

**Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker. *A History of Opera*.
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For many years, few textbooks on opera history have been available, the best known being Donald Jay Grout's *A Short History of Opera* (its most recent edition runs to 1,030 pages). W. W. Norton has recently published three books on the genre, each serving different purposes. James Parakilas's *The Story of Opera* (2013) functions as a Music Appreciation text on opera,¹ while Michael Rose's *The Birth of an Opera: Fifteen Masterpieces from Poppea to Wozzeck* (2013) examines selected works in depth. In contrast to these two, *A History of Opera* by Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker presents a comprehensive history. While colored by strong biases, particularly regarding the present state of opera, the authors' narrative provides a thorough accounting of opera's historical development as well as rich and penetrating insights into many of its greatest monuments.

Renowned specialists in complementary traditions—Abbate in German and French opera, Parker in Italian—the authors have worked together before, co-editing *Analyzing Opera: Verdi and Wagner* in 1988 (Berkeley: University of California Press). The present book is truly a collaboration, as Abbate and Parker wrote almost every sentence in tandem. They have made the calculated decision not to include musical examples or technical analyses and to rely upon their own experiences of hearing live and recorded performances to explain a work's dramatic impact (p. xv).

As their narrative unfolds, Abbate and Parker emphasize evolving conventions as well as recurring concepts in opera history. One such concept concerns the vocal and visual "extravagance" of opera performance. Another acknowledges the inherent artificiality of sung drama but also its uncanny power to produce and shape reactions. Sometimes the composer produces these responses

1. See the review in this *Journal* 4, no. 2, pp. 349–53, <http://www.ams-net.org/ojs/index.php/jmhp/article/view/142/162>.

through dramatic interactions and even contradictions between what the authors call the *plot-character* and the *voice-character* (pp. 17–18). In *Ernani*, for instance, the “plot-character” Elvira is passive but her “voice-character” is forceful and decisive. Germont’s patriarchal authority may crush plot-Violetta by the end of their duet in *La traviata*, but voice-Violetta triumphs, as her line is sustained and Germont’s broken (pp. 379–81). Through the alchemy of music, listeners willingly accept otherwise absurd suspensions of disbelief (trouser roles) and time manipulations (a character in a hurry stops and sings about it at length). Music can “seduce [us] into making the wrong emotional alliance”: however repellent a plot-character may be, the voice-character may compel at least a degree of understanding (p. 139). In *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, for example, the contrast between Katerina Izmailova’s lyrical and warmly supported lines and the “manically over-energetic” sounds of the men in her life draw our empathy inexorably towards her (pp. 510–12).

A third point of discussion involves the different levels of communication that may be present in an opera. Abbate and Parker discuss the “acoustic shock” in *Singspiele* and other “dialogue operas” that alternate between speaking and singing (pp. 147–53). They also examine the complex interrelationships that may arise in operas that contain both diegetic music that a character hears on stage and the metadiegetic sounds heard only by the audience. Finally, Abbate and Parker note that by the end of the nineteenth century, operas began to be composed less by professional opera composers who devoted all or most of their creative efforts to that genre (Verdi, Wagner, Puccini) and more by masters of instrumental music who occasionally wrote operas (Debussy, Bartók), and whose works increasingly incorporate the formal, tonal, and motivic characteristics of the orchestral music of their day.

Abbate and Parker offer many subtle and penetrating insights into specific developments of opera history. They trace the evolution of Italian opera from Baroque virtuosity to Gluck’s sober declamation to Rossini’s lavish ornamentation—producing, in *seria* works like *Tancredi*, interesting contradictions between suffering plot-characters and voice-characters “bathed in untroubled melodic perfection” (p. 201). With the shift to the dramatic tenor in *bel canto* opera, elaborate vocal ornamentation became the domain of female characters. Verdi’s central innovation was to create forceful vocal lines that projected emotion with unprecedented directness (p. 251). Abbate and Parker discuss Verdi’s real and exaggerated engagement with politics, particularly with regard to *Nabucco* and the “Hebrew Chorus” (pp. 242–47).

Abbate and Parker highlight the international influence of French opera. They examine the impact of *tragédie-lyrique* on Gluck and French Grand Opera on Wagner (especially *Tannhäuser*); and they devote an entire chapter to the

under-acknowledged legacy of nineteenth-century *opéra-comique* (“a pro-
tean force,” p. 317) as well as operetta.

The authors credit Wagner with creating a new kind of opera designed to convey the “continual unfolding of intense emotional states” (p. 398). Abbate and Parker particularly emphasize the unprecedented gender equality reflected in interactions between Tristan and Isolde (pp. 345–48). They find Wagner’s later romantic scenes much less convincing, citing in *Götterdämmerung* his failure to distinguish musically between Siegfried’s genuine passion for Brünnhilde and his drug-induced infatuation with Guttrune (p. 358). Abbate and Parker seem to favor *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin* above the music dramas, in particular the Italianate “ardour” missing from his later compositions (p. 297).

