

Martha Feldman. 2007. *Opera and Sovereignty: Transforming Myths in Eighteenth-Century Italy*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Reviewed by Geoffrey Burgess

Reading Martha Feldman's *Opera and Sovereignty* takes me back to a visit to Chicago some years ago when Martha ferried me through the unfamiliar city. As we proceeded from concert hall, to pizza joint, to jazz club, I eventually left the navigation to Martha's practiced hand and turned to my more immediate surroundings. It was then that I noticed tumbled next to me on the back seat a copy of my dissertation on ritual and French Baroque opera. I asked her what it was doing there and discovered that she had not only read it in its entirety, but annotated it with detailed comments and cogent insights on the intersection between our respective fields of research. Later I was to learn that she subjects her own work to the same degree of scrutiny and reflection.

Feldman's most recent publication admirably demonstrates the thoroughness and insightfulness of her work. To her masterful study of *opera seria* she brings not only her own encyclopedic knowledge, laborious archival work, astute evaluation of disparate materials, and imaginative presentation, but also a critical appreciation of a vast array of related scholarship. Since she began her work on *opera seria* in the mid-1990s, she has not been afraid to revise her thinking and fine-tune her arguments, all the while bringing a fresh perspective to the remarkable life of opera in eighteenth-century Italy. In *Opera and Sovereignty* she revisits topics already presented in article form, most notably in "Magic Mirrors," which appeared in a special issue of *JAMS* dedicated to the dialogue between anthropology and musicology, and which prepared much of the methodological ground for her later work (1995). With Feldman, return visits are rarely restatements, but rather retellings that enrich the subject by taking different perspectives. Only three of her chapters are republished virtually unchanged; the others are substantially reworked from previous publications. So even for those familiar with her writings to date, *Opera and Sovereignty* contains much new material and many new perspectives.

Delving into a subject as rich and dense as *opera seria* in Italy—with its vast repertoire, intricate web of intertexts, multiple reworkings of the same operas, frustratingly conflicting musical and textual sources, and burden of archival records—can be like navigating one's way through the unfamiliar streets in a foreign city. We are fortunate to have Martha Feldman as our

guide, to tie together these elements into a textured account that is both highly engaging and at times personal. Although the personal references in *Opera and Sovereignty* lie just below the surface, they may escape those who are not acquainted with the author. For instance, the photo of “collective effervescence” (29) at the Umbria Jazz Festival takes on meaning not only as a graphic example that mediates historic documentation and contemporary musical practices—a personal memento featuring one of the spaces constructed to house opera in Perugia, but as a touchingly intimate souvenir of a performance given by Feldman’s partner and the book’s dedicatee, the celebrated jazz vocalist-instrumentalist Patricia Barber. Likewise the costume designs, which lend a decorative footnote to the discussion of Traetta’s *Ippolito ed Aricia*, are by Feldman’s mother, Gabrielle Feldman, and stand as evidence that this virtually silenced performance art continues to inspire creative artists.

Feldman writes, “At its moment of occurring, *opera seria* was already a lament for a lost past, reproducing itself as a desire to recapture that past in all its present glory” (33). In various senses, *Opera and Sovereignty* is also a lament for a lost past: the glory of *opera seria* and its place in social history. Feldman’s endeavors include the rehabilitation of *opera seria*’s reputation, which has been unjustly tainted by historians—most notably by Joseph Kerman in *Opera as Drama* ([1956] 1988), who was writing before much of the repertoire was available in modern editions and before any degree of widespread enthusiasm for pre-Mozart opera was imaginable. Implicit in Feldman’s focus on the performative aspects of *seria* is a desire to rehabilitate the space that *seria* provided in eighteenth-century society for celebration, amusement, carnivalesque play, debate, and social self-evaluation.

