

REVIEW ARTICLE

Women in Opera: Not Yet Defeated

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Monica A. Hershberger, *Women in American Operas of the 1950s: Undoing Gendered Archetypes*, Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2023. 228pp.

Marcie Ray, *Coquettes, Wives, and Widows: Gender Politics in French Baroque Opera and Theater*, Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2020. 191pp.

Kimberly White, *Female Singers on the French Stage, 1830–1848*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 239pp.

Is it surprising that three recent publications dealing with women in opera prominently refer to a book from 1979? Maybe not when this book is Catherine Clément's *L'opéra ou la défaite des femmes* (*Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, English translation by Betsy Wing, 1988).¹ Clément's reading of women characters in the standard operatic repertoire from Mozart to Puccini quickly became a 'classic' within feminist opera studies and influenced much of the scholarly debate in the 1980s and 1990s. The monographs by Marcie Ray, Kimberly White and Monica A. Hershberger, all presenting results from their doctoral research and beyond, give revealing insights into where we stand today when dealing with women in opera. Several thematic and methodological approaches in all three books provide indications of the current issues of debate.

The first issue at play is repertoire. Certainly, there is always something new to discover in the standard operatic repertoire. The three studies, however, explicitly focus on repertoire that has not played a central role in musicological research so far, particularly with regard to gender issues. Marcie Ray provides a thorough reading of specific female characters in French comic repertoire in the first half of the eighteenth century, including both musical as well as spoken comedies. Some of these pieces were played at the *théâtres de la foire* and form an explicit counterpoint to the much-debated courtly *tragédie en musique*. Monica A. Hershberger, in turn, deals with American operas from the 1950s and provides a 'first feminist analysis of [Aaron Copland's] *The Tender Land*, [Carlisle Floyd's] *Susannah*, [Douglas Moore's] *The Ballad of Baby Doe*, and [Jack Beeson's] *Lizzie Borden*' (2). Hershberger approaches the question of repertoire from a different angle to Ray, arguing that in the 1950s American librettists' and composers' views on opera were shaped by the widely performed operatic canon and its gendered narratives.

¹ French version published by B. Grasset (Paris, 1979); English translation published by University of Minnesota Press (Minneapolis, 1988).

Unlike Ray and Hershberger, Kimberly White prioritises individual performers over work-based analysis. White's monograph is concerned with female singers on the French stage in the first half of the nineteenth century. The publication's title, however, is slightly misleading as the author appears to be less interested in 'artworks onstage' than in the 'often invisible labor that went on behind the scenes' (1).

White's decision to focus not on works but on performers captures a second thematic approach that has widely resonated in recent years within gender studies in opera. Authors including Susan Rutherford, Hilary Poriss and Mary Ann Smart have published groundbreaking work about female singers.² White's book is the most explicit of the three studies under consideration here in emulating this approach. The author's aim is to 'reconstruct [female singers'] experiences as working women in opposition to and in comparison with the public's diverse and manifold perceptions of them' (8). Hershberger, instead, wants to examine how specific women singers influenced and shaped the characters they embodied on stage, thereby generating readings of these women figures that sometimes differed from those of their usually male creators.

All three studies have in common that they aim for a thorough and detailed contextualisation of the operatic endeavour, discussing works and singers against the background of contemporary gender politics. In White's case this concerns the broader context of working women in the early nineteenth century. She elaborates on how women singers navigated their way through a large variety of legal and social restrictions, be it dress codes, bans on interacting with male fellow students or the dependence on male protectors and husbands. Ray takes the women's salons of the seventeenth century as her starting point. She argues that the rising influence of women in literary circles was broadly perceived as a threat to conventional gender relations in society. Her book 'observes the ways that dramatists negotiated the threatening power of progressive, woman-centered thought' (11). Hershberger reads the mostly unruly women in her analyses against the background of largely conservative gender politics at the time, but also takes into account gradually growing feminist discourses. Her monograph develops a range of intersectional perspectives, particularly with regard to narratives about white and Black women in the operas *The Tender Land* and *Susannah*.

Hershberger's attention to intersectionality is not unique. Indeed, each of the three texts develops a consistent consideration of intersectional perspectives on their subject matter. In Ray's book, the intersectional critical approach becomes clear, especially when the author discusses interrelations between gender and class differences. It was not only the progressive woman but the progressive bourgeois woman, climbing the social ladder and intermingling with aristocracy, that caused disturbances in society. Kimberly White also contemplates class differences and is furthermore interested in the position of the ageing female singer.

