which can be vague or are unverified).

[6] The newspaper pointed out that there were no banqueting scenes in the first batch of operas, but that the first act of *La bohème* 'will remind diners that on occasion it is worthwhile to pawn one's

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the Lyons' Corner House seems like the kind of venue that enabled a 'melting pot' community, with its sizeable, plush, hotel- or theatre-like interiors, and 'cheap and unpretentious' menus that 'attracted a mixed, unpretentious clientele including a large contingent from the respectable working class' and from two more 'cosmopolitan groups': London's Jewish community and homosexual men (66–7). She might have added 'women shopping in the West End' attracted by the low-price 'dainty savouries' from the *café de petit repas*.[7] From this, Wilson surmises, 'It is clear … that irrespective of efforts on certain sceptical parts of the press to reinforce stereotypes about opera being "elite", opera continued to play to sizeable socially mixed audiences' (67). There are further details about the Carl Rosa Company performances, though, that both illustrate and query the ways in which those audiences 'mixed'. The opera-fest marked the opening of the third floor of what was the largest of all the Lyons' Corner Houses: the Coventry Street branch could seat 4,500 diners who 'can be served at the same time with anything from a cup of tea to a full-course dinner with wine'.[8] Each floor followed a national style of decoration – English, French or Italian – and had a differently themed restaurant, as well as their own band of musicians; on the ground floor, Paul Specht's orchestra from the United States (said to command a fee of £350 per week and described in advertisements as 'Masters of Rhythmic Symphonic Syncopation') and on the first floor the thirty-woman-strong Miss Margaret Holloway's Orchestra, with Mr and Miss Brighten from the Trocadero and L'Oonie, 'The Acrobatic Conductor', appearing elsewhere.[9] The architecture of the Lyons' Corner House, in other words, presented a stratification of the available refreshments and entertainments, with jazz on the lowest floor and opera above, with the 'ladies' orchestra' in between (I will return to gender matters later). Opera was there, then, for those who ventured to the next level physically and, perhaps, aesthetically. Mr H.B. Phillips, managing director of the Carl Rosa Opera Company, claimed that the excerpts 'will whet their appetites' for more opera, and the *Financial Times* applauded the bold experiment, but several journalists wondered whether grand opera made an appropriate 'side dish', suggesting that it remained marginalised either in preference to the main business of eating or with regard to other types of social and musical activity.[10]

Among later frequenters of Lyons' Corner Houses were W.H. Auden and Benjamin Britten. They spent the morning of 8 January 1937 chatting at the

coat for a sausage. A certain amount of eating is done in *Louise* but the best restaurant aria, suitable for closing time, occurs in *Manon*: "Adieu, ma petite table".' 'Grand Opera Dinners. Musical Menus as an Aid to Appetite. Carl Rosa', *The Daily Express* (19 October 1923), 3. Elsewhere, Wilson quotes Richard Capell's 1929 description of *Faust*, *Rigoletto*, *Cav* and *Pag* as 'the ham and eggs of opera' (127).

7 As reported by 'World's Biggest Restaurant.' *Daily Mail Atlantic Edition* [Berengaria, Eastbound] (30 June 1923), 2.

8 'Grand Opera Dinners. Musical Menus as an Aid to Appetite. Carl Rosa', *The Daily Express* (19 October 1923), 3.

9 'World's Biggest Restaurant'; 'Lyons New Corner House', *Daily Mail* (19 July 1923), 1; and 'The World's Largest Tea-Restaurant', *Daily Mirror* (26 May 1923), 4.

10 'Grand Opera Dinners', 3; and 'Grand Opera at Lyons', *The Financial Times* (25 October 1923), 8.

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Lyons' near the junction of Tottenham Court Road and Oxford Street. Auden, about to head off to the Spanish Civil War, wrote two poems in the flyleaves of Britten's scores of *Our Hunting Fathers* – his first song cycle, to texts by Auden, which had been poorly received at its premiere the previous year – and *Sinfonietta*, op. 1 (Lennox Berkeley set one of them, 'Lay your sleeping head my love', with a dedication 'To Benjamin').[11]

