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Downing A. Thomas, *Aesthetics of Opera in the Ancien Régime, 1647-1785*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002. viii + 411 pp. Illustrations, music examples, notes, bibliography, and index. \$85.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-521-80188-5.

Review by David Charlton, Royal Holloway, University of London.

Downing Thomas's new book is ambitious and helpful on several different levels. Not least is his attempt to encompass a larger-than-normal field. Opera studies, a latecomer within the latecoming discipline of musicology, has not yet progressed so far as to possess a 'standard text' on French opera in any shape or form. (Over the mountains, the Italians have established their *Storia dell'opera italiana* under Lorenzo Bianconi, now in the course of segmented translation into English). If the present book's aim is not a history of earlier French opera, it does address many of the genres into which lyric theatre was cast. Its aim is in a sense 'higher': to contain or subsume this theatre within a history of the philosophical frameworks that determined its real messages and the deeper connections between its make-believe world and the mental world of those who, actively or passively, constructed it. The book uses case-studies and analyses through which to justify these linkages, so demonstrating its competence in theatre history, music history, and philosophy. As a text it has a fairly modern edge, sharpened by Thomas's extensive reading from cultural histories written predominantly during the last twenty years. These are selectively rather than slavishly used, and entice the reader into regular speculation. Thomas's own dissertation work was on French aesthetics and music in the eighteenth century.[1] This provides more of a backbone for the new project than does any one of the newer cultural infusions, such as Scott S. Bryson's *The Chastised Stage*, John W. Yolton's *Thinking Matter*, or Tom McCall's 'Liquid Politics'.[2] One model for Thomas's approach, however, could have been Charles Dill's book on Rameau, *Monstrous Opera*. [3]

In fact, it would have been impossible to write Downing Thomas's book solely on the basis of a repertorial and contextual approach, because there are too many operas to deal with, very few of which have been staged recently. Fortunately, the author's use of secondary musical literature is wide-ranging and perspicacious, but the belated and slow growth of recent research into earlier French opera means that several areas have remained severely short, or bereft, of necessary synoptic and critical assessment. One such field in the latter category is that of serious opera between Gluck and Spontini.

Thomas has cast his chronological study into two parts, 'French opera in the shadow of tragedy', and 'Opera and Enlightenment: from private sensation to public feeling'. Each of the nine constituent chapters uses a different group of operas, or opera-related texts, to develop a more detailed argument in the form of an essay. Much depends, therefore, on the 'small print' of the arguments, their warp and weft, to secure the superior value of the whole over the sum of its parts. This is not consistently achieved. But it must be stressed how impressive is Downing Thomas's command of the issues and how profitable is his melding of cultural texts, music, and aesthetics. There are also pleasurable surprises in each chapter: unexpected insights, rediscovered theories, critical polarities, and a way of pushing the argument one or more steps further than anticipated. All this more than counters an occasional level of over-determination, plus of course removal from the world of egotism, grease-paint, and gut strings that was also 'opera'. But where the author has been able to experience earlier French opera in the theatre he has seized the opportunity to inscribe the impressions within his discussion.

'Song as performance' (chapter one) is coupled with 'the emergence of French opera': that is, the discussion sets the scene by interrelating (a) problems of drama as sung, (b) Parisian opera versus its

Italian ancestors, and (c) a revisiting of opera theory in the light of a wholly (in this context) neglected text, Jean Terrasson's *Dissertation critique sur l'Illiade d'Homere* (1715), plus F. H. d'Aubignac's 1657 *La Pratique du théâtre*, which he uses to ground future discussions in terms of the following discrimination: '...opera problematizes the distinction between story and performance—a distinction that was crucial to seventeenth-century views of tragedy...and which was designed to erect a firewall between the moral values conveyed by the story [as fable] and the questionable pleasures of the spectacle. [...] Opera tended to dismantle the distinction between music as diegetic (story-telling) and music as extradiegetic (decoration, arabesque). The first theorist to recognize and embrace this tendency in opera was the abbé Terrasson' (p. 7).

The focus on Terrasson enables Thomas to escape the usual concentration on early French opera as a theatre of marvels, while also revealing Terrasson as precursor of the late Enlightenment. The phraseology quoted below pre-echoes Adam Smith's essay on imitation, itself probably indebted to French models: 'Music ... is even very pleasant without imitation, not only in its chords but also in the mere arrangement of tones, which neither imitate nor signify anything in moderato passages and in the natural keys ... One opera ... brings together all these uses of music: one hears it in tunes or airs that are only for the ear, and others which speak to the mind and the heart' (p. 49). Like the early Romantics a century later, Terrasson neither desires nor demands any unity of place in opera, while his willingness to trust the public's capacity to be judge in such cultural matters was also ahead of its age. Perhaps it should have been possible to link this with later discussion of audience/stage interrelations raised in chapter eight, which is focused on new theatre designs and Charles-Nicolas Cochin's 1781 *Lettres sur l'opéra*.

