

reviews

Mary Hunter. *The Culture of Opera Buffa in Mozart's Vienna: A Poetics of Entertainment*. Princeton University Press, 1999. xiii, 329 pp.

Reviewed by Dale E. Monson

In 1997, Mary Hunter and James Webster edited a series of essays for Cambridge University Press entitled *Opera buffa in Mozart's Vienna*. Two years later, Hunter borrowed and emended that title for her own monograph, *The Culture of Opera Buffa in Mozart's Vienna: A Poetics of Entertainment*, a work that won the American Musicological Society's Kinkeldey award in 2000. Through her methodology and substance, made plain by the modified title, she seeks to establish a context for opera buffa in the culture of Josephinian Vienna, within which the genre's meaning for contemporaneous audiences was perceived. She probes the elements, heritage, aesthetic ideals, modes of expression, and, most importantly, the cultural symbols in the text and music of opera buffa. The rich interweaving of meanings she illustrates unveils opera buffa as a sort of *Glaspertenspiel* (to borrow from Hesse): a symbolic matrix of the aesthetic complexity and cultural icons of the age.

A study of this sort would not have been possible until recently. The uncovering, cataloging, and description of archival holdings, manuscripts, libretti, and other documents from the period have been extraordinary in the last twenty years. Interpretations of those materials, alongside known resources, are increasing in number and diversity.¹ The Cambridge volume made this plain in its introduction. While Hunter and Webster found two overriding themes among their collection of essays—the desire to provide a context for the study of Mozart's late operas on the one hand, and the exploration of new methodologies, asking new questions, on the other—most published reviews of that first book in fact focused on its extraordinary richness and diversity of methodology and materials. Each author sought to find value and meaning, but often in different ways.

Hunter herself now uses these textual and musical materials to focus on the cultural meanings of opera buffa in Vienna. In doing this, she does not seek to reveal the importance of individual arias or operas or even composers, though her work is generously laced with expansive musical and

textual examples (including entire arias and ensembles). Rather, she attempts to illustrate cultural norms and expectations. On the issue of characterization, for instance, she writes, "I am less concerned with the ways particular characters emerge as plausible or unique individuals than with the ideological significance of the categories into which most characters more or less unproblematically fall" (103). It is the way in which the form of an aria, the pace of an ensemble, the metaphors of a text, or the intent of a joke acts as a reflection of the living culture of the day that interests her. Many anthropologists would probably be sympathetic with her approach; William A. Haviland writes that culture itself "must strike a balance between the self-interests of individuals and the needs of society as a whole" (1999:35). In addressing the culture of opera buffa, Hunter consistently describes that very balance: how the characters and what defines them in their roles (their "self-interest") are portrayed within the society of the genre (the particular Viennese cultural icons of class, status and expression in the text and music) from which they were either drawn or which they parody. This juxtaposition of individuals within their society swells to a dynamic interplay of soloists, characters, ensembles, and audience, and gives our reading of opera buffa a rich new meaning. In this way, her book is one of the most important studies in eighteenth-century music and culture yet to appear.

Hunter's investigation follows a methodological pattern set by Leonard Ratner's watershed study, *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style* (1980), which has since borne many children, often with distinctive personalities. Wye J. Allanbrook's *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart: "Le nozze di Figaro" and "Don Giovanni"* (1983) was among the first, followed by such recent monographs as Robert S. Hatten's *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation* (1994). While tellingly different in approach, such works seek to decipher what they find to be the symbolic messages of music, to establish a musical epistemology. Those symbols range from clear, contemporaneous connotations (e.g., the use of a minuet for Figaro's "Se vuol ballare," a dance suitable for the "contino") to complex constructive interpretations (e.g., the "tragic-to-transcendent" genre of Hatten). Hunter's particular use of symbols unfolds by distinguishing between what was "mere" entertainment and what carried social meaning, though these fields are, of course, not mutually exclusive. Her work follows from John Locke's view that many cultural symbols "have their signification from the arbitrary imposition of men" (1689:bk. 3, chap. 9), and that symbols for every age carry an innate richness of possibilities, a multiplicity of meanings. By following this path she is able "to portray the ways opera buffa functioned as *entertainment* in late-eighteenth-century Vienna, or, in other words, to suggest ways in which the social and aesthetic world of this genre interacted with the social and aesthetic world of its context" (4).

