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# Review

Edited by Mary Ann Smart, *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000. 301 pp.

In *Opera, or, the Undoing of Women* Catherine Clément noted opera's obsession with dying women and concluded that in opera, 'women perpetually sing their eternal undoing.' The contributors to Mary Ann Smart's *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera* show that feminist criticism of opera has come a long way since the 1988 English translation of Clément's – dare I say seminal – work. Opera scholars interested in gender have been instrumental in pushing musicology towards a critical approach that attends to questions of voice, power, and culture. This approach rejects, or at least historicizes, notions of music as an abstract and transcendent phenomenon. Opera, with its repeated staging of gender relations and sexual conflict, continues to provide fertile ground for paradigm-shifting critical work.

*Siren Songs* grew out of a stimulating conference on gender and opera organized by Elizabeth Hudson and Mary Ann Smart in the autumn of 1995. Many of the ideas presented in these essays have been circulated and elaborated on at subsequent conferences, and this gives the book a vaguely familiar feel; even so, it is useful to have them collected here in one volume. The volume has some concerns in common with two other collections on gender and opera that appeared around the time of the conference: *En travesti: Women, Gender Subversion, Opera* (1995) and *The Work of Opera: Genre, Nationhood, and Sexual Difference* (1996).[1] In the six years since the conference, opera scholars and scholarship have continued to move along, and many of the volume's authors have since published monographs related to their essays here.[2] Meanwhile, Gary Tomlinson and Carolyn Abbate (neither of whom contributes to *Siren Songs*) have published book-length critiques of some of the foundational work behind the essays in this volume.[3]

To contextualize these essays in *Siren Songs* I want to look back to the years before the 1995 conference. Almost all of the authors participate in what might be called a 'second wave' of feminist opera criticism, their analyses shaped by and responding to critiques of Clément by Susan McClary and Carolyn Abbate. With a nod to Martha Feldman's essay on 'The Absent Mother in Opera Seria,' we might call McClary and Abbate the 'absent mothers' of *Siren Songs*: their voices permeate the book's essays and their principles form the basis of its underlying consensus All the contributors are indebted to McClary for moving gender scholarship beyond discussions of female composers and texts and thus demonstrating one feminist way to talk about music within the context of social and cultural issues. Approaching the notes themselves, McClary hears in opera's formal structures a constant tug of war between patriarchal constraint and feminine resistance. Most of the musicologists

[1] *En travesti: Women, Gender, Subversion, Opera* ed. Corinne E. Blackmer Smith and Patricia Juliana (New York, 1995); *The Work of Opera: Genre, Nationhood, and Sexual Difference*, ed. Daniel Fischlin and Richard Dellamora (New York, 1996).

[2] Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, *Opera: Desire, Disease, Death* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1996); Roger Parker, *Leonora's Last Act: Essays in Verdian Discourse* (Princeton, 1997); Mary Hunter, *The Culture of Opera Buffa in Mozart's Vienna: A Poetics of Entertainment* (Princeton, 1999); Lawrence Kramer, *After the Lovedeath: Sexual Violence and the Making of Culture* (Berkeley, 1999); Heather Hadlock, *Mad Loves: Women and Music in Offenbach's Les contes d'Hoffmann* (Princeton, 2000).

[3] Gary Tomlinson, *Metaphysical Song: An Essay on Opera* (Princeton, 1999); Carolyn Abbate, *In Search of Opera* (Princeton, 2001).

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in the volume follow McClary's tactic of using the tools of musical analysis to bolster arguments about the operation of gender in particular musical works.

While McClary discusses individual gestures in the context of form, Abbate has used them to explore the physical force of music – the phenomenological reality of its performance. Critiquing Clément from a different perspective, Abbate addresses Clément's plot-centered approach by arguing that women in opera, though undone by plot, triumph in voice. Building on the work of Edward Cone, her *Unsung Voices* uses the term 'voice' to refer to those rare musical gestures – either vocal or non-vocal – that may be perceived as modes of a subject's enunciation. Abbate pushes these ideas in a more explicitly feminist direction in an essay on *Salome* where she serenades the overtly female musical force of the voice and in effect argued for the displacement of the authorial voice by the female character and singer.[4] She has pushed them still further in her recent *In Search of Opera*, where she argues that understanding the role of women in musical works shows 'how performed arts break down the Apollonian master voice.'[5] Many authors in *Siren Songs* follow Abbate in discerning multiple voices in any one production and attending to the performative presence of female singers, and almost all offer up at least very brief Abbatean readings.