The book opens with an account of a performance of Verdi’s *Rigoletto* at the Teatro San Carlo in 1996, during which the conductor Daniel Oren made the almost unprecedented act (in modern opera performance) of acceding to the audience’s demand for *encore*. While talk of a Verdi opera may seem out of place in a book about *opera seria*, the reference is apt in light of Feldman’s broader argument, as it underscores the distance between eighteenth-century and present-day sensibilities in opera performance. This account of a live opera performance helps to articulate the principal message of the book: that opera of any sort—and particularly *opera seria*—can only be fully understood by adopting “a performative model that stresses communication and interaction through lived experience and even artistic production over text, narrative archetypes, and symbolic functions” (19).

Still, the task of applying a performative model and a broader anthropological-sociological approach to an art form already lost for two centuries poses particular problems. With no living performance tradition, the burden

of proof falls on the traces surviving in written documentation. Over the course of the book, Feldman convincingly demonstrates that social practices relating to this ephemeral art form, which, above all, privileged spontaneity in repeated enactments can indeed be teased out from an interrogation of its only remaining traces: performance treatises, eyewitness accounts contained in letters and travelers' journals, and the archival records of specific opera houses. The information contained in these documents, much of which Feldman has brought to light for the first time, suggests that *opera seria* audiences responded both freely, as individuals, and according to the rules of etiquette imposed by authority. A vivid description of audience behavior in Rome, the city where opera was most strongly aligned with the seasonal rhythms of Carnival (chapter 4, "Festivity and Time"), bolsters Feldman's case and complements the picture presented in studies of listening practices in other European centers at this time, particularly James Johnson's *Listening in Paris* (1995). Parallels with Johnson's work are most apparent in Feldman's later chapters, where she discovers composers and poets working to achieve the new spectatorial goal of continuous absorption.

Opera and Sovereignty is perhaps the most comprehensive study of *opera seria* to date, and certainly it is unrivalled in the English language. Feldman stresses that it was not her intention to write a history of the genre, but rather to produce a book about opera in eighteenth-century Italy and its shifting relationship to sovereignty. Her case studies follow a chronological sequence of events that, taken together, index change as reflected by and initiated in opera theaters throughout the peninsula. The book's chapter-by-chapter oscillation between discussions of general trends and specific case studies reflects the rhythm of its subject. Each case study effects a temporal slowing of pace, drawing the reader into more introspective interrogations that, like the arias of an opera, articulate the flow of the overarching narrative. Feldman's reporting neither ignores nor explains away specific historical data that may appear to contradict the broader trends she maps. This is apparent, for example, in her discussion of the sometimes haphazard process of operatic reform. Here she is comfortable presenting cases that may have been only partially successful, or that were successful more by accident than design.

Chapter 3 ("Programming Nature, Parma, 1759"), which is devoted to Traetta's and Frugoni's *Ippolito ed Aricia*, affords a snapshot of this process. In 1995 Feldman was of the opinion that, in line with reformist ideals of more naturalistic dramatic pacing and more continuous spectatorial engagement, this work pulled "the audience into the kinesis of dramatic action" (1995:473), but in *Opera and Sovereignty* she plays down the work's success in this regard. *Ippolito* was the first new opera presented in the wake

of the social reforms instigated by the recently installed Bourbon rulers in Parma and the influential minister of state Guillaume du Tillot. The reforms were undertaken in order to regulate audience behavior. However, Traetta's and Frugoni's opera remained structurally and stylistically wedded to the conventional practices of the genre, and thus represents less a step on the path to reform than the stubborn resistance of convention to imposed change. Feldman's important exposé of *Ippolito's* ambivalent position deserves further investigation, which might trace how Traetta's experience working on this opera informed the more reformist approach he embraced in his later operas. It would be equally interesting to consider closely contemporary reforms outside Italy, such as those staged in Stuttgart by Niccolò Jommelli.