Britten gets only one parenthetical mention in Wilson's book; his *Peter Grimes* is not named but presumably was the 'key turning point in the country's operatic fortunes after the Second World War' (13). The composer is, of course, the focus of Christopher Chowrimootoo's *Middlebrow Modernism*, which confronts the musical aesthetics of the middlebrow far more readily than Wilson. The portrait of Britten that emerges is complex, not least because of his consistent ambivalence. In Chowrimootoo's introductory chapter, the emergent composer is shown criticising the BBC 'for not trying hard enough to get the public to engage with modernism's challenges', while simultaneously criticising Americans for 'trying too hard' by 'incorporating it piecemeal into their eclectic programs' (18). Chowrimootoo describes Britten as 'positively Greenbergian' in the following appraisal: 'How much this interest in [modern] music is founded on genuine taste and knowledge, and how much on the desire to be *au courant*, to hear the latest thing, is hard to say' (18). On the one hand, Britten was prone to snobbishness (Puccini was declared cheap, obvious and empty); on the other, he worried that his music had 'too much superficial charm' and that it should be 'more avant-garde' (18). These anxieties were evident in his stylistic back-and-forth; for example, 1933's *Sinfonietta* is described by Chowrimootoo as 'Schoenbergian' in comparison to 'the populist *Simple Symphony*' of the following year (18).

Chowrimootoo acknowledges that while, for its supporters, the eclecticism of the middlebrow was associated with 'open-mindedness and even cosmopolitanism', for its detractors, 'this eclectic appropriation quickly became an aesthetic problem too' (14–15). In each chapter he carefully assesses the ways in which Britten's musical decisions interact with broader issues about the reception of the work's dramaturgy. The visual aspects of the Gothic, discussed in Chapter 4, are nicely illustrated in a series of photographs of the original staging of *Death in Venice* at *La Fenice* that serve as an effective foil to a discussion of what is said to have been the most important aspect of the opera for critics: its music. It is an excellent example of Chowrimootoo's ability to present and then pick apart the reception of an opera, through interlacing exegesis of a reviewer's comments with his own reading of the score. Gothic melodrama and high modernism are revealed to sound remarkably alike, which is perhaps unsurprising (radical sounds in opera have long been used to signal the otherworldly) but, importantly, there is no attempt to 'reconcile aesthetic opposites' (116).

What does not emerge quite as strongly from Chowrimootoo's book as it might is a sense of the various inflections accrued by the term 'middlebrow' as the decades

[11] Peter Dickinson, *The Music of Lennox Berkeley*, 2nd edn (Woodbridge, 2003), 36–7.

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progressed. The middlebrow associations of opera discussed by Wilson, with reference to the 1920s, were quite different to those of the 1940s (*Peter Grimes* and *Albert Herring*), and certainly contrasted with those of the 1950s (*The Turn of the Screw*), 1960s (*The Burning Fiery Furnace*) and 1970s (*Death in Venice*). There was also significant variation in the ways the middlebrow was configured in the United States as opposed to Britain. The social aspiration and mobility inherent to the 'American Dream' stood at odds with class-bound British society, while the technological developments that facilitated that mobility were often American in origin or, at least, associated with Americanisation.[12] The times through which Britten lived are reflected in aspects of his works; for example, given his move to New York in April 1939 it could be argued that his views as expressed in the early 1940s reflected the transatlantic middlebrow, with Clement Greenberg then as pertinent as any British author.[13] The excitement surrounding the 1945 premiere of *Peter Grimes* made it seem 'almost as if this single event made good on the cultural democracy that the war had promised to inaugurate'; Chowrimootoo demonstrates, though, that this was far from a rousing or escapist fantasy but a challenging mix of realism and sentimentality (captured neatly by the bus conductor who called out the opera house's stop: 'Sadler's Wells! Any more for *Peter Grimes*, the sadistic fisherman!') (31). If documentary films had fed into the stylistic scenario of that opera, mass media influenced the supernatural elements in *The Turn of the Screw*, which Chowrimootoo situates within an account of the Gothic tradition that extends from Henry James through to film, radio and television of the mid-century. Amidst all this historical context, there are points when the question of the middlebrow seems to disappear from view or at least goes unmentioned, left instead as that 'absent presence' of which the introduction warned, as in the discussion of *The Burning Fiery Furnace*, presented as a renegotiation of the relationship between aestheticism and ascetics that ultimately allowed 'mid-century audiences to have it both ways' (145). The middlebrow then stands for whatever is 'in between' – a useful catch-all category for interpreters, to be sure, but one which diminishes the precision and maybe also the potency of the label itself.

