

REVIEWS



BOOKS

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STEFANO CASTELVECCHI

SENTIMENTAL OPERA: QUESTIONS OF GENRE IN THE AGE OF BOURGEOIS DRAMA

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Stefano Castelveccchi's *Sentimental Opera: Questions of Genre in the Age of Bourgeois Drama* is an essay on aesthetic and conceptual fluidity. The adjective 'sentimental' itself has undergone a significant semantic shift. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* it once described someone or something 'characterized by or exhibiting refined and elevated feeling'. Later, the meaning changed to 'addicted to indulgence in superficial emotion' or 'apt to be swayed by sentiment' (*OED Online* <www.oed.com> (10 March 2016)). Such a turn from positive to negative testifies to a gradual recession of the category of the 'sentimental' within Western culture, one whose historiographical implications are spelled out in the Preface of the book. For most of the past century critics and historians treated manifestations of the culture of sentimentality as by-products of 'alien' intellectual habits – perplexing at best, deplorable at worst. Castelveccchi, instead, re-evaluates the category of the sentimental as an essential component of late eighteenth-century culture, proposing a more nuanced understanding of the aesthetics of opera at a time when established hierarchies and categorizations (social as well as cultural) increasingly came into question.

Fluidity is intrinsic to the concept of 'sentimental opera', which encompasses a variety of eighteenth-century operatic genres inhabiting the grey area between opera seria and opera buffa. In the initial 'Prologue on Genre', Castelveccchi justifies his use of 'sentimental opera' as an umbrella term by positioning his study in relation to several theories of genre. He argues that, *pace* Benedetto Croce's unconditional condemnation of the arbitrariness of genres as opposed to the essential uniqueness of each individual work, 'genres are constructed – or rather, they emerge – within a dialectic among parties of all sorts; the critic's acts are part of this historical fabric, and are not necessarily in a category ontologically separate from that of the acts of other players'. His definition of genre as 'a critical construct' validated by 'a variety of cultural phenomena, practices and experiences' (12) thus prompts him to address the key questions of his book: how can sentimental opera be validated historically as a genre, and why should it be?

Chapter 1 sets the stage for the long-range historiographical challenge of the study – namely, the revision of long-established assumptions whereby the manifold eighteenth-century manifestations of sentimental opera eventually merged in the development of nineteenth-century *opera semiseria*. In Castelveccchi's view, this teleology fails to recognize the cultural specificities of the fragmentation that underpinned eighteenth-century efforts to establish a dramatic 'third genre'. As far as opera is concerned, Castelveccchi traces part of the problem to an all-too-hasty generic attribution of Niccolò Piccinni's *Cecchina, ossia la buona figliuola* (1760) – the first opera in which distinct moments of a 'sentimental mode' (38) can be detected. ('Mode' in this context designates the localized adoption of expressive and stylistic features that do not necessarily belong to a work's genre.) An important stepping-stone in the Italian reception of Samuel Richardson's influential epistolary novel *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740), *Cecchina* nonetheless inhabited a generic space that, as Castelveccchi shows, many at the time found congruent with the buffa tradition. For Castelveccchi, the opera owes its historical importance less to its genre than to the idea that it provided a platform for the development



of an operatic vocabulary for sentimentality. If *Cecchina* is hardly a viable starting-point for the history of sentimental opera, then, where shall we turn?

Chapters 2 and 3 explore the flurry of new dramatic genres (domestic drama, *comédie larmoyante*, *drame bourgeois*) of the period, which attest to the manifold intellectual tendencies connecting the ‘third genre’ to the aesthetic of sentimentality. The lowest common denominator of these new genres was that they helped to define a ‘bourgeois’ mode of expression – a designation that, in Castelvechchi’s view, served less as a social than as an aesthetic signifier. Among its key features were the adoption of a ‘median’ register (simple and colloquial, but polished and poised) and a focus on characters’ interiority rather than on their actions, together with a contemporary setting and some degree of self-referentiality. Central to Castelvechchi’s discussion is Diderot’s theorization of a *genre moyen* – a middle (or intermediate) kind of drama where no space is left for generic mixture. To be sure, Diderot distinguishes between ‘bourgeois tragedy’ and ‘serious comedy’, assigning only the latter to the *genre moyen*, yet ‘the distinction between the two genres probably has more to do with the nature of the two endings than with general questions of subject and style’ (67). And, indeed, the two were soon lumped together into one generic category that was intended to transcend the dichotomy between tragedy and comedy and that would emerge ‘as a radical alternative to them’ (86).

Chapters 4 to 6 probe the scope of the *genre moyen* and sentimental aesthetics in the realm of opera. Chapter 4 looks at the theme of desertion as a subject whose dramatic and operatic treatment heavily relies on the sentimental mode. Here Castelvechchi compares a bourgeois drama, Louis-Sébastien Mercier’s *Le déserteur* (1770), with two operas, Michel-Jean Sedaine and Pierre-Alexandre Monsigny’s opéra comique of the same title (completed in 1765–1766; first performed in 1769) and Bartolomeo Benincasa and Francesco Bianchi’s *Il disertore* (1784). Mercier, a pre-eminent theorist of bourgeois drama, wrote his work after the success of the opéra comique, but introduced a significant twist: while the opera relies on stylistic mixture and features a happy ending, the drama adopts a serious (median) tone throughout and ends tragically. Benincasa and Bianchi drew heavily upon Mercier. Benincasa’s Preface to the libretto constitutes ‘the most conscious and explicit manifesto for a third genre in Italian opera’ (110), one characterized by a serious, elevated style (essentially derived from opera seria of both Metastasian and Gluckian inspiration) and contemporary setting and situations. None the less, they ultimately opted for a return to a happy ending. Despite the friction between ‘innovative drives and the resistance offered by [the] established practices and habits’ of opera seria (120), this work offered a more compelling alternative route to the ‘third genre’ than Piccinni’s *Cecchina*.