With post-Wagnerian operas, Abbate and Parker arrange works according to various aesthetic approaches that composers adopted to carve out new creative spaces. Their first topic is realism, which takes varied and innovative forms: the orchestral imitation of bells in *Boris Godunov*; Tatyana’s memories of diegetic music during her non-diegetic “Letter Scene” in *Eugene Onegin*; Massenet’s flexible word settings; the combination of reflective concertato chorus and continuous stage action in *Manon Lescaut*; and the “extended soundscapes” of Parisian street life in *La bohème* (pp. 409–19).

In their coverage of *Literaturoper*—setting a spoken prose drama verbatim, leaving little opportunity for traditional set pieces—*Pelléas et Mélisande* and *Jenůfa* receive particularly sensitive and nuanced treatment. Abbate and Parker deftly introduce and define the symbolist aesthetics, distance from realism, and Wagnerian debts of the former, and the idiosyncratic style of the latter (pp. 430–32, 450). Other operas covered include *Salome*, *Erwartung*, and *Duke Bluebeard’s Castle*.

According to Abbate and Parker, many operas written between 1910 and 1950 evince “distance,” combining past and present in innovative ways but with wistful nostalgia (p. 461). To create chronological distance within *Der Rosenkavalier*, for example, Strauss superimposes ironic layers of anachronism (eighteenth-century siciliano, nineteenth-century waltz, and modern harmonic progressions in the Marschallin’s Act I monologue; pp. 464–65). Elsewhere in the same work, Strauss turns to “estrangement effects”: by deriving Baron Ochs’s leitmotif from the Trial March in Act II of *Die Zauberflöte*, he links a noble melody with a figure most unsuited to it (pp. 467–68). The authors discuss similar strategies of engaging and reinterpreting the past in *Wozzeck* and *The Rake’s Progress*.

According to Abbate and Parker, other mid-century composers confronted opera’s inescapable unrealism by including spoken exclamations or conversational musical dialogue, assigning the burden of emotional expression to the

orchestra. Examples include *Zeitoper* during the Weimar Republic, the later operas of Strauss and Janáček, and the works of Shostakovich.

The post-1945 period raises the final and by far most controversial thesis of this book: Abbate and Parker consider the historical development of opera to be complete and fully evolved, as today's companies focus almost exclusively upon the past. They argue that "new works" for opera companies usually mean the revival of neglected compositions by earlier masters and note that operas by living composers typically at best enjoy a very short shelf life. The authors acknowledge exceptions: Britten's operas, especially *Peter Grimes*, and individual anomalies such as Messiaen's *St. François d'Assise* and Adams's *Nixon in China*. As a rule, though, the days in which "the new was more exciting than the old, in which the world premiere took precedence over the revival" are gone forever (p. xiv); thus the early twentieth century represents opera's "late, *terminal* efflorescence" and the postwar years "witnessed opera's *final* mutation into a thing of the past" (my emphases; pp. 457, 519). In *Turandot* and *L'enfant et les sortilèges*, Abbate and Parker contend, the composers are consciously "mourning . . . for a dying art form: for opera itself" (p. 532). The only path to salvation is drastic indeed: jettison most works of the past and move the opera companies to new venues, ones not pre-designed to display nineteenth-century dramas (p. 527).

Such assessments, hinted at throughout the book, give this narrative the tone of an affectionate obituary—a characterization reinforced by the authors' own description of the modern opera house as a "mortuary" (p. 519). Nonetheless, an upbeat one-page conclusion reminds us that opera, even as a museum artifact, "will continue to articulate some of the complexities of human experience in ways no other art form can match" (p. 548). Given its brevity, especially compared to the preceding negativity, this *envoi* strikes me as lacking in conviction—rather like the obligatory happy ending imposed upon a Baroque tragedy.

Abbate and Parker express frank opinions, whether enthusiastic approval (*Tannhäuser* as "a near-perfect opera," p. 304) or hearty disapprobation (Walther's Prize Song as "one of Wagner's dullest and most predictable inspirations," p. 351). Inevitably some of their candid appraisals raise questions. Abbate and Parker's palpable disdain for Baroque *opera seria* (pp. 75–78) leads them to ascribe the revival of Handel's operas merely to the compulsion to revisit unfamiliar works of the past and not to any artistic merit in the dramas themselves (Abbate and Parker deem *Rinaldo* "irremediably triumphalist" and downplay Handel's sometimes daring breaks with convention in his operas; pp. 85, 88). The authors' defense of radical productions and contempt for traditionalist stagings such as those at the Metropolitan Opera—"a mid twentieth century frozen in aspic" (p. 34)—may not sit well with those who, as I do, regard much *Regietheater* with suspicion. In places Abbate and Parker also appear to pay respects to fashionable socio-political interpretations, such as those that