By the mid-1990s, then, the work of Clément, McClary, and Abbate had established that opera, gender, and sexuality are inextricably intertwined, and *Siren Songs* proceeds from this premise. The book as a whole accepts the tantalizing paradox that opera can at once reflect a patriarchal order and provide a space for female voices to challenge the very words they sing. The essays stand almost as position papers on opera and gender, by scholars whose work has pushed musicology as a whole to question gender categories, the authorial voice, and the peculiar power of musical performance both to uphold and challenge received hierarchies. Their critical vocabularies draw on deconstruction, New Historicism, psychoanalysis, performance theory, and queer theory. For instance, both Peter Brooks, in 'Body and Voice in Melodrama and Opera,' and Katherine Bergeron, in 'Melisande's Hair,' use psychoanalytic theory to elucidate opera's hold on its audience, but they avoid the 'enthralled listener' approach of Terry Castle and Wayne Koestenbaum, instead letting historical specificity push against the universalizing tendencies of those theories.

Synthesizing these eclectic approaches in her introduction, Smart writes that the collection is intended to deconstruct two apparently contradictory approaches to women in opera: 'using analysis to uncover music's misogyny' and 'wallowing uncritically in sensuous texture and individual experience' (11). She does this most strongly in a pithy reading of Roland Barthes' *S/Z*, offering its much-discussed analysis of Balzac's novel *Sarrasine* as a counter to binary oppositions and as a model for writing about opera as a dramatic staging of the body. *S/Z* 'marks out an attractive theoretical ground by showing how exploding the fundamental opposition male/female can lead to the collapse of other epistemological categories, including that between systematic analysis and operatic *jouissance*' (8).

The essays that follow take up Smart's theoretical challenge in various repertoires and materials. The individual authors share a commitment to close readings and to the principle that any form of cultural expression contains multiple meanings. Most examine well-known operas – at the level of the scene, aria or even motive – in the service of feminist readings and the consideration of larger ideological questions. They ground their interpretations in diverse historical documents including scores and librettos, political manifestos, poetry and medical texts. Linda and Michael Hutcheon work closely with medical texts and

[4] Carolyn Abbate, 'Opera; or, the Envoicing of Women,' in *Musicology and Difference*, ed. Ruth Solie (Berkeley, 1993), 225–59.
[5] Abbate, *In Search of Opera* (see n. 3), 53.

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post-structuralist theories, this time using turn-of-the-century psychosexual research and recent theories of the gaze to explore Salome's dance of the seven veils. Philip Brett's exploration of the genesis of the libretto for *Peter Grimes* reveals the division of labor between the composer and his collaborators as a site for ideologies of pacifism and sexual morality.

To take one essay in some detail, Roger Parker focuses on Elisabeth's aria in *Don Carlos* in order to make a complicated argument about the idea of history in French grand opera and about the kinds of power women wielded. His 'Elisabeth's Last Act' deftly commingles close readings of Verdi's correspondence and revisions of the opera, the rhythms of Elisabeth's aria, and Anselm Gerhard's recent *The Urbanization of Opera*. Parker circles around the issues of gender until the essay's conclusion, when he makes a brief but powerful argument that is embedded in Verdi's own response to *Don Carlos*. 'I like to think that that is part of the reason why Verdi thought this opera lacked ''Shakespearean'' truth: because the aria he had given Elisabeth in the last act causes her to emerge musically from the passivity of her visual and verbal representation, cease to be ''essential'' ' (117). The problem that Parker refers to is Elisabeth's failure to conform to any essentialized vision of woman and her insistence on influencing the patriarchal authority. Parker's reading reminds us that representations of gender need not confine themselves to gender, and that they are sometimes most interesting when they relate to other forces and discourses.

Several of the close readings in the volume directly engage issues of voice, which have grown increasingly sophisticated in the last decade as opera scholarship has absorbed the influence of Barthes, Abbate, Michel Poizat, and other feminist/psychoanalytic theories of voice and power. Smart's 'Ulterior Motives: Verdi's Recurring Themes Revisited' takes Abbate's ideas in new directions by reformulating them to fit the highly manifest gestures of Italian opera. Rather than illuminating a deeply entrenched metaphysical voice, she focuses on musical enactments of the body's motions. She locates female constitutive power in the body, arguing that music which mimes physical gestures can allow the usually gazed-upon female body to deflect that gaze. She traces Aida's identifying motives as they move from symbolizing her body in orchestral motives to accompanying her seductive arias. In the former, the Aida motive 'captur[es] the heroine's physical presence through a form of mimesis' (138). With this attention to physical gesture and the music that imitates it, as well as discussions of music as inscribed in the body, she reiterates Peter Brook's insistence on the importance of gesture in melodrama. (Brooks himself develops this idea in *Siren Songs*, with a reading of Eboli's aria 'O don fatale' in 'Body and Voice in Melodrama and Opera.') Some questions brought to mind by Smart's essay are: how are the privileges accorded to body and voice inflected by Aida's racial otherness? Does the relationship between sound and body in this piece depend on the eroticized signs of Aida's otherness – her already overconstructed corporeality?