Chapter two, 'The Opera King', is a subtle and interesting essay on the image of the hero in French Baroque opera, especially as judged alongside the 'ironclad' Cornelian hero or the 'corrupt' and 'depraved' Racinian one. The fortunes and royal patronage of history painting form an ingenious explanatory mirror to discussion of the regal prologues of Lully's operas from which, however, opera 'withdrew the person of the king from the stage while nonetheless retaining his overwhelming presence' (p. 70). Louis could effectively transcend history and bargain with or command the gods, while the genre itself could claim superiority over its Italian ancestor, 'recapturing the greatness of Greek models in a form that was utterly modern' (p. 89). Thomas seems reluctant, however, to see Quinault's mainpieces—drawn from the commonwealth of myth—as just temporarily borrowing their legitimacy from the prologue, as moral fables on the proper conduct of the 'King's Peace'. Subsidiary characters and subplots are not discussed at all, and neither are the musical solutions proposed by Lully. 'Allegories of glory' as thematics are not taken up again in later opera contexts, even though Gluck, like Lully, composed an *Alceste* and an *Armide* (p. 99).

The earlier *Armide* forms the subject of chapter three, one I find less convincing for various reasons, though its thesis, as ever, is elegantly wrought: 'The sublime ecstasy of opera sounds the disintegration and death of the hero', whereafter 'an age of divas' is born (p. 126). The 'sublime' is constructed around the notion of 'a moment of loss in which representation falters', so that the heroine's passion goes with musical language, 'leaving desire and loss to the woman as her lot' (pp. 118, 120). In a seemingly added coda, however, the author uses Michel Poizat in finding that the music 'presents a moment of jouissance that turns around an object that is forever being lost, one that is consubstantial with the singer's voice' (p. 125). This might usefully have been connected up with the final chapter (where Lacépède's *La Poétique de la musique* [1785] is finely explained), particularly 'true music' as 'marked by the first man's painful loss', indeed our own 'solitude of loss' (pp. 298, 302). What is not made clear is that pre-Romantic opera almost never used music as illustrative of the external effects of *le merveilleux*; its job was to create analogous marvels by articulating their various relations with characters, human or otherwise. Only gradually does Thomas come round to opera music's capacity to move the affections; the supposedly unprecedented 'somatic meaning' he discerns in Rameau's second Trio of Furies (*Hippolyte et Aricie*, 1733) is in reality ubiquitous in its principle (p. 169). Terrasson's undogmatic

formulation of pleasure says virtually as much. The French perception of power in Armide's 'Enfin il est en ma puissance' arose not from any sustained 'somatic' impact of an Italianate model, but from its response to ebb and flow of a truthful dramatic text—indeed Thomas himself admits that '[it] marks the definitive interiorization of the tragedy' (p. 112). I also surmise that some audiences must have known the unforgettable image of Poussin's painting of just this scene (now in Dulwich Picture Gallery), if not other renditions, and savoured the correspondence. This monologue excitingly fought against the normative unity of affections expected from a scene in music.

Theory and history of music are hard enough to reconcile. Harder still is to hear music with the ears of past witnesses. In the chapter on Charpentier's *Médée*, Thomas attempts this once again with a focus upon monologues: Cybèle's 'Espoir si cher et doux' from Lully's *Atys* (40 bars are shown) and Médée's 'Quel prix de mon amour' (12 bars shown). This is an equally ambitious meditation on operatic tragedy. The theme of Charpentier's Italian training and consequent 'otherness' is driven hard, and Cessac's contrary view almost ignored.[4] The important issue of formal organization is not broached (why is Médée's monologue in rondeau form? Is this exceptional structurally?), and ultimately the argument of 'excessive voice' is circular, since Lully wrote no *Médée* opera against which Charpentier's supposed difference can be read. In the following chapter, Rameau's *Hippolyte et Aricie* is the occasion for a wonderfully sane discussion of opera and tragedy, refracted especially through the problematic enharmonic Trio and the significance of adjustments made later to Act 5, i.e. the relation of the Aricie idyll to the Phèdre tragedy.[5] These adjustments support an argument around the claim that 'set changes in *tragédie en musique* ordinarily occurred between acts'; however, such a scenic switch occurs also between scenes one (the entrance to Hades) and two (the court of Pluto) in Act Two of this very opera (p. 170).

The only chapter to use musical scores as a focus in Part Two is the seventh, where *opéra-comique* is convincingly shown to exemplify the new world of sensibility and sympathy (p.180). The scene for this has been set in chapter six, 'Heart Strings', exploring the role of music in medical theory and, conversely, speculation on nervous and auditory functions within music theory, contextualised through a notably convincing critique of Gary Tomlinson's 'too tidy' separation of Renaissance 'presuppositions of musical magic' from 'the representational convictions of *ut pictura poesis*' (p. 186).

