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Victoria Johnson, *Backstage at the Revolution: How the Royal Paris Opera Survived the End of the Old Regime*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008. xv + 281 pp. Plates, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$45.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-226-40195-9.

Reviewed by Lauren Clay, Vanderbilt University.

Sociologist Victoria Johnson frames her compelling new book, *Backstage at the Revolution*, around a simple yet intriguing problem. How did the royal Paris Opera, the most privileged of ancien régime theatrical institutions, survive a revolution intent on destroying all vestiges of privilege? The Revolution precipitated a very real crisis for the Opera, which was “by far the largest, most expensive, and most powerful” of Paris theaters (39). Beginning in the fall of 1789 the Opera came under attack from reformers for its extravagant luxury and its “despotic” treatment of other Paris stages, which it forced to pay for the right to perform most song and dance. Then, in early 1791, revolutionaries abolished theatrical privilege, ending the system of royal monopolies that had protected and supported the Opera since its inception. With all forms of performance now open to free market competition, the implications for this notoriously costly institution were potentially catastrophic. At this critical juncture, however, Parisian authorities stepped in to save the Opera, granting subsidies of more than 200,000 livres in 1791 alone (76). Why was the Opera not simply spared, but actively protected by the city of Paris and successive Revolutionary regimes?

In answering this question, *Backstage at the Revolution* presents a tightly knit study of the Paris Opera as an institution from its creation under Louis XIV through its reestablishment as an imperial theater under Napoleon. (Despite the title, less than one-third of the book focuses on the Revolutionary era.) Interdisciplinary in approach, this book draws on musicology and history but is most deeply rooted in sociology. The problem of the Opera’s survival is cast above all in institutional terms: “What internal and external mechanisms enabled this formal organization to survive such a dramatic rupture in its social environment?” (8) Applying organizational theory to this particularly high profile historical case, Johnson sheds light on both the history of the Paris Opera and on the dynamics of organizations in relation to their environment.

Provocatively, Johnson argues that the answer to the question of the Opera’s survival is not to be found in contingent events of the Revolution itself or even the later decades of the ancien régime, two eras where important recent studies of the stage have focused attention.^[1] Rather, this study credits “an organizational process begun more than a century earlier” (2). From its very establishment in 1669, Johnson argues, the Opera’s founders, poet Pierre Perrin and his more famous successor Jean-Baptiste Lully, cultivated a unique institutional and cultural identity for the theater, one that was reinforced throughout the eighteenth century.

Unlike other theater companies, the Académie Royale de Musique (as the Paris Opera was officially known until 1791) was established as a hybrid between a public theater and a royal academy, endowing its distinctive new genre—opera in the French language—with unmatched prestige. At the same time, the king granted this new institution a monopoly on the performance of opera, one that was broadly interpreted to apply to most music and dance. This privilege “thwarted imitation” and established the

Opera as “an organization unique in France” (6). This book argues that Perrin and Lully together established the Opera as the theater of luxury par excellence, an identity that later directors sustained. In the midst of the Revolution, this deeply rooted identity—as a cultural institution that was uniquely magnificent, but also uniquely expensive—became the Opera’s saving grace.

Readers acquainted with scholarship on the Paris Opera and theater during the ancien régime and Revolution will find many elements of this story familiar. As Johnson acknowledges, France’s premier musical institution has long fascinated musicologists and historians alike. William Weber has explored the Opera’s distinctive institutional organization during the ancien régime as well as its long-term financial difficulties.[2] Robert Isherwood and Jérôme de la Gorce have examined the Opera’s founding and rise to prominence under Lully and Louis XIV.[3] Isherwood and Michèle Root-Bernstein have exposed the Opera’s aggressive use of its monopoly and its contested relationship with Paris’s popular but unprivileged fairground and boulevard stages in the eighteenth century.[4] James Johnson’s study of listening practices follows the Opera and its audiences from the ancien régime through the tumultuous years of the Revolution to its adoption as “Napoleon’s show” and beyond. [5] This book, however, brings new focus to the question of why the Opera survived a Revolution that eventually brought down France’s royal dramatic theater, the Comédie-Française, and royal academies such as the Académie française. It also proposes a new answer.

Methodologically, Johnson approaches this study of the Opera’s survival as a long-term historical case study of the “organizational imprinting hypothesis,” a concept introduced by Arthur Stinchcombe in a seminal 1965 article (15).[6] At its most basic, organizational imprinting theory proposes that an institution’s founding arrangements frequently persist over time to shape its future. Graciously, Johnson has placed the book’s discussion of imprinting as it relates to the field of organizational theory and sociology more broadly in discrete chapters. In chapter 1, the book opens with an examination of Stinchcombe’s theory and its legacy. Here, Johnson presents her own definition of imprinting as a process that was shaped by forces internal and external to an institution, and by deliberate as well as unintentional actions.

Readers less interested in the finer points of organizational sociology may skip directly to what the author describes as “the swashbuckling tale of how one of the world’s most fabled cultural institutions survived one of the most significant and violent events in European history” (18). Rather than following a chronological exposition, the book’s structure recapitulates the logic of this driving question. Chapters 2 and 3 recount the Opera’s trials and ultimate salvation during the early Revolution. To account for the theater’s success Johnson then turns back to the origins of opera in France. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 focus on Perrin, Lully, and their pivotal role in establishing the Opera’s distinctive organizational structure and its enduring identity as the site of “unparalleled luxury in the field of French theater” (132). Chapter 7 argues for the lasting influence of these so-called “phantom founders” on the Opera’s institutional and cultural identity during the century leading up to the Revolution.

