

**An Opera Sampler: Miscellaneous Essays on Opera.** By Carl Morey. Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1998. 160 p. \$16.99. ISBN 1-55002-308-X.

While the author is clear that his intention is not to present an academic history of opera, I question the need for yet another “generalist” book about this genre, given the substantial amount of fodder offered to the opera neophyte on the menus of any bookseller on the Web. With Professor Morey's expertise in the subject, I, as a *Kenner*, would have appreciated something a little more thorough. On the other hand, the *Liebhaber* could benefit from the 19 sundry essays in generally very readable prose about various topics ranging from the origins of the genre to the operas of Harry Somers. Certainly the Canadian content included in several of the essays is not easily accessible to the general public. The attitude one should take in order to really enjoy this book is to view it as a plate of hors d'oeuvres that will whet one's appetite before delving into the more substantial main course of a detailed study of operatic history.

The most frustrating things I experienced in reading this book were the overall lack of details, footnotes, and musical or interpretative commentary, as well as what seems to be the inclusion of essays on subjects that are either unoriginal or not particularly useful. There are also some odd lapses in paragraph linkage and organization. Yet some valuable information is woven into almost every piece. For instance, in the first essay, entitled “From Florence to Forty-Second Street: Words, Music and the Theatre,” Professor Morey glosses over the origins of opera without mention of the Florentine *intermedi*. Yet his inclusion of musical theatre and the media in the survey, while superficial, is an excellent way to appeal to opera

neophytes. To discuss Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, the subject of the second essay, without any reference to Monteverdi's new dramatic compositional style (Morey uses the term “simple declamatory style” without reference to the composer's desire to portray the meaning and emotion of the text) or use of large-scale unity seems almost negligent. Why not clarify the Venetian Republic's unique relationship to papal authority to demonstrate how the religious festivals and marvelous processions this city-state lavished on itself helped to establish its operatic tradition, as stated in the title to the third essay? Yet Professor Morey gives an excellent and concise description of the interior of an opera house through the ages, and makes wonderful intuitive leaps between centuries, such as the comparison between the types of *stagione* systems used in 17th-century Venice and 20th-century Toronto.

In the essays on 18th-century operatic genres, I wondered why “Handel and *Acis and Galatea*” was even included, as there are other summaries of the development of Handel's English oratorios to be found elsewhere. The omission of detail about Weill's *Three Penny Opera*, as part of the discussion about *The Beggar's Opera* found in the next essay, was also unsatisfying. “*Don Giovanni*: an Icon, a Puzzle, a Librettist” combined both the strongest and weakest features of this book. I particularly enjoyed Professor Morey's demonstration of how the study of an autograph score can be used to explain procedural and musical details about a composition. The section about Pauline Garcia-Viardot's ownership of the manuscript

would be interesting for the majority of readers. On the other hand, the woman who inherited André's publishing company goes unnamed, and there are several quotes given without references.

The lack of paragraph links is most evident in the essay on Donizetti and Massenet. Some of the paragraphs have been thrown together, and the omission of explanations and an overall sense of cohesion leaves the reader frustrated. I did not find most of the other essays on the 19th-century to be useful to the Kenner either. To discuss *The Queen of Spades* without any musical commentary beyond stating "the warmth of the music" seems senseless, even though the focus of the essay was on Pushkin's story. And why another summary of the story of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*? On the other hand, "The Chorus as Sexual Protagonist: *Rigoletti*," is well-written, although the thesis about the chorus representing the courtiers seems obvious, and I found "The Many Versions of *Boris Godunov*" to be quite illuminating. The most useful essay from a Canadian perspective is "Wagner in the New World: Notes on Early Performances in Toronto," which provides a wealth of information about music-making in this city in the late 19th century. However, endless lists of performances of various operas or portions thereof does not make for particularly interesting reading, and should have been better organized. This would have facilitated the presentation of this useful information from which Professor Morey could make observations. Our expert never gets to the point: Why was Wagner played more often than Brahms? What was it about Wagner's music that so interested Torontonians? How

did a Korean comic opera come to be performed in Toronto, as he mentions briefly?

In the essays about 20th-century operas, the one on *Wozzeck* offers nothing new. Again, Professor Morey only summarizes Stravinsky's stage works in "A Man of the Theatre" and offers no interpretation. "Opera and Politics" is a good summary, but could certainly be more detailed. "*Evviva gli Italiani*" is another essay that would benefit from the organization of performances of Italian operas in Canada into lists about which observations could be made. Many of the essays found in this book were originally lectures, but still some more thought could have been put into the transference into the written medium. However, "A Censor's View of *Der Rosenkavalier*" provides an illuminating study of censor cuts in this libretto, some of which were ignored by singers performing at the time, and some of which still remain in some English versions to this day. "Harry Somers: Opera as Politics," although sketchy on the historical background to *Louis Riel*, is very useful with reference to the libretto and music of *Mario and the Magician*.

It appears these essays have been "curing" for some time and then arranged together to create a pleasant although unusual assortment of appetizers for the opera gourmand. Where Professor Morey shines is in matters associated with operatic performance: with the interpretation of scores and libretti, which he explains very clearly and succinctly. Of primary value is the inclusion of Canadian operatic creation and performance, adding a little variety to the opera enthusiast's diet.

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