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Vincent Giroud, *French Opera: A Short History*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010. x + 366 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$40.00 U.S. (cl) ISBN 978-0-300-11765-3; eBook ISBN 978-0-300-16821-1.

Review by Jeffrey Langford, Manhattan School of Music.

In *French Opera: A Short History* Vincent Giroud presents his reader with an almost dizzying collection of facts about opera in France from its origins in the mid-seventeenth century to its most recent developments in the twentieth century. Found within the 305 pages of this book is a long parade, arranged chronologically, of the great and the not-so-great composers who populate the history of this genre in France. The arrangement of the book into distinct subsections dealing with individual composers one after another creates more the feel of a dictionary or encyclopedia than of a traditional, narrated history—clearly not the kind of book one would pick up and read straight through, but rather one that might be consulted for specific information about the lives and works of these French composers. Within each “entry” one finds a wealth of valuable facts, assembled from over 220 relevant books on specialized aspects of French opera. (Needless to say, footnotes abound on every page.) Giroud presents essential biographical information about each composer, and at least a short discussion of nearly every opera he wrote. (There are no women composers in this history). Many of the more important of these works receive plot synopses accompanied by often fascinating information about librettists, revised versions, foreign productions, revivals, and original casts. Thus the discussion of Gounod’s *Faust*, for example, informs us that Valentin’s famous aria “Avant de quitter ces lieux” was composed not for the opera’s premiere, but for a particular British baritone who took the role in an 1864 revival in London. Even virtually unknown composers of French opera, such as Victorin Joncières (who composed both serious and comic opera at the end of the nineteenth century), get at least passing mention along with a list of their works and theaters in which they were produced. The level of documentary detail here is impressive, resulting in a book that packs a vast amount of useful information into a relatively compact, handy, single-volume survey.

Despite this satisfying collection of facts regarding composers, librettists, productions, and so much else, Giroud’s history of French opera suffers from one glaring omission: a detailed discussion of the music in these operas. Because opera is a genre that tells a story through the nexus of music and dramatic texts, one might expect, with some justification, that a history of this genre would deal with the evolution of both, more or less equally. One that glosses over the music, as does Giroud’s, could therefore be accused of jeopardizing its overall effectiveness by ignoring what is arguably the most important element of opera. I am not suggesting that Giroud never mentions music in this otherwise detailed exploration of French opera, but rather that his comments on this aspect of his subject are limited to a few very general observations, such as his assertion (p. 39) that Henri Desmarests’s style is “both learned (as in the beautiful Act 5 passacaille) and affecting, with expressive recitatives,” or (on p. 54) that a trio in one of Rameau’s operas was written in a style “of such harmonic audacity that it defeated performers at the Opéra in 1733 ...” The problem here is that the adjectives “learned” and “affecting” are never defined, and that the mention of Rameau’s “harmonic audacity” is never explained or

illustrated. Many readers will want to know in what way Desmaret's music is "learned." Is it simply the use of the passacaglia that makes it so? Or is there some other aspect of his music that lends it a "learned" sound? Similarly, the lack of a musical example to illustrate the nature of the "harmonic audacity" in Rameau's opera hinders the reader's understanding of this aspect of his compositional style, and perhaps also of how that style differs from the harmonic vocabulary of his contemporaries. Beyond these specific musical issues, lie several broader questions of the role of music in creating dramatic effects in opera, the evolution of musical styles and forms from one composer or one historical period to another, the changing role of the orchestra, and the evolution of singing techniques (especially the use of improvisation) in French opera, all of which go virtually unexamined in Giroud's history. Here and there tantalizing suggestions of interesting musical issues do arise, as in the author's mention of the effect of poetic meters on the *tragédies lyriques* of Lully. But as soon as any such subjects are raised, they are dropped.

A by-product of this lack of serious detailed discussion of musical style and form is the total absence throughout the book of musical examples of any kind. Perhaps Giroud felt they were not necessary, given that musical analysis is not the focus of his discussion; or perhaps he decided such examples would be useless, or even off-putting, to a general readership. Whatever the reason, the lack of illustrative musical examples prevents any serious reader from coming to an understanding of some of the more sophisticated and subtle issues concerning the musical side of opera—issues, for example, of how musical styles serve (or are the product of) the gradually evolving aesthetics of French opera through the ages. So while Giroud's book is clearly aimed at a well-read, sophisticated audience, that audience is most definitely not one of musicians.

One of the most useful parts of any book, but especially an encyclopedic study like this one, is its index of names and topics. At one point in my reading, I wanted to consult all of Giroud's references to the Théâtre Lyrique, a theater that played an important role in the development of alternative types of opera in the second half of the nineteenth century. In turning to the index, I was dismayed to discover that Giroud had indexed nothing but the names of important people, leaving no way to locate specific references throughout the book to anything inanimate, like the Théâtre Lyrique. Given that the usefulness of this book lies mostly in its comprehensive compilation of information (dates and related facts) about specific composers, the decision to index only proper names may at first seem logical; but ultimately such a narrowly focused index is sure to frustrate the user who is looking to this book for specific information about a theater, a kind of opera (such as *opéra lyrique*), a compositional technique (such as *mélodrame*), or any other operatic terminology (such as the *mise en scène* or the *divertissement*). This index simply does the book and its readers a disservice by unfairly diminishing the usefulness of what is otherwise a valuable reference tool.

While every new book contains a fair share of typos in its first printing, this one is spoiled by an annoying overabundance of such errata. Although a review such as this is not the place to detail all such editorial oversights, a few examples will serve to illustrate the general nature of the problem. Some errors are a matter of the simple omission of words or letters, as in (corrections indicated in brackets) this sentence on p. 21: "Medea in *Thésée*, Urgande and Arcabonne in *Amadis*, Logistille in *Roland*, [and] Armide are all magicians, while ancient god[s] and goddesses are endowed with magical powers ..." Or this on p. 108: "Unlike Grétry, [who] produced no work of consequence after ..." Other errors include obvious word transpositions, as on p. 189: "The public and critical response was far from matching the enthusiasm *Orphée* that [that *Orphée*] had inspired." More serious, however, are those proofreading mistakes that result in sentences that simply make no sense, such as the following on p. 132: "If French Romantic works--particularly the exceptionally arduous over [?] by

Meyerbeer--have failed to retain..." What does this mean? The word "over" cannot be used as a noun, as it is here. Such errors stop the reader dead in his tracks, and render Giroud's ideas incomprehensible. Both Giroud and the reader deserve better.

On the whole, *French Opera: A Short History* makes a welcome addition to the writing on a subject that has long been neglected (especially in the popular literature) and overshadowed by attention to the history of Italian and German opera. To its credit, the book contains an astonishing amount of detail, and lets no corner of the history of French opera go unexamined. While most general opera histories would begin the treatment of the subject of French opera with an account of the works of Lully, and then skip directly to those of Rameau, Giroud fills in the gap between these two early giants with no less than a dozen other less well-known composers. For the light this book throws into the nooks and crannies of the French operatic repertoire, we can be thankful. Yet at the same time, we can also regret the decision to concentrate so heavily on the who, what, when, and where of this history at the expense of the less tangible musical side of the subject. While documentable facts concerning French opera are valuable, so too is an understanding of the many facets of evolving musical styles as they bear upon its history. To the extent that Giroud neglects the latter in favor of the former, he has given us a book that, while useful, is also only partially satisfying in its account of the development of opera in France.

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