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Ancient Rome in Early Opera. By ROBERT C. KETTERER. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009. Pp. 253. Cloth, \$40.00. ISBN 978-0-252-03378-0.

We now live in a world of academic “interdisciplinarity,” in which scholars bring materials or methodologies from other fields to enrich their own. But it remains rare for a classicist to become so deeply learned in a remote discipline that his or her work is taken seriously by scholars of that discipline. Robert Ketterer (K.), both in his earlier papers and in this remarkable book, has shown himself such a scholar. I have been a regular, even obsessive, opera-goer for the last half-century and have attended more than a dozen pre-Mozart operas—often in multiple productions—but I am in awe of K.’s vast knowledge of obscure works and his sensible judgments on more familiar operas. This book will be of great interest both to musicologists and to historians of early modern European history interested in the subtleties of artistic patronage and imperial ideology.

Perhaps fewer classicists will find *Ancient Rome in Early Opera* immediately appealing; it does not so much shed light on antiquity as demonstrate the enduring importance of antiquity in the cultural and political conversations of Europe between the Renaissance and the Age of Revolutions. But many classicists in recent decades have turned to *Nachleben* to make our knowledge of ancient poetry and drama, mythology and religion, sculpture and architecture, philosophy and political thought available to modern historians and literary critics. K.’s book is a splendid example of that worthy enterprise.

Even classicists need to know how succeeding centuries used, transformed and sometimes abused ancient material. Before we bluster about the fictional characters of Ben Hur or Maximus in *Gladiator*, or the inventions in *I, Claudius* or *HBO Rome*, it is useful to see how the librettists invented characters or devised happy endings (Cato spared by Julius Caesar in Vivaldi’s 1724 *Catone in Utica*) much as English actor-directors in the 18th century tacked happy endings onto *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. Hollywood is certainly “inaccurate,” but it is no more disreputable than centuries of French tragedians, Italian librettists, English actors and Austrian composers who rewrote history to serve their own purposes. We should ask ourselves how and why this material inspired both imitation and innovation through the centuries.

In this book, K. examines Italian opera during the two centuries from its origins in Florence about 1600 until the end of the 18th century. (The quadricentenary of opera was celebrated at the Getty Center in

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Los Angeles in October, 2000, with a performance of the first surviving opera, Peri's *Euridice*.) Though those Tuscan intellectuals claimed to be recreating the declamation and music of Greek tragedy, K. argues (as he has earlier) that it was ancient Rome that more truly inspired the great majority of librettists and composers. Not only were most of the subjects Roman, but the central themes of the clement prince and the quest for liberty are more dependent on Roman historians and Stoic philosophy than on Athenian drama. K. rightly identifies the Stoic themes of constancy, clemency and friendship as "the moral basis for eighteenth-century serious opera." Even when the characters are Greeks, these and other Roman values and attitudes—*Romanitas*—inform the operas.

To most classicists, early Italian opera is (relatively) *terra incognita*—and with good reason. These works were almost universally ignored between 1800 and the middle of the 20th century. New York's Metropolitan Opera's excellent on-line archives reveal that in 125 years it has offered a single performance of Monteverdi—a concert *Orfeo* in 1912 with a *New York Times* headline: "Primitive Opera Heard" and a review that mentions the audience's bewilderment. The Met has offered no Cavalli, and presented no Handel operas until its 1983–1984 centennial season; it has since offered four. Even the revered Mozart's *opere serie* were ignored until *Idomeneo* was offered (for Luciano Pavarotti) in 1982 and *La Clemenza di Tito* in 1984. Other groups, such as the Handel festival in Halle, Drottningham, and the Glyndebourne festival, did much to bring Baroque opera to wider attention. as have the recording industry and diligent scholars such as Winton Dean (Handel) and Ellen Rosand (Monteverdi and Cavalli). (Rosand, with funding from the Mellon Foundation, now directs the Yale Baroque Opera Project, which recently presented several evenings of Cavalli excerpts.) My aim in recounting this operatic history is to demonstrate that K. is truly at the cutting edge of research, and I hope that his work will inspire even more attention and even performances.

