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Tamara Levitz, *Modernist Mysteries: Perséphone*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. xxiii + 655 pp. Music examples, illustrations, color prints, bibliography, and index. \$65.00 (hb) U.S. ISBN 978-0-19-973016-2.

Review by Helen Julia Minors, Kingston University, London, U.K.

In constructing a new approach to musicology in her vast tome of over 600 pages, Tamara Levitz tackles a historical-cultural interrogation of the fraught collaboration leading to the performance of *Perséphone*. The volume thrives on thick description, and seeks to project all the hybrid complexities of the creative collaborative process by presenting the multiple voices and diverse perspectives of this melodrama. This book further develops the fresh perspective offered by her previous edited volume, *Stravinsky and His World*.^[1] To do so, Levitz engages with a plethora of primary source material and many unpublished letters: the detail such archival research provides is both impressive and exasperating.

Levitz's book presents the immense collaborative universe behind the work known as *Perséphone*: as with any large-scale operatic-balletic production, the overall architecture, main themes and development of those themes is complex. To manage this, the book adopts three parts, each dedicated to the core issues which "[e]ach of the collaborators had different notions about" (p. 9): Faith, Love, and Hope. It is notable that despite the failure of this production, and the collaboration described in no uncertain tones as a "quagmire of acrimony" (p. 9), Levitz's volume carefully navigates towards a positive tone, ending with Hope (perhaps this is a structural analogy to reading *Perséphone* as a redemptive character) (p. 574). The 1934 premiere (30 April, Paris Opéra) was deemed a "failure," and it is reassuring that Levitz acknowledges this as a critical stimulus for her study "by exploring the relationship collapses and moments of failure permeating the production of *Perséphone*" (p. 22).

The introduction not only sets the main aim and questions, but the summary of the collaborative beginnings of the project, of the artists involved and the multiple contexts, which reads much like a novel, where this foundation will inform the journey which follows. Levitz is not shy to refer to contemporaneous rumor (p. 5), or to use adjectives to give a flavor of Ida Rubenstein's character. What is clear from this introduction is Rubenstein's central role not only in financing the production and in selecting her collaborators, but also in interpreting the scenario and modeling the final production in which she aimed to dance. Levitz makes clear that Rubenstein (impresario, dancer), André Gide (playwright), Igor Stravinsky (composer), Jacques Copeau (artistic director), Kurt Jooss (choreographer) and André Barsacq (designer) were "divided from one another" at the outset due to differences in "age, nationality, personal experience, and history" (p. 9); one could add faith and sexuality to the list.

The "focus on the history of *Perséphone* as a performance event" (p. 16) has required Levitz to "dismantle myths about neoclassicism" (p. 17); in so doing, she has not redefined terms previously established by Scott Messing (and others), nor has she resorted to jargon; rather she opens up such stylistic labels and challenges researchers of the period to reassess our assumptions of such artistic movements.^[2] Her literature review and thorough critical cross-referencing across disciplinary fields, demonstrates depth

and breadth of reading which seem to have no bounds: Levitz's extensive bibliography and engagement with literature, from even the most remote sources, ensures that this volume incorporates every possible review, letter, record and report of this performance event.

The first part of the book explores Faith, and the chapters contained within this part probe in minute detail the perspective of individual collaborators. Chapter one, "Gide's Anxiousness," charts his long history with the myth of Perséphone. Levitz reveals a secular focus, founded on a personal conflict with Catholicism, which resulted in his "radically alter[ing] the original myth" (p. 79), according to his own moral concerns and "experience of daily life" (p. 101). Gide's personal "fear" and anxiety are detailed (p. 60) and his exploration of faith and sexuality are outlined, while ensuring his personal response to music is grounded before we read about Stravinsky's compositional approach (p. 63). Chapter two, "Stravinsky's Dogma," outlines an opposing creative intention, founded on the two artists' "disagreement... over the issue of immanence" (p. 122) and "dogma" (p. 123). As Levitz concludes, "Stravinsky's mythical intuition about transhistorical sacred energy confronted Gide's intertextual, self-reflexive, dialogical texts" (p. 175). Chapter three, "Performing Devotion," explores Copeau's intentions. Set apart from those of Gide and Stravinsky, who, despite their aesthetic disagreements shared conflicting views regarding the religious movement with which Copeau was a part, namely, the *Renouveau catholique*, Copeau's "theater projects give evidence of [a] strong affinity" with this movement (p. 187).

