

Review of *Local Glories: Opera Houses on Main Streets, Where Art and Community Meet*. By Ann Satterthwaite. Pp. viii + 446. (Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 2016. £22.99. ISBN 978-0-19-939254-4).

Charlotte Bentley

In 1891, Kearney, Nebraska, a town of a little under 10,000 people, celebrated the opening of its brand new opera house. Seating 1,200 people—over ten percent of the local population—the opera house was hailed by the local newspaper as ‘Kearney’s wealth and Kearney’s work; Kearney’s beauty and Kearney’s manhood’ (13): the ultimate testament to the town’s modernity and prosperity. As Ann Satterthwaite’s book reveals, Kearney, Nebraska was just one of thousands of American towns that built and sustained an opera house in the late nineteenth century. It joined the ranks of other such unlikely locations as Red Cloud, Nebraska (population in 1888: 796) and Vergennes, Vermont (1890 population: 1,773), not to mention the aspirationally named Paris, Kentucky (population: 4,218 in 1890). Satterthwaite’s book therefore serves as a fascinating survey of the hitherto under-explored history of these small-town theatrical institutions and their relationship to wider developments in America—social, cultural and economic—in the final years of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth.

The first of the book’s four interlocking sections—‘A Heady Time: Thousands of Opera Houses’—sets up the context for this proliferation of opera houses in the decades after the Civil War. She outlines early American theatrical history in terms of the division between the Puritan north and the less theatrically resistant south, and also draws vital connections between the growth of rail networks and the building of new opera houses, revealing the role that technological and infrastructural developments played in the cultural growth of small-town America. If a town was well-connected on the railway, performers and patrons would come; but equally she suggests that businessmen and civically minded individuals would fund an opera house with the specific aim of attracting the railway companies to build a branch line to their town. In addition, these new houses became the focus for multifarious civic functions, providing a key location for municipal meetings and positioning them at the centre of social life.

‘On Stage: Performances, Performers, and Patrons’, the next section, then offers a miscellany of material relating to the historical struggles of opera houses, their repertoire, and the people who performed in them and frequented them. Satterthwaite outlines some of the challenges that were posed to opera houses even in their heyday, by such rival institutions as the Chautauqua movement (which was originally set up to train Sunday school teachers, but grew to provide educational lectures and musical performances in rural communities), and the popular showboats that visited river towns. Thus she contextualises the opera house’s glory days within a developing industry of entertainment and education in small-town America. The response to such challenges, which in part involved diversifying the opera houses’ repertoire and further adapting their flexibility as public spaces, is particularly striking: these were multi-purpose buildings, playing host to theatre of all sorts, as well as public lectures, dances, wrestling matches, and roller-skating, among other activities. Opera houses, in other words, were never just opera houses, nor even simply places to watch entertainments, but instead places to participate actively in them.

This subject is developed in Satterthwaite’s next section, ‘In Town: Public Halls and Public Roles’. Here, we are introduced to everything from the intricate links between the opera house and local business to the relationship between opera house architecture and town planning around the turn of the twentieth century. Satterthwaite also teases out the roles immigrant groups large and small—from the Czechs to the Welsh and the Cornish—played in the cultural life of the towns in which they settled. She explores the ways in which opera houses physically became part of the fabric of a town, showing that they often included the town’s government offices and could even on occasion be located within the commercial hub of a company store. Their placement, she suggests, was a peculiarly American phenomenon as, unlike in Europe, the opera house was rarely a building set apart. Nonetheless, certain opera houses occupied more influential and meaning-laden locations than others: one particularly intriguing example (that deserves further exploration) is that of the Haskell Opera House which was built straddling the American-Canadian border between Derby Line, Vermont and Stanstead, Quebec (231).

