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MENDELSSOHN: *Athalia*

In addition, to his popular score to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Felix Mendelssohn wrote incidental music to several other plays. Commissioned by the Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm IV, the incidental music to *Athalia* was intended for a private performance of the play by Jean Racine. While the story is a complicated Old Testament plot, Mendelssohn's music captures the tone of the tragedy with delight, whimsy, and severity.

MORRIS: Reading Opera Between the Lines: Orchestral Interludes and Cultural Meaning from Wagner to Berg

Interludes in opera articulate moments when the lush voices of singers and vivid spectacle of scenery and action are removed and often the curtain is drawn, and thus they span a functional gap between textless instrumental music and explicit theatrical vehicle. Although composers and analysts suggest rich and multivalent meanings for the music, those implications often escape decoding by audiences. Even the interlude titles – *Zwischenspiel*, *entr'acte*, *intermezzo* – suggest their intermission-like nature. As functional placeholders for scene changes and the like, the interludes are for many a cue to relax attentive listening, read synopses, and whisper with companions. Undaunted by such complexities, Morris takes up the problematic nature of operatic interludes, engaging their ambiguities with eyes wide open in an effort to enrich our understanding of these challenging bits of music.

GOEHRING: Three modes of perception in Mozart – the philosophical, pastoral, and comic in *Così fan tutte*

According to the book jacket, this is the first major scholarly study of *Così fan tutte*, considered to be one of Mozart's least-understood operas and librettist Lorenzo Da Ponte's most interesting text. *Così fan tutte* has been studied extensively, despite the broad assertion stated in the book. What the author of this study brings to the reader, which others have not, is a detailed examination of the philosophical, pastoral, and comic background of the libretto, characters, and music of the opera. New perspectives on text and tone in the opera, the subtle use of the pastoral mode, and the tension and balance between philosophy and comedy are what the author brings to the study of this work. In addition, the author does an intensely close reading of the primary sources of the opera, in order to support his theories and statements.

TRIBO: Annals 1847-1897 del Gran Teatre del Liceu

The importance of the Teatre del Liceu, can not be overstated. The house ranks with all the leading theatres of the world, being right up there with Paris, London, New York, Vienna, Madrid, Rome, Milan, Lisbon, St. Petersburg, Moscow, Turin, Naples, Buenos Aires, and other cities of comparable importance. During its long history (158 years at the time of writing) it featured many of the great singers. These include Caruso, Battistini, Tamagno, Ruffo, Caballe, Tebaldi, Mario, Pavarotti, Vignas, Lazaro, O'Sullivan, Stracciari, Pagliughi, Gayarre, Masini, Stagno, Lauri-Volpi, Bellincioni, and countless others. Quite a few of these who sang there before 1897 are represented on the accompanying disc.

MAY: Decoding Wagner – An Invitation to His World of Music Drama

Thomas May's stated goal in *Decoding Wagner* is indeed summarized in his subtitle, *An Invitation to His Music Dramas*. Mr. May offers an introduction to those who may seek a reliable yet succinct guide in their first Wagnerian experience; a further potential readership is seen among those who have attended performances of Wagner but who wish to expand their appreciation of the music dramas. In his chronological overview of Wagner's oeuvre from the mid-1830s until the close of his career May presents an approachable guide to appreciating the composer's operatic genius. As an illustration of May's commentary on the works, a generous selection of Wagner's music is included on two Discs that accompany the volume in a protective sleeve.

The Cambridge Companion to the Lied
Books described as a "Companion" to this or that



07 Jul 2009

Saariaho's sumptuous L'amour de loin at the ENO, London

Absence of plot is by no means an impediment in opera.

This new production at The English National Opera, created by noted circus director Daniele Finzi Pasca proves that superlative staging can make up for weak narrative. Through visual images, the spirit of *L'Amour de loin* is invoked to express the drama beneath the music, better than the text itself.

Kaija Saariaho's music wavers in a langorous swoon. Cadences rise and fall away, legato rippling upwards and down without regard to syntax. This is lavishly sensual, complete with faint echoes of the French medieval world of the troubadour, Jaufré Rudel (Roderick Williams), and the "Moorish" exoticism of Tripoli where the heroine Clémence (Joan Rodgers), resides. It's the musical equivalent of intoxicating fumes, perfume or perhaps some strange potion inhaled through a hookah. Dramatic structure isn't relevant to mood music as dream-like as this.