would find *Gianni Schicchi* proto-fascist because of its nationalist invocation of Dante (pp. 454–55); at the same time, however, they do not hesitate to call out un-nuanced or simplistic readings of misogyny in *La traviata* and demeaning exoticism in *Aida* by pointing to Verdi's calculated dissonance between plot-character and voice-character (pp. 376–87). Abbate and Parker touch on most major operas. Intentionally or not, the most notable omissions—Handel's operas (save *Rinaldo*), the majority of *tragédies lyriques*, Poulenc's *Dialogues des Carmélites*, and Kaija Saariaho's *L'amour de loin*—belong to the periods they least respect. Prokofiev is the most prominent composer not mentioned.

Despite these misgivings, the book contains a number of astute and enlightening observations about individual operas. Bizet's treatment of orchestration and dynamics in the “Flower Song” and final duet illustrate the inability of Carmen and Don José to communicate (pp. 337–39). The seemingly incongruous ending of *La bohème*, which pairs Mimì's death with the motive of Colline's farewell to his overcoat, reflects Puccini's strategy to “allow a space to emerge between words and music, a space in which musical drama could reside” (pp. 420–21).

Abbate and Parker draw upon an imposing array of non-musical resources to demonstrate and reinforce points about an opera's meaning, reception, or impact. They cite a scene from the film *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) in which an inmate describes the liberating effect of hearing *The Marriage of Figaro* (pp. 117–19). Balzac's *Massimilla Doni* (1839), Dumas's *Le Conte de Monte-Cristo* (1844), and Twain's essay “At the Shrine of St. Wagner” (1891) are quoted to illustrate period perceptions of Rossini, French Grand Opera, and Wagner respectively; similarly, Robert Falcon Scott's 1911 South Pole team provides an early twentieth-century perspective on the *bel canto* tenor. The famous passage describing the impact of *Lucia di Lammermoor* on Emma Bovary receives due consideration. A reflection on Laurel and Hardy's *The Devil's Brother* (1933) reveals the long-lasting shadow of Auber's *Fra Diavolo*, while an examination of René Clair's 1931 film *Le Million* reveals operatic influence upon early cinema. Abbate and Parker quote liberally from reviews of premieres and subsequent productions that offer contemporary evaluations on various works. In addition, Abbate and Parker have assembled 50 inter-text plates of photographs and caricatures of composers, singers, productions, and audiences, as well as commercial advertisements and stills of films and cartoons. They consider performances as recent as the 2010 Metropolitan Opera *Ring* cycle.

Despite its density, the book is engagingly written, though certain word choices may occasionally derail student readers (“prelapsarian,” “lubricious”; pp. 43, 72). Stray Britishisms appear—opera history “as a kind of pantechicon” (p. 37), Emanuele Muzio as “Verdi's composition pupil and general dogsbody” (p. 253)—as do, less often, colloquialisms (“eye candy” and “high-calorie

orchestral effects” in French Grand Opera; pp. 272, 274). Wry understatement frequently adds to the reader’s delectation:

- “The higher the male voice, the more youthful and more romantically successful its possessor; but, as so often happens in opera, life expectancy diminishes alarmingly as one ascends the vocal ladder” (p. 250).
- “German librettists shied away from turning national literary monuments into fodder for sopranos” (p. 267).
- Elsa’s brother is “en-swanned by an evil spell” (p. 298).
- “*Carmen* is hardly a tragedy from the point of view of the impresarios who have profited from it” (p. 339).

Finally, each chapter contains numerous subdivisions labeled with apposite and occasionally droll titles (“Outside the Radioactive Zone,” for Janáček’s late operas and their distance from expressionist aesthetics, p. 448).

There are few mistakes and fewer typographical errors, especially for a volume this size. Cardinal Mazarin could not have patronized Lully’s *tragédies lyriques*, as he died in 1661 (p. 65). Peter Cornelius is credited with writing the opera *Gunlöd* in 1891, but he left the work unfinished at his death in 1874 (p. 428). The playwright who inspired Berg’s *Lulu* was Frank, not Franz, Wedekind (p. 474). In *Turandot* Timur is the father of Calaf rather than Liù (p. 533). Finally, *Doctor Atomic* (2005) is not John Adams’s “only recent opera” (p. 547), as he wrote the two-act *A Flowering Tree* the following year.

A History of Opera has much to teach the reader, providing rich insights into specific works as well as important connecting threads between them. Like Parakilas’s volume, but for opposite reasons, this book is not the most advisable resource for a first-time introduction to opera history: while the former is most suited to undergraduates, Abbate and Parker’s book will best be absorbed by graduate readers already conversant with the basics of opera history. But opera lovers of all backgrounds will find much to ponder in this book as they discover many new and stimulating insights about the power this art form exerts.