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Cambridge Opera Journal at Twenty

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When Steven Huebner and Suzanne Aspden asked me to contribute an essay to commemorate the twentieth birthday of *Cambridge Opera Journal*, I accepted their invitation immediately. For me as well as for most musicologists and opera lovers, the journal has been a constant source of stimulation since its inception. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine our scholarly world without such a periodical. Yet the new editors' invitation compelled me to recall the days before its advent. And although they suggested that I reflect on the consequences of my having 'opened the floodgates on reflections on gender and the body' with my article in the journal's first year,[1] I find it necessary to put that essay itself into a broader context.

'Constructions of Gender in Monteverdi's Dramatic Music' started its life in response to a dare of sorts. In 1987 I had included the following cursory statement in a footnote:

> One of the profound musical achievements of the seventeenth century was the invention of a vocabulary by means of which women characters in operas could be portrayed. That vocabulary is an ideological construct, and it is informed by (male) attitudes of what women are, how they behave, and feel, and so forth. Both the code itself and its uses in particular compositions can tell us a great deal about how gender was (and is) socially shaped.[2]

Jane Bowers challenged me to make good on that claim for a session she was organising for the 1988 meeting of the American Musicological Society in Baltimore. Although no one knew it in advance, this particular meeting turned out to mark the emergence of what came to be called New Musicology – or critical musicology, as those of us identified with this moment prefer to call it. Quite unexpectedly, a large number of people gave talks in a variety of sessions that raised new issues and that questioned assumptions fundamental to the discipline as the previous generation or two had constituted it.

Those were heady times, somewhat reminiscent of the political and cultural upheavals of 1968. And it is indeed no accident that many of those who engaged in the musicological sea change in Baltimore had come of age precisely twenty years before, marched in the streets, then gone back to graduate school to hone their research skills. After a period of dormancy or law-abiding docility, those energies suddenly surfaced again, leading to a new array of possible modes of enquiry.

Among those, of course, were projects focused on gender, sexuality and the body. These issues seem so obvious to us today that my students cannot quite bring

[1] 'Constructions of Gender in Monteverdi's Dramatic Music', *this journal*, 1 (1989), 203–23.
[2] 'The Blasphemy of Talking Politics during Bach Year', in *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance and Reception*, ed. Richard Leppert and Susan McClary (Cambridge, 1987), 52n44.

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themselves to believe they were not always self-evident. Yet a glance at Catherine Clément's *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, published in English translation in 1988 – along with the vehement response it received from North American musicologists – reveals the extent to which even the slightest moves in this direction seemed intolerably radical.[3] It is immensely gratifying to those of us who first tried to pose such questions to observe that *Cambridge Opera Journal* has published gender-orientated scholarship throughout its history. In fact, the paper I wrote for Jane Bowers's AMS panel appeared in the journal because Arthur Groos, one of the inaugural co-editors along with Roger Parker, actively solicited it immediately after the session concluded.

But as I mentioned above, I understand the intrusion of gender scholarship into musicology as only one part – albeit a very significant part – of the history one has to grasp in order to understand the significance of this journal. For it was not gender alone that raised the hackles of more traditional scholars at the time. The study of opera itself and, even more fundamentally, the discussion of meaning in music were also off-limits in professional musicology.

High brow/low brow

In his *High Brow/Low Brow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*,[4] Lawrence Levine explains how nineteenth-century Americans – especially immigrant populations – treated opera as popular culture. This was their vernacular: they sang along with arias, swooned over divas, pelted unworthy performers with overripe vegetables. They had engaged in similar ways with Shakespeare plays and Beethoven symphonies, though these were cordoned off through educational processes that taught people that they could *not* understand them, as elite art forms, by the beginning of the twentieth century. Only opera remained in that nether zone still accessible to the untutored and thereby inappropriate for the attention of scholars.