The thematic approaches chosen by Ray, White and Hershberger frame the omnipresent basic question about women's power and agency in society, whether as performers or in operatic plots and music. Thus, the texts continue to resonate with Clément's groundbreaking study from the late 1970s, while broadening the original work's perspectives to a remarkable extent. A brief outline of each book gives glimpses into the variety and richness of insights presented by each study.

Marcie Ray explores in four chapters four different types of women in opera and theatre plots. Notably, none of the female types in Ray's study conform to society's expectations. The first chapter is dedicated to the coquette, here understood as a woman who

² See Susan Rutherford, *The Prima Donna and Opera, 1815–1930* (Cambridge, 2006); Hilary Poriss, *Changing the Score: Arias, Prima Donnas, and the Authority of Performance* (Oxford, 2009); Mary Ann Smart, *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera* (Princeton, 2000).

manipulates men, mostly with the aim of climbing the social ladder. As in the rest of the volume, Ray discusses this character type within different institutional and class settings. The coquette was either a bourgeois character, negatively depicted for example in Molière's play *Les précieuses ridicules* (1659), a 'condemnation of salon women, and their alleged social climbing' (20, 21), and still present much later in Rameau's *Platée* as an explicitly foolish character. In other contexts, however, she resembled the decadent aristocrat. Ray draws parallels to Madame de Pompadour, the first non-aristocratic lover of a French king, who was criticised for her growing influence and power.

The second chapter discusses the widow as a type of woman that could gain legal and financial independence, particularly when the deceased husband had been wealthy. With numerous examples from *comédie Française*, *comédie Italienne* and *opéra comique*, the author illustrates how dramatists and librettists mostly depicted this type of woman negatively. Ray also discusses the integration of vaudevilles into the *opéra comique* repertoire, adding new layers of subtext when considering their original texts.

Chapter 3 deals with the numerous women characters that sought marital separation in stage works. Ray again shows the difference between the royal theatres (*Comédie-Française*, *Comédie-Italienne*) and the more popular, or common, *Opéra-Comique*. She discusses the works performed on the monarch's stages within the context of omnipresent royal family metaphors, including the king as the father of the state, and the image of stable families obeying his rule. Within this framework, women who fractured marriage were condemned. *Opéras comiques* such as Marc-Antoine Le Grand and Louis Fuzelier's *Les animaux raisonnables* (1718), on the other hand, were more sympathetic to women who wanted to separate from cruelly portrayed men.

In the last chapter Ray returns to the topic of salon women and female writers who created female characters that were not interested in marriage or love towards men at all. Male dramatists and librettists reacted to these literary endeavours by emphasising the suffering of men in their works. In a close reading of André Campra's and Antoine Danchet's *opéra-ballet L'Aréthuse* (1701) Ray argues that 'other characters and the hero himself largely coerce the heroine into a romantic relationship' (98). In her epilogue Ray reads these mostly negative depictions of progressive or non-conforming female characters as reactions to a fragile gender system that had already been exposed by salon women and female writers in the seventeenth century. Ray argues convincingly that the limited scope of action for female characters in theatre and opera reflected gender politics and the fear of processes of emancipation in real life – a debate that is most often discussed for the decadent *femme fatale* characters of *fin-de-siècle* opera. The nuanced contextualisation of the French comic plots provides a completely new angle to this narrative.

With her study of American operas of the 1950s, Monica A. Hershberger gives the debate about agency still another twist: although female characters in her opinion still appear 'as the genre's inevitable victims', she argues that 'the singers who embodied these American victims did not always accept their victimhood' (2). Ray and Hershberger start from quite similar research questions. However, Hershberger – with her twentieth-century topic – had access to a completely new set of sources, whereas Ray basically only had librettos and scores to work with. Biographical information, interviews, newspaper reports and audiovisual materials enable Hershberger to include creative processes, concrete productions and their reception into her analysis of gendered narratives. A reading of Gian Carlo Menotti's *The Consul* (1950) in the first chapter lays the ground for capturing the atmosphere in America's postwar operatic landscape, where 'New opera companies and festivals sprang up across the country' (36). Hershberger takes the opportunity to elaborate on the extensive influence that Patricia Neway (1919–2012), who sang the role of Menotti's female protagonist Magda Sorel about 550 times, had on the performance and reception of *The Consul*.

