Reading Critics Reading

Opera and Ballet Criticism in France from the Revolution to 1848

edited by

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Introduction: On Reading Critics Reading

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Everyone 'reads' these days: a book, a person, a bodily gesture, a picture, a set of moral principles, a musical performance; and claims for the startling newness of the activity thus renamed are often exaggerated. But perhaps in the present case there is some justification for the overt banner of difference. Our project is to examine in new ways some small part of the opera and ballet criticism in early nineteenth-century France, most of it journalistic; and our starting point came with the feeling that this body of writing had been undervalued and, for that reason, insufficiently thought about. In that sense, the project falls into a developing pattern in musicology generally (at least in its Anglo-American wing). Whether from a new mistrust of analysis or—in some extreme cases—of any detailed explanation of the internal workings of pieces of music, or as a way of suggesting new and broader fields of meaning for those pieces, musicological conferences, journals, dissertations and books seem increasingly dominated by 'reception studies'.[1]

For those brought up on a musicology that concentrated the major part of its energy, and invested a major part of its prestige, on 'genetic' issues, the

[1] As so often with Anglo-American trends of the 1990s, one of the key influences in this turn was translations of Carl Dahlhaus in the late 1970s and 1980s. For a succinct account of Dahlhaus's position, see 'Problems in Reception History', in *Foundations of Music History* (Cambridge, 1983), 150–65. Much of the most theoretically sophisticated work has emerged from discussions of 19th- and 20th-c. German music, in particular the numerous articles that have appeared in the journal *19th-Century Music*. To take two areas almost at random, see Scott Burnham, *Beethoven Hero* (Princeton, 1995); or Karen Painter, 'The Sensuality of Timbre: Responses to Mahler and Modernity at the *fin de siècle*', *19th-Century Music*, 18/3 (Spring, 1995), 236–56, and K. M. Knittel, '"Ein hypermoderner Dirigent": Mahler and Anti-Semitism in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna', ibid., 257–76. Apart from the specialist contributions cited below, perhaps the greatest recent stimulus in the field of 19th-c. French music has come from James H. Johnson's *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History* (Berkeley, 1995); see, however, Mary Ann Smart's review in *19th-Century Music*, 20/3 (Spring, 1997), 291–7, which raises a number of important objections to the book's methodology and aesthetic stance.

logistical implications of this change of emphasis—the sheer volume of material at one's disposal—can itself be a severe methodological challenge, forcing us relinquish any hint of triumphalism about a new 'objectivity' thus achieved.[2] The considerable expansion in so many domains of artistic activity during the early nineteenth century is nowhere more evident than in published writing about the topic, much of it in widely disseminated printed sources. Theatres multiplied and expanded, orchestras (and singers) got larger and louder, audiences became socially more diverse, opera (and ballet) spread its message out from Europe to reach around the globe, leaving in its wake a vast trail of non-theatrical activity, in prestigious concerts and aristocratic salons as well as in far more lowly venues. And to celebrate and aid in the dissemination of all this activity, there was a huge expansion in periodical publication, with a large number of ventures either including extensive reference to or entirely dedicated to opera and ballet. Distinguished titles such as the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* (Leipzig), the *Gazzetta musicale di Milano*, and the *Revue et gazette musicale de Paris*, were accompanied by countless less ambitious publications.

The centre of this activity, at least in terms of sheer bulk, was Paris, in which an important première at mid-century would stimulate as many as twenty or thirty separate reviews, many of them lengthy.[3] This outpouring only increased as the century went on, with some periodicals tending to become yet more specialized, sometimes even being devoted to a single theatre. Paris is justified as a focus of concentration, then, merely in terms of production volume; but the criticism produced there also had a particular breadth and commitment to literary innovation. For one thing, as we see frequently in this book, the Parisian journals matched the cosmopolitan atmosphere of their city in the sheer range and international provenance of their journalism, which in this respect certainly outstrips any German and Italian counterparts.[4] Most striking is the vehicle of the feuilleton, which—along

[2] For a meditation on this issue that remains challenging, see Thomas Bauman, 'Requiem, but No Piece', *19th-Century Music*, 15/2 (1991), 151–61.

