

Vincent Giroud. *French Opera: a short history* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010). x + 366 pp. \$40.00.

English speakers have long needed a history of French opera that opens up this rich but neglected operatic tradition. Vincent Giroud claims that his study, a 'short history' of about 300 pages of text, has the 'modest' ambition (even though his goal is actually quite daunting) of providing a survey of 'the evolution of the genre by focusing on its actors and their achievements – who wrote what in what context, and how it was received' (p. 3). To this end he includes not just succinct discussions of the works everyone knows – like Gounod's *Faust* (1859), Bizet's *Carmen* (1875), Saint-Saëns' *Samson et Dalila* (1877), Massenet's *Manon* (1884) and Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902) – plus historically significant monuments of the French tradition normally mentioned in music history textbooks, but also looks 'at the contributions of lesser-known composers and at the lesser-known works of well-known composers' (p. 4). Indeed, he lays out for all to see the many riches of a repertory that contains far more titles than those that are regularly staged in modern opera houses around the world. Giroud does not conceal that he is an advocate for this French tradition, 'second only to Italian opera in the length, breadth, and diversity of its history' (p. 1), for his voice is ever present. And he speaks with an elegant command of the repertory in smooth and graceful language.

French Opera: a short history contains a wealth of data, including useful background information (both political and cultural), concise composers' lives, discerning plot summaries and pithy commentary on operas and their reception history. Still, this is not a study that makes its points through musical analysis, though important moments/numbers are often indicated. In fact, the book contains no musical notation at all. The intended reader may well be the educated opera lover and serious students of opera; still, the many tantalizing observations on early and/or lesser-known works will undoubtedly stimulate musicologists, conductors and other music professionals to explore this repertory further on their own. To this project Vincent Giroud, now a professor at the University of Franche-Comté, brings not only a lifetime of involvement in French opera but also a broad background in European literature. Formerly the Curator of Modern Books and Manuscripts at the Beinecke Library (Yale University's rare book collection), he recently has published on William Walton, Picasso and Gertrude Stein, and St. Petersburg, not to mention co-editing volumes of essays on French opera with Jean-Christophe Branger.¹

Though French opera initially sought to define itself as 'not Italian', and at the beginning of the twentieth century made a concerted effort to tame and/or exorcise Wagner's influence, this tradition has also happily embraced ideas and techniques, individual operas and even the entire *oeuvres* of composers born

¹ See *William Walton, Composer: A Centenary Exhibition* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2002); *Picasso and Gertrude Stein* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); *St. Petersburg: A Portrait of a Great City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003). Volumes co-edited with Jean-Christophe Branger are: *Figures de l'antiquité dans l'opéra français des Troyens de Berlioz à l'Œdipe d'Enesco* (Saint-Étienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, 2008) and *Aspects de l'opéra français de Meyerbeer à Honegger* (Lyons: Symétrie, 2009). Branger and Giroud also organize and participate in the biennial Massenet conference at Saint-Étienne (coordinated with the Massenet Festival) and are preparing a thematic catalogue of his works.

elsewhere (Lully, Meyerbeer and Offenbach, to name a few). And so, Giroud begins by defining French opera as 'any opera set originally to a French text' and notes that the nationality of the composer and even the librettist 'are components of the genre rather than limits to its definition' (p. 2). He deals only briefly with the implications of using the French language and mentions French opera's preference for declamation over the overtly lyrical forms that characterize much Italian opera. He also acknowledges that the spoken/sung dichotomy is more important in the French tradition than elsewhere, because of the central position of opéra-comique, not to mention operetta (a sub-genre whose contributors include composers as notable as Delibes, Bizet, Chabrier and Honegger). To survey this tradition, however, Giroud chooses not the thematic organization that modern scholars have often turned to in order to highlight problems and enduring issues in a genre, but one that is chronological.² Each of the ten chapters covers about fifty years, but they do become longer (c. 35 pages, instead of 20–25) after the narrative reaches the French Revolution. This extra space accommodates important subjects like the influence and characteristics of grand opéra, the important repertory premiered by the Théâtre-Lyrique during the Second Empire, the flowering of opéra-comique after 1870, and the large number of names in the twentieth century.