Love, after all, is an "altered state" where logic doesn't apply, particularly in the case of idealized troubadour love, where artistic indulgence is as much an impetus as the love object. No wonder Jaufré panics and becomes fatally ill when he crosses the sea to meet Clémence for the first time. Unlike *Tristan and Isolde* where strong characters are transformed by a potion, to the horror of those around them, everyone in *L'amour de loin*, even the Pilgrim, is complicit in the dream state, so intensity dissolves in romantic washes of chromatic color.

Saariaho's writing works best describing images like the ocean crossing, one of the most brilliant scenes in this production where light images are projected onto waving expanses of silk. It's less suited to dramatic rationale. Jaufré and The Pilgrim debate endlessly whether he's mad but the point's already made in the music. Narrative meaning is further obscured by the distortion of natural rhythm and by dropping single spoken words into lines that are otherwise sung. Richard Stokes's translation is lucid but retains the unworldly illogic of the original.

Roderick Williams, Joan Rodgers and Faith Sherman sing well, but this isn't an opera where

Kaija Saariaho : L'amour de loin

Roderick Williams (Jaufré Rudel), Joan Rodgers (Clémence), Faith Sherman (The Pilgrim), Antoine Marc, Ted Sikström, Sara Lundstedt, Lilli Mühleisen, Tamzen Moulding, Phillipa Anderson, (spirits), Robyn Simpson, Jami Read-Quarrell (shadow actors), Daniele Finzi Pasca (director, choreographer, lighting) Jean Rabasse (designs), Kevin Pollard (costumes) Edward Gardner (conductor), Orchestra of the English National Opera

Above: Joan Rodgers as Clémence [Photo by Johan Persson courtesy of English National Opera]

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very good.

DUNSBY: Making Words Sing: Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Song

In *Making Words Sing*, Jonathan Dunsby investigates what he calls the "vocality" of song, that is, the "quality of having voice," as the author states in the introduction to his study. By using this perspective, Dunsby focuses on the intensification of the text that occurs when words are set to music, which stands in opposition to the kind of "songfulness" that Lawrence Kramer discussed in *Musical Meaning: Toward a Critical History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002).

RANDALL & DAVIS: Puccini & the Girl

"Puccini & the Girl" is a rare and engrossing work of scholarship that can be enjoyed on several levels. For the Puccini-lover, to say nothing of one who has a special interest in *La Fanciulla del West*, it will provide a wealth of information not previously available, particularly all in one place. Any one interested in the creative process will find it exposed and examined clearly. The scholar will recognize the fascinating chance discovery, the thrill of the chase and the deep rewards of work undertaken lovingly and with rigorous care by the dedicated and passionate co-authors.

HANSEN: The Sibyl Sanderson Story – Requiem for a Diva

Jack Winsor Hansen's 520-page biography of Sibyl Sanderson (1865 - 1903) is packed with romanticism and gossip that will delight and titillate true worshipers of operatic divas and inquisitive opera fans. It also fills a gap in the music-historical writings about opera at the end of the 19th century.

The Cambridge Companion to John Cage

Cage's music is like Einstein's theorem: most people know it exists, know it's important, but beyond these facts know nothing about it (count me in this category when it comes to Einstein).

WEAVER & PUCCINI: The Puccini Companion

If any opera lover feels daunted by the many biographies and analytical tomes dedicated to the life and art of Giacomo Puccini, Norton has done that reader a tremendous favor with the publication of *The Puccini Companion*. Tightly organized, this series of essays details the life, discusses the operas, and provides a wealth of supplementary information about the composer.

STRAUSS: Der Zigeunerbaron

When Rudolf Bing came to the Metropolitan Opera in 1950, he scored a tremendous hit with a new staging of the perennial operetta favorite *Die Fledermaus*. Both at the opera house on 39th Street and on national tour, the slickly Broadwayized *Fledermaus* packed in big audiences season after season. A decade later, Bing assembled a fine cast and proven production team for the company's first performances of Strauss's *Der Zigeunerbaron* in fifty years. 18 performances were scheduled. It sank like a stone and has never appeared at the MET again.

