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'Postopera: reinventing the voice-body' by Jelena Novak (2015). London: Ashgate Interdisciplinary Studies in Opera, 173 pp., ISBN 9781472441034, h/bk, £60.

Book reviewed by Pamela Karantonis, Bath Spa University

This volume makes a singular and exemplary contribution to the discussion of the singing body and its meaning to readers and audiences through the recent appraisal of the phenomenon of 'postopera'. Once readers unpack the key terms 'postopera' and 'voice-body' from the book's title, the work becomes accessible as it is clearly written and convincingly argued. So, to firstly address these key terms – what is 'postopera'? Novak carefully explains the earliest appearance of the term 'Post-Opera' in Jeremy Tambling's work on Opera and the Culture of Fascism (1996) to denote what she sees as 'unconventional, contemporary operatic pieces in which the relationship between music and drama is reinvented' (Tambling: 5). Importantly, she situates this term historically, by referring to Nicholas Till's far more radical and historically-contingent use of the term in 2004, as a postmodern evisceration of opera's corpus (Till 2004: 20). Further, interdisciplinary consideration is given to the possible parallels between postoperatic music theatre and the impact of Hans-Thies Lehmann's Postdramatic Theatre (1999: 2006) which has responded to postmodern circumstances and the conditions of late capitalism in the de-centring of coherent dramaturgical structures. Novak synthesises these scholarly worlds within a wider paradigm of postmodernism and performance (Till: 6). The 'voice-body' too, is a useful intervention here and for the purposes of its clarity of use, it is given due attention. Its lineage begins in the classical world of vocal pedagogy but is grounded as a cogent theory in more recent times with Steven Connor's wider study of ventriloquism and its identification of a 'vocalic body' (or 'voice-body') in which he isolates 'a surrogate or secondary body, a projection of a new way of having or being a body, formed and sustained out of the autonomous operations of the voice' (Connor 2000: 35). Novak satisfies the reader's curiosity very quickly as to how these complex concepts reconcile within a map-able area of concern and the results are very convincing.

The author does this through the selection of artworks that, in their complexity, generate theoretical assertions about the dismantling of traditional operatic and dramatic hierarchies. In her selection of six major artworks, it is argued by the author that a critical mass exists for the discourse of post-opera and its focus on the (crisis of) the singing body. Michel Van der Aa's multimedia postopera *One* (2002) is illustrative of 'the singing body and its reinvention' (Till: 4), Philip Glass's *La Belle et la Bête* (1994), an opera for live ensemble, is presented in tandem with Jean Cocteau's film projections; Louis Andriessen and Peter Greenaway created a 'multimedia singing tableau vivant' (Till: 93) in *Writing to Vermeer* (1997–98); Steve Reich and Beryl Korot's *Three Tales* (1998–2002) is a 'video documentary opera' (Till: 58) with content presented as postmodern allegory; Louis Andriessen and Hal Hartley's *La Commedia* (2004–2008) is a 'film opera' (Till: 114) based on Dante's *Divina Commedia*; and Laurie Anderson's 'vocal drag' (Till: 134) is her album and live performance series *Homeland* (2007).

Titled sections of the book require some decoding for general readers. Part I, entitled 'Focusing on Body Singing', accounts for the pluralistic practice in postopera of multiple forms of vocal emission by rendering the site of the physical body and matrixed staging properties as contingent. Part II,

'Voices Beyond Corporeality: Performing Singing as Upgrading', concerns itself with horror and the monstrous, and has a convincing psychoanalytic component and issues regarding new media (Till: 14). Part III, "Throwing the Voice, Catching the Body: Opera, Ventriloquism, and De-Synchronization", made the greatest impression on me, for its excavation of opera's past. It begins with a very strong chapter on 'Operatizing the Film: Body Without Voice and Voice Without Body', making reference to the prominent body of academic publications that attests to the cultural and material interdependence of opera and cinema. Part II alleges that opera's history contains the ingredients for its uncanny deconstruction through the cultural practice and metaphors of ventriloquism. In classical vocal pedagogy, the ability to 'throw' the voice is for the purpose of producing an organic, deeply embodied and expressive sound that fills a sizeable venue. So the author's achievement here is significant for readers interested in vocal pedagogical history. Part IV

'Singing Gender as a Performance', could have done better credit to its interesting content with a more imaginative title. La Commedia is handled with expert analysis, as both the site of a splitting of voice-body-gender and the ontology of the work as a 'film opera'. The most difficult of the case studies was that of Laurie Anderson's *Homeland*. Her work is not necessarily operatic (or postoperatic), however the author makes a refreshing case that by virtue of Anderson's masculine stage persona and the use of technology such as the digitised vocoder, she stages a history contra to the castrati of early opera. In sum, it is the voice-body, staged by Anderson that dramatizes the crisis of postopera – she is the 'counter-castrato', using vocal drag (Till: 140). As such, the vocalic body was always prepared to be disruptive, in what Michelle Duncan also elaborates upon as a 'corporeal cultural practice' (Duncan 2004:299). This is a highly provocative section of the book and really tests the appropriateness of the label of 'postopera' for postmodern examples.

A lingering question is the one that challenges the coherence of the term 'postopera' in discourse subsequent to this study. Are readers just as willing to accept the hybridity of terms such as 'film opera' or 'film concert' and place the somewhat more totalizing concept of 'postopera' itself as historical? Consequently, this volume is a highlight in the Ashgate Interdisciplinary Series in Opera for its considerations of the limits and challenges of new works and new voices.

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