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Review Article
Hugging the Bank: Opera Studies in Brobdingnag

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Helen M. Greenwald, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Opera*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. xxxv, 1177pp.

It occurred to me, some way into reading this enormous book, that academic reviewers of composite volumes live in interesting times. So much has changed recently in the dissemination of such volumes. Perhaps the very act of writing 'a review' of one of them – of capturing some kind of topic-wide panorama, perhaps with a selection of 'state of the art' homilies thrown in – is now irremediably anachronistic. After all, few people except reviewers would conceivably acquire and then read from cover to cover a volume such as this, which retails at £120 ($185) and spreads over 1,200 pages covered with around half a million words. What's more, the huge variations in tone among the book's fifty chapters – from, say, Tim Carter's friendly, all-embracing opening essay, 'What is Opera?', to a large contingent of densely musicological, *JAMS*-aspirant confections, on any number of recondite topics – would surely defeat all but the most dogged and most catholic of consumers. But, in today's academic world, objections such as this hardly matter. As we all know, the primary readers of these *Handbooks* (or *Companions* or *Compendiums* or *Encyclopaedias* or *Readers*; the proliferation of soubriquets itself tells a tale) are no longer those who confront the volume in physical form, but rather those with institutional access to the eBook, who can thus pick and choose among – or be directed to – selected eChapters, with no need to be aware of the 'real' book's massy materiality, let alone any cumulative effect it might have. So what's a reviewer to do? This one, at some cost to his work schedule and professional well-being, and perhaps in despite of the times, read from beginning to end. He is here to tell the tale.

Whether all this reading might possibly promote conclusions about the present state of 'opera studies' was a question that occurred with some insistence as my task continued. But before essaying that particular topic, some caveats need to be aired. Of the fifty contributors (the dust jacket's puff preliminary describes them as 'fifty of the world's most respected scholars'), forty are based in either the US (29) or the UK (11). Given the language of the collection, this geographical concentration was probably inevitable; but it does, of course, make for a particular take on the topic,

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one that would be very different if mainland Europe had been the dominating presence. Also of significance is that most of the contributors (more than forty) are professional musicologists. Again, such a preponderance was unlikely to be avoidable, but it, too, lends a particular flavour to the concoction.

A more serious impediment to general conclusions comes in the shape of many of these fifty essays. On one level, the contributions would seem to invite coverage of an extremely broad territory. As editor Helen Greenwald puts it in her introduction, the various invitees 'were given a keyword and instructed, more or less, to build their own sandboxes and have some fun' (7). And the fifty keywords almost all embrace large, non-period-specific topics (genre, concept, dramaturgy; voice, characterization, meaning; acting, dance, costume; audience, politics, religion; critics, images, sources; and so on). However, Greenwald's next sentence tells us that she extended to her authors a further invitation: 'They were asked to define issues, discuss important research, *and then focus on a problem in some detail*' (7, my italics). It was this last, italicised phrase that often proved a Pandora's box. While some contributors made a brave attempt to venture out into the wide river of 'opera studies', only settling on a case study or two at a later stage of their chapters, many others – doubtless pressed for time, and finding themselves with research to hand that had not so far appeared in print or that could be judiciously recycled – found irresistible the chance to remain within the safer, shallower waters of a specialist interest.

A case in point is the chapter on 'Rehearsal Practices', which might have offered the chance to consider in broad historical terms an aspect of operatic production that – at least to my knowledge – has rarely been addressed outside specialist publications. Its author, Mark Everist, makes the point that there is a great deal of information available documenting twentieth- and twenty-first-century operatic rehearsal practices, and a healthy body of sources about the topic in the nineteenth century, not least copious material concerning Verdi, Wagner and several others. Before that period, the cupboard is less crammed, but there is surely enough to make an interesting and doubtless challenging new account. However, Everist adds nothing to this general picture, briskly bringing his three-paragraph introduction to a close with a passing – and, in the circumstances, distinctly ironic – sideswipe at the *New Grove Dictionary of Opera*'s entry on the topic, which did, whatever its local failings, attempt a 400-year survey. The remainder of his chapter, which extends to a generous twenty-two pages, concerns minutiae from the Paris Opéra in the nineteenth century (i.e., determinedly hugging the bank of his own specialism). Its latter stages are largely taken up with a detailed description, suitable to the appendix of a critical edition and complete with facsimile pages, of a 'hitherto unknown document … currently in the possession of the author; hereafter *GB-SO*' (429): a volume that assembles in manuscript skeleton score and printed vocal score the roles (sorry, *rôles*) of three nineteenth-century operatic heroines and – lest you were wondering – might possibly have been used by someone (but alas we are not sure who, or where) *in rehearsal*.

