

BOOK REVIEW

Ancient Drama in Music for the Modern Stage. Edited by PETER BROWN and SUZANA OGRAJENŠEK. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. xvi + 460. Hardcover, £93.00/\$160.00. ISBN 978-0-19-955855-1.

*"Old dead legends! How can we go on forever writing about gods and legends?
... Come on now, be honest. Wouldn't you all rather listen to your hairdresser
than Hercules? Or Horatius? Or Orpheus? All those old bores!"*

—Mozart in Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus*

Mozart's" protestations to the contrary, composers continue to find inspiration in the legends of Greece and Rome. While there is a vast amount of scholarship examining the relationship between individual composers and their classical source material, books encompassing such relationships from the origins of opera to the present day are surprisingly rare. *Ancient Drama in Music for the Modern Stage* is a work that does much to remedy this lack.

This book contains nineteen essays examining the relationship between ancient drama and music for the stage, from the late sixteenth century to the twenty-first. It is a companion volume to *The Ancient Dancer in the Modern World*, edited by Fiona Macintosh (Oxford 2010). Chapters 4–11 were written for the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama (APGRD) conference, "Ancient Drama in Modern Opera, 1600-1800," held at the University of Oxford in July of 2007. The remaining chapters are either based on lectures delivered at Oxford for the APGRD, or written specifically for this volume. Most of the essays concern themselves with opera, but several discuss music written to accompany spoken performances of Greek tragedies. Greek tragedy has proven to be more influential to music than comedy, although descendants of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* receive their own chapter. The dramatic aspects of opera receive the most attention, but there is also an essay by Jennifer Thorp on "Dance in Lully's *Alceste*."

While the essays are organized chronologically, the topics discussed are eclectic. The book does not pretend to be an exhaustive survey of every musical

composition based on ancient drama. For the most part, it covers only those works based on extant Greek dramas, although there are discussions of operas based on Greek myth in general, or on Roman history. Monteverdi's *Orfeo* and Gluck's *Orpheus and Eurydice* are too influential to omit. Ancient non-dramatists were as influential as Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes in the development of opera; Aristotle receives much attention in these pages. The importance of Horace's and Lucian's writings on ancient art forms is also repeatedly brought out. Librettists and choreographers share space in these pages with composers. Opera is never a matter of one man re-creating a classical predecessor's work, but a true team effort.

The opening chapters, "Precursors, Precedents, Pretexts: The Institution of Greco-Roman Theatre and the development of European Opera" by Roger Savage; and "Greek Tragedy and Opera: Notes on a Marriage Manqué" by Michele Napolitano, examine the sometimes controversial origins of the musical form we call opera. It began with a desire to re-create what "the Camerata," the humanists and musicians of Medici Florence in the 1570s and 1580s, believed was the all-sung form of classical drama (a view no longer generally accepted, and not universally accepted in the Renaissance either). Of these introductions, Napolitano's essay is more likely to appeal to the non-specialist in music, while Savage's goes into greater depth on the technical aspects of the early operas and their direct predecessors.

One paradox pointed out by Wendy Heller in her essay "Phaedra's Handmaiden: Tragedy as Comedy and Spectacle in Seventeenth-Century Opera" is that, "while the first sung dramas were presumably inspired by the desire to imitate the emotive power of Greek tragedy, Italian opera composers resisted using the tragedies of Ancient Greece as models for opera during much of the seventeenth century" (67). What happened when composers did look to ancient models comprises some of the most fascinating reading in the book. Tragic myths and dramas were transformed into grand spectacles, with vastly expanded casts, on-stage battles, ballets, and often happy endings. For example, in the hands of the librettist Pietro Paolo Bissari, the composer Johann Kasper Kerll, and the stage designer Francesco Santurini, the tragic tale of Phaedra and Hippolytus ended with the resurrection and deification of the young hero.

An important transitional essay in this book is "Who Killed Gluck?" by Simon Goldhill. It shows how Gluck's *Orfeo* cleared away much of the clutter of its predecessors in favor of "simple lines, emotional directness, and austerity" (216). Revolutionary in 1770's Paris, obsolete by Napoleon's day, it nevertheless in-

spired composers well known for their classically themed operas, such as Berlioz (*Les Troyens*) and Strauss (*Elektra*). The latter composers are discussed at some length in this article, but there is, oddly, no individual essay wholly devoted to either in the book.

The latter part (nearly half) of the book deals with composers from the late nineteenth to the early twenty-first century. Some of the composers discussed here are well known (Stravinsky, Orff); others less so (Taneyev, Xenakis). Several essays touch on a paradox: While many associate “the Classics” with tradition and traditionalism, they have often been a starting point for the avant-garde. At the start of his essay “Sing Evohe! Three Twentieth-Century Operatic Versions of Euripides’ *Bacchae*,” Robert Cowan states, “... under the influence of the ritualists, of Freud, and especially of Nietzsche, Hellenism could also have a very different meaning” (320).

Readers searching for a discussion of the best known operas with classical predecessors should read Marianne McDonald’s *Sing Sorrow: Classics, History, and Heroines in Opera* (Greenwood Press 2001), which contains chapters on Breuer’s “The Gospel at Colonus” and Theodorakis’ “Medea” as well as Mozart’s “Idomeneo,” Stravinsky’s “Oedipus Rex,” and the above mentioned works by Berlioz and Strauss. Those seeking depth of information on the work of some less well known musicians and librettists will find much in *Ancient Drama in Music for the Modern Stage* to send them on quests to the nearest music library.

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