

SKETCHES TOWARD AN OPERATIC  
SOCIOLOGY \*

THIS BOOK CAN STAND AMONG those that do most to bring sociological concepts back to the analysis of opera as a cultural form, a practice and a ritual, and also to enrich the toolkit of sociology by bringing together contributions from historians, musicologists and literary scholars. It anchors its many interventions – fourteen articles and a foreword – by organizing them in three themes: the representation of social and political relations in operatic works (contributors being mostly literary scholars and musicologists), the institutional basis for the production and the reception of opera (as discussed by both historians and musicologists), and the theorizing of opera and the social (where sociological concepts enter via the writings of Pierre Bourdieu – as interpreted by Herbert Lindenberger, Jane Fulcher, Tom Ertman – and Antoine Hennion).

What are the lessons sociology can learn from opera studies? Sociology has usually made opera a proxy for high culture, failed to differentiate it from symphonic music in surveys about cultural consumption, and attributed the meaning of its practice exclusively to the search for status – be it the achievement of distinction, the conversion of the capital accumulated into other social species, or the construction of intra-class networks of sociability. As Victoria Johnson claims in the introduction to this volume (p. 4): “sociologists have shied away from examining the specifically musical contents of musical works in favor of explaining the social and economic structures behind its production” and, we may add, its reception. This perspective has allowed organizations, networks and “cultural entrepreneurs” to do the work cultural sociologists should do: to thoroughly understand “the work itself” (and the work that goes into producing it) as one of the necessary elements for adequate explanation.

Among the many ways in which this book contributes to an enhancement of the sociological understanding of opera, two stand out. First, the focus on meaning and signification structures, centering on the ways in which “the systems of meaning (musical as well as extra musical) [...] have shaped the production and reception of operatic

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works in historical contexts” (p. 15). One way in which this is achieved is by analyzing the relationship between the diverse levels where meaning structures operate (societal/operatic; production/reception) and the relationship between more generalized vocabularies to express and/or discuss social life and those specific to the libretti, roles, parts and characters. Among the many useful examples in the book are the changing ways in which the idea of what society is and how it is organized transforms the representations and uses of “on stage societies” in Lully’s operas beyond the scope of its original context of production as court-derived “propaganda”, and – especially – the analysis by Philip Gossett of the political conditions that allow for the use of more or less direct rhetorical figures to describe particular political realities via opera. In his analysis of seldom studied libretti (edited and destroyed by Ricordi), Gossett explores the well-known relationship between Verdi and the Italian *Risorgimento* by focusing on how choruses referred to the Italian nation and the specific political conditions and mechanisms that produced the transformation of indirect figures like analogy and metaphor. Meaning was displaced and transposed Austria-occupied Italy to Egypt, Greece and Turkey, or transformed the force of its musical structure by means of religious transpositions into hymns, *i.e.*, into direct political anthems that made explicit the political matters at stake.

The second key way in which opera studies can contribute to sociology is by inviting us to provide explanations and accounts of the formation and institutionalization of cultural forms that expand their scope to the international and transnational level. Sociology has traditionally dealt with the establishment of cultural forms mostly at a local level and focused on a founding moment in which an “institutional entrepreneur” struggles to impose a symbolic classification, tying a set of cultural practices to a particular meaning and a particular social group, and then secures arrangements and resources that upholds that interpretation. The article by historian William Weber “Opera and the cultural authority of the capital city” shows, by contrast, the consequences of opera globalism by exploring how its identification with key “cultural capitals” like Venice, Paris and London shaped the operatic season in Germany. Weber also shows the particular mechanisms through which this happened, of special importance being the role played by the framing of the elite as part of the cosmopolitan *beau monde*, which affiliated the latter (and opera) to the metropolis while preventing them from excluding others via the establishment of structural hierarchies. Of equal importance here is the contribution by Christophe

Charle, who – through arduous comparative work between England, France and Italy – shows the interrelated character of local patterns of operatic production, export capacity, and the channels and processes (e.g. translation, imitation) through which dissemination took place. Tom Ertman's conclusion to this book is a bold step in this direction, applying the theoretical frame developed by Bourdieu in *The Rules of Art*, examining the autonomization of the literary field in order to answer the question whether opera would follow such a model in which commercial success was confronted by two twin strategies: the embrace of a political art and the development of an *avant-garde*. The answer Ertman gives to this question is not only comparative, but also takes into account the way in which patterns of development and positions taken in foreign fields (Wagner in Germany) transform and intervene in the position-taking within a national field (France).