The establishment of a third operatic genre from ‘on high’ was soon overshadowed by the huge success of Paisiello’s *Nina, ossia la pazza per amore* (1789). Chapter 5 traces the genealogy of the title character of this work, Nina, through various manifestations of the eighteenth-century culture of sensibility – anthropological, social and medical, as well as artistic and intellectual – and outlines a persuasive picture of the overlapping means through which sensibility and sentimentality were expressed in opera (simplicity of plot, *tableau* technique, overall musical organization, contemporary setting and so on). Chapter 6 is then dedicated to the ‘markers of a sentimental mode’ (167) in Paisiello’s opera and to a discussion of the persistent misunderstandings of its genre. Although the work was often billed as an opera buffa – an indication that ‘the realm of comedy was often associated with contemporary and private life even in the absence of humour or ridicule’ (182) – Castelvechchi provides much evidence reinforcing both ‘the widespread perception of *Nina* as an essentially serious and sentimental work’ (182) and its elusive position within a polarized system of operatic genres.

Chapter 7 is dedicated to another kind of polarity, one between sentimental and anti-sentimental elements surfacing in Mozart and Da Ponte’s *Le nozze di Figaro*. Castelvechchi claims that sentimental topoi in the opera coexist – and at times are all of a piece – with their subversion, affecting the degree of empathy with which listeners are supposed to respond to the action represented on stage. In order for this subversion to be effective, one must ultimately postulate an established and shared operatic vocabulary of sentimentality. In the last chapter of the book, Castelvechchi returns to the conceptual separation between sentimental opera and nineteenth-century *opera semiseria*, bringing the historiographical argument of the book full circle. The former category comprises works that, despite their differences, all respond to ‘a cohering set of aesthetic premises, narrative themes, representational and expressive devices, and implied spectatorial attitudes’ (225)



quite apart from those of both opera seria and opera buffa. The generic nature of nineteenth-century *opera semiseria*, conversely, is grounded in the idea of generic mixture, with no concern for a contemporary subject. In this respect, *opera semiseria* can hardly be conceived as the late stage of sentimental opera, but rather as a manifestation of its ‘undoing’ (228).

With its nuanced argumentation, ambitious scope, absorbing prose and intellectual rigour, this book constitutes a seminal contribution both to opera studies and to the history of eighteenth-century culture at large. By advocating a more fluid understanding of generic boundaries in opera, Castelvechi is also complicating our understanding of the inclination for taxonomy inherent within much late eighteenth-century thought. His many thought-provoking and path-breaking ideas whet the reader’s appetite and raise a plethora of questions. Some of them, inevitably, are destined to remain open. One wonders, for instance, how the cultural axis masterfully traced in the book (from England to Italy, via France) intersected with other intellectual orientations of the time – most notably, the development of proto-romantic trends of moral philosophy in the German lands – which also had a major impact on the aesthetic of drama. Even if Castelvechi does not address this issue, *Sentimental Opera* will certainly offer an essential starting-point for possible answers.

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MARY SUE MORROW AND BATHIA CHURGIN, EDS
THE SYMPHONIC REPERTOIRE, VOLUME I: THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY SYMPHONY
Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012
pp. xvii + 897 + CD-ROM, ISBN 978 0 253 35640 6

This excellent volume is as formidable as it is rich and strange: rich, as a twenty-two-author assault on a still practically virgin landscape of twenty thousand neglected symphonies; strange, because unbalanced at every level of its baroque intricate architecture. The spine bears the name of ‘Brown’, but the late A. Peter Brown bequeathed an organizational scheme and a treasure-trove of data to the two actual editors, Mary Sue Morrow and Bathia Churgin. Morrow is very much the senior partner: nearly two hundred pages (seven chapters) of the volume are by her, amounting virtually to an embedded monograph. At the next level down we have seven senior scholars contributing substantial capstone essays to the various geographical regions: Bathia Churgin for Italy, Joanna Cobb Biermann for North Germany, Sterling E. Murray for South Germany, Morrow again for the Austrian monarchy, Robert O. Gjerdingen for France, Simon McVeigh for Britain and Bertil van Boer for ‘The Periphery’. The edifice bottoms out with assorted case studies of individual composers: some canonic (Sammartini, Stamitz, and J. C. and C. P. E. Bach), many less familiar (such as Brunetti, Harrer, Guilleman), but emphatically excluding W. A. Mozart and Joseph Haydn – whereas the latter’s brother Michael gets an illuminating chapter by Michael Ruhling. (Brown himself completed the second volume of the series, *The First Golden Age of the Viennese Symphony: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).)

The lion’s share of ideas stems from Morrow. Her one-hundred-page introductory ‘Overview’ throws down a number of gauntlets. A historically and historiographically responsible survey of this rich terrain must reject the symphony’s standard Sammartini–Stamitz–Haydn–Mozart–Beethoven evolutionary narrative. The provenance of composers is defined not by the region of their birth, but by where they did most of their work (thus the Italian-sounding Antonio Rosetti, though Bohemian born, is covered by Murray in the South Germany section, because he served at the *Hofkapelle* of Kraft Ernst at Oettingen-Wallerstein). Getting away from the ‘Great Man’ view of music history, we must focus on a plurality of practices, options and