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WHAT ARE YOU READING?
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What might one read for an opera course? I teach an occasional survey that looks at opera in the context of theatre. It is intended to demystify opera for those who have no experience of it but also to explore some nooks and crannies that even fans might not know well. The general layout is chronological, but local production schedules may mean that we start out of order or that there are interruptions. My concern is that students be somewhat prepared when they go to see an opera on the syllabus. Rather than choose warhorses for their own sake, I seek out pieces that offer historical, political, or aesthetic choices that are surprising to many students. Thus, with John Adams's *Nixon in China*, we also read three plays about Madame Mao. With the intermezzi presented as part of the Medici wedding festivities of 1598,[1] we read one of the plays the intermezzi graced, Bargagli's *La pellegrina;*[2] for the production process, we read excerpts from James M. Saslow's wonderful 1996 book about the wedding,[3] and so on. I change the overall content to accommodate available productions and to keep the course interesting for me and (I hope) for students. Since I keep an eye out for books that might be useful, this essay combines things I have actually read with things I will consider for the syllabus the next time I teach it.

I will certainly assign parts of Dennis Kennedy's *The Spectator and the Spectacle: Audiences in Modernity and Postmodernity* (Cambridge University Press, 2009) for the breadth of perspective he offers. He ranges widely, so more circumscribed studies help in confronting particular problems, such as the appeal of opera seria. For a number of years I have used an essay by Martha Feldman for this purpose, but she now has expanded that essay into *Opera and Sovereignty: Transforming Myths in Eighteenth-Century Italy* (University of Chicago Press, 2007). Starting from the ritual aspects of attending opera seria and moving on to the magic of myth, she lays out four case studies—"Programming Nature, Parma, 1759"; "Abandonments in a Theater State, Naples, 1764"; "Bourgeois Theatrics, Perugia, 1781"; and "Death of the Sovereign, Venice, 1797"—to traverse the

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century and show consistencies and variations in the pattern of support for political absolutism. Beth L. Glixon and Jonathan E. Glixon's *Inventing the Business of Opera: The Impresario and His World in Seventeenth-Century Venice* (Oxford, 2006) deals with an earlier historical moment and shows just how ad hoc the business side of opera has always been.

John S. Powell's *Music and Theatre in France, 1600–1680* (Oxford, 2000) covers the use of music in theatre in the period when Paris became the center of culture, neoclassicism established its peculiarly French mode, and French opera split definitively from Italian. Powell is concerned with the larger issues of how much music was being used in what forms and in which theatres rather than with the subtleties of meaning of various plays. Still, he shows conclusively that music played an increasingly large part in Molière's oeuvre as his career came to an end, adding a useful perspective to Virginia Scott's account in *Molière: A Theatrical Life* (Cambridge, 2000). Sarah R. Cohen's *Art, Dance, and the Body in French Culture of the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge, 2000) provides a comprehensive view of the subject, particularly important because this is when ballet as we still know it was codified.

Guides can be useful, even to those who know a field well. John A. Rice has written an unusually well-integrated one in *Mozart on the Stage* (Cambridge, 2009). Instead of discussing the works opera by opera, he treats practical and aesthetic subjects in a series of chapters that deal, for example, with "Mozart and His Singers," "Rehearsal, Revision, and Promotion," "Mozart's Operas: Function, Genres, Archetypes," and "Performance and Reception." As a concise picture of what a composer did in the later eighteenth century and how he interacted with others in the production process, Rice's book would be hard to beat. If one were teaching *La clemenza di Tito*, another useful book would be Robert C. Ketterer's *Ancient Rome in Early Opera* (University of Illinois, 2009), which looks at how various Roman stories, including those of Poppea and Titus, were remade for operatic purposes.

I often teach two versions of *Iphigenie in Aulis*, Gluck's and Goethe's. For perspective on the story, see Derek Hughes's *Culture and Sacrifice: Ritual Death in Literature and Opera* (Cambridge, 2007). To put some limits on a vast subject, he first follows versions of the Iphigenia myths, then notes where sacrifice tales begin to switch over to *The Bacchae* as inspiration. He shows that although the process began hesitantly with Nietzsche, Frazer, and Freud, by the middle of the twentieth century, Iphigenia had been overwhelmed. Hughes found so many examples that he could not devote much detail to any one version, but he provides many stimuli for further research and possible choices for an opera course.