Opera and Sovereignty focuses on what is usually referred to as *opera seria's* "second age," the mid to late eighteenth century. This was the generation of Hasse and Traetta, then of Mozart and Zingarelli, when the genre was putatively at its height. Feldman's comparative evaluation of libretti by Zeno and Metastasio in chapter 6 comes out heavily in favor of the latter, but this judgment, like the book's general privileging of *seria* in its maturity, is not intended as a validation of the highest achievements of the genre. Rather, the tacit assumption behind the author's focus on this particular period is that, in its later manifestations, *opera seria* better reveals its *modi operandi*. By the mid-eighteenth century poets and composers were no longer able to resist the extraordinary power accrued by singers. From this moment in *opera seria's* history, textual prescription and performative interpretation were held in a delicate balance, and it is precisely the interface between the textual and the performative that furnishes Feldman with the most cogent material for her reading of *opera seria*. She emphasizes both the gradual erosion of convention and the growing demand for reform in *opera seria's* later history in order to follow its continual reinvention, ritualization, and reinscription of the myth of the sovereign ruler. All of these elements are more apparent in the historical fabric of the late eighteenth century than in *seria's* earlier history, when intention was generally more veiled and *seria's* ideological armor had not yet been weakened by Enlightenment cynicism. While *seria's* reliance on conventional formulas suggests that it is perhaps more appropriate to speak in generalizations about *seria* than about other musico-theatrical genres, Feldman's conclusions drawn from evidence of the "second age" of *opera seria* may not all apply to the genre's early period.

Opera and Sovereignty is less explicitly concerned with methodological and theoretical discussions than some of Feldman's previous work, notably the *JAMS* article which served as a prolegomenon to the anthropological reading of *opera seria* as ritual. Like many scholars in the "new musicologi-

cal” tradition, Feldman draws theoretical frameworks from other fields, but instead of introducing the procedures and then applying them to her musical analyses, in *Opera and Sovereignty* she reverses the established pattern and postpones discussing theory until after she has applied it in context. By so doing, Feldman foregrounds the subject of her study and avoids forcing her analyses to comply with preexisting theories. This method is not simply a rhetorical ploy, but rather allows the author to engage more directly with both her subject and her theoretical models.

Feldman treats Erving Goffman’s theory of frames, for example, in a postscript to chapter 2 (“Arias: Form, Feeling, Exchange”). In the body of this chapter she offers an analysis of aria structure and period strategies for eliciting and controlling audience reaction in which she considers the function of instrumental ritornelli in *seria* arias in terms of “frames.” Only in the postscript does she reveal that Goffman’s theory provided the catalyst for her own approach. Furthermore, she has not simply appropriated Goffman’s ideas, but rather honed them into an analytic tool tailored to the material at hand. In another afterword, this one appended to chapter 6, on the mythological foundations of *seria* libretti, Feldman engages Georges Bataille’s notion of sovereignty. Here the relationship between Feldman’s own work and her theoretical model is less straightforward. Her reference to the twentieth-century French theorist reads more as a provocatively open door than a recapitulation of issues addressed in the book up to this point. The degree of overlap between Feldman’s and Bataille’s uses of the key terms at play—sovereignty, identification, and utility—needs further interrogation, as does the manner in which Bataille’s idiosyncratic, post-Marxist view of capitalism might inform a reading of the economics and sociopolitical climate of eighteenth-century Italy.

Opera and Sovereignty restricts its coverage to *opera seria* in Italy—already a subject of vast proportions—and consequently references to its life beyond the Alps are mentioned only in passing. There are instances where more detail on non-Italian practices would have clarified Feldman’s argument. I admit my own Francophile bias, but other readers, too, might be surprised to read that *opera seria* “was more closely identified with sovereign rulers than any other genre” (440). The *tragédie lyrique*, with its apparatus of panegyric prologue and mythological conceits venerating the hero-king, created and perpetuated by the Académie Royale de Musique (established for the glorification of its patron and prime spectator, the king of France), was certainly even more closely and consistently identified with the sole sovereign of an entire kingdom. Further, the status of *tragédie lyrique* as official state art accounts for marked differences between Italian and French operatic genres.

