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Book Reviews

Christina Fuhrmann, *Foreign Operas at the London Playhouse: From Mozart to Bellini* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). vii + 262 pp. $99.99.

Operatic adaptation continues to be a source of contention in scholarly examinations of theatrical life in nineteenth-century Britain, leading Christina Fuhrmann to quite rightly point out that 'negative rhetoric has hampered scholarly exploration of these adaptions' (p. 1).[1] Though Fuhrmann's study hones in on specific examples of adaptation that contextualize the wider issues of the practice in early nineteenth-century London opera, the book, perhaps unintentionally, addresses current debates. A recent article in *The Guardian* exclaimed that opera companies such as English National Opera 'must adapt or die', and while current ideas surrounding adaptation are not with regard to major changes of operatic content, there is pressure for companies to utilize modern methods of media and technology to remain appealing to a twenty-first century audience.[2] Fuhrmann makes it clear that nineteenth-century adaptation was driven by contemporary opinion as represented by the press, though she takes care to note that while there are numerous easily accessible contemporary newspaper reviews, the study does not represent 'all contemporary feelings' as audiences' views can only be 'glimpsed … through the occasional memoir' (p. 12). However, examinations of the behaviour of eighteenth and nineteenth century audiences is not a new area of scholarship and could easily have been woven into the narrative to provide another layer of contextualization, where the motives of the press reviews are questioned rather than taken at face value.[3]

Despite this, the book is undoubtedly an excellent contribution to the field, particularly as it re-evaluates the role of the composer-adaptor, not as a mere hack who quickly put together slap-dash, low brow works, but as a careful craftsman who drew on content from multiple 'original versions' of the story. The composer-adaptor took care to marry the most popular musical elements of the original score with other compositions from the original composer, popular songs of the day and newly composed material that – when correctly combined together – were considered 'improvements' better suited to the tastes of a demanding and critical audience.

Fuhrmann provides well-chosen examples giving equal attention to Italian, French and German operatic adaptations. Her examination of *Der Freischűtz*

[1] Fuhrmann notes scholars such as Lydia Goehr and William Weber argue in favour of the idealistic 'canon'. See Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works, An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) and William Weber, *The Rise of Musical Classics in Eighteenth-Century England: A Study in Canon, Ritual, and Ideology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

[2] Darren Henley, 'Every opera company must adapt or die: the ENO is no exception', *The Guardian*, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/feb/16/english-national-opera-eno-cultural-treasure-value-for-money (accessed 25 May 2016).

[3] For more see William Weber, 'Did People Listen in the 18th Century?', *Early Music* 25 (1997): 678–91, and Jennifer Hall-Witt, *Fashionable Acts: Opera and Elite Culture in London, 1780–1880* (Lebanon, NH: University of New Hampshire Press, 2007).

allows her to fulfil an ambition brought forth in a previous 2004 article where she 'beg[ged] for further reassessment of London's overwhelming response' to this opera.[4] Fuhrmann's writing comes into its own in this chapter as she effectively argues *Der Freischűtz*'s impact on London opera, particularly as it enabled minor theatres to seriously compete with the major theatres such as the Theatre Royal (p. 71).

London adaptor Henry R. Bishop is a central figure in Fuhrmann's narrative, particularly as his operatic adaptations dominated London theatre throughout this period. He is noted as one of the first to foreground the original work, in this case *Jean de Paris* by François-Adrien Boieldieu, in advertising campaigns despite substantially altering the original content. However, as Fuhrmann points out, substantial alteration was necessary to 'bridge the divide between native and continental conceptions of opera' (p. 13). All-sung opera rarely succeeded in London, while spoken drama was highly prized and this is apparent in Bishop's decision to split the role of the innkeeper, casting a skilled comedic actor who could not sing and a singer who did not speak. This point is continued when examining Bishop's adaptations of two Mozart operas, *Don Giovanni* and *Le Nozze de Figaro*. The title role of *Don Giovanni* was completely reworked as a speaking role and the singing role of Anna lacked the vocal pyrotechnics typical of a prima donna role.[5] While many examples are given of the influence of the singers on the adaptors creative decisions, Fuhrmann does not specifically address this. The vocal abilities of singers were often the driving force behind compositional choices in both continental and native operatic traditions. For example, Mozart frequently recomposed arias when his operas were recast and there had been a long-standing tradition of singers performing substitute arias of their choice, which would showcase their vocal prowess.[6] Yet, Fuhrmann's study places much emphasis on the adaptor controlling the creative decision-making. In the discussion of Bishop's adaptation of Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* Fuhrmann states that he inserted a new aria after Rosina angrily agrees to marry Bartolo. Rossini would also add an aria in the same place after his premiere, leading Fuhrmann to suggest that 'adaptation was therefore not always incongruent with a composer's own instincts for revision. In this case adapter may even have aided composer (p. 51).