While commentaries on eighteenth-century opera are generally quick to acknowledge that the music was written for its singers, tailored like a suit of clothes (to use the common metaphor found even in Mozart's letters), it is still difficult to discuss this today in much detail; the state of the sources and lack of modern studies on singers make this an enormous challenge. Probably for that reason, Hunter at times acknowledges the importance of singers,² but with few exceptions does not pursue this in detail. To what degree are the musical characteristics she describes as intrinsic to the social and cultural messages of this music also a reflection of an individual singer's predilection for a certain type of aria or mood, pitch range or melodic character? The notion of the influence of singers is intrinsically bound to the idea of the performance itself. The Italianate performer-centric orientation was quite different than the developing Germanic view of music arising from the composer's genius. An explanation of the collision of these two worlds, which surely was unfolding in Mozart's Vienna (as attested in his letters), would have also been helpful.

Some singers excelled in their acting and dramatic projection, while others favored lyric singing, and such preferences were minded by composers. A ready example among the most famous buffo singers of a slightly earlier age was Francesco Baglioni (singing from at least 1729 until 1761), who was a crucial influence on the dissemination and style of comic opera in its formative years (Mackenzie 1993:256–65).³ The sheer pleasure that such singers provided is important, as she notes, but those performers were also fundamental in shaping the very elements of their operas, and this increases their importance. The changes made by Mozart in *Don Giovanni* and *Figaro* to accommodate new singers might be a good example—how does the sociological affect or imagery of those passages change with the singer, and how far can the altered cultural nuances be traced to a singer's personal musical preferences? When Hunter discusses the vocal range of "Sono una fanciullina" from Giuseppe Sarti's *Fra i due litiganti il terzo gode*, noting that it encompassed "a mere octave," she asks the reader in a footnote to "Compare the relative independence and strongly gestural aspects of the accompaniment in Petronio's aria quoted above" (136). Can any such differences be laid at the feet of the singers?

Hunter points to the "'naturalness' of interaction [in opera buffa] that contrasts with the supposed 'stiff artificiality' of opera seria." Though serious opera was more or less absent in the 1770s and 1780s from the Viennese stage, I wonder if its influence on opera buffa has been undervalued. Hunter does draw on seria models for comparisons, such as noting how the endings of buffa arias, with their repeated cadential patterns, are analogous to the lengthy coloratura embellishments that conclude seria arias. It may be that such seria conventions played more of a role in

Viennese opera buffa than their presence in this study may imply. Certainly early Neapolitan comic opera, before it found its way north, was thoroughly grounded in opera seria conventions, and not only in the *parte serie* roles. To what extent, after the expansive development of comic opera in the 1750s and 60s, was that true for the Viennese productions by Cimarosa, Anfossi, and Paisiello, in addition to the “longstanding norms of comedy and carnival” (21) that Hunter cites?

As Hunter recounts details of the structure and symbols of opera buffa, seria models often come to mind. When she suggests that the happy endings of opere buffe are important messages of those works, surely opera seria is lurking in the background. When she points out that Giovanni Battista Casti’s libretto *La grotta di Trofonio* appealed to familiar Classical authority to validate its message, we are reminded of the hundreds of seria libretti that do exactly that. The unfolding of the typical duet as a pattern of individual solos later joining into a homophonic section is a seria device. Likewise, establishing character types for the roles in a libretto by boldly announcing them at the beginning is an analogy to a seria tradition (34).⁴ If opera buffa affirmed the stability of Viennese society, as she proposes, it surely must have been heard against the backdrop of the seria libretto, whose goal (at least in its Metastasian ideals) had been that each character would act naturally within his or her own station, and that the aristocracy would be shown models for appropriate behavior.

Among the many valuable contributions of Hunter’s study, the formation of aria categories is particularly useful. The use of aria types has held great appeal for writers on opera of the eighteenth century. Hunter’s own classification for buffa arias works well, particularly because it lends itself to distinctions of class and social relationships. These categories are carefully drawn and consider details of tonal, melodic, and formal construction. Though Hunter notes that many modern classifications of aria types are inconsistent, even in their *methods* of classification, it is really not so clear that eighteenth-century authors were much better.