[3] For an indication of how extensive this material can be, see Marie-Hélène Coudroy, *La Critique parisienne des 'grands opéras' de Meyerbeer* (Saarbrücken, 1988); and, especially, Karl Leich-Galland (ed.), *Fromental Halévy, 'La Juive': dossier de presse parisienne (1835)* (Saarbrücken, 1987), together with subsequent volumes in this valuable series. A parallel venture in the field of Italian opera is Annalisa Bini and Jeremy Commons, *Le prime rappresentazioni delle opere di Donizetti nella stampa coeva* (Rome, 1997), which includes an extensive anthology of the Parisian critical reception of all of Donizetti's grands opéras.

[4] Of the many famous figures who gravitated towards the capital in this period and found themselves writing journalism, it seems wilful not to mention Richard Wagner, who looms very small in the present volume. Robert Jacobs and Geoffrey Skelton (eds.), *Wagner Writes from Paris: Stories, Essays and Articles by the Young Composer* (London, 1973) offers a brief, very selective compilation and translation of some of Wagner's Parisian publications.

with the more usual fare—could produce items as diverse as the first French translations of E. T. A. Hoffmann, Balzac's short story 'Gambara', or those fantastic tales about women's bodies and voices so thoughtfully analysed recently by Margaret Miner.[5] The fact that this diversity has sometimes encouraged past specialists in nineteenth-century French opera and ballet to ignore 'the music itself' may once have been cause for lament, and may still be a matter of regret to some; but for those who are keen to expand musicology's epistemological territory, the attractions of 'reading' this rich grain of criticism are obvious and—in this book—willingly embraced.

Most of the journalistic 'criticism' thus produced was of course directed towards performances and performers, and was written to routine formulae; what is more, many of the opinions expressed were evidently 'bought' by the owners of the publication (who would frequently have biases brought on by financial and/or political interests). Partly for these reasons, there has been a tendency in the past merely to accumulate such material, concentrating far more on content than on style. Moreover, even recent investigations have tended to rely on a critical 'canon' made up almost exclusively of writers who were also prominent as practitioners, usually composers. The 'Criticism' entry in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera* gives a succinct account of the traditional line. The section on the first half of the nineteenth century (for some strange reason entitled 'Early Romanticism') mentions Hoffmann, Weber, Schumann, and (most extensively) Berlioz. Only near the end are two non-composers briefly castigated:

> As might be expected, it is not only in his musical style but also in his musical specificity that Berlioz outshines the other Parisian critics, such as the ineffectual opera-doctor Castil-Blaze (responsible for mangling Weber's *Freischütz*, among other works) and the ex-singer Scudo, for whom the apogee of Romanticism was represented by Meyerbeer.[6]

There we have it. According to this prescription, history can march comfortably along, with our museum of musical works (Weber in, Meyerbeer out, for example) unchallenged. Critics who argued passionately for causes now long lost, or who, worse still, castigated the occupants of our current pantheon—

[5] See Margaret Miner, 'Phantoms of Genius: Women and the Fantastic in the Opera-House Mystery', *19th-Century Music*, 18/2 (Fall, 1994), 121–35, which also contains bibliographic information about the Hoffmann translations (p. 121 n. 2) and 'Gambara' (p. 122 n. 3).

[6] Jeremy Noble, 'Criticism', *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, ed. Stanley Sadie (London, 1992), iv. 1011.

imagine someone who disliked Mozart!—need not be 'read' except to see where they went wrong, thus congratulating our present taste.[7]

In the present volume we set out to complicate this picture of the past, in particular by taking more seriously the motivations and beliefs of some of these journalistic critics (Berlioz not excluded).[8] Rather than seeing this body of work as critically superseded, and thus useful primarily for the raw factual information it can furnish about performers and works and institutions, all the essays here try to offer a 'thicker' description, one that looks at the historical, cultural, and aesthetic background which led critics to write as they did—that, in modern parlance, sets out to examine closely their 'agendas'.[9]