This is an extreme case, but not an unusual one. Too many of the authors of this book – albeit with notable exceptions, some of which are mentioned below – used

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the circumstance of an occasional publication to unload treasured items from their backfiles and databases. A sure sign of such unloading is a sudden proliferation of self-citation: one unblushing author clocks up ten footnote 'selfies' in the space of fifty lines (943–4), which is good going by any standards. As well as resulting in many, many dull pages, in which too much information is delivered with too little context, this disciplinary bank-hugging was a lost opportunity, undermining as it did the imaginative and potentially stimulating editorial decision to make a volume whose taxonomy – those 'keywords' – was not guided by the usual style-period or national divisions. What is more, the picture of 'opera studies' that results in the volume as a whole is of a collection of sub-disciplines that have difficulty in talking to each other in any meaningful way. This cannot have been the intention.

Is there, in spite of these caveats and difficulties, *any* sense of disciplinary direction in 'opera studies' that can be gleaned from these pages? Various fugitive annotations occurred during my 1,200-page journey. The first is that Richard Wagner, albeit still a considerable if not dominating presence, is no longer the starting point/ending point/talking point par excellence that he once was, or at least not the *automatic* choice when world-historical operatic moments are discussed. Of course, there's some backsliding. The late Ulrich Müller's chapter on '*Regietheater*' gets on the slide early when, in his second paragraph, he tells us almost casually, and surely mistakenly, that 'Richard Wagner was one of the first composers who tried to direct performances of his own operas' (582). He gets into even muddier waters when he opines a few pages later that, along with Felsenstein, Wieland Wagner 'can be considered as defining the beginnings of modern *Regietheater*' because he was 'trying to clear out the dreadful affiliation with the ideology of National Socialism' (585). As has been made clear recently by Gundula Kreuzer and others, the 'dreadful affiliation' with the NS regime was certainly part of the history of *Regietheater*, and not – however much we might like it to be one – a hiatus. Another example is in Marc A. Weiner's chapter on 'Politics', in which all but the first four pages are devoted to *unser seliger Richard*, including devotional, space-devouring full-orchestral quotations from *Tristan*, one of which (723) seems to illustrate nothing more mysterious than a bassoon trill. But in general the days in which Wagner was always, inevitably, a special operatic case seem to have passed: in this volume, he still exceeds all other composers in index column inches, but not by much; Verdi, as usual, follows close behind.

A second point is that the musicological times in which opera was deemed to be uplifted and dignified by formal analysis are now mostly behind us. Those frantic searches for the origins of the da capo aria in the seventeenth century, or for sonata-form phantoms in the eighteenth, or for elephantine one-key unfoldings in the nineteenth, have now faded into the past: but ah, the romance of it all, now as distant and nostalgia-imbued as an AMC Concord or a Chevy Citation, the two cars I owned in the 1980s. William Drabkin's engaging chapter on Analysis (*après* Chabrier, it might have been subtitled *Souvenirs de Princeton*) adopts, not surprisingly in the circumstances, a somewhat defensive tone: the first subsection is entitled 'The Problem'. It nevertheless has interesting things to say about both the joys and the limitations of his chosen subject. One of his starting points, though, is 'the

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ultimate conviction that we are concerned with a genre that is, after all, primarily musical' (249); even with its string of qualifiers (*ultimate*, *after all*, *primarily*), this statement might point to the fact that 'analysis' loses whatever sway it might hold as we move back in operatic time, into a period before around 1800 when opera was above all considered a theatrical rather than a musical genre. Small surprise that, in his closing pages, Drabkin retreats to (advances to?) Wagner, in whose endless tonal wanderings the questing analyst can linger untrammelled.