The endnotes are a goldmine of information. They, and sometimes the main text itself, give tips about recordings and DVDs, landmark recordings, and significant revivals, not to mention French dissertations and other publications that may have escaped the notice of English speakers. The substantial bibliography contains some 200 entries. Interestingly, all titles are in English or French, and publications originally in other languages are included only when available in English translation. In truth, books in German by musicologists like Thomas Betzwieser or Arnold Jacobshagen, not to mention other scholarship from Europe, would also have been relevant to the discussion here.³ Nonetheless, even if French opera has been a relatively neglected field until the past few decades, no one bibliography could be entirely comprehensive.

The index consists of names only (composers, librettists, directors, performers and others). An index of opera titles would also have been useful, since readers need one if they are using this fact-filled volume as a reference work. In addition, chasing down the history of a specific theater poses challenges because of the limited index. And if a reader wanted to study French operas by women, it would be necessary to read the entire text to come up names like Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre, Irish-born Augusta Holmès, Claude Arrieu, and Finnish-born Kaija Saariaho. The last opera Giroud discusses, Saariaho's expressive *L'amour de loin* (premiered in 2000 at the Salzburg Festival), is a lovely choice to round out this short history, for he tacitly refers to both the cosmopolitan nature and international impact of French opera. Giroud's tenth chapter, however, stops fairly abruptly after this, and a concluding (eleventh) chapter tying together the various threads woven through the book could have guided the readers to better interpret the dizzying amount of information here.

² In this generally chronological organization and even his book title, Giroud may take his cue from Donald J. Grout and Hermine Weigel Williams' *A Short History of Opera*, 4th ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

³ See, for example, Thomas Betzwieser, *Sprechen und Singen: Ästhetik und Erscheinungsformen der Dialogoper* (Stuttgart/Weimar: J.B. Metzler, 2002) and Arnold Jacobshagen, *Der Chor in den französischen Oper des späten Ancien Régime* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1997).

Each of the chapters begins with more general comments about the politics, cultural landscape, theaters and their resources, and performers. Chapter 1 provides an excellent summary of the origins of French opéra and, for its second half, a concise, ten-page discussion of Lully's life, operas and their style. Throughout, Giroud gives more extended 'entries' for the composers he ranks as truly significant in the genre: Rameau, nine and a half pages ('far and away the greatest French opera composer of his century' [p. 49]), Gluck, five ('Gluck's influence on French opera was enormous' [p. 85]), Cherubini, four and a half ('yet to be given his due as a French opera composer of the first rank' [p. 101]), Auber, six ('one of the most published and performed composers of his age – on a level comparable to Rossini' [p. 140]), and so on. Given Giroud's connections with Massenet research, it is not surprising that these two sections are relatively extensive (nine pages), or that he advocates for this composer whose place in the history of French opera 'comparable to a Puccini or a Strauss – has yet to be fully acknowledged in his own country' (p. 241). From the same era Bruneau, too, receives Giroud's emphatic support: 'It is a pity that Bruneau's association with Zola has not encouraged modern opera directors to revive his work. *Le rêve* and *L'ouragan* are the prime candidates' (p. 231).

The second chapter surveys the period between Lully and Rameau, and Giroud bemoans the fact that, despite their high literary and musical worth, these works were under appreciated even in their own time. Five brief biographies precede succinct remarks about the beginnings of the opéra-comique. While a chapter structure with biographical interruptions is readily manageable in these earlier chapters, the increasing number of brief biographies in later chapters as well as the larger biographical/stylistic discussions tends to break up the historical narrative (especially from the Second Empire onward) and create a kaleidoscopic feel that obscures the genre's development. Perhaps a more detailed table of contents might have provided a map to navigate the book's structure.

