

Hervé Lacombe. *The Keys to French Opera in the Nineteenth Century*. Translated by Edward Schneider. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. xv, 415 pp.

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Hervé Lacombe's *The Keys to French Opera in the Nineteenth Century*, a revised and expanded translation of his *Les voies de l'opéra français au XIXe siècle* (1997), is a brilliant study that, as the title suggests, provides keys to understanding French opera. Early on, Lacombe argues that nineteenth-century French opera was "governed by a complex set of codes and practices" (1). He then explores the many elements that make up these conventions by dividing the book into three parts—"Genesis, Performance and Reception," "Drama, Poetry, and Music," and "Society, Genre, and Aesthetics"—each of which is further divided into three chapters. Lacombe emphasizes the fact that the three parts overlap. While he clearly states his point that artistic and sociological matters intersect, the book's organization results in some structural choices whereby Lacombe returns to certain topics in a circular fashion.

For example, the first section, "The Genesis of Opera," logically contains a discussion of the difficulty that young composers faced in getting a work staged (10). Lacombe then returns to this topic in the beginning of the final section, "The Parisian Operatic World," with valuable observations about the inaccessibility of the theater at the Opéra, and the fact that earning the Prix de Rome opened no doors to young composers (209–15). He also makes some unusual grouping decisions within the three parts. Because part 2 concerns questions of structure, it seems surprising to find "Genre" in part 3 rather than in part 2. Structure determines genre in many ways. The genre of *opéra comique*, for example, is determined by the fact that it contains spoken dialogue and is usually in one or three acts (Speare 1997:111–61).

Because of Lacombe's tendency for writing many short sections with subheadings within chapters, it is not always clear how sections relate to each other; some of these seem like short essays complete in themselves. In the thought-provoking section entitled "Music and Time-Enfolded Time," Lacombe discusses the way in which dramatic time is suspended, for example in an aria. Yet while he argues that the loss of distinction between recitative and aria in *drame lyrique* at the end of the century could be "better suited to dramatic action" than number opera, he does not give any examples. In fact, the only operas that he mentions in this section are

Monteverdi's *Orfeo* and Rossini's *Otello* (124–25).

These quibbles about the organization of the text do not detract from the fact that this book is an important work. Lacombe's skillful use of source materials, including unpublished letters, opera receipts, and particularly contemporary reviews gives us a comprehensive picture of nineteenth-century French opera. In presenting information on the rules of the theater, he also sheds light on minor but interesting points. The story that one reads in all the Bizet biographies about how he had the audacity to take a bow after the first performance of *Les Pêcheurs de perles*, for example, has always seemed merely amusing. Lacombe proves, however, that in violating the rules of good manners in the theater, Bizet's act was detrimental to his career (38–39). Lacombe even gives the reader a fresh view of Wagner's experiences in Paris, suggesting that the *Tannhäuser* incident was "first and foremost the result of a breach of customary behavior" (39).

Another strength lies in Lacombe's discussion of the *idées fixes* that occur in French criticism. Nineteenth-century French critics constantly bemoaned the loss of melody in opera and complained that operas are too symphonic. Inevitably the name of Wagner appears, even in a period when critics had actually heard very little Wagner. In a review of the opera *Ondine* (1863) by the little-known composer Théodore Sernet, for example, the critic Durocher wrote that Sernet's orchestration was modeled on Weber, Félicien David, Gounod, and Wagner with its "violin tremolos, growling bassoons, flute sighs and strange instrumental couplings." Durocher went on to complain that a *chanson* of the King of the Crickets was in questionable taste. Berlioz, by contrast, particularly praised the orchestration and stated that the *chanson* was "delicious and extremely original" (Sperare 1997:156–57). Lacombe's discussion of the "reign of melody" and its relationship to the popularity of Rossini in Paris, as well as the influence of Stendhal's writings, explains this aesthetic (Lacombe, 267–71). In his discussion, Lacombe quotes Saint-Saëns, who wrote in 1876, "for 150 years 'melody' has been the facile catchword of musical criticism" (271).

From the outset, Lacombe states that he tried to enter into the "spirit of the age" of nineteenth-century French criticism (xiii). At times his opinions seem as passionate as those of his heroes, Berlioz and Saint-Saëns. When discussing the advent of the tenor chest voice, he argues that French head voices were not entirely replaced by chest voices in the nineteenth century and laments the loss of the head voice in the twentieth century. Whether or not one entirely agrees with him, it is refreshing to read such bold statements as, "It must be admitted that late-twentieth century tenor technique has become almost uniformly rudimentary and monotonous. This is particularly awful in *opéra comique* . . . which is bloated by performers devoid of vocal subtlety or charm" (48). Words like "charm" strongly

recall the language of nineteenth-century French criticism. Lacombe's frankness is also evident at another point when, in discussing the question of authenticity, he states: "Very few works are published in high-quality editions and the state of the French repertory is particularly disastrous. The works of Offenbach, Gounod, and Bizet, to name a few, have been distorted and are performed from incomplete material riddled with errors" (65). One could go further and point out that not only are familiar works misrepresented, but that there is a wealth of less familiar repertory waiting to be discovered and published in reliable editions. Saint-Saëns, for example, wrote twelve operas (thirteen if one counts the opera by Ernest Guiraud that he finished, *Frédégonde*), only one of which (*Samson et Dalila*) is performed regularly.