A third point is about a musicological enthusiasm that in some ways proved a safe haven after the heyday of analysis: that of locating operatic meaning in the interaction of verse forms and musical forms. This *solitaformenlehre* seems now to have fallen from grace; the task of explicating here fell to Andreas Giger, whose chapter is entitled 'Versification'. Giger, like so many others in the volume, makes no attempt to enlighten readers about the broad historical picture, but dives immediately into his area of specialism, which is the mid-nineteenth century. In the process of offering many detailed examples, in Italian, French and German, Giger demonstrates the kinds of valuable insights that attention to versification can produce. A continuing problem, though, is that the application of such insights to any broader sense of operatic meaning can be obscure, especially if the composer's decisions at any given time are – as here – automatically lauded whether or not he adheres to his libretto's prosody. So, for example, when Verdi (a notorious ignorer of verse accents, when it suited him) set the line 'D'Egitto là sui lidi' in Act I of *Nabucco* with a flamboyant misaccentuation ('*D'E*gitto là sui lidi'), Giger tells us that he did so because he was 'establishing a melodic pattern that conveyed the drama'. All well and good, if rather vague; but when the procedures allow a 'great' composer such get-out clauses, it is difficult to take seriously the hermeneutic claims made for the entire undertaking.

One final state-of-the-art point is this: twenty years ago, the writings of Carl Dahlhaus would have been an important point of reference, and liberally so, for many Anglo-Saxon musicologists in a volume such as this, even though some might have reluctantly admitted that his operatic adventures – other than those *chez* Wagner – were perhaps not among his most glorious. One of the few remaining flag bearers in this volume is Damien Colas, whose thirty-page chapter on Musical Dramaturgy is staunchly Dahlhausian, and leads off with the great man's manifesto statement, that 'the primary constituent of opera *as a drama* is the music' (179). Over the course of an extremely wide-ranging essay, Colas is often convincing about how this statement might still have relevance for today's operatic explorer; but there is nevertheless, as with Dahlhaus, more than a suggestion that a covert teleology is involved – a sense in which opera reaches maturity as its 'dramaturgy' becomes more thoroughly enmeshed within a musical argument. At an early stage, for example, Colas compares mad scenes from opera's first three centuries (Cavalli, Handel, Donizetti), concluding that they show 'the gradual movement from dramaturgy centered on the libretto to an ever deeper exploration of the dramaturgical powers of music itself' (181). And that particular progress, with its constant recourse to evolutionary metaphors, all ends, has to end, in … you've guessed it, Richard

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Wagner, after whose monumental achievements opera's 'dramaturgy' could do little more than struggle with remnants and revenants, more or less skilfully deployed.

Those four brief observations are all, more or less, about how over the last quarter century or so the landscape of 'opera studies' has changed by shedding some of its former discursive enthusiasms. Surprisingly, though, there are at least two stalwart musicological themes of the 1980s and 1990s that seem, at least on the evidence of this volume, to have become newly interesting and relevant.

The first of these is genre, a topic treated in a complex, many-faceted essay by Emanuele Senici: one that will repay scrutiny in many a graduate seminar. The issue of genre, with its heavy-hitting literary and philosophical apostles, was something of a siren-song for those who wished to find new ways to talk about instrumental music in a post-analysis mileu; but, as Senici points out, it has always remained a difficult and thorny topic in opera studies, in part owing to the sheer variety of modes opera encompasses. But this circumstance, he tells us, is only a discouragement if one wishes to locate generic meaning exclusively within the objects under scrutiny. If on the other hand – and following much recent theory – one chooses to think of genre as also, and inevitably, bound up with *discourse* around and about the object, and thus with the ideologies that form that discourse, then generic theory concerning opera suddenly becomes less of a problem and more of an invitation. After all, and famously, the very idea of 'opera' was certainly invented as discourse – if you will, as an ideal type – some time before it existed as a sounding object in the world, and its progress since then has been invariably narrated as a series of 'reforms', of epistemological readjustments in which theory regularly precedes demonstration. (In this sense, Senici's chapter makes a good companion piece to Lydia Goehr's demanding – and, for a volume like this, surely over-long – chapter on 'The Concept of Opera', whose opening premise, on page 92, is that 'The concept of opera is inseparable from the writing of opera's history'.) Seen through this amplified generic lens, a good deal of operatic history becomes newly meaningful, in particular its co-option by the various national movements of the nineteenth century, and – Senici's focus in his final pages – the manner in which a supposed transcendence of genre has been so routinely used to reify individual operatic works (he discusses *Don Giovanni*, *Fidelio* and *Carmen*).