Rich in details of many sorts, this volume even refers to twentieth-century editions. For example, Rameau's last *tragédie en musique*, *Les Boréades* (before 1763), was rehearsed but never staged in his lifetime, possibly due to a fire at the Opéra. Giroud tells us that the manuscript, found at the Bibliothèque nationale, served as a basis for a radio concert in 1964 and finally a staging at Aix-en-Provence in 1982: 'In that same year, the Bibliothèque nationale, by selling exclusive rights to a music publisher, created an interesting precedent of a mid-eighteenth-century opera now fully protected by copyright until 2052' (p. 52). Even more complex is the tale of Offenbach's last opera, *Les contes d'Hoffmann*, left unfinished at his death. The tribulations of this score began in the 1880s with orchestration and recitatives added by Bizet's friend Ernest Guiraud, massive cuts by the director of the Opéra-Comique, Léon Carvalho, and dispersion of the manuscripts, 'causing everyone to believe, for more than a century, that Offenbach had left the Venice act unfinished' (p. 193). Giroud outlines the deficiencies of Choudens' 1881 and 1907 scores, chronicles the Raoul Gunsbourg/Ernest Bloch retouchings of 1904, and describes how the missing manuscripts reappeared late in the twentieth century; he even alludes to the definitive score issued by Schott that bears the names of both Michael Kaye and Jean-Christophe Keck, though he does not go into the legal battle that preceded its publication (pp. 327–8). Like Rameau, Offenbach receives an extended discussion (almost seven pages), for this 'heir to Auber and Adam, created miracles of musical wit [...], setting for French operetta standards that few since have equaled and none surpassed' (p. 194).

Even if Giroud does not engage in musical analysis *per se*, he sets the reader on the path to do this for himself by pointing to major musical devices, designating musical high points, and outlining a basic approach for understanding and evaluating the essentials of the work. For example, Boieldieu's *La Dame blanche* (1825) may have a minimal role in today's repertory, but it was considered the model for opéra-comique for fifty years and had reached 1,000 performances at the Opéra-Comique alone as early as 1862. Giroud begins his one-and-a-half-page discussion with the libretto and describes the vogue for Walter Scott's novels about 1820. He also acknowledges the influence of Weber's *Der Freischütz* on the work's atmosphere. For the music, Giroud points to the principal recurring motifs and briefly describes the most anthologized parts of the score (the three virtuoso tenor arias for the hero). Then he names two impressive ensembles (the auction scene and the trio ending act 1). For his brief account of the reception, details are equally well chosen: that the critics saw the piece as the French retort to Rossini (though Boieldieu had assimilated elements of Rossini's style), and that Rossini, in turn, was absorbing ideas from Boieldieu's example when he wrote his last comic opera, *Le comte Ory* (1828); and – even more intriguing – that Wagner admired the auction scene as quintessentially French ('In comparison to that we are a nation of drunken artisans' [p. 119]). A book organized around case studies could have spent a whole chapter analyzing Boieldieu's score, its sources, and its historic resonance, but this was neither the design nor the aim of this more encyclopedic survey.

Despite many well-turned phrases, some computer glitches and other slips in the writing force the reader to stop, think and then mentally correct before proceeding. Two examples are: 'Fauré's filled the gap with *Pénélope* (p. 244)', which should be corrected to 'Fauré filled the gap with *Pénélope*'; or 'One wonders how many among the thousands who attended [Bizet's] funeral at the Trinité church two days later realized that they were burying the greatest living French composer' (p. 204), which should read '[...] that they were burying the greatest contemporary French composer'.

The author covers the vast scope of his material with true authority, and readers will be pleased to find that this volume does indeed permit *entrée* into a great tradition that deserves far more exploration, whether through analyzing a score in its cultural context in order to write about it, listening to rare recordings, attending revivals, or organizing a modern staging. One can only hope that Giroud's fine scholarship and committed advocacy will inspire engagement like this and more.

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Roe-Min Kok and Laura Tunbridge, eds, *Rethinking Schumann* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). xv + 471pp. £30.00.

Inspired by the centenary anniversary of Robert Schumann's birth, this new collection of eighteen essays was compiled with the clear aim 'to take stock: to reflect on the state of existing views and to suggest new paths' in Schumann scholarship (p. v). Perhaps some might feel with me an air of trepidation on being faced with another book on a composer whose life, works and reception have already been prolifically chronicled. Nevertheless, this volume does indeed