Musicologists and scholars of Italian literature will doubtless focus on K.'s discussions of the scores and librettos of these operas, but for classicists the primary interest remains how these works make use of ancient literary models and, indeed, ancient history. We are well aware of the dangerous erotic power of Dido and Cleopatra in Roman literature, but the other North African *femme fatale* and suicide, Sophonisba, wife of King Masinissa, features in spoken tragedies in English, French and Italian as well as a number of operas. This shows how the early modern dramatists might prefer relatively minor figures from Roman history—Otho, Berenice, Britannicus, Octavia—to create powerful protagonists.

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K. argues well that Ovid's image of love as a battle pervades Monteverdi's treatment of Nero and Poppaea in his 1636 *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, though his claim of a Stoic program in that seemingly amoral opera was not entirely convincing for me. Yet one of K.'s interesting threads is the initial appearance of comic, even Plautine elements in 17th-century Venetian public opera, before such elements were reduced in the operas for the Hapsburg court of the Holy Roman Empire, which preferred to see its "forbears" as moral and clement rulers. Still later, in Handel's Italian operas for the London stage, comedy returns, with Claudius depicted in *Agrippina* as the stereotypical foolish Roman *senex*.

Since the librettists were regarded as dramatists, K. reasonably links the spoken plays with libretti on the same topics. An enormously popular Roman on the 18th-century stage was Cato the Younger. Joseph Addison's 1713 *Cato* divided the Whigs and Tories at the London performances—each regarded Cato as reflecting their views and the tyrannical Caesarians as their opponents. The Whig interpretation prevailed, and the play became popular among revolutionaries in Europe and America; Washington's officers even performed it at Valley Forge. Metastasio's 1723 libretto *Catone in Utica* was set by more than a half-dozen composers, including J.C. Bach, and played in dozens of opera houses. The temper of the time can be gauged by which Romans became popular on the stage.

I can hardly correct K.'s impressive knowledge of the libretti and operas, though I might have liked more discussion of the music. (His most extended musical discussion—of Handel's *Giulio Cesare*—is excellent.) There are also occasional slips. The defeat of Hannibal at Zama is twice given as 203 BCE (p. 42) instead of 202 BCE, while the suicide of Cleopatra and the end of her reign is placed in 31 BCE (p. 43) instead of 30 BCE. K.'s desire to differentiate between the historical figure ("Nero" and "Poppaea") and the operatic role ("Nerone" and "Poppea") can be confusing. On pp. 74–5, he refers to "Claudio," "Claudius," and (twice) "Claudios"—I take these last to be typos. When writing for two groups of readers, it might have been clearer to regularize the nomenclature.

In an Epilogue, K. offers some testy comments about the 2005 Salzburg production of Mozart's *Lucio Silla*. It is in the grand tradition of operaphiles to complain about unconventional stagings. I did not see *Silla*, but at the same Festival I was revolted by a production of *The Magic Flute* in which the Queen of the Night was good, and Sarastro seemed to be presiding over an old age home for former

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Nazis. So much for Mozart's devotion to freemasonry. I only wish K. had told us more about other contemporary productions, especially those available on DVD. He briefly mentions Peter Sellars' *Giulio Cesare*, but several other excellent directors (Hytner, Negrin) have updated that work to the 19th (Napoleon) or 20th centuries. The themes of European imperialism, orientalism and racism certainly merit this sort of reexamination, and I imagine that K. would have interesting things to say.

In conclusion, this is a marvelous book and by no means a simple survey of obscure material. I have mentioned K.'s arguments about the effect of Stoicism. Particularly interesting is his discussion of how two popular themes—the myth of the clement prince and the myth of liberty—both contradict and reinforce each other. This dramatic conflict was often reconciled by imperial generosity. Dramatists and composers moved between tragedy and happy endings as changing aesthetics and political developments challenged the older conventions of *opera seria*. K. shows how the rise of the chorus is an indication of democratic stirrings as the Age of Revolutions approached. K. has performed a signal service in bringing his classical knowledge to the attention of musicologists, and his musical perceptiveness to the community of classicists.

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