In chapter eight, Thomas addresses not opera but theatre architecture, where the dialectic devolves upon three visions familiar from French history: C. N. Cochin's *Lettres sur l'opéra* (1781) and a plan from his *Projet d'une salle de spectacle* (1765); Louis-Etienne Boullée's project for an opera theatre (not illustrated); and Charles de Wailly's 1794 plans for the exterior public spaces around his Odéon theatre. The nodal term is 'spectatorship', a term that serves generally enough for the 1765 plan (re-jigging the audience's mutual confrontations and forcing them to note the artificiality of staged combats precisely by mounting them *downstage!*) The undiscussed tension is that this went counter to the age's drive for enhanced verisimilitude of illusion, for within a decade of *Lettres sur l'opéra*, realistic staging had become a primary site of contest between rival theatres. Theories of spectatorship also recognize 'opposed and conflicting tendencies' that sit uneasily with issues of democratization, never mind riots in the *parterre*, which surely in part informed de Wailly's and Boullée's architecture: one that suggests control and policing of the public space (p.289). Thomas, however, finds de Wailly's Odéon project a 'mystifying vision of the spectator as citizen' even though the final chapter of the book celebrates the extraordinary naturalist and musician Lacépède's way of understanding opera as giving access to virtue (p. 291). Lacépède even accepted opera as paradigmatic of the current world-view that humans are bound by mental and physical ties of sympathy. (See, for example, 'animal spirits', 'brain traces', 'elastic fluid' and the 'Hartleian theory of vibrations' analysed by John Yolton).

Thomas, as usual, pushes the arguments further: 'By resuscitating the presumably hidden fundamental tones of humanity, opera accomplishes something other cultural forms cannot', since (according to Lacépède) it recalls and commemorates 'foundational human moments to which we can no longer

otherwise gain access in an advanced culture' (p. 309). This sounds like a step too far, but it is worth considering how close 1780s writing already is to Romanticism, e.g. the way that Lacépède makes authentic experience into something exclusive to 'sensitive souls... who have received the precious and fatal gift of sensibility' (p. 298), reminiscent of Hoffmann in 1810; or the Frenchman's use of a personal and literary myth in his *La Poétique de la musique* as an invented means of theorising the complex actuality of music's power.[6] In the end, however, the commonality wins out: operatic sympathy is exemplified in the love of Orestes and Pylades (in Gluck's late *Iphigénie en Tauride*), so that with 'intersubjectivity' we can ultimately locate 'relative interchangeability of each individual's experience of the world'; Lacépède's 'implicit aim' may have been 'to provide compelling proof of the existence of a *sensus communis*' (p. 319).

To end with, some stray notes for future editions. The music examples receive no textual translations, and a few still have errors, such as the missing triple-time signatures on p. 111, missing E sharps on p. 163, and the missing quaver in bar eleven on p. 233. On p. 226 the names 'Arsène', 'Fée' and 'Zémire' refer not to characters but to works (*La belle Arsène*, *La Fée Urgèle*, *Zémire et Azor*); on p. 228 'the Portuguese conspiracy' must be La Motte's *Inès de Castro*, derived from Camões. The 'pedal point' on p. 233 is probably a mistranslation, for the context indicates rather 'cadenza': the relation between 'point d'orgue' and 'cadenza' is expounded in Rousseau's musical dictionary, and the *Encyclopédie Méthodique*.

NOTES

[1] Downing A. Thomas, *Music and the Origins of Language. Theories from the French Enlightenment* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[2] Scott S. Bryson, *The Chastised Stage: Bourgeois Drama and the Exercise of Power* (Saratoga, Calif.: Anma Libri, 1991); John W. Yolton, *Thinking Matter: Materialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983); Tom McCall, 'Liquid Politics: Towards a Theorization of "Bourgeois" Tragic Drama', *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 98/3 (Summer 1999): 593-622.

[3] Charles Dill, *Monstrous Opera. Rameau and the Tragic Tradition* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998).

[4] Thomas invites us to read Catherine Cessac's *Marc-Antoine Charpentier* (translated by E. Thomas Glasgow [Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1995]) where, however, on p.355 Cessac finds Médée's later monologue 'strongly reminiscent' of Lully's earlier one for Cybèle.

[5] However, the explanation of enharmony in the Trio seems not well glossed technically, as regards quarter-tones (p. 167).

[6] 'Der romantische Geschmack ist selten, noch seltner das romantische Talent', from the review of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Cf. the myth of the mysterious moss-covered rock, told by Chrysostomos in the final portion of Hoffmann's Kreisleriana sequence.

David Charlton
Royal Holloway, University of London
D.Charlton@rhul.ac.uk

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