The context for a single controversial opera can be so important as to deserve a whole book. In *Opera, Liberalism, and Antisemitism in Nineteenth-Century France: The Politics of Halévy's "La Juive"* (Cambridge, 2002) Diana R. Hallman has much to say about the generation of the opera, where the Halévy family fit within French society in the early part of the century, and why the librettist Eugène Scribe shaped the story of the opera as he did. *La Juive* was possible only because of a tiny window between periods of censorship, yet once it had established itself it continued to flourish even after that window had been

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slammed shut. This phenomenon of co-optation is one to which theatre historians have paid insufficient attention. Hallman makes some attempt to take the actual production into account, as the appendix of personnel shows, but production is not really her subject. Nevertheless, *La Juive* provides a fine example of grand opera with some continuing relevance, as the DVD of the production that stars Neil Shicoff shows.[4]

Wagner is unavoidable in a course like this, although exposing people to the scale of his work is about all I attempt to do. When facing such a massive subject, *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, edited by Thomas S. Grey (2008), offers current overviews of various subjects that will help guide the nonexpert. The book is divided into four sections: "Biographical and Historical Contexts," "Opera, Music, Drama," "Ideas and Ideology in the *Gesamtkunstwerk*" (including "The Jewish Question," by Grey himself), and "After Wagner: Influence and Interpretation." In theatre, Wagner leads to the reaction of Brecht, so I should mention Joy H. Calico's *Brecht at the Opera* (University of California Press, 2008). Calico reads the *Lehrstücke* and other early plays such as *The Mother* and *The Round Heads and Pointed Heads* against what was happening in the world of opera in Germany at the time to argue that that world was part of what pushed Brecht to develop the theory of *Gestus.*

Among the most daring of recent books in this general area is David J. Levin's *Unsettling Opera: Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Zemlinsky* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). Like a number of other musicologists in recent years, Levin is concerned with how opera affects audiences viscerally and emotionally as well as intellectually, and he focuses on actual productions rather than abstract discussions of what a given opera is about. For example, his second chapter is "Reading a Stage/Staging a Reading: Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* in Performance." He compares and contrasts specific productions, some fairly conventional, others quite radical, to see how and whether they serve operas by his chosen composers. If Levin comes down against Calixto Bieito's *Entführung aus dem Serail*, it is not because he resists Bieito, the most notorious director whose work he surveys, but because he finds the "depiction of contemporary society's underbelly . . . as monotonic as it was unsentimental" (xiii) and ultimately ineffectual. He juxtaposes an equally unsentimental but infinitely better-thought-out production by Hans Neuenfels at Stuttgart in 1998 to show why some *Regietheater* works and some is just vandalism. Whether you agree with Levin about a given production or not, he at least articulates his reasons for his responses, and since he has chosen productions available on DVD, it's relatively easy to examine the evidence yourself.

I will consider Kurt Weill's version of Elmer Rice's *Street Scene* the next time I offer this course, partly because I saw it last year at the Manhattan School of Music but also because my colleague David Savran's *Highbrow/Lowdown: Theater, Jazz, and the Making of the New Middle Class* (University of Michigan Press, 2009) will be useful for the context. Other Weill possibilities would be the operetta *The Firebrand of Florence*, about Cellini (very strange); or *Der Silbersee*, a modern fairy-tale piece; or *Lost in the Stars*, which is based on Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country*, for a piece about South Africa. I also include in

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my course at least one musical that has crossed over into opera houses, often something by Stephen Sondheim, in part because I have seen people who are not yet senior citizens ostentatiously walk out of *Sweeney Todd* at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. Steve Swayne's *How Sondheim Found His Sound* (University of Michigan Press, 2007) combines interviews (his own and those of others) with musicological analysis to show why Sondheim's music is complex enough to attract invitations from opera houses, whereas that of Andrew Lloyd Webber (so far) is not. I place the musical late in the semester so the less-experienced listeners have as long as possible to get an idea of why so few musicals do cross over.

I have space only to mention that I include a section on Slavic and East European opera, areas that are not well known to most of my students. I have been teaching this course for nearly a decade now, and I must say it has gotten considerably easier. Not only are there many DVDs with which to supplement recordings but the scholarship has also become noticeably more interdisciplinary. In the best instances this can happen without sacrificing technical musicological standards, and an increased sensitivity on the part of the musicologist or dance historian can supplement genuine expertise in their respective disciplines, which is as it should be. Try some of these books: they have much to offer us.

ENDNOTES

1. Available on CD as *Una "Stravaganza" dei Medici: Intermedi (1589) per "La pellegrina"* (EMI CDC 7 47998 2, 1988).

2. Girolamo Bargagli, *The Female Pilgrim (La pellegrina)*, translated and with an introduction by Bruno Ferraro (Ottawa: Dovehouse Editions, 1988).

3. James M. Saslow, *The Medici Wedding of 1589: Florentine Festival as Theatrum Mundi* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

4. *La Juive*, conducted by Vjekoslav Šutej, directed by Günter Krämer for the Wiener Staatsoper, 2003 revival of 1999 production (Deutsche Grammophon 00440 073 4001, 2004).

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