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BOOK REVIEWS

Tin Pan Opera: Operatic Novelty Songs in the Ragtime Era. By Larry Hamberlin. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Innovative and persistently inquisitive, Larry Hamberlin's *Tin Pan Opera* demonstrates the power of musicological inquiry as applied with focus and enthusiasm to a little-known, widely neglected, and virtually dismissed repertory. The unconventional subject of this inventive study has likely found its name for the first time in the subtitle of this book: "Operatic Novelty Songs in the Ragtime Era." Even though most of these songs may have been long cast aside, Hamberlin's engaging and imaginative work brings the songs and the decades in which they flourished back to life. *Tin Pan Opera*, well organized and clearly written from start to finish, is not so much a study of novelty song in the sense of examining how musical fads rise into and fall out of fashion; neither is it a recovery project, even though it does consider around 150 songs that fall under this musical umbrella. Rather, this study convincingly shows how even practices that some might consider disposable or ephemeral have much to tell us about the musical, social, and cultural life of a given time.

Tin Pan Opera focuses on the opening decades of the twentieth century, when Tin Pan Alley firms came to dominate the sheet music publishing industry in the United States, and its title succinctly signals the types of critical intersections under consideration: popular/elite, lowbrow/highbrow, American/European. Although other books have also offered illuminating portraits of the ragtime era, it is one of the few that does not place instrumental piano music at its center. Hamberlin instead mines a trove of Tin Pan Alley ragtime-era songs that engage with the world of opera—through references to operatic plots, quotes of operatic melodies, and allusions to operatic culture—and transforms this unlikely source material into an evocative slice of musical and cultural history. The book also supplies a welcome contribution to the recent uptick in scholarly attention given to Tin Pan Alley by Daniel Goldmark and David Suisman, among others.[1]

Although Hamberlin includes informative historical commentary and engages to some extent with cultural and feminist theory, *Tin Pan Opera* places the novelty songs at its center, generally focusing on their printed form as sheet music, but also reflecting on selective recordings as well as performances on Broadway, in film, and on the vaudeville stage. His detailed analyses of these songs are made more convincing by the book's lush production, which incorporates dozens of musical examples and an even greater number of memorable illustrations (primarily sheet music covers). Not especially concerned with aesthetic significance, commercial impact, or authorial intent, Hamberlin instead reveals what these songs tell us about opera, opera singers, and the relation between opera and popular culture in

[1] Daniel Goldmark, "Creating Desire on Tin Pan Alley," *Musical Quarterly* 90/2 (2007): 197–229; David Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

the United States. In that sense, *Tin Pan Opera* extends work by Renee Lapp Norris, Katherine Preston, and others who have examined the broader impact of opera on antebellum popular culture.[2]

Tin Pan Opera delves into three major issues involving American identity—nationality, gender, and race—that structure the book's three main sections. In the process, Hamberlin addresses a wide array of related topics, ranging from immigration to the relationship between American and European culture, from performance practice to the development of recording technology. The incorporation of opera into American popular song led some scholars to celebrate the populist appeal of these songs and others to critique them as a desecration of high culture. Issues of class thus prove absolutely central to his interrogation of the distinctions between lowbrow and highbrow culture, the boundaries of which remained significant, yet at the same time contested and permeable.

The first part of *Tin Pan Opera*, "Caruso and His Cousins," examines songs that incorporate Italian opera (including "Rusty-Can-O Rag" and "Rosa Rigoletto") and also opera singers such as Enrico Caruso and Luisa Tetrazzini who proved especially popular to U.S. audiences. Given the history of Italian immigration to the United States, Hamberlin's analysis pays special attention to how these developments may have resonated among working-class Italian immigrants, whether channeling stereotyped representations, prompting cultural pride in opera, or reflecting their attempts at assimilation. As he convincingly argues, the use of opera in popular ragtime songs, along with enthusiasm for star singers, highlighted the contradictions between the popularization and sacralization of art in American culture. Here and throughout the book Hamberlin effectively moves between taking a broader perspective and offering detailed examinations of individual songs. The production and consumption of most of these novelty songs—whether opera-themed ragtime songs or songs that included operatic fragments—began to fade by the end of the 1910s, and it remains a challenge to estimate commercial sales or to determine the composition of audiences these songs reached. Hamberlin makes the most of the especially popular numbers, such as those that were recorded and performed by stars Billy Murray ("My Cousin Caruso") and May Irwin ("That Opera Rag"). Although we may not be able to establish conclusively to what degree certain groups heard and responded to these operatic novelty songs, Hamberlin offers suggestive insights about how the themes addressed in these songs, and the notion of presenting elements of high culture in popular song, resonated through the United States.

The book's second part, "Salome and Her Sisters," explores Tin Pan Alley representations of gender through a group of songs that satirized female singers or offered musical responses to specific operatic heroines. Songs about female singers reflected patriarchal notions about women's roles, concerns about female display and spectacle, and anxieties surrounding relationships between young female students and male teachers. Hamblerlin explains how Tin Pan Alley songs also perpetuated certain stereotypes about professional singers, both male and female, who were

[2] Renee Lapp Norris, "Opera and the Mainstreaming of Blackface Minstrelsy," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 1/3 (2007): 341–65; Katherine K. Preston, *Opera on the Road: Traveling Opera Troupes in the United States, 1825–60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

shown variously to be greedy, vain, and vacuous. Nevertheless, public fascination about star singers, and the world of opera, also led to the publication of a number of Tin Pan Alley songs based on individual operatic heroines. Hamberlin's compelling exploration of songs based on Richard Strauss's *Salome* takes an unexpected turn, demonstrating how such musical visions not only engaged with orientalist fantasies, but also occasionally revealed the artifice of exoticism itself. This section of *Tin Pan Opera*, which carefully explains how the American form of "Salomania" differed from its European counterpart, is especially notable for its fruitful integration of both music and dance history. Hamberlin next turns to the many topical novelty songs produced in response to Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*. By understanding songs such as "Poor Butterfly" within the context of American imperialistic overtures in the Pacific, Hamberlin shows how Tin Pan Alley publishers attempted to appeal to broader audiences in the United States by retaining the opera's display of exotic femininity while frequently downplaying Puccini's critique of U.S. overseas aggression.

Tin Pan Opera makes evident throughout that Hamberlin is comfortable with contradiction and eager to discover multiple layers of meaning. This approach is most evident in his treatment of "That Opera Rag," the centerpiece of the third section of the book, "Ephraham and His Equals." Written by Ted Snyder and Irving Berlin, this "Negro dialect" song (or "coon song") served many purposes: as what Hamberlin describes as a "racist commentary on heightened cultural aspirations of the first post–Civil War generation of Americans" (208), as a song interpolated into a show that sought to warn Americans about idolizing European culture, and as a stage vehicle for May Irwin through which it became an opportunity to showcase American popular culture alongside European high culture. Rather than highlighting a single interpretation, Hamberlin productively draws on the tensions felt by audiences in the United States who were becoming less committed to upholding European high culture and becoming increasingly interested in American popular culture in general and to ragtime, jazz, and other African American musical innovations in particular. In this way, *Tin Pan Opera* marks how ragtime and opera stood as emblems of the African and European influences on American musical life, even as these musical symbols of national identity were in the midst of significant flux and transition.

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Música Norteña: Mexican Immigrants Creating a Nation between Nations. By Cathy Ragland. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009.

Before the 1846–48 war between Mexico and the United States, the southern tip of Texas and the states of Nuevo León, Coahuila, and Tamaulipas were all part of Mexico, forming a region with a cultural affinity that became transformed after the