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Twenty Years

SUZANNE ASPDEN and STEVEN HUEBNER

Twenty years of *Cambridge Opera Journal*: in view of the journal's place in the discipline, the occasion seemed worth marking. When Roger Parker and Arthur Groos founded *Cambridge Opera Journal* in 1989, it offered the first forum to the musical community for serious opera criticism that took into account changing orientations in literary studies and seriously engaged with ideology, reception history, and representations of race, class and gender. Subsequent editors – Mary Hunter, Mary Ann Smart, and Emanuele Senici – continued to foster this wide intellectual perspective and to engage with an extraordinary variety of methodologies. For the current issue, we gave *carte blanche* to authors who contributed in the first two years of publication to reflect on their past work, or on opera studies, or on the journal, either informally as an opinion piece or through new scholarship – and so to measure time by developments in the discipline itself.

Not so long ago the range of concerns was much smaller. Because popular writing in the early twentieth century about Mozart and a few dozen other canonic works took little account of sources and the archival record, it was perhaps inevitable that philological studies were given pride of place as musicology itself sought academic legitimacy in the Anglo-American world after the Second World War. Yet it is also clear in retrospect that pressure to move beyond these methodologies was inevitable, as crucial as they were and remain, not only because of developments in criticism writ large but also because of the very growth of musicology itself as scholars sought different ways of making their voices heard in an increasingly crowded field. Changes in the demographics of university populations also played an important role in broadening the range of methods. Another factor was surely a repeated critique of the operatic canon itself by avant-garde composers who sought to create a space for new approaches to music and theatre, a phenomenon noted by Arnold Whittall in his contribution to this issue. Just as *metteurs en scène* breathed new life into well-known works with productions transplanted from their original settings in time and place, so too have critics used varied subject positions to de-familiarise the familiar in order to sensitise readers to new ways of understanding just what might be at stake in well-known operas. And it is precisely such questioning of the unified subject – on the sides of both creation and reception – that has fostered greater appreciation of the contrapuntal nature of the operatic experience. Hermeneutics did, of course, have a venerable academic pedigree, but around the time that Parker and Groos created *Cambridge Opera Journal*, opera scholars, like colleagues in other fields, had newly become more self-conscious about the premises of their methodologies. They also had become especially sensitive to multiple meanings produced by different ways of reflecting upon the various components of the genre: word, grain of voice, physical gesture,

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instrumental gesture – and on the list might go. Aesthetic attributes attached to each of these informed critical discourses applied to operas from the Baroque to the present day. 'Progress' can scarcely be conceived in the abstract, but if assessed as the richness of critical discourse about opera in the academy, then *Cambridge Opera Journal* can well claim a part in the 'progress' of the discipline.

In outlining opera's status as a latecomer to musicology in her brief contribution to this issue, Susan McClary observes that the undeniably populist side of the genre had played a role in its slow acceptance by the academy in the twentieth century. Implicitly, however, that low-brow appetite excluded the almost-unknown works of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century composers, even such names as Monteverdi, Lully, Purcell, Handel, Rameau and Gluck. Academic and popular reacquaintance with opera before Mozart, brought into focus by the early music movement, often concentrated on the simple exposition of hitherto unknown works, as scholars wrestled with the source materials. Ellen Rosand's search for the meaning of *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* in the first volume of the journal was pioneering, and her return to the topic here demonstrates not only that interpretation operates on shifting terrain but also just how much we still have to learn about opera of this period.

Lawrence Kramer has been one repeatedly to suggest new paths, many with a psychoanalytic orientation (as in his first contribution to *Cambridge Opera Journal* twenty years ago), and in the current issue he continues his legacy by suggesting an interpretative model for *Tannhäuser* drawn from economics, while also (characteristically) drawing attention to the pleasures afforded by the music. Carolyn Abbate similarly – and many would say still more radically – has pushed academics to move outside traditional comfort zones in challenging conventional constructs of unity. More recently she has sought meaningful ways to acknowledge opera's liveness, its essence as performance. Here, these exhortations carry practical resonance, as her dramaturgical suggestions serve as the starting point for a Copenhagen rehearsal of the final scene of *Das Rheingold*. Nila Parly's meditation on that process, and Abbate's response to Parly, demonstrate how fruitful interaction between performance and the academy can be, even as Abbate's suggestions seem to provide a role for (academic) historicism within the performance itself. Of course, adopting self-conscious staging only works for those operas already freighted with historical significance. Abbate's encouragement to academics who acknowledge performance in their scrutiny also implicitly emphasises the canonic repertory. While the growing field of performance studies will undoubtedly influence contributions to this journal in the coming decade (and stretch the boundaries of the medium), it will be interesting to see how such studies negotiate those works less often performed.

For all the vertiginous and intellectually exciting explorations of fragmented post-modern experience, claims to disunity still deserve to be played against claims for unity – this even in constructions of narratives about the variegated history of post-war opera. The avant-garde critiques of the canon noted by Whittall rub shoulders with reliance upon it: precisely where repudiation merges with self-conscious effort to shape the tradition into something new has not always been easy to detect. Likewise, a hard division between 'new musicology' and 'old musicology'

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would seem specious, a point that arises from Philip Gossett's call (cast here in an informal and polemical vein) for continued attention to the source record. His forceful tone, and even occasional dissatisfaction with this journal, bespeaks a musicological constituency committed to grounding in the documentary record of operatic works. He implies that this legacy remains essential to the relevance of analytical categories we might associate with coherence. One need not concur with Gossett's analysis of past and current editorial practice at *Cambridge Opera Journal* to accept the premise that, as heterogeneous as opera is, sources do reveal *something* about musical and dramatic intent fuelled by identifiable and rational purposes, or, if not, at least about a range of possible purposes within a discrete field. How one deploys this knowledge in criticism is another matter, yet any claim to critical persuasion would seem to call for a recognition of both the potential and limitations of the sources.

Musicological sands continue to shift, and the journal will undoubtedly have to keep pace. For the present editors the essays in this issue, reflecting variously on the past (and future), are themselves salutary in the diversity of approach they offer to our relationship with that past. Whether passionate, reflective, or celebratory, they encourage us in our own sense of engagement with the journal's history – and commitment to its future.

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