What emerges from this new 'reading'? Certainly no simple new lines that can replace the old: a history that, in keeping with many developments elsewhere, questions many of the old certainties. Katharine Ellis, for example, offers us a case study: a rehabilitation of one writer in the 'amateur' school of musical criticism, and a discussion of where such enquiries might lead us. One point that is immediately clear is the bias of a modern(ist) view in which technical detail is prized above all. Julien-Louis Geoffroy's writings are certainly not part of the present-day critical canon, and no wonder when he could write in 1805 that *Don Giovanni* 'contains too much music; it is a feast in which one quickly becomes replete: the ensemble numbers are so numerous, so full and so powerful, that the listeners find themselves as it were

[7] Dahlhaus had firm words to say about this kind of history-making: 'an historian must always be ready to find in his period not only correspondences but discrepancies as well, at times even unintelligible discrepancies'; see *Foundations*, 141.

[8] As their footnotes will show, the authors assembled here have clearly benefited from a number of distinguished predecessors, many of them pioneers who made the musicological world aware of the riches that were available. Important studies published in the last thirty years are of course too numerous to mention. However, the following have been particularly influential: Peter Anthony Bloom, 'François-Joseph Fétis and the "Revue Musicale" (1827–1835)' (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1972); Danièle Pistone, 'La Musique dans *Le Charivari* (1832–1870)', *Revue internationale de musique française*, 10 (Feb. 1983), 7–54; Jean Watelet, 'Les Débuts de la critique musicale dans la presse illustrée', *Revue internationale de musique française*, 17 (June 1985), 7–18; Shelagh Aitken, 'Music and the Popular Press: Music Criticism in Paris during the First Empire' (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1987); Kerry Murphy, *Hector Berlioz and the Development of French Music Criticism* (Ann Arbor, 1988); Belinda Cannone, *La Réception des opéras de Mozart dans la presse parisienne (1793–1829)* (Paris, 1991); Donald Garth Gíslason, 'Castil-Blaze, "De l'opéra en France" and the Feuilletons of the "Journal des Débats" (1820–1832)' (Ph.D. diss., University of British Columbia, 1992); and Katharine Ellis, *Music Criticism in Nineteenth-Century France: 'La Revue et Gazette Musicale de Paris', 1834–1880* (Cambridge, 1995).

[9] For parallel investigations of the political press, see in particular Charles Ledré, *La Presse à l'assaut de la Monarchie: 1815–48* (Paris, 1960); Charles-Marc Des Granges, *Le Romantisme et la critique: la presse littéraire sous la Restauration, 1815–1830* (Paris, 1907; repr. Geneva, 1973); Daniel Rader, *The Journalists and the July Revolution in France: The Role of the Political Press in the Overthrow of the Bourbon Restoration, 1827–30* (The Hague, 1973); and Jean-Jacques Goblot, *La Jeune France libérale: 'Le Globe' et son groupe littéraire, 1824–1830* (Paris, 1993).

crushed under their harmonic weight'. However, the very strangeness of such judgements can in fact provide us with a point of entry into what is now an alien aesthetic. In this case, for example, it can help us to understand further the complexity of Geoffroy's cultural nationalism, in particular the paradoxical fact that—in spite of the political situation—it remained powerfully linked to ideas of classicism founded on seventeenth-century French models.

The distortions created by concentrating on a single line of 'professional' critics can stretch to other areas. Benjamin Walton's essay on *Le Globe*, which like Ellis's strives to recuperate an 'amateur' critical tradition, also encourages us to reconsider the whole issue of French Romanticism and the precarious and contested idea of its 'dawn' in the years around 1830. The *Globe* critic Ludovic Vitet's series of articles on this topic in the mid-1820s argues, among other surprising positions, that 'Romantic' opera would not inevitably arise from its adoption of 'Romantic' spoken drama—and that these two genres might even find themselves antithetical. At a time when we are still in doubt about what exactly constitutes Romanticism in musical terms, and when as a result we often lean too heavily on musical appropriations of literary texts to justify the label, such a proposal might occasion a radical rethink of a rather basic musical category.

