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OLIVIA BLOECHL

OPERA AND THE POLITICAL IMAGINARY IN OLD REGIME FRANCE

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When talking about opera, Orpheus is never far away. As a singer-poet, he is often cast as a metaphor for this genre's insistence on continuous music and singing and as mitigating its challenge to theatrical verisimilitude (or *vraisemblance*) – a hotly debated topic in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This oft-interrogated trio – Orpheus, opera and verisimilitude – makes an appearance in Olivia Bloechl's new book on French *tragédies en musique* as well, yet she gives a new interpretation of their interconnectedness. Rather than use the character to elaborate on the aesthetic premises of the genre, she examines the verisimilitude of the myth's lyrical storytelling from the viewpoint of the 'political imaginary', the political meanings available to the Opéra's audiences in old-regime France. In her final chapters, she frames Orpheus's conduct in the underworld within the context of a subject's interaction with sovereignty. This interpretation rests on her claim that the harsh and merciless environment of Pluto's imperium was often imagined to resemble the absolute monarchy under emergency rule, laying bare a monarch's forbidding power over his subjects' life and death. Music (and song), she suggests in the conclusion, 'performed an aesthetic work of sublimating the most menacing aspect of life under the Bourbons' (203).

Maintaining that the storytelling of *tragédie en musique* is inescapably intertwined with the political realities of life under the Bourbon monarchy is, of course, not new; as Bloechl acknowledges in the Introduction, 'we cannot seem to be rid of kings' (ix), whether as patrons or as subjects of the art form. This has led to a plethora of studies excavating the correspondences between political reality in ancien-régime France and on-stage representations of kingship. Georgia Cowart, for instance, has pointed out that some late seventeenth-century portrayals of Pluto implicitly sought to denounce Louis XIV's militarism towards the end of his life (*The Triumph of Pleasure: Louis XIV and the Politics of Spectacle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 203–205). Bloechl, however, advocates a move away from this attention to particularity. She proposes that rather than mirroring or allegorizing a specific, real-life situation, *tragédies en musique* modelled experiences of government and sovereignty that were 'filtered through their idealist and decorum-governed conventions' (xi) and, in the conclusion, she advances the notion that they 'had a homelier [and more general] function of aestheticizing the precarity of political existence in the ancien régime' (200).

Accordingly, the subject rather than the king moves centre stage in *Opera and the Political Imaginary*, for Bloechl's principal aim is to explore how operatic plots dramatized the ways in which royal subjects experienced their encounters with and subjugation to monarchical and governmental power. In order to analyse these experiences, Bloechl brings the political theories of Michel Foucault (especially those from the end of his career), Judith Butler and Giorgio Agamben to bear on this repertory. She focuses on how various power structures affect ritualized political behaviours such as glorifying and mourning a monarch, as well as confessing and receiving punishment. While not getting 'rid of kings', Bloechl still arrives at an understanding of *tragédie en musique* in which characters' political actions and their experiences of sovereignty depend more on the ideology of absolute monarchy than on the actual physical presence of a ruler. In fact, subjects' propensity to behave politically in the absence of the king is crucial to her larger narrative. While she finds that political authority was more often personified in princely or divine figures in seventeenth-century *tragédie en musique*, she argues that towards the end of the ancien régime, plots 'tended to emphasize a more distant, providential form of authority' that was often exercised through intermediaries (20), a change she convincingly links to eighteenth-century changes in governmental administration. This point comes through particularly well in the final chapters on the underworld scenes.

Throughout her six chapters, Bloechl substantiates her claims about the representation of subjects' political existence in *tragédie en musique* by tracing how recurrent elements of storytelling changed from the



mid-seventeenth to the late eighteenth century: public glorification (chapter 1) and mourning of the king (chapter 2), acts of confession (chapter 3) and punishment (chapter 4), and underworld scenes (chapters 5 and 6). Despite their omnipresence in *tragédie en musique*, some of these plot elements have been sidelined in scholarship on French opera because they are perceived as subsidiary to the drama.

Particularly productive is her discussion of the chorus as crucial to *tragédie en musique*'s perpetuation of 'the ideological myth of an unchanging, sublimely legitimate political order' (200): in other words, the political theology of absolutism. She understands these choruses, especially those praising the ruler, as reifying what Agamben has theorized as power's need for glory (a perhaps surprising complement to its need for efficacy). Such choruses are usually dramatically and musically inoperative – they do not propel the action, nor are they marked by musical innovation. But their inoperativity, Bloechl argues, is precisely the point: through expressing approval of politics and, above all, characters' own enjoyment of their political existence, they model the affective behaviour expected from royal subjects, thus creating a collective that supports the genre's political theology. A similar procedure of ideological support might be expected to be at work in choral mourning, a subtype of the glorifying chorus. Yet the more expressive musical language that Bloechl detects in mourning choruses was due to their function of displaying the precariousness of political existence: to be specific, the threat that death posed to the king and through him to the nation and its subjects.