While Smart works with a very complex notion of voice as it plays out in a particular opera and character, Clément's essay 'Through Voices, History' takes a more categorical approach in its consideration of voice types according to timbre. This foray into philosophical and psychoanalytic approaches critiques the operatic exploitation of voice types and dramatic associations as a way of projecting meaning. She describes the overly entrenched characterizations of sopranos as helpless and tenors as vulnerable and romantic. The series of vignettes on vocal types enumerates opera's ability to convey meaning through conventional associations between voice type, character, and drama. As in *Opera, or, The Undoing of Women*, she considers the voices as a product of abstract figures rather than actual singing bodies and thus attends mostly to operatic plots, in particular the heterosexual imperative of a soprano–tenor love story.

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While Clément eschews the performer's body, musicologists working on opera have been instrumental in insisting that the discipline take account of the performer. Such 'performer politics' have usefully demythologized the composer and repositioned the aesthetic truth of music as material presence – a position that allows the female voice to work a magic on listeners that exceeds the libretto, the score and even the composer. Among the book's provocative attempts to deal with performance are three short essays that began as a panel discussion on 'Staging Mozart's Women.' Mary Hunter, Gretchen Wheelock, and Wye Allanbrook examine modern directors' and singers' efforts to make Mozart's submissive female characters resonate with modern feminist sensibilities. In other words, their interest lies in the liminal space between character and performer. These short essays raise issues of performance and staging, and also gesture towards the dialogue between opera and film studies that has grown considerably in the last five years. Allanbrook argues that Peter Sellars' staging of Zerlina's 'Batti, batti' in his controversial production of *Don Giovanni*, particularly as filmed for television, ignores the music and its social resonances in order to privilege the aria's textual demand for violence. 'It might be a scene in *ER* , so gritty is the setting, so naturalistic is the representation, so immediate its application' (63). In keeping with her interest in the social relations and cultural assumptions projected by Mozart's musical gestures, she highlights the tension between the 'erotic promise of the gavotte with its coyly sado-masochistic surface' (64) and the accompanying cello obbligato, 'whole-hearted and flowing, seeming to speak for the interior self' (63).

In readings of 'Martern aller Arten,' another disturbing performance of female power-through-submission, Hunter and Wheelock argue that Konstanze's extreme coloratura can be understood either as an expression of madness or force of will, depending on the performer's gestures. Hunter explores the space between character and singer in order to contextualize the character's apparent weakness. She rightly likens her approach to what Brecht and his followers called the alienation effect – the separation of audience and spectacle that encourages critique. This notion of opera performances as 'alienated' could be very fruitful in longer studies. These three essays would be even more impressive if their discussions of staging had included the phenomenological presence of the female voice – not necessarily one that makes the woman all powerful. For instance, Konstanze's aria stuns listeners no matter how you stage it. Like the Queen of the Night she tosses off a vocal object that effectively deconstructs language – language which has been the instrument of her oppression.

Despite this foray into Mozart studies the book would have been more effective had it ventured further outside the nineteenth century. With the exception of Feldman, Brett, and Auner, it treats opera's 'common practice period' (from Mozart to Wagner, with Strauss and Massenet in Wagner's shadow). A broader historical range would have elicited discussions of sexual contingencies that differ markedly from those in circulation today, and whose difference highlights the precariousness of our own most precious constructions. That the essays by Auner, Feldman and Brett lend theoretical diversity is as much a statement about the object of analysis as the analytical method. To take Feldman as an example, her enumeration of different systems of gender, sexuality, and operatic performance in 'The Absent Mother in Opera Seria' points out the historical specificity of her own repertoire, and by extension the other operatic moments discussed in the collection.

Feldman reads eighteenth-century opera seria as betraying deep ruptures in patriarchal authority. For instance, librettos insistently portrayed an all-powerful king and an absent mother despite the rapid disintegration of the political structures reflected by those roles. This tension played out in ways particular to the culture of opera seria. Unlike the distanced stage world of nineteenth-century French and Italian opera, these pieces mobilized the

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language of myth to reiterate precarious power structures. Feldman eschews discussions of the uncanny power of the voice in favor of mapping out a model for hearing arias as liminal moments, performed on the border between stage and audience: 'Lyric moments thus inhabited a liminal space where normal time and action were suspended, where feeling annihilated reason' (37). In addition her discussion of the family box as an endeavor to mask the crisis in marriage and in the marriage market maps out the details of a sexual economy that differs radically from our own.