Mark Everist moves the argument closer to home when he considers a face-to-face confrontation between two major critics with very different agendas: Berlioz and Castil-Blaze, arguing over the canonic status of a composer, Gluck. Of course, since their argument took place, the relative worth and influence of these two writers has turned full circle, something that makes all the more ironic the fact that Berlioz's changing views on Gluck brought him closer to Castil-Blaze's position as the decades rolled on, and as Berlioz's own career pushed him into altering his priorities. But again, one of the main aims of Everist's essay is to oblige us to examine *why* Berlioz has become so much more influential. To do this we need to think critically about our own preoccupations—in this case that our notions of musical transcendence, though rarely supported overtly, still perhaps linger sufficiently to make us feel more at home with Berlioz's position.

Two of the essays collected here focus on a further much misunderstood aspect of French opera reception: that concerned with genre. David Charlton's discussion of opéra comique lays out the scene in a broad perspective, but perhaps the most important aspect of his argument concerns the complex mediations that took place between genre and state censorship. In Paris, of course, genre involved robust physical institutions as well as mere

concepts, and in this sense it is small surprise that ideas of 'politically acceptable vs. politically unacceptable' cannot easily be disentangled from other binaries, notably the idea of 'good vs. bad' and 'high vs. low'. In other words, censorship was often as much a matter of policing taste as it was of policing political correctness. (The same point could of course be made about the debate over Romanticism, which was much bound up with generic purity, with institutional control over the *types* of piece that could be performed in a given theatre, before a given segment of the population.) As if to illustrate the point, Sarah Hibberd's 'thick' description of the vogue for Faust topics in 1820s France offers a revealing case study of generic mutation and its consequences. The Faust idea moved freely between very different kinds of texts: from scholarly commentary on Goethe's original, to translations and adaptations, to visual representations, to plays and minor musical theatre genres, and finally to grand opéra itself; each transformation was accompanied by a wealth of journalistic commentary, and with each the cultural valency of the idea was recast in the light of the different audiences it encountered.

As was perhaps inevitable, a number of the essays collected here focus on the business of opera and politics. Grand opéra scholarship in particular has long tended to think of this issue in monochromatic terms—one in which opera is always liable to reflect 'popular' opinion, and so constantly threatens the political status quo, thus giving rise to a system of state censorship that we can now expose as a profoundly negative and repressive influence on many levels of theatrical activity.[10] The most frequently cited recent example of the latter line of thinking has been a book by Jane Fulcher, *The Nation's Image*, in which she argues at length that the phenomenon of grand opéra was at base 'a subtly used tool of the state', albeit one in which the control could fail or be subverted by its creators or an unruly public.[11] Most would agree with elements of Fulcher's thesis, but the cumulative effect of the essays collected here is to stress counter-narratives—in particular examples in which the relationship between political change and opera may produce alarming cross-currents.

[10] For a general overview, see F. W. J. Hemmings's *Theatre and State in France, 1760–1905* (Cambridge, 1994), esp. 204–25. One of the most stimulating recent reviews of the issue is provided by Odile Krakovitch, *Hugo censuré: la liberté au théâtre au XIX^e siècle* (Paris, 1985).

[11] Jane Fulcher, *The Nation's Image: French Grand Opera as Politics and Politicized Art* (Cambridge, 1987), 2. An important predecessor to this book is William L. Crosten, *French Grand Opera: An Art and a Business* (New York, 1972; first published 1948). Though his remit is much broader, Anselm Gerhard's *The Urbanization of Opera: Music Theater in Paris in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago, 1998) offers many important adjustments to Fulcher's position.

Sandy Petrey suggests that our habitual view of opera passively reflecting political change may sometimes be turned on its head, and that operatic representations may help to construct a vital space for political change. The vogue for Meyerbeer's *Robert le diable* may have obvious resonances with the political events surrounding Paris at the time of its première. On the one hand, one can indulge in speculation about the relationships that might have been made between the opera and the 'real' drama unfolding on Paris's streets. On the other, and more abstractly, the collapsed dualism of Robert the character may echo or parallel the political need to collapse the dualism of 'king' and 'citizen' occasioned by the accession of Louis-Philippe after the July revolution. But the very success of the opera may also have had a far more concrete effect on the social and political sphere: it effectively forced competing political factions to sit together in the auditorium ('everyone' had to see *Robert*), in the process creating out of the Opéra's loges and foyers a further 'stage'—one on which violent political oppositions were perforce domesticated and muted.