The fact that the aria was inserted into a place that instinctively appeared to suit the work (both from Bishop's and Rossini's point of view) appears to be a coincidence, and a much more likely scenario is that Bishop was expected (by both singer and operatic convention) to compose a new, show-stopping aria, uniquely designed to showcase the vocal abilities of his leading lady Maria Dickons, who had recently returned from the continent. Even in a performance of *Le Nozze di Figaro* in 1827, which Fuhrmann uses to establish a moment of change in the attitudes towards operatic adaptation, the change was facilitated not by Bishop's

[4] See Christina Fuhrmann, 'Continental Opera Englished, English Opera Continentalized: *Der Freischütz* in London, 1824', *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* 1 (2004): 115–42.

[5] While the premiere of this adaptation was modest in the vocal scoring for the prima donna, Fuhrmann notes when Maria Dickons took on the role in a later production the arias were changed to include the typical virtuosic elements expected of a leading lady (p. 43).

[6] Susan Rutherford and Rachel Cowgill discuss this at length in their recent studies. See Susan Rutherford, *The Prima Donna and Opera, 1815–1930,* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), and Rachel Cowgill and Hilary Poriss, *The Arts of the Prima Donna in the Long Nineteenth Century,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

newly composed music, but rather should be credited to his leading lady Lucia Vestris who sang the role of Susanna. Though the aria 'I've been roaming', which was one of Vestris' hits, had been advertised as part of the production, it attracted negative attention both during the performance and in the subsequent reviews. This incident leads Fuhrmann to conclude that this was a turning point in London adaptations where 'performers and adaptors had to modify more subtly' (p. 118). While this incident may have put a spotlight on growing debates surrounding adaptations, it would appear that the reason for the negative reaction was to do with a scandalous publication and subsequent lawsuit to do with Vestris rather than the adaptation itself.

Though all these points regarding the singer's influence as highlighted above are briefly discussed in the later chapters, it is somewhat underestimated and this is perhaps down to the choice of chapter headings. Fuhrmann points out that the canon formation has hindered examinations of these operatic adaptations, and yet the majority of the chapter titles are specifically connected to canonic opera composers such as Mozart, Weber and Rossini. This does serve a purpose as it allows issues such as the exotic 'pineapple' of Mozart who required more care in adaptation than the every-day 'pippin' Rossini, thus drawing attention to the problems with canon formation. Yet, it also means that the composer and the composer-adaptor receive the most attention from Fuhrmann, when the evidence presented suggest that the early nineteenth-century singer actually held the reins. This is evident in the musical examples included throughout the book, which are all songs and not newly composed instrumental passages. This is perhaps because there are few full scores of these adaptations in existence, though songs and arias were preserved in print editions for the domestic market. I am glad these musical examples have been included in the text and not as appendices as they provide integral evidence and support to the written prose. The occasional playbill and title (such as the title page of *Der Freischűtz*) also enhances the written prose, demonstrating that much care has been taken when thinking through the layout of these additional materials.

This book exemplifies the vastness of the subject and the multiple areas of research required to understand this past tradition. Fuhrmann's well-written prose manages to explore the complex world of music, adaptation and opera politics in a concise, yet detailed manner, and though certain areas are given less attention than perhaps they deserve, Fuhrmann makes it clear that this book is not a closed study but an invitation for further research. Though she notes that it is unlikely, Fuhrmann's encouragement to revive the tradition is timely, as it resonates with multiple areas of current scholarship including historically informed performance practice and welcomes a change in how operatic adaptation is viewed both in scholarship and in performance. The conclusion is particularly well-written and thought provoking, tying together a vast amount of well-researched information.

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