The following four chapters of Hershberger's study are each dedicated to a close reading of an opera, starting with two works whose female leads were based on real people: the gold digger and 'homewrecker' Elizabeth 'Baby Doe' Tabor (1854–1935) and the alleged axe murderess Lizzie Andrew Borden (1860–1927). Hershberger chooses different approaches for these two chapters. For Douglas Moore and John Latouche's opera, *The Ballad of Baby Doe* (1956), she discusses in detail the transformation of the character throughout various literary and operatic imaginations. She is particularly interested in the performance of Beverly Sills (1929–2007), who started singing the role in 1958 and wrote about it extensively in her three autobiographies. The singer's identification with the role enabled her to create a nuanced portrait of Baby Doe ('both a strong and a tender character', cit. Sills, 69) that transgressed the 'virgin'/'whore' dichotomy. In Jack Beeson, Kenward Elmslie and Richard Plant's opera, *Lizzie Borden* (1965), Hershberger does not see opportunities for such transgressions. Although the authors transformed the story in such a way that the murders committed by Lizzie were motivated by the domestic abuse and violence she suffered, in the final scene she has turned into a 'mannish lesbian' that does not leave much space for interpretation.

Sexual violence is also the predominant topic in the two operas Hershberger discusses in the remaining chapters. For Aaron Copland and Erik Johns' *The Tender Land* (1954), the author unfolds the cultural context of sexual paranoia in the 1950s, where anxiety about protecting women and concerns about sexual violence – often perpetrated, in these narratives, by racially or socially othered figures – go hand in hand. The discussion of several singers who interpreted *The Tender Land*'s female lead, Laurie Moss, are less convincing here, because autobiographical sources are scarce, particularly in comparison to the rich material from the autobiographies of Beverly Sills in the chapter about *Baby Doe*.

In the next chapter, which deals with Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah* (1955), Hershberger can again go into more detail. When discussing the performance of the singer Phyllis Curtin (1921–2016), the author considers how Curtin's portrayal of the titular character in Floyd's opera was shaped by a series of provocative *Salome*-photographs that appeared in *Life Magazine* in 1954. Hershberger suggests that 'we might understand *Susannah* as a woman suspected of having African American ancestry', and contextualises the character both within 'the long history of violence against Black women in the US' (176) and through stereotypical narratives about Black women such as the promiscuous Jezebel. By following the reception of *Susannah* from its creation until today, Hershberger also uncovers how readings of the work have changed alongside growing feminist awareness about harassment and violence – issues that were brought to the discussion especially by the opera's female lead singers. In her epilogue, Hershberger reflects critically on the potential influence of women singers on operatic works created mostly by men, and on the lack of sources available to scholars wishing to trace these legacies. Sometimes, Hershberger concludes, 'the imprints of women's voices [remain] rather vague' (192).

This absence of evidence of women singers' agency and impact motivated Kimberly White to 'reconstruct the day-to-day activities during a singer's career' (3) in her book. White argues that the male-dominated public voices of the nineteenth century 'made it almost impossible to separate the "real" theatrical world from its fictions' (7). In five chapters, the author follows the careers of French female singers between 1830 and 1848. An appendix compiles 70 short biographies that provide further details about their lives. Chapter 1 is dedicated to singers' education. White deconstructs the myth of the 'street-singer-turned-prima-donna' (11), arguing that most female singers came from a middle-class background, often from families already working in the theatre. Statistics about the family origins of conservatoire students set the tone for White's general approach in this book: it is a hands-on social history of singers, with specific

sensitivity towards the gender-based inequalities women singers faced. White discusses the social stigma that attached to a stage career for women, and the difficulties that accompanied soprano Laure Cinti-Damoreau's (1801–1863) appointment as a professor at the Paris Conservatoire.

In her second chapter, on operatic debuts, White explains that women did take an active role in shaping their careers, despite the patriarchal constraints placed upon them. She cites letters such as those from the singer Noémie de Roissy (1824–?), which testify how determinedly she negotiated with the theatre direction to secure a contract. Negotiations also form the primary topic of Chapter 3, which describes the daily efforts of singers to ensure that they could work under the best possible conditions. This concerned not only salary (which was surprisingly equally distributed between the sexes), but also rehearsal times or arrangements in case of illness. Sources detailing regulations pertaining to pregnancy or menstruation reveal how the theatres and the singers handled these 'women's matters' quite differently. Some singers had special clauses in their contracts so that they did not have to perform at such times without losing their income; others intentionally did without such clauses so that they were not accused of being lazy.

In Chapter 4, White is concerned with morals and with the expected position of women in society – one to which a female opera singer certainly did not conform. The author discusses not only legal matters but also texts and stage works, such as Daniel-François-Esprit Auber's *opéra comique*, *L'Ambassadrice* (1836). According to White, in this opera the female lead's final decision to remain on stage and refuse to marry the ambassador shows 'the inherent incompatibility of a prima donna's talent, lifestyle, and class with aristocratic mœurs' (105).