Hunter’s numerous insights are often individually helpful in the extensions the reader can make from them. She notes, for example, that expressions of sentiment are most commonly sung by women, and that “the woman’s guarantee of pedigree is her capacity to express her sentiments directly and movingly, [while] the man’s is his capacity to be moved rather than to demonstrate comparable expressive power” (150–51). The aristocratic men in *Don Giovanni* might be seen in this light. Though it is the power of Giovanni’s seductive wives that is his greatest weapon, those expressions of sentiment are certainly anything but genuine or heartfelt. On the other hand, he cannot be “moved” by pity or love—these faults then help frame the musical, textual, and cultural backdrop for his

ultimate demise. Likewise, according to this model, Don Ottavio's often faulted weakness might be a reflection of his expressions of sentiment being seen as somehow too much for a man.

Hunter's work establishes a pattern for interpreting opera that will surely be imitated. If her thoroughly systematic approach to unraveling meaning in opera is followed in similarly uncompromising, contextual analysis, there is much of eighteenth-century opera, of all kinds and locations, that we will yet learn. This is a marvelous beginning.

Notes

1. Important studies on Viennese theater life continue to appear, as demonstrated by Hunter's bibliography. Some of these studies make Viennese materials widely available, such as that by Dorothea Link (1998). Others point to new directions or redefine old ground, such as Bruce Alan Brown (1991), the many articles by John Platoff (e.g., 1990, 1993, 1997), Daniel Heartz (1990, 1995), and the previous year's Kinkeldey winner, John A. Rice (1998).

2. For example, in her concluding chapters on *Così fan tutte*, Hunter points to Vincenzo Calvesi and Adriana Ferrarese and their roles in *Così*, noting the similarity of their music to what they had sung in other operas by other composers (252).

3. Baglioni carried four influential comic operas throughout Italy: Latilla's *La finta cameriera* and *La commedia in commedia*, and Rinaldo di Capua's *Madama Ciana* and *La libertà nociva*. His views were likely sustained by his many singing children, among them his daughter Clementina (fl. mid-1750s to late 1770s), perhaps the most famous, who sang in both serious and comic operas. Antonio Baglioni, who may have been Francesco's son, was the first Don Ottavio and Tito for Mozart.

4. In the first few lines of Metastasio's *L'Olimpiade*, for example, we know exactly how the work will unfold, and what roles the key characters will play, when Aminta scolds Licida, "Deh modera una volta / questo tuo violento / spirito intollerante" (Alas! Temper, for once, your violent, intolerant spirit).

References

- Allanbrook, Wye J. 1983. *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart: "Le nozze di Figaro" and "Don Giovanni"*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Brown, Bruce Alan. 1991. *Gluck and the French Theatre in Vienna*. New York: Oxford.
- Hatten, Robert S. 1994. *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Haviland, William. 1999. *Cultural Anthropology*. 9th ed. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace.
- Heartz, Daniel. 1990. *Mozart's Operas*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . 1995. *Haydn, Mozart and the Viennese School: 1740–1780*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Hunter, Mary and James Webster, eds. 1997. *Opera buffa in Mozart's Vienna*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Link, Dorothea. 1998. *The National Court Theatre in Mozart's Vienna: Sources and Documents, 1783–1792*. Oxford: Clarendon.

- Locke, John. 1689. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. London: Printed by Eliz. Holt for Thomas Basset.
- Mackenzie, Barbara Dobbs. 1993. *The Creation of a Genre: Comic Opera's Dissemination in Italy in the 1740s*. Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan.
- Platoff, John. 1990. The buffa aria in Mozart's Vienna. *Cambridge Opera Journal* 2: 99–120.
- . 1993. Mozart and his Rivals: Opera in Vienna. *Current Musicology* no. 51: 105–11.
- . 1997. Tonal Organization in the opera buffa of Mozart's Time. *Mozart Studies* 2: 139–74.
- Ratner, Leonard. 1980. *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style*. New York: Schirmer.
- Rice, John A. 1998. *Antonio Salieri and Viennese Opera*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.