David Levin. 2007. *Unsettling Opera: Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Zemlinsky*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Reviewed by Delia Casadei

David Levin's *Unsettling Opera: Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Zemlinsky* is an ambitious book, and one that opens with an unusual insight: namely, that the onstage performance practice of opera in the last twenty years is a field ripe for academic discourse, one that promises to uncover new perspectives on the restricted repertoire of historical musicology. Levin suggests that operatic productions in Europe and the United States have amply paid homage to academic concerns about the production of meaning and other post-modern enthusiasms. Yet academia has not returned the favor, instead preferring studies of historical performance practice that largely ignore contemporary productions.

Of course, it is by no means the case that no one cares about these new productions. Levin spends a good part of his preface quoting the *Financial Times*'s and the *New York Times*'s dismissals of two provocative productions of *Don Carlos* and *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*.[1] Indeed, Levin may even have taken his cue for this book from the sheer volume of critical bile elicited by the work of directors such as Hans Neuenfels or Peter Sellars; he knows full well that a reception marked by anger and rash dismissal is the signpost to an interesting field of inquiry.

Levin's project employs shifting analytical angles and takes the form of six chapters, each of which is devoted to the contextualization of a repertory opera in its contemporary staging. Following an introductory chapter on aims and methods, his second chapter treats *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* as a locus of intertwining musical and dramaturgical ambitions. He discusses the contradictory effect of Wagner's ideas about theatre on contemporary stage designers and directors. In chapter 3, Levin seeks the conceptual support of theoretical writing on translation—here to be understood as the transition of a text from one culture and language to another, and most importantly from one medium to another—to outline a framework for the evaluation of Peter Sellars's notoriously controversial staging of *Le nozze di Figaro* (1988). In chapter 4 he focuses on Hans Neuenfels's 1998 production of *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* and its deconstructionist take on Singspiel. With chapters 5 and 6 Levin turns the methodology of the two previous chapters on its head: rather than studying a specific production for hermeneutic insight, he works as dramatist and scans two operatic texts—

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Verdi's *Don Carlos* and Zemlinsky's *Der König Kandaules*—for musical and psychological concerns that can translate into ideas for staging. Chapter 6 presents a new problem for the author: Levin is dealing with an opera written in the twentieth century that is very rarely performed. He thus tests the validity of his interpretive methodology on a work that has no performance canon to react against.

The appeal of this slim book lies in its ability to capture and confront several core concerns of many contemporary musicologists. Can musicologists talk about performance? If so, can it be recorded performance? Can musicology influence performance practice? To each of these questions, Levin's short answer is a sonorous "yes," a heartening "yes," but also a "yes" whose vigor it is difficult to sustain while negotiating a fully-fledged scholarly answer.

Let us take the issue of discussing recorded performance (a DVD recording of an operatic production, in Levin's case). Given that the array of available DVDs is vast, Levin faces a difficult question that deeply impacts on his analysis: which recordings should he choose for discussion? He picks recordings that, in his eyes, are successful "post-modern" productions and feels compelled to justify his choices on grounds of artistic quality. This is unsurprising given that the two productions he looks at in significant detail (Sellars's *Le nozze di Figaro* and Neuenfels's *Die Entführung*) generated heated controversy in the press. Indeed, his emphasis on demonstrable artistic value lands Levin right in the middle of the journalistic reviewer's territory. This agenda is in conflict with what he calls (borrowing from Kristeva) "polylogical criticism": that is, analysis that seeks out the fissures between the systems of signification at play in opera. On the one hand, Levin questions the ways in which meaning is created, rather than attending to an intrinsic, immanent signification. On the other, though, he is trying to set up a framework to judge whether a production is, to be blunt, any good. This is bound to be problematic: one cannot pass judgment on the efficacy of a form of expression unless one also makes assumptions about the objectivity of the meaning that is being conveyed. The result is a confusion that tends to obfuscate the brilliant insights Levin has about the subtle dialectics of an opera's transition from score to theatre.

Chapter 2 provides an apt example. Levin introduces the reader to the complex negotiations at stake in the staging of an opera by talking about Wagner, and with good reason: Wagner was one of the first opera composers to proactively and radically re-invent the technicalities of theatrical performance. More importantly, however, he was the one composer for whom these issues accrued such deeply ideological value that they achieved allegorical representation in his operas. Levin introduces *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* as a prime example of this type of allegory. Wagner endeav-

ored to portray theatrical illusion as a natural phenomenon by hiding the infrastructure of production from the audience's gaze. This is mirrored in his negative portrayal of Beckmesser, who, unlike Walter, cannot simply break into spontaneous song, but needs the mediation of technical instructions: he has to read the music from the score. Levin interprets the Beckmesser-Walter opposition as one between two types of readings: the petulant literal reading or "weak reading," and the "strong reading," which appropriates and re-enacts the message.