White's last chapter deals with ageing singers and retirement. Women in particular suffered both from public expectations about youth and beauty, and the limited availability of repertoire for ageing women. Dwelling on the career of French soprano Cornélie Falcon (1814–1897), White shows how the singer's unusually short career – she retired at 27 – actually served her artistic legacy. For women, the end of a singing career often meant the end of a life in public. Similarly to Hershberger, White concludes her study by reflecting on the whereabouts of these women's voices: 'Their continued participation in concerts, teaching, and composition, and the support they provided to their children and students in their musical and theatrical careers should not be forgotten, even if it cannot always be precisely documented' (137).

No matter how divergent the monographs of Ray, White and Hershberger are in terms of the periods they cover and the results they offer, when taken together, they raise surprisingly similar questions about women in opera: Who are these women and how can they be contextualised? Who shaped their 'womanhood', and are there alternatives to predominantly male gazes, narratives and readings? Which spaces did female singers occupy to actively develop their careers and the roles they sang? How do intersectional differences influence their agency? What sources are available, and are silenced, submerged or even non-existent voices able to speak in some capacity through engaged scholarly work? Each of the three studies faces different obstacles in answering these questions, and this provokes further reflections on the issue of women in opera.

First, there is the relation between 'real' life and the opera stage. That women figures on the opera stage are fictitious constructs is as true as that they are reflections of social and political debates. However, these debates are far from uniform; rather, they are influenced by quite diverse voices, ranging from very conservative or even misogynist to quite progressive. How far can contextualisation of women characters go, and at what point does it become difficult to capture the complexity of a political debate when proposing similarities between stage figures and reality? One example in particular made me think intensely about this question. It is the assumed similarity between Rameau's

Platée and Madame Pompadour in Marcie Ray's study. Both seek social advancement and are in one way or another sanctioned by society. But are they actually similar, as Ray suggests? Platée is from the very beginning unsuccessful in her aspirations to become Jupiter's wife and is used as a plaything by Cithéron and Jupiter; Madame Pompadour, in contrast, resolves to be the King's official mistress, an aim she realises with resounding success. The nymph is ugly, ridiculous and played by a male singer – a tradition that directly invokes the *vecchia nutrice* (old wet-nurse) figure in Italian opera. At the time of the premiere of *Platée* in 1745, Madame Pompadour was 23, had only recently become the King's mistress and had already gained significant influence at court. A poem defaming her, quoted at length by Ray, describes Madame Pompadour's physical appearance negatively. (It asks how the King can take her as a mistress; she is not even beautiful.) But rather than a comment on Madame Pompadour's appearance, Ray correctly reads this as a critique of the King's decision to make a married woman from the middle classes his mistress. The poet is mocking the King, rather than Madame Pompadour. With her important role at court, she certainly is a completely different type to the stock character of the ugly, ridiculously amorous woman embodied by Platée.

What is observable in both cases, however, is that women are defamed by being described as not beautiful. This signifies the negative reverse of the idealisation of female beauty both on and off stage, a practice that connects directly to the longstanding narrative that outstanding beauty offers the only possibility for women's social advancement. Ray's comparison between Platée and Madame Pompadour made me think more deeply about these patterns, even if the differences between the two figures, at least in my opinion, outweigh the proposed similarities. When working with female types – as all three monographs do – the most striking discoveries are in the details and nuances that hint at broader patterns and narratives appearing in quite different contexts.

A second topic that deserves debate is the relation between musical works, female agents and feminist studies. All three books discuss operas written by men and are concerned with the agency and emancipation of fictional women figures, real female performers and women in society in general. Hershberger raises the question of feminist interpretations developed by singers themselves. Here, the author works from the premise that the singers tried to add new layers to their characters, ones that librettists and composers did not offer. The results, however, remain at least partly inconclusive, despite Hershberger's various efforts to capture performers' voices, including for instance by drawing on several interviews. The occasional inconsistencies between singers' own reflections and the feminist impetus the scholar seeks to uncover provoke thoughts about what we, as scholars, expect from women in opera history. It is a platitude, and yet worth repeating: a female voice is not necessarily a voice with feminist consciousness. Throughout history, women have navigated patriarchal society in widely divergent ways – sometimes opposing it, sometimes playing along, sometimes even actively supporting it.

In pursuit of the 'undoing' of 'gendered archetypes', as Hershberger puts it in the subtitle of her book, one must often make do with the breadcrumbs of feminist thinking. The three studies under discussion here go as far as their respective subjects and sources allow them to go. Each in its own way challenges Clément's *défaite des femmes* without causing the pendulum to swing completely the other way. These texts' nuances in analysis and contextualisation, and the revealing results they present, demonstrate that the topic of 'women in opera' is by no means an obsolete pursuit in music research.