The second born-again theoretical topic is one that, unlike genre, has been routinely associated with opera, possibly from near its 'invention', and that might recently have been thought rather thoroughly exhausted. This is 'Exoticism', which is the subject of a chapter by W. Anthony Sheppard. Please, I hear you cry, no more orientalist *Aida*; the issues were once vital, but with time they have been seen to rest on over-simple assumptions about operatic communication and, in particular, about operatic audiences. But perhaps that realisation of a necessary complexity makes exoticism a useful way to examine the sheer difficulty of the hermeneutic turn when applied to such a heterogeneous object as opera. There is, for one thing, the eternal problem about where to draw the line; after all, almost all opera is exotic to someone (cue here to the endlessly cued Samuel Johnson). As Sheppard says, with due reference to Ralph Locke's fundamental work in the area, 'Exoticism's rampant run

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throughout operatic history makes any attempt at definitional precision a quixotic venture' (796). For another, there is the issue of periodisation, specifically of whether, as in so many other operatic areas, the theoretical ideas that emerged to address works of the long nineteenth century function equally well for those before or after that time. For another, there is the conundrum of 'authenticity': is it better to take one's exotic sources from any old music box, or to research the ambience exhaustively, with ethnographic fervour? Or, as Sheppard asks in a related question, 'is it possible to parody orientalism without simultaneously perpetuating it?' (810). Sheppard's essay doesn't – praise be – attempt to answer any of these impossible questions. Instead, he does something more important, asking us to ponder anew the intricate involutes that make up any configuration of the operatic message.

What of the much-vaunted performance turn (or, rather, the writing-about-performance turn) we are now experiencing in musicology? Does the *Handbook* bear the traces of this nouvelle vague? There are certainly many chapters that might potentially come under such a rubric. Hilary Poriss takes on 'Divas and Divos', and accords them a wide-ranging and engaging chapter. As she says, one of the most obvious ways in which the *New Grove Dictionary of Opera* now shows its age (I should confess here that its four volumes are perched to the immediate left of this computer: I still consult them most days of my writing life) is in its perfunctory treatment of singers. Perhaps we have now emerged into a different worldview of the operatic economy: one in which 'act' is privileged over 'text', and thus – not incidentally – one in which women feature at least as prominently as men. But looming before us may still be a variant of Sheppard's orientalism question: is it possible to deal critically with the idea of the diva without simultaneously perpetuating it? Certainly Poriss retells with some relish many diva and divo anecdotes, even if in the process she mostly gives them a valuable new ideological context. And her final thoughts, beautifully written though they are, might take readers aback:

> Catalani, Callas, Alagna, and so many others have enchanted and will continue to enchant long into the future. On the wings of their artistry and their voices, they float delicately above the fray, drowning out all other bustle and noise, and with them they carry their spectators far off into a divine realm. (390–1)

It would be unkind, and unfair, to submit these final sentences to anything like a rigorous *explication de texte*; but finishing in this vein, although doubtless well-intentioned, nevertheless risks bringing back into play some of the attitudes that the main body of the chapter has been at pains to decry.

There are further chapters that delve into 'performance' territory. Michal Grover-Friedlander writes on 'Voice', and retreads much of the territory of her two books on the topic. I admire her project but often find her conclusions frustratingly opaque. On *Gianni Schicchi*, for example, we are told that the epilogue, in which Schicchi, after impersonating a dead person during the opera's comic climax, wryly recalls that he himself ended up in Dante's *Inferno*, 'reflects back … to the whole opera and refashions the character's operatic self as one that is simultaneously living and dead' (329). From this, it is a short step to the conclusion: that 'Opera's

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expansion of the space of death, so that singing takes place beyond the boundaries of life, is then at the same time a re-articulation, even a transgression of the boundaries of singing itself. Singing as such becomes more present, becomes a being with its own identity and soul' (330). Stirring indeed, but then almost all historical drama, whether spoken or sung, is peopled by the dead. Are all their voices thus freighted? And if so, for whom? In what specific reception context might such divagations take hold?