‘Born Again: Revived Opera Houses and Their Communities’, the final section, brings us to the present day. The temptations to tell this story as one of decline, Satterthwaite argues, in which the local opera house was ultimately rendered redundant by the advent of cinema and other technological innovations, should to some extent be resisted. Instead, she

focuses on the opera house regeneration projects that have grown in number and scope since the early 1970s. These have taken numerous different forms: while some towns, such as Middlebury, Vermont, now boast a resident theatre company of their own, in other places, such as Stonington, Maine, opera houses have regained something of the variety of entertainments that they enjoyed in their heyday at the turn of the twentieth century. Of course, for all the successes, there were hundreds of other opera houses that were demolished or whose historical function is identifiable only from the remnants of external architecture, but the stories of individuals and communities striving to rescue their opera houses are heartening and form a focus for Satterthwaite's closing chapters.

Intended for a general readership, the book is an engaging read throughout; the extent of its debts to existing scholarship, however, is not always made explicit, although the shadows of earlier works such as Katherine Preston's *Opera on the Road* and John Dizikes' *Opera in America* are ever present. Satterthwaite's background is not in musicology, meanwhile, but in city planning with a focus on civic engagement, which accounts for her interest in the present day 'afterlives' of these opera houses. Nonetheless, in both its ideas and the material it presents, *Local Glories* contains much of interest for musicologists and theatre historians alike.

Particularly striking for musicologists is the way in which opera itself is at its most conspicuous in this history of the American opera house by its relative absence. Indeed, Satterthwaite devotes only one chapter (out of nineteen) to opera, and from that it becomes clear that it rarely formed a large part of the repertoire of these small-town opera houses. While visiting opera companies did include some of these locations in their touring circuits, many 'opera houses' outside of large towns seem to have been graced only occasionally, if at all, by actual operatic performance. And yet the image of opera was clearly significant enough—or just conventional enough—for the patrons of these venues and the towns in which they were erected to keep reaching for the name 'opera house'. With the implications of sophistication borne by the term 'opera', these opera houses were seen to form a 'lifeline to civilisation' for new residents of small towns, as Satterthwaite suggests. In fact, she argues that for the small Northeastern states, clinging in the period after the Civil War to an older Puritan legacy, opera was often viewed as morally superior to spoken theatre, and it is a shame that Satterthwaite does not articulate or develop these ideas more closely. Without any detailed information on the reception of operatic

performances, it is hard to work out how exactly some of these local audiences conceived of opera or its significance. The role that opera—or, indeed, the idea of opera—played in the cultural development of small-town America therefore remains a subject for further exploration.

There is nevertheless a wealth of carefully researched material here to serve as a starting point. Satterthwaite draws upon newspaper accounts and interviews with conservationists, as well as other, more unusual sources, such as the archive of restored theatre curtains curated by the Vermont Painted Theater Curtain Project, to give insight into both the materials and discourse surrounding the opera house phenomenon past and present. Her decision to focus principally on opera houses in four states—Nebraska, Kentucky, Vermont, and Colorado—contains the scope of the discussions while still providing varied perspectives in terms of geography and cultural background: between them the four states represent north and south, east and west, with their varied cultural influences and immigrant communities.

As is perhaps necessarily the case with this kind of broad history, however, the sheer volume of information makes it difficult to sustain in-depth thematic arguments. Satterthwaite's characterisation of the opera house as 'neutral turf devoid of social, economic or religious associations' (10), for example, would surely benefit from closer engagement with specific local contexts. In fact, Satterthwaite herself later begins to undermine this utopian image when she discusses the 'rifts, tensions, and problems' (socio-economic and racial) that struck some small-town opera houses. Nonetheless, *Local Glories* demonstrates the wealth and variety of information that remains available in relation to theatrical culture outside of the United States's largest metropolitan centres. It provides a striking insight into the specifically North American context of the small-town opera house, but is also of relevance for understanding the spread of opera in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries more generally. In particular, her demonstration that opera was decidedly not only a metropolitan preoccupation is one worthy of considerable further exploration for opera studies.