Part two, Love (comprising chapters four, "André's Masked Pleasures," and five, "Igor's Duality"), follows a structure similar to that of the first part in that Gide, then Stravinsky, form the focus of successive chapters. The issue of Gide's subjectivity versus Stravinsky's seeming avoidance of subjectivity through neoclassicism becomes the aesthetic disagreement under analysis. Chapter five offers a new perspective on Stravinsky that complements Stravinsky scholarship: notable is Levitz's continued critical assessment of neoclassicism within a microhistorical framework, and, in addition, her assessment of the duality ("between mysticism and obedience to orthodox dogma," pp. 301-302) that Stravinsky experienced as a Russian émigré and artist. Chapter six, "Ida the Sapphic Fetish," finally explores Rubenstein's own creation frictions, identifying the different approaches to the public and private representation. Chapter seven, "Voices from the Crypt," brings together a discussion of all the collaborators. As Levitz explores the resulting readings, she reflects also on her methodological approach and as a consequence "rejects the standard materialist view of neoclassicism" (p. 476).

The third and final part of the book, Hope, is much shorter and contains only one chapter. Chapter eight, "The Promise of Irreconcilable Difference," explores the premiere in 1934. Levitz's aim to chart *Perséphone* as a performance event is born out in the final chapter. A moment of aesthetic union is outlined regarding the "vision of Persephone's rebirth": it is notable that Stravinsky, Copeau and Rubenstein are discussed together, in contrast to Gide (p. 574). Throughout the book Levitz includes illustrations, quotations and copious footnotes: here musical examples are incorporated to give a greater sense of the performance event, beyond the creative intentions and debates, to the practicalities of the final work. As she notes at the outset, Levitz concludes "that neoclassicism is not only a style but also a vitalist art haunted by ghosts of the past—and brimming with promise for the future" (p. 45).

In formulating a new approach to musicology and to an interdisciplinary study of melodrama, Levitz integrates references to the contemporaneous political context, theological concerns, and philosophical ideas, bringing them meaningfully into dialogue via a methodology which "investigat[es] theatrical aporias and music as an event" through "reflections on microhistory" (p. 23). In selecting a refined period of history (the creative, collaborative context of the artists leading to the performance of *Perséphone*) and in exploring the biographical details alongside their aesthetics and opinions, established through primary source evidence, Levitz's microhistory is a "study of poietics" (p. 24) which speaks directly to Jean-Jacques Nattiez.^[3] In order to chart both the artists' intentions and the "neutral" texts, the notion of voice becomes prime in her work. Beyond the objects of her study, Levitz's own personal

voice is projected, as she switches to the first person often throughout the text: this might seem abrupt, but it is in line with her microhistorical approach as she situates her own methodological choice and reveals what she has learned through this approach, notably in the last chapter: “Heterogeneity emerged for me as the greatest lesson of the experiment in microhistory” (p. 622). The first person is used exclusively to distinguish her own perspective from that of previous literature, or to demarcate her rationale for taking a particular perspective, ensuring that she offers sign posts for her reader (see, for example, pages 31 and 124).

The problematic collaboration between Stravinsky and Gide, especially, is fairly well known among Stravinsky scholars and scholars of early twentieth-century dance. This book, however, draws attention to the different perspectives these artists had on a wide range of issues, and sets them within their European context. This book’s microhistorical engagement with one of Stravinsky’s lesser-known works contributes new research to the field of Stravinsky scholarship, certainly, and moreover, demonstrates a nuanced approach to cultural-historical musicology. The new reading of neoclassicism will be especially of interest to musicologists specializing in early twentieth century work.

This microhistory reveals a whole universe of artistic collaborators and critical thinkers, engaged with critical debates concerning religion, politics, sexuality, and artistic approaches, as well as the communication of the past with the present, and beyond. The expansive referencing, depth of archival research, and multiple voices presenting the artistic intentions of Rubenstein, Gide, Stravinsky, Copeau and Jooss is authoritative and copious. Its scale, length, detail and complexity may detract from this being adopted as a score text for introducing new students to these artists, but for those inducted into the wondrous world of early twentieth-century European theatre art, it will be a welcomed theoretical, analytical, philosophical volume.

Debate and conflicting critical voices coalesced around the central figure, Rubenstein, while the storm arose between Gide and Stravinsky, and then with Copeau. The result was a performance failure: the book, however, reveals the theme of hope by subverting the standard reading of neoclassicism and seeking new questions and counter-arguments about this European era. Levitz proposes “a heterogeneity of theatrical means” and suggests an “alternative politics of hope” (p. 622). This is a vast monograph, on a new scale, with a magnitude of primary sources; as such it requires patience, a slow reading, and a returning glance across the book to draw comparisons between chapters dedicated to individuals.

NOTES

[1] Tamara Levitz, ed., *Stravinsky and His World* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013).

[2] Scott Messing, *Neoclassicism in Music: From the Genesis of the Concept through the Schoenberg/Stravinsky Polemic* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1988).

[3] Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990).

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