Continuing the 'performance' thread, and on firmer historical ground, Mary Hunter's chapter on 'Historically Informed Performance', elegantly written and persuasively argued, was also attention-grabbing as a rhetorical display in that it sought to undermine its very title, not an easy trick to bring off. As Hunter writes in her conclusion, surely correctly, 'even an *implicit* binary opposition between historically "informed" and historically "uninformed" productions is a deeply unhelpful way to think about historicity in operatic performance' (622). She continues by making clear that the boost of the epithet 'historically informed' relies at base on a straw person – on the notion that the average performance at La Scala or the Met has no interest or concern for history, a formulation that is plainly false as soon as one examines it at all closely. This objection could also be applied to any self-declared 'historical' performance, of course, but in opera the obstacles are even greater, not least – as Hunter says – by the fact that those who feel operatically comfortable with ancient instruments and revised playing techniques are always obliged to make enormous compromises (basically to turn a blind eye) when it comes to singers: the bizarre presence of the countertenor in otherwise 'historical' performances is a case in point, but hardly the only one. And then there's the even larger problem of how to reconstruct the 'event': we don't have the stage machinery; we can't afford the painted backdrops or find people who could paint them; we're forbidden to take the risks with naked flames that our ancestors did; we're phobic about audience noise and other signs of inattention; and so on and on. It's remarkable in the circumstances that anyone even attempts to claim 'historically informed' operatic performances. But attempt them they do: so powerful remains the pull of 'authenticity', no matter how often the special-pleading surrounding it are exposed.

I could go on, trawling through the volume in search of other themes, but it is better to be (comparatively) brief. To stretch to even a hundredth of the *Oxford Handbook*'s length would strain readers' patience. I am, though, aware of having barely skimmed the surface, in particular of leaving a number of stimulating chapters unmentioned. Let me squeeze in a couple more here.

The first is Thomas Christiansen's 'Soundings Offstage', which presents a stirring manifesto, certainly not one reflected in the book as a whole. It is that 'operatic music heard outside the theatre in the guise of … domestic and salon arrangements for piano was as important a part of operatic history as that experienced during a live stage performance' (900). Equally significant, he backs up that *point d'appui* with a survey of domestic consumption through opera's entire history. Could he have gone further? The piano was, of course, hugely influential in the 'long' nineteenth

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century, but its expense and bulk meant that it was restricted to certain domestic interiors, mostly those of the comparatively rich. Many other instruments were involved in opera's diaspora, and some spread across society even more broadly: the guitar (understudied in this period, but now receiving the welcome attention of Christopher Page and his Cambridge group: see https://guitarconsortium.wordpress.com), whose portability and relative cheapness made its profile very different from that of the piano; the bands, military and otherwise, that played in the streets or in the parks of large cities; and of course the barrel organs of street performers, which had operatic tunes at their core, and with them plagued the urban middle classes.

A second chapter that drove the annotating pencil was Veronica Isaac's on 'Costume'. Again, this was a brave attempt to offer something like a historical overview of the topic. But most of all Isaac provided glimpses of an operatic world, and an operatic locus of research, that I – for one – had barely registered as a separate discipline. We are, for example, introduced to Adelina Patti's white satin shoes, embellished with lace and diamante, which she wore (and why not? no 'authenticity' here!) as both Lucia and Violetta, and which are preserved at the Royal Opera House. Or, going back in time, we encounter the ubiquitous 'tonnelet', one of the first garments specifically associated with operatic performance: 'a sleeveless, three-quarter length tunic with a stiff, wide skirt'. One of these survives in the V&A, of mid-eighteenth-century Italian provenance. Made from heavy crimson velvet:

> the bodice and layered skirt are decorated with a stylized design of flowers and scrolls in raised silver embroidery. Furnishing velvet was used to create the 'ground' of the costume; both this rich fabric and the precious metal thread used for the embroidery would have glowed in the candlelit interior of the theatre. (557)

Now *there's* exoticism for you. The tonnelet, by the way, was worn exclusively by male performers.