Of all the works treated by Feldman, Traetta's and Frugoni's *Ippolito ed Aricia* (Parma, 1759) most overtly references non-Italian opera. This opera drew heavily on French spoken and lyric theater. Racine's *Phèdre* was performed in Parma immediately prior to the premiere of *Ippolito ed Aricia* and served as a point of reference for the opera's first audience, much as it had in Paris in 1733 for the first audiences of Rameau's and Pellegrin's *Hippolyte et Aricie*, the work on which *Ippolito* was modeled. But more than the relationship between Racine's classical masterpiece and *Ippolito*, the level of debt the Parmesan team owed to Rameau and Pellegrin deserves reinforcing. In the process of "co-opting the French court model . . . as artillery against native theatrical traditions" (112), the Parmesans co-opted a good deal of Rameau's music. The plot line of *Ippolito* is also closer to the French model (albeit with necessary adjustments to satisfy the conventions of *opera seria*) than suggested by Feldman's description "adapted with extensive modifications" (97). Indeed, when she considers "certain details of Frugoni's story" (116), Feldman could be summarizing *Hippolyte et Aricie*. Pellegrin had already significantly revised the myth of Phaedra to satisfy Enlightenment audiences, most notably by diminishing the authority of the supernatural characters. In his preface to the *livret* he put forward elaborate logic to legitimate not only the changes he made to the myth as transmitted by Euripides and Racine (most prominently in the hero's last-minute rescue), but also the intervention of divinities required to satisfy the conventions of the *tragédie lyrique* in a way that appeased critics who questioned the credibility of *le merveilleux*. Pellegrin's solution effectively placed the divinities in a diplomatic bind that divested them of agency and transferred their authority to the mysterious entity Destiny. Frugoni appropriated Pellegrin's overall treatment of the myth, along with changes made to *Hippolyte et Aricie* in its 1733 and 1757 incarnations.

Hippolyte et Aricie provides a rare example of a *tragédie lyrique* in which characters from the *tragédie* also appear in the Prologue, and therefore render the prologue more integral to the opera than was typical with most French operas. Nevertheless, at the middle of the eighteenth century when the Académie Royale de Musique deemed the operatic prologue dramatically redundant and its function as royal panegyric outmoded, this prologue was dropped from subsequent performances along with all other prologues to both newly composed *tragédies lyriques* and revivals of older works. The de-emphasis on divine presence that resulted from the omission of the prologue to *Hippolyte et Aricie* was therefore an effect of this broader policy. Shifting attention away from *le merveilleux* to the natural was no doubt a popular move. Consistent with the propagation of the natural in *Ippolito* was another concession to French aesthetics: the long-standing distaste for the unnaturalness of castrato voices. Traetta calls for only one prominent castrato

role in his score, a striking reduction from the usual number in *opera seria*. The French background to *Ippolito* is important to understanding Frugoni's and Traetta's agency in the molding of their opera and provides additional support for Feldman's argument that *Ippolito* occupied an intermediary position in the reformist ventures in *seria*'s later history.

One of the book's central arguments pertains to *opera seria*'s mythological basis. Feldman interrogates the presumption that historical subjects predominate in *seria* libretti, while mythological subjects are more common in French operas. Through close examination of a series of archetypal libretti by Metastasio, she shows how *seria*, regardless of whether it took its subject material from mythology or history, acted as a performative retelling of a mythologized history that ultimately reified the absolutist myth of the miraculous sovereign. As Downing Thomas notes in his dust jacket review, Feldman "deftly undoes the opposition between history and myth that is the common understanding of the difference between Italian and French opera of the time." Indeed, Feldman emphasizes the manner in which operas were subjected to incessant manipulations not only by creative individuals—poets, composers, and singers—but also by broader social contingencies as they were incorporated into the fluid sociopolitical environments of eighteenth-century Italy.

As it traces the transformation of notions of sovereignty as reflected in *seria*'s performativity, the book frequently touches on issues of staging. In chapter 4 ("Festivities and Time"), for instance, Feldman situates lighting as a component of the spectacular, arguing that the extravagant lighting in the theater represented the munificence of the sovereign by literally creating light in society. Stage movement is touched on in chapter 2, where Feldman explains the movement from narrative-based recitative within the space of the stage to arias performed in the limen of the proscenium. According to Feldman, the scantily documented practice of situating the transcendent aria in the interstices of dramatic situation and performative retelling, between stage set and audience, symbolized an engaged coming together of performer and spectator. Inasmuch as they suspended the more-or-less realistic time of recitative, arias, with their framing *ritornelli* that served as "formal semantic cues," allowed the audience to "tune in and out" with respect to the onstage performance. Further, through their outpourings of emotion and spinning of magic, they transcended the drama of both stage and house. I would note, also, that arias were sung from the footlights because that was where the singer could be seen and heard best. It was there that performers appeared least distorted in the context of the perspectival stage décor (also discussed in Feldman 1995:448), and it was also there where the lighting was strongest.