This tale is indeed well told. Johnson’s intensively researched and beautifully illustrated narrative of the Paris Opera’s history is lively and colorful. Her account of the creation of the Opera and the birth of a new genre—the *tragédie en musique*—is filled with drama and intrigue. Making good use of the Opera’s rich archives, the book takes readers behind-the-scenes of this venerable stage. The connections it establishes between the Opera’s institutional history and the artistic repertory created on its stage will be of particular interest to musicologists and theater scholars.

Backstage at the Revolution bravely crosses disciplinary lines. Yet, in the process, disciplinary differences are also thrown into relief. Rather than analyzing change over time, the historian’s traditional vocation, Johnson sets out to explain how and why institutions and their organizational structures and identities remain the same. The book’s basic premise, that “an organization’s origins decisively influence its subsequent trajectory,” is not quite as deterministic as it sounds (29). The author distinguishes

organizational imprinting from “path-dependent processes,” self-reinforcing chains of events or institutional patterns that qualify as deterministic. Institutional imprinting, she suggests, allows for contingency, agency, and the untidiness of historical processes. The book suggests the need for action from an organization’s leadership to shore up founding arrangements and institutional identities over time, rather than assuming that these maintain themselves through inertia alone. Nonetheless, Johnson presents the Opera’s founding arrangements alone—through the mechanism of effective imprinting—as sufficient to “cause” the Opera’s survival of the Revolution (196). No other potential causes are developed or weighed.

It makes for a neat model, but one that is likely to strike historians as too neat. It left me wondering what other more immediate factors might have contributed to the Opera’s resilience. What strategies did the Opera’s directors or singers use to curry favor with revolutionaries? Was the Opera, as other scholars have suggested, particularly successful at adapting to the political culture of the Revolution?[7] Casting the Opera as a unique institution, the book provides readers with little basis for comparing its Revolutionary experience with those of other leading cultural institutions. Yet in fact, with the notable exception of the Comédie-Française which was closed in 1793, almost all Paris theaters in operation in the summer of 1789 survived to perform another day.[8] Did imprinting play the critical role in these other cases as well?

Johnson’s own evidence suggests that in protecting the Opera Parisian officials were motivated by a variety of factors, not all of which can be traced back to its founding. In fact, the very reason that that the Opera seemed to require special treatment—that unlike other theaters it was deemed inherently unprofitable and unable to survive on its own—was a post-foundational development, Lully himself having managed his business affairs to great personal advantage (127). In Jean-Jacques Leroux’s crucial 1791 report arguing in favor of Opera subsidies, the deputy did make allusion to the Opera’s deeply rooted institutional and cultural identity. Yet, as Johnson notes, he also emphasized pragmatic concerns, for example that the Opera employed more than 500 people and pumped more than a million livres a year into the Paris economy. Leroux also played upon the politicians’ pride, arguing that Paris should not be “forced to give up one of the establishments that brings it honor . . . the most beautiful Theater in existence” (183). Given that the city of Paris enabled the Opera’s survival at this crucial moment, the municipality’s prior experience administering the Opera (which it oversaw episodically from as early as 1749) seems to call for greater attention.[9] In the midst of the Revolution, Paris reassumed an already familiar role as patron of the Opera.

In *Backstage at the Revolution* the answer to the question of the Opera’s survival is narrowly focused. The real power lies with the Opera’s founders in the seventeenth century, while later directors and even the revolutionaries seem to fall into already prescribed roles. By developing an important long-term cause of the Opera’s resilience, however, this eminently readable book makes an important contribution. It reminds readers of the extent to which institutions over time do begin to take on a life of their own. In the wake of recent record-breaking government bailouts of unprofitable organizations, the attitude of the Paris authorities strikes a surprisingly familiar note. The Opera needed administrative overhaul—that much was clear. But whatever the cost, the Opera had become too important to allow it to fail.

NOTES

[1] See especially Jeffrey Ravel, *The Contested Parterre: Public Theater and French Political Culture, 1680-1791* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999) and Paul Friedland, *Political Actors: Representative bodies & Theatricality in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

[2] William Weber, “L’Institution et son public: L’Opéra à Paris et à Londres au XVIIIe siècle,” *Annales ESC* 6 (1993): 1519-1539.

- [3] Robert Isherwood, *Music in the Service of the King: France in the Seventeenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973) and Jérôme de la Gorce, *L'Opéra à Paris au temps de Louis XIV: Histoire d'un théâtre* (Paris: Editions Desjonquères, 1992).
- [4] Robert Isherwood, *Farce and Fantasy: Popular Entertainment in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Michèle Root-Bernstein, *Boulevard Theater and Revolution in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984).
- [5] James Johnson, *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1995).
- [6] Arthur L. Stinchcombe, "Social Structure and Organizations," in James G. March ed., *Handbook of Organizations* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1965), pp. 142-193.
- [7] Marvin Carlson, for example, argues that the Opera and two other theaters secured subsidies in 1792 because of "some form of concession to the new order" in *The Theatre of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), 133. See also Emmet Kennedy, *A Cultural History of the French Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 179.
- [8] Carlson, *The Theatre of the French Revolution*, 289-291.
- [9] Weber, "L'Institution et son Public," 1530.

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