

**James Parakilas. *The Story of Opera*. New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2013.
xx + 473 + 34 pp. \$71.25.
ISBN 978-0-393-93555-4 (paper)**

BRIAN J. HART

For many years the standard textbook on opera history has been the now-comically misnamed *A Short History of Opera* by Donald Jay Grout (1947; the fourth edition, prepared by Hermine Weigel Williams for Columbia University Press in 2003, runs to 1030 pages). Two important supplementary sources are Joseph Kerman's popular *Opera as Drama* (revised edition, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) and Piero Weiss's *Opera: A History in Documents* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). Since 2012, however, three new surveys have appeared: Robert Cannon's *Opera* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), *A History of Opera* by Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012; to be reviewed in a future issue), and James Parakilas's *The Story of Opera*; in addition, Michael Rose examines the composition histories of selected notable works in *The Birth of an Opera: Fifteen Masterpieces from Poppea to Wozzeck* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013). Whereas Cannon and Abbate/Parker present comprehensive histories, Parakilas proposes to introduce the reader to the experience of attending an opera and to the various stories opera tells, including the social, political, and cultural assumptions underlying them.

Parakilas organizes his book in two parts. The first lays out what one sees and hears at an opera: how people dress, both cast members and audience; the design and acoustics of the house; and the types of music heard (solo arias, ensembles, orchestral music, dance). He draws examples from various operas to illustrate his points. He concludes this section with a detailed study of the first half of *La traviata*: the translation of play to opera, the dramaturgy of Act I, and rhetorical devices employed in the Violetta/Germont duet in Act II, Scene 1.

In the remainder of the book Parakilas undertakes a survey of operatic development. He traces seventeenth- and eighteenth-century opera chronologically: court opera on classical subjects in the beginning (with emphasis on

Monteverdi's *Orfeo*); public opera in Venice on classical and historical subjects (Monteverdi, Cavalli); opera in France and England (Lully, Purcell); eighteenth-century opera on classical stories (Handel, Rameau, Gluck); and comic opera (*The Beggar's Opera*, Pergolesi, Mozart).

With the Romantic age the focus changes. From here on Parakilas examines operas by plot topic: stories of political conflict, domestic conflict, and legend for the nineteenth century, and stories of "human interest"—meaning social conflict—and dream worlds (both pleasant and nightmarish) for the twentieth century. Within each topic, he discusses six to twelve operas in varying degrees of detail. Parakilas chooses works from different lands and periods; in addition to standard repertory items, he includes non-canonic works such as Grétry's *Richard Coeur-de-Lion* (political opera) and Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh* (legendary opera). The twentieth-century topics include two operas from 2000, Heggie's *Dead Man Walking* and Saariaho's *L'amour de loin*. Besides *La traviata* and Monteverdi's *Orfeo* individual operas that receive the fullest treatment include Cavalli's *Giasone*, Handel's *Giulio Cesare*, the Mozart /da Ponte comedies, Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots*, Wagner's *Die Walküre*, and Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*. As this list shows, he often emphasizes works according to their historical importance rather than frequency of performance. His discussions of these works draw upon many of the most notable and authoritative secondary sources available.

Each chapter in the historical survey begins with a timeline that summarizes political, social, and musical events, referencing only the operas discussed in the text. Occasional sidebars include short passages from primary documents ("In Their Own Words") or explain concepts in creating and producing operas ("On Stage and Off"). Chapters end with a short selected bibliography and assorted questions for class or individual consideration. One of the most impressive features of the book is its superb array of illustrations with often detailed captions; subjects include scores and poster bills, historic and recent stagings, paintings or other artworks that illuminate the story or background of an opera, and so forth. All the illustrations are available as PowerPoint slides to instructors who adopt the book. The appendices include a glossary of basic technical and musical terms; Parakilas refers the reader to Wikipedia for further information. A website offers students chapter outlines and playlists, as well as access to video excerpts from Metropolitan Opera performances for a fee. Karen Hiles has prepared an instructor's manual that includes sample syllabi and lecture advice.

In the preface Parakilas states that he has designed this book both to introduce people to opera and offer opera lovers new ways to think about the genre (p. xvii). While the book indeed addresses both audiences, the casual writing style and presentation make it most suitable for novices. The narrative contains

numerous informalities (e.g., Brünnhilde as Wotan's "right-hand gal," p. 363) that many graduate readers—and reviewers—might well find off-putting. Certain emphatic words, especially "endless," recur excessively and often to exaggerated effect, as in the "endless" choruses and dances in Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* (p. 167). The discussion of eighteenth-century comic opera overuses the phrase "seeing or hearing double," and its meaning is not always clear. Some word and phrase choices seem inapt and overdramatic: Gluck accompanies "Che farò senza Euridice" with "sawing" eighth notes, the continuous motion of which "seems to tell us that we don't dare breathe until [the aria] is over" (pp. 209–10). At the same time, for every annoying colloquialism or "endless" reiteration we also find witty and astute turns of phrase: "The mordents . . . on the repeated violin notes at the beginning of the aria set the mordant, teasing tone" (p. 186); *Wozzeck* is a drama of "interconnected disconnections" (p. 387); and "[Katarina Izmailova's] case is fascinating to contemplate because it is too contradictory to adjudicate" (p. 406).

Parakilas strives to relate operatic elements and styles to modern popular culture. Some allusions are thought-provoking, such as the comparison of Rameau's scores to cinematic soundtracks (pp. 197–98). Others, though, seem forced and simplistic: Mozart comic operas are breezily described as "the sitcoms of the day: stories of ordinary people who learn to cope with duplicities defined by traditional inequities of class and gender, and who emerge capable of loving with their eyes open. That's all." (p. 254) Moreover, to call opera buffa servants the "rap singers of opera" (p. 248) misleadingly implies that patter is exclusively rhythmic and non-melodic, when in fact melody is almost always present, in the orchestra if not in the voices.