In spite of these and other fine chapters (Lawrence Kramer on 'Meaning'; Martha Feldman on 'Castrato Acts'; Ryan Minor on 'The Chorus'; Georgia Cowart on 'Audiences'; Joy Calico on '1900–1945'), the cumulative effect of *The Oxford Handbook of Opera* was – alas – disappointing. This was not chiefly a matter of simple error. True, on page 156 we are told that the 'French versions of *Tannhäuser* and *Don Carlo*' are examples of 'adapting scores to other national conventions'; on page 671 we meet 'Giacomo' Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* and on page 951 'Leonora' in *Fidelio*; we even encounter 'Nicolas' Cook (939) cheek by jowl with 'Nicholas' Gage (942) – but perhaps the proximity of these two puissant gentlemen proved distracting. Given its length and its dense thickets of specialist detail this kind of slip-up (there are many, many more) could probably not have been avoided. More serious is that many authors were offered too much space and latitude, and that what they produced seems then to have been ushered into print with minimal editorial supervision. How else can one explain, among other misfortunes, the translations worthy of Google:

> The ecstasy of Gilda and Radamès at the limit of their final hour cannot merely signify abandon at the close of physical life; these are the prescience of a rebirth and the anticipation of a new harmony, delivered from the strife and injustice of earthly existence. (743–4)

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> *Fidelio* (1805/1814) continues to incite controversial discussions about Beethoven's lucky hand in dealing with the genre and the dramatic impact of the subject, […] However, even if Brahms had found what he judged to be an acceptable opera books, […] (629, 631)

the plethora of someone-please-check moments:

> In May 2002, the same *Fingal's Cave* autograph was sold for £600, in the very same auction at which the above-mentioned symphonic sketch by Beethoven was sold for a price almost four times greater. (689)

the metaphors gone mad:

> Put a bit differently, scholarship on opera and film operates in a fluid playing field drawn from many disciplines and resists a definable body of theoretical perspectives. (922)

the classic illustrations of forcible-feeble:

> Writing the history of opera, even in the most restrictive form of that concept, without understanding the history of each opera, seems to me a thankless task. (1039)

or the moments of frank incoherence:

> For today's times, it also suggests that the materializing and the culturalist scholarly approaches might aspire to test each other's findings, to ask in what they sustain, or do not, each other's theorizing, tuning in, all the while, to the reciprocal interplay between pasts and presents. (525)

It would be churlish to single out these examples if they were merely isolated phenomena, but in places such writing is close to the lingua franca of this sadly inflated volume.

However, as mentioned at the start, most readers will not have to encounter – still less feel they have personally paid for – such calamities. In the comparative safety of electronic consumption, they can concentrate on the chapters – and there are more than a few – in which they are encouraged to think anew about opera and the operatic event, and then to ponder how the peculiar nature of their chosen topic might prove a testing ground for larger questions about musical meaning. And my most positive impression from the *Oxford Handbook* was that opera can still fulfil this function in the musicological universe. When the *Cambridge Opera Journal* began life in 1989, it did so with, inevitably, a certain amount of fanfare and talk of a brave new world. To some extent that world then came into being. It felt as though 'opera studies' became – for a time, in the Anglo-Saxon bubble – something like a cutting-edge musicological activity. Of course, it cannot claim that status today, and for the best of reasons: 'opera studies' has become part of the mainstream, and is now very much a staple of establishment musicological values. Indeed, it's difficult to recall (even for those who were, like me, around at the time) how daring it seemed to write musicologically about, say, Donizetti or Bizet in the 1970s or 1980s; even Verdi raised eyebrows (although never Wagner, never Mozart, and certainly never Johann Adolf Hasse or anyone else fortunate enough to be no longer performed). We are now, yes, in the mainstream, which means that occupants of other, newer

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tributaries can now enrich us and diversify our purview, in the process making more complicated, more exploratory and thus more enjoyable our journey down the river.

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