In her endeavor to cover *seria* in its full richness, Feldman places music in a position as an equal among the other elements that constitute the totality of the phenomenon: theater architecture, staging, costumes, lighting, dance, gesture, audience interplay, etc. Nevertheless, music is represented in numerous well-chosen analyses that serve as dramatic centerpieces to her case studies. They often function as paradigmatic exemplars for the entire corpus of the genre, underscoring the assumption that resonates throughout the book: that *seria* was a highly conventionalized art form. Feldman views conventionality as positive, indeed, vital to communication between stage and audience. Reflecting her emphasis on performativity, Feldman's analyses focus on the music's rhetorical aspects, inspired by the approach outlined in Koch's *Versuch einer Einleitung zur Composition* (1782). Her analysis of Cecilio's aria "Il tenero momento" from Mozart's *Lucio Scilla*, which formed the centerpiece of the 1995 *JAMS* article, is elaborated in *Opera and Sovereignty* with richer historical contextualization, allowing her to amplify the significance of this example as a model of how music, stage performance, and social performance cohabited in the theaters of *opera seria*.

To support her claim that musical scores constitute documentary traces of works-as-performance, Feldman explores the interpretative space allowed the performer in the elaboration of the text. Her primary example traces a particularly close association between composer and performer: the aria "Son qual nave ch'agitata" composed by Riccardo Broschi for his brother Farinelli to perform in the 1734 *pasticcio Artaserse* (music by Hasse and Broschi). This aria is particularly suited to Feldman's investigations because Farinelli left a notated "transcription" of his ornamental elaborations of the melody. Describing Farinelli's embellishment of the cadential preparation, Feldman plots a trajectory from the simple to the elaborate, whereby the singer added ever more complexity, even where it seemed he had already attained the height of virtuosity. It is also possible to read the source as showing Farinelli playing with audience expectation in more sophisticated ways, such as refraining from embellishment in certain passages, but all the while making it seem as if he were nonetheless going beyond the possible in invention and vocal technique. According to his annotations, on the repetition of the aria's first section Farinelli did not always increase ornamentation. Rather, he started off by actually simplifying his brother's music in order to add trills on every note of a melodically constrained line. This had the effect of highlighting the remarkable runs added to the next passage, which in its original form is one of the simplest sections in the original. In other places, such as immediately before the cadenza, his additions are again minimal, and the *tessitura* is identical to that of his brother's composition. This strategy was no doubt calculated in part for practical reasons, allowing the

singer to pace his performance; further, by returning to what the audience had already experienced on the first hearing, Farinelli made the remarkable cadenza seem all the more dazzling.

Opera and Sovereignty is a book of astounding breadth of subject matter, rich source materials, and provocative methodologies. It traces *opera seria*'s history from the apogee of Metastasian influence and the triumphant celebration of sovereignty in royalist houses like the Teatro San Carlo in Naples, through the implementation of regulations to control audience behavior in Parma in the 1750s and the growing tensions between *cittadini* and a depleted nobility desperately clutching at its diminishing power in Perugia of the 1780s, to the genre's demise as the exclusive privilege of the elite in a Venice buffeted by the winds of social change in the wake of the French Revolution and the arrival of Napoléon's troops. In its richness of ideas, comprehensive coverage of a diversity of opera houses and local practices, multi-layerings of readings, and exhaustive bibliography, this is a truly extraordinary achievement that will offer much to scholars of eighteenth-century opera. This long-awaited revisionist reading of the genre will dominate our understanding of *opera seria* in eighteenth-century Italy for the foreseeable future. May it also stimulate new endeavors to reclaim this lost performance art as well as encourage the recovery of the communicative and performative aspects of other art forms whose loss we lament.

References

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