While most of the essays in the volume are about women, Heather Hadlock and Joseph Auner tackle the problem of discussing sexuality from a musical and a historical perspective. Hadlock's essay 'The Career of Cherubino, or, The Trouser Role Grows Up' treats opera as a space for gender subversion. It challenges Clément's vocal taxonomies by making visible a voice that doesn't fit – the cross-dressed soprano who displays a putatively 'male' character with not-male sounds. Hadlock defines a female erotic space that depends on tensions between voice and body. In doing so she pushes against oppositions between voice and body, sound and vision, male and female, lesbian and straight. Hadlock argues that Massenet's 1905 *Chérubin* highlights the erotic potential of a cross-dressed woman who desires women. In it, Cherubino emerges as a *voice* that is anything but straight. 'Not the cross-dressed body, but the undisguisable voice has been the real actor in Chérubin's escapades, and so Cherubin's adulthood fulfills its transgressive promise: even as Massenet's staging upholds the ban on our seeing Cherubino as an erotic spectacle, we may hear the "'love that dares not speak its name" raise its soprano voice in song' (91). Hadlock grounds the transgressive sounds of *Chérubin* by discussing the emergence of a female salon culture in Paris that took the page as a symbol of women-oriented desire and eroticism. As such she effectively historicizes sexuality and desire and thus acknowledges the constructedness of both phenomena.

Auner treats alternative sexualities in a different era. His essay differs from most of the others in that it is not about the nineteenth century and it is not about women. His consideration of male sexuality in Kreneck's *Jonny spielt auf* works with sexuality as a matter of sex acts and relates these constructions to a variety of other cultural systems. He reads the opera as a staging of Andreas Huyssen's opposition between masculine modernist high art and feminized mass culture. At the same time he unpacks the complexities of a representation of sexuality that is inflected with race and contingent upon fluid dynamics between self and other, man and woman, spirit and body, human and beast, civilized and primitive. Arguing that Krenek reinscribes Max's high-art, white hegemony by relegating jazz to phenomenal spaces, he points out that Jonny's music always reverberates through the distancing effects of off-stage and loudspeaker versions of stereotyped blues, jazz, and tango elements that remain for the most part in the opera's phenomenal world. This also renders Jonny an empty representation who inhabits the techno-mechanical side of the world. Pushing Auner's reading a bit further, Jonny's music could reflect an estranged and alienated body that can only be refracted through technological mediation.

In conclusion, I want to think about some of the questions opened up by the book's subtitle, *Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera*. For the most part, the essays take both sex and sexuality as givens and do not think enough about how and what those terms mean. Sexuality, defined as a set of sexual practices and the social constructions of those practices, is highly contingent and demands careful scrutiny. It is easy to say that opera is about sex, but the sexual effects created by operatic music are specific to historical and cultural milieus. For example, the volume would have benefited from a deeper consideration of the erotic potential of the human voice in specific times and places. The voice, residing at the

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intersection of bodily and subjective experience, enjoys a special resonance with sex and sexuality. The book's unconscious heterosexism – signaled by the prominent placement of Clément's essay – might have been balanced by more contributions from queer-theoretical perspectives, such those staked out in *Queering the Pitch*. This perspective would have enhanced the volume not only by analyzing the ''queer" aspects of the operatic experience, but by foregrounding the complex, conflicting and most importantly contingent aspects of sexuality and eroticism in opera and opera scholarship.

Despite the prominence of 'gender' in the book's subtitle, these essays prove to be less about gender than about women. Like sexuality, gender is a social category mapped onto bodies. And like sexuality, it is hard to talk about because it involves the material body and the cultural construction of that body. Only a few of the essays consider gender as a dynamic force that involves relations between women and men, and between bodies and their gendered construction. I wonder if the word-choice here relates to a larger tendency within the academy to substitute 'gender' for 'feminism' because it sounds more benign and perhaps less political. Most of the authors here are doing feminist theory – understood as a critical framework for understanding women's roles in power structures and the complex representation of women in cultural expressions – but they seem reluctant to stake the political claims implied by the word feminist.

Finally, the book treats opera and music as reflections of gender and sexuality rather than as active participants in those dynamics. To change the terms slightly, most of the essays in this volume imagine opera as symptomatic rather than constitutive of gender. Opera is most critically enticing when it slides between mirroring and marking gender and sexuality. Attending to this slippage means moving away from reading opera through the methods of other disciplines, especially literary criticism; opera's unique sensuous effects and status as performance invite its readers to push against theories developed for the interpretation of texts. This means thinking hard about music-making as mutually constitutive with constructions of gender, sexuality, and body. In other words, we might be well served both within our own discipline and in the interdisciplinary community by asking what music tells us about and how it creates gender and sexuality.

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