Mary Ann Smart's 'political' reading of Donizetti's last opera, *Dom Sébastien*, reveals a different though related set of oppositions, adding to a conjunction that may once have seemed simple. She certainly finds political resonances within the plot of her chosen opera, resonances that become particularly focused when examined through the plot narrations offered by contemporary critics. Those seemingly interminable synopses that French critics routinely present to their readers at the start of reviews have traditionally been ignored by today's 'readers'. But their narrative choices, the manner in which they tell the tale to highlight certain themes over others, become in Smart's words 'prime sites for critics to convey their own biases and construct their own political analogies on a specific plot'. At the same time, however, the reception of *Dom Sébastien* and in particular its perfunctory treatment by the censors seems to have had relatively little to do with these covert or overt 'political' readings. Finally, any political meanings attached to *Dom Sébastien* were much more dependent on simple accidents of history, in this case the fortuitous resemblance between a grand funeral scene in the opera and ceremonies marking the death of a prominent member of the ruling classes.

Cormac Newark takes up further strands of this argument, developing the idea that grand opéra criticism during this period—even of the lowliest kind—might on occasions be called 'performative': that, as well as merely reflecting current cultural or political prejudices, it might also *construct* them in some important senses; and that the forms this criticism takes might also

serve to construct notions of what is and is not essential to the operatic experience. Nowhere is this clearer than in the tendency of critics to describe in the minutest detail the various scenic spectacles that were so much a part of grand opéra's effect: the sheer length of the description often contributed to the grandiosity of the scene, adding another layer of detail to the already crowded canvas. This observation leads in turn to a deeper question concerning the relationship of operatic spectacle to France's revolutionary past, in particular to the manner in which elaborate 'stagings' played a crucial role in educating the public about various versions of national history.

The last two essays in our collection turn to ballet, an area that has long been treated as rather peripheral to music history but in which scholars now seem to be making powerful claims for shared interests and concerns. Partly this is a matter of an increasingly shared terminology: as operatic scholars turn to the visual aspect of works, and to the impact of music on the body, writings on ballet become essential. Marian Smith makes a powerful argument in favour of this rapprochement, in particular by her investigation of what she calls 'seismic shifts' in the critical perception of mime: of why a readily translatable conjunction of music and movement, one that had been seen as unproblematic and 'natural', quite swiftly became 'artificial'.

Clearly the answer to such a question will always be complex and multilayered, the disappearance of 'voice' from balletic characters being linked to many larger aesthetic changes of perspective. However, both Smith and Maribeth Clark offer a partial explanation within the realm of gender politics, and in particular the 'feminization' of ballet during this period. This trend is illustrated in the clearest possible manner—and immediately reminds us of another crucial aspect of critical partiality, another cultural window critics reveal to us—in both authors' discussions of the male gaze. Again, as with earlier essays, the sense of exchange—of the free circulation of cultural meaning—is striking: the gaze is of course increasingly invited by nineteenth-century ballet plots, with their progressive isolation and idealization of the female dancer; and certain privileged members of the audience were allowed more palpable delights, gaining access—sometimes sexual access—to the dancers in the notorious foyer de la danse. But the gaze is also celebrated in journalistic reviews: indeed, such is the concentration on moments of visual pleasure caused by female dancers that one is again tempted to claim *performativity* for critical discourse: journalistic responses that lingered on and luxuriated in aspects of the female body served to create the gendered response of the audience as much as merely report it.

This is a fitting note on which to end. Our musicological past over the last fifty or so years has been punctuated by exhortations that present themselves as unproblematic, as a 'common-sense' view: 'just' attend to the facts; 'just' listen to the music. Perhaps the covert ideology nesting in that small word 'just' has by now been sufficiently exposed. But these essays, none of which is couched in polemical terms, nevertheless present a powerful collective response to such exhortations: they attempt to persuade us that the material which builds what we call music history can be more broadly conceived, and that sometimes the least monumental contributions to the grand canvas can cause us radically to rethink the shape of what we have fashioned from the past.

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