The relationship between musicological conceptions of the middlebrow and those developed in other disciplines raises some interesting questions in both books under review. Within literary studies, explorations of the middlebrow have often been rooted in questions of female authorship and readership (or, in the case of film studies, spectatorship); long-standing gender bias is given as one reason for their lack of recognition.[14] The scarcity of early twentieth-century British female opera composers (with

[12] See Genevieve Abravanel, *Americanizing Britain: The Rise of Modernism in the Age of the Entertainment Empire* (Oxford, 2012). Mass culture – and its technologies – were vital for the construction and dissemination of the middlebrow, both ideologically and pragmatically.

[13] Clement Greenberg, 'Avant Garde and Kitsch', *Partisan Review* 6 (1939), 34–49.

[14] The classic study, from an American perspective, remains Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Durham, NC, 1992); see also Lawrence Napper, *British Cinema and Middlebrow Culture in the Interwar Years* (Exeter, 2009).

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the notable exception of Ethel Smyth) explains their absence in *Opera in the Jazz Age*, although it is evident that women played an important role in London's operatic life as patrons and singers.[15] The representation of women in Britten's operas is not Chowrimootoo's concern but through epigraphs he brings in resonant, roughly contemporary literature, much of which is by women (with the exceptions of Chapter 2, on *Peter Grimes*, which has as its epigraph a review of the premiere and Chapter 5, which starts with Colin Stephenson's Anglo-Catholic memoir *Merrily on High* (1972)).[16] Thus Chapters 1 and 3 open with Virginia Woolf (her essay 'Middlebrow' (1932) and the 'novelistic swansong' *Between the Acts* (1941) respectively), Chapter 4 with Elizabeth Bowen's *The Demon Lover* (1945), and Chapter 6 with Iris Murdoch's *The Black Prince* (1973). Few would dare to classify Woolf as anything other than modernist, although Nicola Humble argues that the gap between her and female contemporaries such as Rosamund Lehmann and Katherine Mansfield was not really that yawning; for that matter, few would dare to discuss the middlebrow without reference to her 1932 essay, even after its era had passed – though given the dozens of references to Woolf in *Middlebrow Modernism*, far more than to any other author, I found myself wondering what would have happened if a different writer had been the touchstone.[17] Although Bowen and Murdoch have sometimes been labelled middlebrow, they have of late been reassessed.[18] Chowrimootoo's selection then serves to illustrate the ways in which these novels test cultural boundaries in a manner similar to Britten's operas; possible links between the middlebrow and sexuality are not explored directly.

At the start of *Middlebrow Modernism*, Britten is said to have been self-conscious about the 'anachronism' of the 'modern opera composer' (23–4). However, Chowrimootoo argues that his musical eclecticism 'not only raised questions about modernity's aesthetic oppositions but also threatened to knock music itself off its pedestal of autonomy' (25). By the final chapter, on *Death in Venice*, it seems that music may have wobbled but not toppled. Critics are shown to have approached the opera 'as more intellectual than visceral' despite being 'never able to erase fully the opera's powerful spectacles and visceral music' (150). Although Britten continually questioned the validity of producing new opera in the twentieth century, *Death in*

[15] As discussed by Helen Richardson in 'The Economics of Opera in England 1925–1939', PhD diss. (King's College London, 2019). Wilson touches on gender issues throughout her book, noting for instance that in the run-up to the 'Flapper Election' the audience for Wagner was reported to have included more women, though there was some general anxiety about the feminisation of theatrical repertory (58–60).

[16] Ellen McDonald characterised the major female roles in Britten's operas as 'oppressive or destructive'; in 'Women in Britten's Operas', *The Opera Quarterly* 4 (1986), 83.

[17] Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (Oxford, 2004), 27.

[18] On Bowen, see 'Elizabeth Bowen: Realism, Modernism and Gendered Identity in Her Novels of the 1930s', *Journal of Gender Studies* 4 (1995), 271–79. On Murdoch as middlebrow see Gabriel Josipivici, *What Ever Happened to Modernism?* (New Haven, 2010), 1; as modernist, see Andrzej Gasiorek, '"A Renewed Sense of Difficulty": E. M. Forster, Iris Murdoch and Zadie Smith on Ethics and Form', in *The Legacies of Modernism: Historicizing Postwar and Contemporary Fiction*, ed. David James (Cambridge, 2011), 170–86.

