



[*The Operatic Archive: American Opera as History*](#) by **Colleen Renihan**. New York: Routledge, 2020. 230 pp. ISBN: 9780367134327 (hardback); 9780429026447 (ebook).

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The Operatic Archive: American Opera as History, by Queen's University musicologist Colleen Renihan, explores a selection of operas premiered in the United States between 1990 and 2017 to demonstrate the genre's capacity to function as a form of historical knowledge. The book responds to the growing number of operas written in the United States that feature a direct and central engagement with history, which Renihan argues is reflective of renewed American historical consciousness within the last thirty years. It is a vital and fascinating work

that integrates opera studies with historiography and trauma studies and has much to offer anyone interested in contemporary opera.

The Operatic Archive explores opera's potential as a means of historical knowing, grounding its arguments in a number of operas based on historical subjects. The work is divided into five chapters that progressively unpack the concept of historiography, each of which features one or two illustrative case studies. Throughout, Renihan builds on the work of Joseph Roach, Rebecca Schneider, and Diana Taylor, among others, to define a role for opera within the cultural process of creating and understanding history. She challenges understandings of opera as ephemeral and unreal and questions the prioritization of textual documents and linear time within the study of history to argue for opera's value as both a historical document and a historical experience.

Each chapter in this work begins with a discussion of theoretical frameworks, which Renihan then applies to her case studies. The author thus situates her work in relation to existing scholarship both within and outside of the field of musicology. Chapter 1: "Opera and/as History" lays out history's "linguistic turn," a movement within historiography that understands historical work as an inherently creative process in which the narratives imposed by historians are understood to be



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aesthetic and ethical interventions that construct, rather than report, the past. It is in this creative, literary space that Renihan finds a place for opera as a mode of historiographical expression. She uses Nico Muhly and Craig Lucas's 2011 opera *Two Boys* to demonstrate opera's capacity to express the mediated, liminal nature of historical knowledge.

Chapter 2: "Opera as *(mi)lieu de mémoire*," explores the historiographical conflict between the ideas of history as an objective, scientific discipline, and memory as an inherently subjective form of knowledge. She uses Paul Ricoeur's understanding of collective memory and Pierre Nora's idea of the *(mi)lieu de mémoire* to propose opera as a space in which historical distance is dissolved and the testimony stage of history-work is revived. Opera thus becomes a crucial vector for the formation and dissemination of collective memory. Renihan illustrates this process through discussion of two contrasting examples. Kevin Puts and Mark Campbell's *Silent Night* (2011) provides a traditional aestheticized memorial in its depiction of the World War I Christmas truce, but also exposes the limitations of this kind of commemoration through staged portrayals of memorialization in Act II. In so doing, *Silent Night* illustrates both opera's effectiveness as a form of memorial and the controversial nature of traditional, sentimental World War I memorialization in the twenty-first century. *Two Remain* (2017), by Jake Heggie and Gene Scheer, deals with a similarly controversial site of historical memory, the Holocaust. The struggle between memory and history is a central concern of *Two Remain*, which portrays two Holocaust survivors struggling to make sense of memories that are persistent, often traumatic, and impossible to fully express.

In Chapter 3: "Opera as Historical Experience," Renihan introduces the idea of historiography's "affective turn" to argue that opera, through its embodied, immersive mode of performance, is able to provide not only a description of the past but also an experience of it. Opera offers a sensory, emotional experience of its historical subjects that creates a personal relationship to history for both audience and performers. This affective engagement with history is exemplified in Allen Ginsberg and Philip Glass's *Hydrogen Jukebox* (1990), which immerses its audience in its historical moment, and engages the body directly through the haptic impact of Glass's minimalist music and Ginsberg's invocations of the suffering body.

Chapter 4: "Ghost Notes: Opera, History, and Time," explores opera's capacity, through music's inherently temporal nature, to provide a complex experience of linear time, and thus of history. Renihan argues that time in opera is both multi-sensory and porous; the past, present, and future interpenetrate each other, allowing for a suspended and temporally thick present, rich with possibilities. This suspension of the past and future within the operatic present creates a space in which audience and performers are able to experience an opera's historical moment as present, with all potential futures made possible. John Corigliano and William M. Hoffman's *The Ghosts of Versailles* (1991) performs this potential, as Beaumarchais's opera within an opera attempts to rescue the ghostly Marie Antoinette from her own execution before allowing her to come to terms with her own past and accept the inevitability of her death.

In the fifth and final chapter, “Opera at the Limits of History,” Renihan uses *Canticle of the Black Madonna* (2013) by Ethan Gans-Morse and Tiziana DellaRovere to explore the potential of “applied” opera, a sub-genre that – by engaging with the social, educational, and political work that creative processes can entail – functions as a therapeutic space in which trauma can be confronted and perhaps healed. Renihan uses recent scholarship in trauma studies to argue that opera’s expressive excesses provide a vehicle for trauma’s unassimilated, unknowable nature to be honoured. *Canticle of the Black Madonna*, which portrays an American veteran of the Iraq war with PTSD, provides a demonstrative case study. DellaRovere and Gans-Morse describe their opera as “an environment for healing through music, poetry, and ritual,” and involved the Portland-area veteran community in the production, both by hiring veterans as supernumeraries and by offering special performances reserved for veterans, which included debrief sessions with a psychologist after the performance.¹

Perhaps due to her case study model, Renihan’s overall scope is quite narrow. Operas with historical subjects or settings are hardly unique to the United States or the turn of the millennium. One wonders whether Renihan’s theoretical framework might be applied to operas of other times and places to similarly compelling effect. *The Operatic Archive* may therefore serve as the prototype for similar future scholarship on operas of diverse times and places. Renihan’s deep, interdisciplinary engagement with current scholarship and incisive readings of contemporary operas provides an expansive view of opera’s capacity to function as a cultural agent and has exciting implications for those interested in the relationship of music and history more generally.

¹ Tiziana DellaRovere, *Canticle of the Black Madonna* libretto (2011, revised 2013), iii, https://issuu.com/animamundiproductions/docs/cbm_libretto_2013.