EVERETT: The Musical – A Research and Information Guide

Much current popular culture assumes that its audience is knowledgeable of the American musical. References to, and parodies of, specific musicals are frequently a part of episodes of *The Simpsons* and *South Park*, and ads for companies as diverse as The Gap and the World Wrestling Entertainment promotion recently have restaged numbers from *West Side Story* to plug their products or events. Rarely, if ever, are the sources acknowledged; it is simply taken for granted that a general audience will understand the quotations and parodies.

TOMMASINI: The New York Times Essential Library: Opera – A Critic's Guide to the 100 Most Important Works and the Best Recordings

"I particularly want to reach newcomers" writes Anthony Tommasini, Times chief classical music critic, in his preface. I do not think they will be helped very much by this book. A rookie who picks it up and reads the subtitle may expect something more than two operas by Bellini, two by Donizetti, one Gounod (not *Faust*), one Massenet (not *Manon*) and no *Lohengrin*.

KRAMER: Opera and Modern Culture – Wagner and Strauss

character development matters much. Its energies lie in the non-vocal writing, giving Edward Gardner and the ENO Orchestra a chance to luxuriate in lush orchestral texture.

The last scenes, where Clémence curses God, then quite quickly gives in to His will, might afford great opportunities for drama had the libretto engaged seriously with ideas. This is where the staging proved itself completely. As Clémence rages at God, Roderick Williams as the dead Jaufré descends from the roof on a wire, his white shroud trailing to the ground. At his side are the two "spirit Jaufrés" who had been doubling him as he lay "dying". Is it a reference to Christ flanked by the two thieves at the crucifixion? Perhaps not, but the idea is just as sacrilegious as Clémence's curse and vaguely logical in the same sense. But as pure theatre it's undeniably dramatic. The stage is lit up in colors as gorgeous as the music, while the chorus shine searchlights upwards towards the ceiling. Gradually the number of searchlight beams increase until the whole auditorium is bathed in unearthly white light. Whatever the image may mean, it's a magnificent statement.



Joan Rodgers as Clémence and the spirits of Jaufré [Photo by Johan Persson courtesy of English National Opera]

In an opera where ideas are so loosely defined, moments like this make all the difference. Finzi Pasca uses the specialist circus skills to extend the range of effects possible on stage. Acrobats dressed in strange headless garb "swim" in the air against a background of silk and colored lights. Huge planes of blue silk zoom onto the platform released on flywires from the upper balconies. Cutout transparencies and panels create illusions of space. Even the costumes act. Sleeves are made with huge silken extensions manipulated by actors, so it seems the singers are surrounded by huge, winged beings. It turns the opera into something truly magical.

Anne Ozorio

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VIVALDI: Orlando Furioso

The box-sets containing the complete recordings of the music of J.S. Bach and W.A. Mozart occupy substantial shelf space in the collections of those fortunate enough to possess them.

SMART: Mimomania: Music and Gesture in Nineteenth-Century Opera

Here's a serious niche book, a relatively slender volume dealing with a topic at once both arcane and surprisingly central to some of the major controversies in opera production today. I think it has major problems but it has become for me the pebble dropped into the pond that sends ripples to unexpected places, raising interesting questions in the process.

The Cambridge Companion to Grand Opera

Among the recent publications on opera, *The Cambridge Companion to Grand Opera*, edited by David Charlton, breaks new ground with its systematic and thorough exploration of grand opera, a specific part of the genre which played an important role in the musical culture of the nineteenth century.

LOEWENBERG: Annals of Opera, 1597-1940

This volume has long been regarded as the definitive work on the subject, and has been quoted in countless later works whenever a reference was required to the performance histories of individual operas. Taken as a whole, especially when one considers the state of library science when the book was first written, it is a magnificent piece of work, and belongs on the bookshelf of every researcher in the operatic field.

GOUNOD: Faust

During his heyday, Alain Vanzo did not get quite the recognition he deserved. Though the voice was sweeter and more beautiful than the somewhat white sound of Nicolai Gedda, it was the latter who got all the plums; primo because he was a discovery of Legge and a few years earlier on the scene and secundo while opera managers could cast him in other languages than French and Italian.

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