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Venice 'appears to have signalled a return to a more traditional form': it was staged in a conventional theatre, with a large and more conventional orchestra than *Owen Wingrave* or the church parables (152). The abstraction of John Piper's set designs, the symbolic characterisation of Myfanwy Piper's libretto, the inclusion of stylised dance and, more than anything, the thematic density of the score 'all conjure up a phantasmagoric vision that both transcends and is pure theatre' (161). Chowrimootoo points out that almost all commentators are drawn to the first act's conclusion: Aschenbach's cry, declaring love for Taddeus. It is 'body music', in Daniel Albright's terms, that rubs against the determination to admire the work's long-term structure. Analysts are said to resort 'to philosophical abstraction to redeem the opera's pleasures from the taint of the visceral' (166–71).[19] The book ends with a brief discussion of the binaries that still trouble musicological discussions of modernism and the notion of 'bourgeois opera' (the usual players feature: Adorno, Boulez, Taruskin), 'laying bare the precariousness of the great divide' (175). Chowrimootoo had warned that the tendency in scholarship to sort twentieth-century music into 'modernism vs. everything else' has on occasion 'risked restaging a latter-day "battle of the brows"' (7) and this conclusion makes it seem as if we may be stuck in the same scenario with which the book started.

Chowrimootoo had predicted:

> In teasing out these historical stresses, *Middlebrow Modernism* ultimately invites us to take heed of our own guilty pleasures and ambivalence – as scholars, critics, and audiences – along with our strategies for assuaging this guilt. This means interrogating the conflicts, between what we think we 'ought to like' and what we actually like, between aesthetic ideals and the messy realities of artistic taste. (3)

The italics here are somewhat ambiguous. Is it the book that invites us to indulge in guilty pleasures – to enjoy the 'post-coital' gasp of Aschenbach, perhaps? Or is it that middlebrow modernism, as a concept, allows readers and listeners to admit to liking or not liking music that they think they should or shouldn't? Or is this the 'new aestheticism', enabling scholars to deal with artworks not only in historical context but also as objects with which we engage in the present – but then, have musicologists and analysts ever managed to do anything but that?[20]

Both *Middlebrow Modernism* and *Opera in the Jazz Age* return, at their conclusions, to Andreas Huyssens's 'Great Divide', an idea that Chowrimootoo acknowledges has been decried by literary scholars, who have argued instead for a less monolithic or esoteric understanding of modernism.[21] Wilson describes her operatic case study as stretching to the limit 'the notion of any simplistic cultural "Great Divide" during this period', explaining that 'opera could not comfortably be categorised as either highbrow or lowbrow' (209). For Chowrimootoo, polarised critical structures

[19] The reference is to Daniel Albright, *Musicking Shakespeare* (Rochester, 2007), 296.

[20] See Rita Felski, 'Context Stinks!', *New Literary History* 42 (2011), 573–91; and Carolyn Abbate, 'Overlooking the Ephemeral', *New Literary History* 48 (Winter 2017), 75–102.

[21] He points as an introduction to Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, 'The New Modernist Studies', *PLMA* 123 (2008), 737–48.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586719000193 Published online by Cambridge University Press

'assigned Britten's music firmly to the middlebrow orbit', perpetuating his outsider status (19). Dismantling the high-low binary is not, at heart, what these books set out to achieve; instead opera – bel canto or Britten's – is left in a kind of static middle, 'betwixt and between' (as Woolf described the BBC) and as a result, Schoenberg might add, never reaching Rome. Wilson and Chowrimootoo do not offer the kind of liberatory gestures aimed for by earlier middlebrow projects, as caricatured by a character such as Muzzy (Carol Channing) in *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, who could send up her riches and social status, through an expensive engagement ring squirting water or Muzzy herself being fired out of a canon into the arms of acrobats, all to her joyous cry of 'raspberry!'. These are more earnest times, politically, artistically and academically, and perhaps staying safe, stuck in the middle, brow furrowed, is what we need to weather the surrounding storms.

LAURA TUNBRIDGE is a Professor of Music at the University of Oxford. Her middlebrow-related publications include *Singing in the Age of Anxiety: Lieder Performances in New York and London between the World Wars* (Chicago, 2018), 'Frieda Hempel and the Historical Imagination' in the *Journal of the American Musicological Society* (2013), and 'Singing Translations: The Politics of Listening between the Wars', in *Representations* (2013). She is currently completing a book about Beethoven, to be published by Penguin in 2020, and embarking on a Major Research Fellowship from the Leverhulme Trust for a new project about string quartets.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586719000193 Published online by Cambridge University Press