

also conclusion, for the book is reasonable, if not surprising – ‘the realization that intellectual institutions must change’ (p. 15).

University of Texas at Austin

DONALD G. DAVIS, JR.
dgdavis@ischool.utexas.edu

ROME IN OPERA

KETTERER (R.C.) *Ancient Rome in Early Opera*. Pp. xiv + 256, ills. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009. Cased, US\$40. ISBN: 978-0-252-03378-0.

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Operatic librettos remain for the most part an unearthed cache of scholarly treasure. The number of books and articles written by classicists thus far are too few to have surveyed adequately or analysed thoroughly the thousands of works composed over the past four centuries. We need more books like this, a learned and focussed effort analysing operatic librettos set specifically in ancient Rome. K. has chosen twelve Italian librettos representing Roman reception from mid seventeenth century Venice to the 1790s. He has selected important and interesting librettos, examines them perceptively, and offers some well nuanced observations. This book should serve as a model for classicists who choose to explore this important but neglected field.

In Chapter 1 K. convincingly justifies studying an opera’s libretto rather the ‘opera’ itself. Although many operatic productions of the periods in question were conceived as dramatised songfests or *Gesamtwerk*, K. confronts the reader with the reality that most of them were literary productions first and then later realised and enhanced by other arts. He not only identifies the sources from which librettists drew their stories about the ancient Romans but parallels the imperial rule of the Caesars and the patronage and political systems of early modern Europe. Another useful parallel he makes is that between the Arcadian influenced librettos of Zeno and Metastasio and the proscriptions of Aristotle, at least in so far as the ‘Unities’ were perceived at the time.

Chapter 2 on Monteverdi’s *L’incoronazione di Poppea* engages the reader in a thorough reading of Busenello’s libretto. As the first important opera based on Roman history, it is a well chosen item to discuss. K. includes a brief mention of the contributions of Giulio Rospigliosi and his paleochristian librettos, which first historicised operatic settings, and although there is much one could write about Tacitean studies at the time, K. by design confines himself to his reading of the libretto itself. He surveys the various learned but inconclusive opinions about Seneca as a Stoic character and then focusses on Neoplatonism and light imagery as well as the Ovidian metaphor of love as military campaign.

In Chapter 3 on the Nicolò Minato libretto *Scipione affricano*, first set by Cavalli in 1665, K. again offers an engaging and thorough reading of the librettic text and offers many important insights, particularly regarding Sophonisba, much ignored today but one of the quintessential tragic characters in Renaissance and early Baroque Europe. I am wary of his implication that the Love theme derives exclusively from Ovid: there is an equally important tradition within the confines of Italian poetry itself.

Chapter 4 on Otho consists of extensive readings of relatively minor but intriguing librettos which have been revived in recent recordings of the settings by two of modernity's favourite Baroque composers: Handel and Vivaldi. K. gives a brief but useful account of the life and tradition of Marcus Salvius Otho and demonstrates with examples how ancient figures who are generally neglected in modern traditions had important narrative and singing roles in Baroque opera.

Chapter 5 on Scipio in Spain begins a series of innovative chapters that elevate the book considerably. Here K. puts Zeno's libretto (*Scipione nelle Spagne*) in its historical and political context during the War of Spanish Succession. Another integral part of the essay is the Stoic context in which the libretto was conceived. Here, too, K. has the opportunity to conjure up the 'powerful resonances' of Sophonisba in his analysis of Elvira and Empress Maria Theresa.

Chapter 6, 'The Problem of Caesar', presents the conflicting tradition of Julius Caesar, who has been both vilified and praised. K. surveys Caesar in earlier dramas and then gives readings of the Haym/Handel *Giulio Cesare in Egitto* and Metastasio's *Il Catone in Utica* which offer contrasting portraits and dramatisations.

For Chapter 7 on Arminius, K. moves on to the theme of resistance to liberty which would become dominant by the end of the eighteenth century but remained in an almost exclusively historical/legendary context until then. Arminius fits into this tradition perfectly, as evidenced in several librettos which feature him as the native northern European opponent of the ancient Roman invaders.

Chapter 8 on Titus analyses complex sources and navigates through complicated political transformations within a consistently learned and scholarly narrative. K. describes the relatively neglected Titus as 'an even better analogue than Scipio to the Habsburg emperor and representative of the imperial myth of the clement prince' (p. 152). Where the cultural background is filled in as well, for example in his discussion of Addison's *Cato*, the work is appropriately comprehensive.

Chapter 9, 'Revolution and the End of a Myth', is probably too short to account for the profound political movements which inspired or controlled parallel changes in the arts, particularly the dramatic arts. K. assumes his readers are well equipped and proceeds apace in describing the last remnants of imperial and monarchic rule and hence the end of *opera seria*.

I have two minor quibbles. The chronological label 'early opera' in the title, despite its traditional usage among music historians, seems to relegate these important works to a developmental era rather than highlight the Baroque and early Classical periods during which opera was the quintessence of high theatrical art. But perhaps I am alone in thinking that neither Verdi nor Wagner necessarily represents the culmination of the form. Second, his use of the term 'myth' for the important motifs he identifies as the 'Myth of the Clement Prince' and the 'Myth of Liberty' is misleading. K. quotes (p. 2) T.P. Wiseman's 'simple definition' of myth to support this usage, but there is nothing simple about the definition of myth. Kirk wrote a classic book on the subject, and within the various subfields of classical studies the word has many meanings of significance. Most important among them is its distinction from 'history', which becomes blurred in the hands of Livy and Virgil, who write about early Rome and its mytho-historical period, as K. observes. But here too I hasten to add that K.'s identification and analysis of the tradition (or 'motif') of Caesarian clemency is one of many important motifs he discusses in this valuable book.

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

JON SOLOMON
josolomo@comcast.net