Not all opera, of course. Mozart and Wagner were exempted, in part because their scores could be subjected with some success to purely musical analysis; issues such as motivic manipulations, cyclical recurrences, or allegories based on key relationships rewarded the close study of the music itself. But many other operas that still make up the principal performing repertory – by Rossini, Donizetti, Verdi, Bizet, Puccini – seemed too transparent to require the expertise of professional musicologists. People already knew all too well how to react to this music. Inexpensive performing scores were readily available and magazines catering to the particular desires of opera fans existed in abundance: one could read interviews with one's favourite star or pore over descriptions of the latest Met production in *Opera News*, much as one could keep up with Hollywood in glossies that circulated widely. Put simply, nineteenth-century Italian opera qualified as a guilty pleasure. One might

[3] Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis, 1988). For a recent reflection on the contributions and reception of Clément, see Joseph Kerman, 'Verdi and the Undoing of Women', *this journal*, 18 (2006), 21–31.

[4] Lawrence Levine, *High Brow/Low Brow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA, 1990).

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listen avidly to these pieces, spend one's hard-earned cash on multiple recordings, and attend every available performance, but one could never acknowledge it in public – or at least not at school.

The struggle to make opera acceptable as a respectable scholarly interest predated *Cambridge Opera Journal* by only about a decade.[5] When a fellow graduate student, James Hepokoski, announced in the 1970s that he would write his dissertation on late Verdi, we were all astonished and even a bit dubious. It took the clout of Philip Gossett – clout he had established in part by translating Rameau's *Treatise on Harmony* and scrutinising Beethoven sketchbooks – to launch the critical editions of Rossini and Verdi, uncovering as he did so the woeful inadequacy of the standard performing scores; one can read about his efforts at adding such composers to the musicological canon in *Disciplining Music: Musicology and its Canons*.[6]

Edition-making and close analysis had always been crucial aspects of musicology, and the endeavours of the 1980s in part sought to elevate nineteenth-century Italian opera into a context that would make it eligible for such treatment. But bringing this repertory into the canon exposed a methodological gap that had not been so obvious before: the gap between research and the overwhelming pleasures afforded by multimedia spectacles in the opera house. Even in the late 1980s, a scholar as formidable as Harold Powers could still worry that admitting 'Nessun dorma' gave him a thrill might discredit him as he and William Ashbrook were writing their scrupulously researched book on *Turandot*.[7]

If a need for new questions and approaches was becoming urgent in opera studies, this same need was also arising with the introduction into musicology of other long-excluded musics. In fact, claims for the inclusion of mainstream opera occurred almost simultaneously with the sudden flowering of popular-music research, and although some specialists produced Schenker graphs of rock songs as a way of legitimating their enterprises, many others sought to create a bridge between their professional skills and the impact of the music on fans. The concerns that from the outset have characterised contributions to *Cambridge Opera Journal* – performativity, voice, bodies, gender, sexuality, exoticism, visual effects – have also driven the most important work in pop-music research, in part because of a widespread, interdisciplinary move towards cultural studies, but also because Levine and his nineteenth-century American audiences turn out to have been right: opera still qualifies as popular culture.

As the boundaries drawn around the proper field of study have relaxed, it has become easier to blur the line between European modes of music theatre and those

[5] To put this in some disciplinary perspective, recall that the journal *19th Century Music* had blazed more or less the same path only slightly earlier in the late 1970s and early 1980s: the standard repertory of the symphony orchestra also seemed to need no scholarly attention. My teachers in graduate school were aghast at Leonard Bernstein's revival of Gustav Mahler, whose music they regarded as tacky.

[6] Philip Gossett, 'History and Works That Have No History: Reviving Rossini's Neapolitan Operas', in *Disciplining Music: Musicology and its Canons*, ed. Katherine Bergeron and Philip V. Bohlman (Chicago, 1996), 95–115.

[7] William Ashbrook and Harold Powers, *Puccini's Turandot: The End of the Great Tradition* (Princeton, 1991). The late Professor Powers spoke to me at length about these concerns.

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native to North America. The Broadway musical and, more recently, the mega-musical are now beginning to command the same kind of respect, the same degree of professional attention as opera.[8] The study of arena shows by rock stars – shows that in their combinations of instrumental music, song, carefully choreographed dance routines, and state-of-the-art special effects resemble the spectacles invented for the sixteenth-century Medici court – should soon be appearing as well, perhaps even in this very journal. And where better?

What does it all mean?