The separation of the study of opera into national or metropolitan cases seems especially arbitrary when we think of opera as one of the first globalized genres. Taking this geographical dimension into account allows us to add another dimension to a model in which most opera houses around the world, eventually, yet in a puzzling way, adopt a similar organizational structure, despite the maintenance of distinctive systems of ritual classification, along very different historical trajectories.

How can sociologists deal with a cultural form as complex as opera? The contribution of Antoine Hennion is key here as he points to the historical transition that has made opera such a phenomenon with many facets: “evolving from the status of a manifestation with intertwined ritual, theatrical worldly, political and musical elements to a musical repertory of musical works catalogued, appreciated and consumed in the weighty modern system of lyrical institutions and a worldwide market of recordings and musical taste” (p. 333). If we were to follow Hennion's suggestion, the study of opera (in particular) and of complex cultural forms (in general) would entail its study as a prism that refracts, distorts, attracts, and renders it inseparable from political, economical, organizational and biographical factors, as well as attending to the endogenous character of its evolution and the way its specific properties have been developed, transformed and maintained through time.

Such an approach would be informed by many levels of analysis and show the constant relationship between macro forces and micro processes as well as the precise conditions under which one of the levels might gain causal efficacy and be not only analytically autonomous but have adequate explanatory force. So, instead of postulating that opera is

really about politics or status or organizations or fields or markets or individual pleasure or whatever else, we would get a study like the one Lindenberger undertook for this volume of the fate of *Die Entführung*, in which the explanation of its circulation depends on particular organizational forms (Italian patronage), the relationship between Turkish music in general and in this opera in particular, the Orientalist representations at play, and Mozart's role in the struggle for the growing autonomy of music.

The book under review contains *in nuce* both this proposal and the many ways in which it could be operationalized. The relationship between opera and politics appears under three guises: by exploring the role the State played in the constitution and maintenance of opera as a form (be it via subsidy or patronage); the use particular governments gave to opera (as in the paper by Piperno, or in the exploration of the mechanisms to censor operatic material); and the way larger systems of meanings with political connotations appear within operatic material (as in the study by Goseett). The relationship between organizational factors and the shape opera takes is evidenced when discussing not only patronage but also the length of the seasons, the seasonal character (or not) of the production and the networks of singers that obtained work, and how the latter influenced the development of certain roles (the papers by Piperno and André discuss this at length).

Discussions about the structuration of opera tend to vary between those who focus on markets (such as Hennion, but mainly in the chapter by Kintzler, who provides an ecological explanation of how the use of the "little people" in opera was best understood by looking at its morphological development in comparison to the niche left by spoken theater) and those who think of it as occurring within a "field" in Bourdieu's sense. Among the contributions which employ concepts coined by Pierre Bourdieu, are those by Ertman and that by Fulcher about how an Adornian understanding of modernism occludes the internal struggle between different modernist factions, while the use of a relational concept like "field" can help us illuminate the contested use of the same conventions and materials as happened in France with Faure, Satie, d'Indy and Milhaud.

This kind of ambitious analysis would also take into account the biographies of composers, conductors and other performers who have shaped particular iterations of works (there are many examples of this in the book, but the best example would be Norbert Elias, *Mozart: Portrait of a Genius*, 1993) and the specific symbolic properties of the genre and their endogenous development (as in the chapter by Fulcher on how

the musical success of the “opera of ideas” paradoxically condemned its political message to failure, or in the one by André, in which an explanation of singing in travesty is not fully exhausted by gender as a background factor but by the intricate theatrical codes and conventions that caused the vocal and characters pairings).

The last frontier for a sociological understanding of opera for Hermion lies in “the pleasure of the sound, the roles of the bodies, the sets and the dynamics of a hall of an audience seeking its voices” (p. 344). The movement in recent times from the sociology of culture to a cultural sociology, in which meaning plays a central role in structuring social dynamics and is not just the result of the latter, is one of the steps in this direction. The introduction by musical educator Christopher Small of the concept “*musicking*”, in which music is always an activity (Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*, 1998), and its appropriation by “musical” sociologists like Tia DeNora would be a second step forward. The many chapters in this collection suggest a conceivable third step: an operatic sociology that would go beyond the previous discussion and add to its inquiry the role that liminality plays in the production of an experience outside of everyday life (as Craig Calhoun states in the foreword). It would put the social experience of opera at the intersections of theater and music, as well as next to film and sports, in the kind of attachment it generates and the communal experience it produces (as Lindenberger proposes in his chapter). It would also look at opera’s distinctive kind of myth-making and artificiality – not to debunk these, but rather to reveal their manifold consequences, the productivity of the artifice that is opera.

C L A U D I O E . B E N Z E C R Y