Parakilas's musical analyses are frequently rich in insights and alert to significant nuances: notable examples include his discussions of Puccini's use of *parlante* and orchestral and vocal doubling to create ironic effect in *La bohème* (pp. 323–26) as well as rhythmic disjunctions between voice and orchestra that dramatize Jenůfa's isolation in Janáček's opera (pp. 379–83). He introduces the terms "acting style" and "singing style" to distinguish narrative and reflective sections, and the manner in which he applies these terms—for instance, describing the mature styles of Wagner and Janáček as idiosyncratic approaches to acting style (pp. 358, 379)—offers innovative ways to think about individual composers' language. French opera receives its just due with extended and highly informative discussions of works by Lully, Rameau, Grétry, and Meyerbeer, in addition to *Faust*, *Carmen*, and *Pelléas*. Parakilas's analyses include various reflective questions arising from the developments in the plots. While he sometimes risks "over-problematizing" a work, so to speak—asking for example whether the conclusion of *Fidelio* promotes the equality of the sexes or reinforces traditional patriarchal hierarchy (pp. 270–71)—others, such as

those raised by the multivalent ambiguities of plot and music in *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, are well worth considering (p. 405).

By focusing on the stories opera tells rather than a comprehensive survey, much new understanding is offered, but inevitably much is also sacrificed. With some exceptions, the book has little to say about the composers: it does not include biographies (except as they bear upon the topic of the opera), work lists, or concentrated discussions of individual composers' achievements or influence. Many important operas never appear in the text: nowhere does one find *L'elisir d'amore*, *Il trovatore*, *Falstaff*, *Tosca*, *Elektra*, or, perhaps most surprisingly, *Die Zauberflöte*. Other works, such as *Der Freischütz*, *Rigoletto* (save for a brief commentary on the Quartet), *Tristan und Isolde*, *Parsifal*, *Madama Butterfly*, and *Salome*, receive only passing mention. Both of these lists could be expanded. While Parakilas devotes almost a whole chapter to Lully, he discusses only one opera each by Puccini and Strauss (*La bohème* and *Die Frau ohne Schatten*); Massenet is barely mentioned, and Smetana never appears.

When appropriate, Parakilas provides fairly detailed plot synopses, and while most of these are good, there are occasional inaccuracies. The jailer in *Fidelio* is Rocco, not Roc (p. 267); the unnamed king of *Les Huguenots* is Charles IX, not his brother Henri III, who ascended two years after the massacre (p. 274); and Figaro does not address "Largo al factotum" to Count Almaviva, as he becomes aware of the Count's presence only after the aria (p. 308). Enrico Ashton browbeats Lucia into marrying Arturo Bucklaw to save himself from political disgrace and possible execution rather than financial ruin (p. 312). Germont does not suggest that Violetta's tuberculosis will eventually drive Alfredo away; as he confesses in the last act, he did not believe at the time that she was seriously ill (p. 318). Some assertions fall victim to overstatement. It is difficult to accept that "the exchange of roles and musical styles between masters and servants . . . virtually disappears from the comic operas of Rossini" (p. 310), when such a switch between Prince Ramiro and his valet Dandini is a fundamental plot component of *Cenerentola*. Parakilas describes the opera orchestra as "percussion poor" (except for the timpani), but this is not true for a number of twentieth-century operas, including Puccini's *Turandot*, Shostakovich's *The Nose* (which includes an innovative all-percussion interlude), Britten's *Death in Venice*, and Messiaen's *Saint François* (p. 30).

In the operas he examines Parakilas explores the socio-cultural assumptions that allegedly underlie the works. Frequently his examinations yield important insights, as in the discussions of class and racial divides in *Wozzeck* and *Porgy and Bess*. On the other hand, his readings of *Carmen* and to a lesser extent *La traviata*, both heavily informed by the feminist interpretations of Catherine Clément and Susan McClary, result in some curious statements. If *Carmen* "wanted to be free of [Don José] the moment she seduced him" (p. 304), why

does she throw a tantrum in Act II when he tries to obey the bugle call and then entice him to join her smuggling crew? Further, if “the possibility never arises that Don José might give up his Spanish identity to become Carmen’s Gypsy husband” (p. 302), what are we to make of his fevered exclamation in the final duet that “if necessary, to please you, I’ll remain a bandit, everything you want”? And while women such as Violetta Valéry, according to Clément, are frequently “crushed by the bourgeois family” (p. 316), Parakilas might have mentioned that male characters receive their share of class or racial prejudice, if admittedly less often: two examples in Verdi include the plebeian Simon Boccanegra and the “damned Indian” Don Alvaro of *La forza del destino*.

Despite its title, this book is an introduction to the experience of opera rather than a narrative of the genre. The reader will learn more about how opera works and the stories it tells—or rather the stories some operas tell—than about its composers, development after 1800, and most historically influential works (e.g., *Tristan*). It might better have been titled *Experiencing Opera*. In terms of writing style, presentation, and content the book is more suitable for freshman or sophomore classes—including music appreciation classes focused on opera—than for upper-level or graduate courses focusing on opera history. Nevertheless, no other source covers so extensively what it can mean to attend an opera, and the topical studies offer a very astute accounting of the sociological issues operas can raise, as well as the diverse ways in which composers have responded to these issues in their music. On these grounds, whatever the reservations raised here, Parakilas achieves his goal of writing a book from which both opera lovers and connoisseurs will learn.