Some of the most admirable passages in *The Keys to French Opera* occur in the second section, "Drama, Poetry and Music," particularly when Lacombe explores the idea of poetic expression in opera. He defines the term "poetic expression" as "the composer's ability to bring to life a series of emotions or images, to make them as brilliant and moving as can be" (148). Once Lacombe defines the term, he proclaims Gounod as the "clearest and most influential embodiment" of operatic poetry in the mid-nineteenth century (149). Here, however, the only example of poetic setting is found in the caption to an image of the garden scene in Gounod's *Faust*. At this point a musical discussion of the scene would be helpful. Instead, one must skip ahead past the next subsection in the chapter to find a section entitled "The Poetic Model of Gounod—Expressiveness in the Orchestra" (154), where Lacombe returns to this topic and provides several examples that prove his point. Again, he makes his argument through the words of nineteenth-century criticism. My only minor complaint with this illuminating discussion is that Lacombe could have given more details about specific passages in Gounod. At one point, for example, in discussing Gounod's *Sapho*, he tells us, "Let us look a little more closely at how this [operatic poetry as the essence of the work] is reflected in *Sapho*" (155), but he does not do so, except through the eyes of Berlioz. Stating that the "most interesting passages are to be found in Act 3," he quotes Berlioz, who called it a "broad and poetic creation" (*ibid.*), but Lacombe does not analyze the score or suggest in what ways the orchestration had inspired Berlioz. Nevertheless, his view of Gounod is compelling.

Although Gounod is viewed as an innovator, Lacombe is scrupulously fair in considering Gounod's predecessors, mentioning poetic orchestral effects in Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* as well as Act 2 of Rossini's *Guillaume Tell*. And here, he does provide the kind of musical detail that is lacking in other examples when describing Rossini's "four root position chords in long note values, separated by rests" (159). This sentence, along with his

subsequent description of the orchestration, provides a balance between his own analysis and the criticism of the past without the need of musical examples, so vivid is his description of this passage.

The three overlapping parts of Lacombe's work help the reader understand one of his themes, namely that, "Nineteenth-century French opera may . . . be seen as a series of frames within frames"—although this important statement is buried in the endnotes. He goes on to explain that he means a "well-organized system that dictates structures or limits, such as the framework of genre, the framework of aesthetics, or the social framework" (393, n. 1). In an intriguing section within part 2, Lacombe uses the word "framework" to explore connections between staging and musical score. In his discussion of open and closed spaces, he observes the ways in which scenes tend to change from open to closed, and from day to night, depending on whether the emphasis is on the "collective" or on the "individual" (90). It is through this staging technique, he notes, that conflict in *grand opéra* is portrayed on stage (92). He later effectively demonstrates how theatrical space became incorporated into scores. Meyerbeer, for example, translates stage movement into a "polychoral musical structure" when the various contrasting groups are presented on stage (such as Huguenots, Catholic women, and clerics in Act 3 of *Les Huguenots*) (128–29).

In part 3, "Society, Genre, and Aesthetics," the discussion about national divisions between French music and German music is particularly fascinating as he explains the differences between German and French attitudes towards music in the nineteenth century: "For the Germans, music was a matter of soul, of the inner life; for the French, it was a social matter, a matter of entertainment." Lacombe suggests that the "French resistance to [German] romanticism" helps explain why *grand opéra* was concerned with startling effects rather than with "opening a door on the world of ideas" that we find in German opera (295). This profound difference, of course, helps explain the whole complex system of French opera. So much of the activity of opera production was related to economics in Paris, beginning with theater directors who were reluctant to stage a work by either an unknown composer or by Berlioz (for whom entertainment was of least consideration).

In his concluding chapter, Lacombe returns to several of the strongest themes of his argument—German aesthetic values, operatic poetry, and private spaces—and brilliantly weaves them together. He suggests that what he calls the "interiority" of the Germans, an emphasis on introspection and domesticity, can also be found in France and that musically it was best expressed by Gounod and Massenet. In these composers' works, he states "opera depicted private space, achieved a poetics of intimacy, and revealed the close ties that bind individuals and their environment" (304). One

thinks immediately of such scenes as Manon's "Adieu notre petite table" (from Massenet's *Manon* of 1884), which Lacombe discusses earlier in the text (285). Indeed, the intimacy of this scene, and especially the familiar object of the table, helps illustrate one of the most important points of the book when Lacombe makes a connection between operatic poetry and the realist aesthetic at the end of the century. Operatic poetry, he argues, is linked to realism because it refers "spectators to their own experiences of the tangible world" (304).

In helping the reader to make connections such as these, Lacombe fulfills the promise of the title. It is worth noting that in the original French edition, he uses the term "les voies" (paths) rather than "keys" in the title. Along these paths, he provides countless valuable details, thought-provoking discussion, and entertaining quotations and illustrations. His own observations are equally entertaining, such as his clever comparison of the dignity of the theater of the Opéra with seventeenth-century opera: "This was a matter of glorifying, not a Sun King, but a Sun Nation; a very French need . . . to display on stage the radiance of France's fortune and culture" (244).

References

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 Speare, Mary Jean. 1997. *The Transformation of Opéra Comique*. Ph.D. diss., Washington University.