**Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker. *A History of Opera*. New York and London: W.W. Norton, 2012.**

**xix + 604 pp. $49.95.**

**ISBN 978-0-373-05721-8**

 For many years, few comprehensive histories of opera have been available, the best known being Donald Jay Grout's *A Short History of Opera* (its most recent edition runs to 1030 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 (see the review in this journal, Vol. 4 No. 2, pp. 349-53), while Michael Rose's *The Birth of an Opera: Fifteen Masterpieces from* Poppea *to* Wozzeck (2013) examines selected works in depth. By contrast, *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—henceforth AP—wrote almost every sentence in tandem. They made the calculated decision not to include any musical examples, technical analyses, or in-text illustrations, relying on impressions gained through live and recorded performances to explain a work's dramatic impact; while a potentially hazardous choice, resulting in 548 unbroken pages of text, the lively prose and intriguing insights maintain the reader's interest throughout.

 As their narrative unfolds, AP emphasize evolving conventions as well as recurring motifs in opera history. One motif 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 through dramatic interactions and even contradictions between the *plot-character* and *voice-character*. 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. 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 motif involves the different levels of communication that may be present in an opera. AP discuss the "acoustic shock" in *Singspiele* and other "dialogue operas" that alternate between speaking and singing. They also examine the complex interrelationships that may arise in operas that contain both diegetic music that a character hears on stage ("real song") and the non-diegetic sounds heard only by the audience ("unmotivated music").

 Fourth: AP 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. Such procedures enriched the genre greatly but also made individual works much more difficult to compose. The emergence of a canon with which new offerings had to compete contributed to the challenges these creators faced.

 AP 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). AP discuss Verdi's real and exaggerated engagement with politics, particularly with regard to *Nabucco* and the "Hebrew Chorus" (pp. 242-47).

 AP emphasize 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-unacknowledged legacy of nineteenth-century *opéra-comique* ("a protean 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). AP particularly emphasize the unprecedented gender equality reflected in interactions between Tristan and Isolde. Wagner's later romantic scenes they find much less convincing, citing in *Götterdämmerung* his failure to distinguish musically between Siegfried's genuine passion for Brünnhilde and his drug-induced infatuation with Gutrune (p. 358). AP 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, AP arrange works according to various aesthetic approaches that composers adopted to carve out new creative spaces. First 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).

 *Literaturoper*—setting a spoken prose drama verbatim, leaving little opportunity for traditional set pieces—represented another approach. Of these, *Pelléas et Mélisande* and *Jenůfa* receive particularly sensitive and nuanced treatment: 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 AP, many operas written between 1910 and 1950 evince "distance," combining past and present in innovative ways but with wistful nostalgia (p. 461). In *Der Rosenkavalier*, 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 he 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 AP, many twentieth-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 confronts us with the final and by far most controversial thesis of this book. AP consider the history of opera complete and fully evolved, as today's companies focus almost exclusively upon the past—"new works" to them meaning the revival of neglected compositions by earlier masters—and operas by living composers typically at best enjoy a very short shelf life. AP 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 the funereal scenes of *Turandot* and *L'enfant et les sortilèges*, among others, 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 their own description of the modern opera house as a "mortuary" (p. 519). The 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 a happy ending imposed upon a Baroque tragedy.

As the preceding indicates, AP express frank opinions, whether enthusiastic approval (*Tannhäuser* "a near-perfect opera," p. 304) or hearty disapprobation (Walther's Prize Song "one of Wagner's dullest and most predictable inspirations," p. 351). Inevitably some of these candid appraisals raise questions. AP'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 (AP deem *Rinaldo* "irremediably triumphalist" and downplay Handel's sometimes daring breaks with convention in his operas; pp. 85, 88). The implication that the portrayal of Caspar in *Der Freischütz* is anti-Semitic needs more evidence (pp. 179-80). 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, like this reviewer, regard much *Regietheater* with suspicion. In places AP 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).

Astute and enlightening observations about individual operas abound. 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).

AP 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* 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*, and Twain's essay "At the Shrine of St. Wagner" illustrate period perceptions of Rossini, French Grand Opera, and Wagner respectively; Robert Falcon Scott's South Pole journal 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. Laurel and Hardy's *The Devil's Brother* (1933) reveals the long-lasting shadow of Auber's *Fra Diavolo*, while René Clair's 1931 film *Le Million* reveals operatic influence upon early cinema. In addition, AP quote liberally from reviews. They consider performances as recent as the 2010 Metropolitan Opera *Ring* cycle. As mentioned above, the text includes no illustrations, but AP 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 (though, regrettably, not *The Rabbit of Seville* or *What's Opera, Doc?*).

 Despite its density, the book is engagingly written, though word choices may occasionally derail student readers (opera idealized as "as a noble, prelapsarian form of expression," "lubricious" stories about castrati; pp. 43, 72). Stray Britishisms appear—opera history "as a kind of pantechnicon" (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).

AP 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.

 Mistakes are few and typographical errors fewer, 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, AP'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.