The change in disciplinary focus that allowed nineteenth-century Italian opera to be taken seriously could not have occurred without the concomitant re-examination within musicology of meanings in general. For a very great variety of reasons rehearsed many times over since Joseph Kerman's *Contemplating Music*,[9] discussions of cultural values had been prohibited in the years following World War II. Implicit – but all the more powerful for going without saying – was a preference for German instrumental genres. Inasmuch as music without words could pass as having transcended mere social concerns, it seemed impervious to questions increasingly raised in other humanities disciplines. Nor were musicologists the only professionals eager to keep music beyond the reach of social criticism: individuals on the cutting edge of literary theory such as Jacques Derrida and Edward Said also wanted to exempt music from the modes of analysis they themselves were developing.

So long as we had music that mattered precisely because it had surpassed questions concerning meaning, we really had no viable ways of dealing with anything outside that very narrow category. And the notion that one might haul cultural issues into the pristine symphonic canon remained unthinkable. That repertory stood as the unmarked partner in a whole series of binary oppositions, and it had to be contextualised before the music with adjectives – nationalist, programmatic, texted, women's, non-Western, popular – could be put into intelligible contexts.

At least as much as any of the others involved in this project in the 1980s and 1990s, I know how painful the process was that brought cultural criticism to bear on music; I still get e-mails from outraged individuals who have only recently heard about the infamous Beethoven debate.[10] But as long as symphonies have nothing to do with gender or desire or bodies or narrative or politics, then the music that overtly traffics in such matters – including opera – will remain by definition inferior.

[8] See the review essay by Kim Kowalke, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 60 (2007), 688–714. Kowalke neglects to refer to female scholars who have become prominent in this area; see, for instance, Stacy Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* (Ann Arbor, 2002). My colleague Raymond Knapp published the first article in this journal on musicals: see his '*Assassins, Oklahoma!* and the "shifting fringe of dark around the camp-fire"', *this journal*, 16 (2004), 77–101.

[9] Joseph Kerman, *Contemplating Music* (Cambridge, MA, 1985).

[10] See Susan McClary, 'Getting Down Off the Beanstalk', in *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis, 1991), ch. 3.

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In other words, the hermeneutic swerve was a necessary condition for the flourishing of an enterprise like *Cambridge Opera Journal*. I do not mean to suggest by any means that this is the only legitimate approach. I am merely arguing as a veteran of those times that the playing field had to be made somewhat more level before it became possible to deal seriously with opera and its range of priorities.

Where next?

First, we do not seem to need special pleading on behalf of Verdi anymore: nearly a fifth of all articles published in *Cambridge Opera Journal* have concerned his works, testifying to the excitement that followed his long-overdue elevation to the scholarly canon (he had never disappeared from the stage, of course). The other high rankers – Mozart, Wagner and Puccini – lag behind by a considerable distance. A number of quite prominent composers have received surprisingly little attention: Adams, Berg, Bizet, Cavalli, Handel, Rossini, Massenet and Strauss each shows up once or twice, and I find no articles devoted to Bellini, Gluck, Marc-Antoine Charpentier or Philip Glass. Without the submissions by Richard Taruskin, Russian opera would nearly vanish from sight.

Second, for all the prominence of gender-related issues raised in articles throughout the journal's history, pieces on female composers of opera are in short supply: I count one each concerning Judith Weir, Augusta Holmès and Ethel Smyth. To be fair, some specialists have chosen to publish such work elsewhere: Suzanne Cusick's research on Francesca Caccini has revealed a great deal about the position of musicians in general in northern Italian courts, and Elizabeth Wood's essays on Ethel Smyth helped to forge the beginnings of gay and lesbian musicology. But surely we should begin to find pieces on Thea Musgrave, Meredith Monk, Laurie Anderson, Libby Larsen and Anne LeBaron. Kaija Saariaho's stunning *L'Amour de Loin* begs for serious study.

As my generation slouches (and none too quickly, some would claim!) towards retirement, the focus of this and other prominent journals will necessarily change. It is gratifying to see how much has been accomplished by *Cambridge Opera Journal* since it produced its first issue in 1989. And it is exciting to realise how many more projects remain to be explored. Here's to the next twenty years!

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