One of the most fascinating issues raised in Bloechl's study is how practices that structure affective political behaviour become internalized and naturalized, leading her to ask whether the textual and musical utterances of characters (including the chorus) can be perceived as authentic self-expression. With this, she challenges Rousseau's insistence that voice is the immediate expression of the self – a notion that still plays an important role in studies of eighteenth-century French opera. In chapter 3 she demonstrates that the question of whether self-expression was perceived as authentic had especially weighty consequences in confessional scenes. Building on Foucault's theories of veridiction, she maintains that acts of confession are 'a mode of government by which individuals control their own and others' behaviour by referring it to norms' (91). Thus, not only can their authenticity be questioned, but confessional acts also lay bare the peril of self-expression; pleading guilty could lead to banishment or death. Yet, using Chloë Taylor's work on the culture of confession (*The Culture of Confession from Augustine to Foucault: A Genealogy of the 'Confessing Animal'* (New York: Routledge, 2009)), she highlights that characters (but also real subjects) may choose to confess because of the promise of pleasure in eliciting pity and sympathy from the listener – an aspect that she finds reflected in the often-heightened musical expression (and at times, the vocal extravagance) of confessional numbers.

This attention to musical representation is characteristic of Bloechl's approach throughout the book: in every chapter, she corroborates her theoretical insights with textual and musical analyses of a well-chosen selection of excerpts from across the repertory, at times even including ballets. Refreshing also is her close reading of the orchestra as an active agent, especially in chapter 4, when she looks at scenes of torment. Here she follows the lead of David Charlton and others, who have long advocated a more in-depth study of the changes in orchestral writing in eighteenth-century France. Indeed, Bloechl finds that from the time of Rameau, the orchestra plays an ever more active role in scenes of torment, either as exacted through external agents or through the subject's own feelings of remorse – a development she relates to the growing propensity for introspection in the eighteenth century.

Opera and the Political Imaginary is ambitious in its treatment of an impressive array of works and its aim to uncover larger developments in how the Parisian elites imagined their political selves through opera from the mid-seventeenth to the end of the eighteenth century. This bird's-eye perspective has great explanatory potential: drawing attention to aspects of continuity provides one explanation for the long-lasting popularity of works by Lully and Rameau. But, at times, it is also revealed as a weakness. Because of the plenitude of musical and textual examples, each individual case can be examined only briefly. Some of the analyses would benefit from more in-depth treatment, in particular because of the relative unfamiliarity of some of the repertory and the complex nature of *tragédie lyrique* plots. This would have clarified the fine-grained



distinctions between convention and exception on which much of Bloechl's argumentation seems to hinge. Nevertheless, this book is an asset to the field of French opera scholarship: it opens up new avenues for analysing how specific, recurrent scene types reflected the political experiences of the Parisian elites, and thus how the genre served as an essential – yet subtle – tool in what Foucault termed 'the government of men'. What is more, Bloechl's larger argument about the political imaginary as a defining element in the experience of theatre should be appealing to a wide array of scholars far beyond those interested in French opera.

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GIANLUCA BOCCHINO AND CECILIA NICOLÒ, EDS

JOMMELLIANA: UN OPERISTA SULLA SCENA CAPITOLINA. STUDI SUL PERIODO

ROMANO DI NICCOLÒ JOMMELLI

Lucca: Libreria Musicale Italiana, 2017

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Few opera-seria debuts made such a mark as Niccolò Jommelli's *Ricimero, Re de' Goti* (1740) at the Teatro Argentina in Rome. Singled out in Charles de Brosses' oft-quoted travelogue and featured in an annotated caricature by Pier Leone Ghezzi, *Ricimero* sparked thirty-four years of success in every realm of vocal music, both secular and religious. Even so, Jommelli's early years have not been dealt with as extensively as his 'middle' period in Württemberg (1753–1769) and his late endeavours for Naples and Lisbon (1769–1774). Happily, the tercentenary of the composer's birth, in 2014, has yielded three Italian conference reports that uncover lesser-known Jommellian areas, including the early operas. Alongside *Niccolò Jommelli: l'esperienza europea di un musicista 'filosofo'*, edited by Gaetano Pitarresi (Reggio Calabria: Edizioni del Conservatorio di Musica F. Cilea, 2014) and *Le stagioni di Niccolò Jommelli*, edited by Maria Ida Biggi, Francesco Cotticelli, Paologiovanni Maione and Iskrena Yordanova (Naples: Turchini, 2018), a third collection deals specifically with Jommelli's early endeavours for Rome. That this anthology and its linked conference have been undertaken by two early-career scholars, Gianluca Bocchino and Cecilia Nicolò, deserves praise and emulation.

Italian *auctoritas* has dictated that a senior scholar, Andrea Chegai, be invited to preface the volume with a *captatio benevolentiae* that, oddly enough, does not properly introduce, much less endorse, the volume and its topic. Instead, Chegai's contribution muses on recent developments in scholarship on eighteenth-century opera, most notably the rise of the digital humanities. Chegai both recognizes and condemns the digital humanities, arguing that their promotion of 'accumulation' and 'collectionism' stands in the way of a 'lucid historical perspective' (xii; all translations are mine). Further open-ended remarks are offered on opera seria's subject matter, the difficulties underlying the interpretation of old chronicles, the ephemerality of operatic scores and, inevitably, the issue of *Regietheater* in our time. I wished, instead, to learn more about Chegai's historical perspective on Jommelli, if not about the possibilities and challenges of 'urban musicology' carried out on an oeuvre that transcends the boundaries of one particular city – several of Jommelli's Roman operas were in fact revived elsewhere, which is insufficiently acknowledged in this book.

The first part of the volume sketches the composer's mid-eighteenth-century context. Cecilia Nicolò discusses Rome's role as a springboard for operatic careers. She seeks to uncover the motivations of Jommelli's benefactors, who enjoyed a close relationship with the papal authorities. However, she argues that 'while in other European cities, the operatic theatre could constitute one of the symbols of power, the Church in Rome,