The next step in Levin's argument is problematic: the dichotomy between "strong" and "weak" reading is transferred to the evaluation of three stagings of the song contest. The uncomfortable assumption here is that whatever elements make a reading strong or weak are intrinsic to the staging itself. However, it is ultimately impossible to say whether the stagings here classified as "weak" readings are simply those whose strengths are not apparent to the author. After all, he is discussing one short excerpt from a five-hour performance, and what is more, his discussion is essentially a "silent" one: specific vocal performances are generally not taken into account. Most importantly, Levin's allegorical link between Walter's song and strong staging fails to take into account a crucial factor: reception. Just as Walter's song is received with wild acclaim, one would expect "strong" readings to speak powerfully to audiences and critics; yet Levin ends up defending the work of directors like Neuenfels, whose work is, to say the least, by no means universally enjoyed by the opera-going public. How can a reading truly be strong if its most appreciative audience is located not in the theatre seats but in the rarefied atmosphere of scholarly circles? This problem is not, fortunately, omnipresent. Indeed, in chapter 4 Levin demonstrates the hermeneutic scholarly potential of Neuenfels's *Die Entführung* in a manner that displays the full potential of his critical imagination. His explanation of Neuenfels's production is compelling: the song and speech of the opera are taken as a point of departure for a tight game of doublings, where each singer is accompanied by a speech-only *doppelganger.* The curtain rises to reveal another stage within the stage, and the human voice is the sound of both order and disorder, while the theatre becomes the locus of both "presence" effects and rationalizing distance. It is clear that Levin is quite taken with Neuenfels's work, and this enables him to communicate the visionary element of the production. In this chapter Levin does precisely what he said he'd do at the outset: read productions for scholarly insight on new stagings of well-established classics of the operatic repertoire.

Should we wish, however, to challenge Levin's interpretation of Neuenfels, we would quickly reach an impasse. What could we weigh his reading against? On what is his interpretation based? Is it a mixture of his impressions of the live opera and the further elaboration of his insights

afforded by the DVD? If it is, then his interpretation stems, at least in part, from the live performance—an experience to which few can have access. DVD is a format that gives us something that may well have value in itself, and yet must surely be kept separate from live performance. This is best illustrated by way of an example: unlike Levin, I am not entirely sure that declaimed speech in this production has such a strong link with Mladen Dolar's "voice of the father" (2006). The principle of order embodied by the voice that speaks but refuses to sing (as found in Pasha Selim, who has a speech-only part in *Die Entführung*) seems to me more the embodiment of eighteenth-century rationalism than of the devastating archaic power of Dolar's "father."[2] My possible disagreement is not necessarily a problem—this kind of debate is the fun part of scholarly exchange. What frustrates me is that the DVD of Neuenfels's production can do very little to support either Levin's argument or mine, for the sound of the voice on digital reproduction has little in common with the live theatrical performance. The sheer volume of delivery is my concern. It is easy to read, say, the Commendatore in *Don Giovanni* as the voice of the father, because this character sings, and does so in an obviously imposing manner. However, the onstage singing voice tends to be a lot louder than the speaking voice. How does this shift in volume reflect on the role of the spoken word as Levin interprets it? This is a question that the DVD, in which voices are mixed separately and then synched into the visual recording, presents in a significantly different way from anything we would experience in live performance.

I would go further and suggest that Levin's decision to use DVDs as a means of studying operatic productions *tout court* is deeply problematic. Had the author chosen opera on DVD as his specific field of inquiry, this problem would not have arisen: it is the fact that Levin uses the DVD as a *substitute* for live performance that is troubling. "This is a book about opera in performance," he writes at the top of his first page. The element of ineffability that comes with musical performance—as sound in time and, most importantly, as sound in time produced before our ears and eyes—has recently become an urgent object of inquiry for musicologists. A case in point is Carolyn Abbate's 2004 article on the matter, which is among the most widely-referenced and discussed musicological writings of the last several years. Admittedly, Levin engages with Abbate's work ten pages into his book, challenging her claim that recorded performances cannot offer solace during the scholar's tortured commute from music as sound and "presence" to music as object of academic absorption. He suggests that the possibility of returning again and again to the DVD imbues the medium with a double purpose: it is an object of both "critical" and "experiential" absorption, offering an escape from the impressionistic tone that is often

the result of attempts to describe a unique experience such as that of live performance (9–10). But the differences in psychological effect and cultural valence between the live performance and its reproducible counterpart—the presence/absence of the audience, the difference between watching opera in the sitting room (or at the work-desk) and in the theater, to mention just a couple—do not enter into Levin's analysis. As he puts it: "There is no reason why we couldn't be transported by a recording as by a live performance: it is, I think, a question of openness and approach" (9). He also dismisses Abbate's circumspection towards recordings, suggesting they are motivated by an abstract search for authenticity of performance per se.

Yet the issue of authenticity distracts us from the awareness that, whether or not we consider "live" performance to be the "real thing," live opera and DVD opera are two radically different performance contexts, reflecting the deep rift between the media of theatre and film.[3] The screen-shots in Levin's book are mostly close-ups, views entirely inaccessible from a theatre seat. The stage perspective is imposed by the camera and inevitably turns the viewer's attention to those aspects of the production that the director deems important. More often than not, this is done to afford clarity to the symbolism of the staging, a clarity that can turn a subtle reference into something banal and obvious or, conversely, turn an inscrutably complex staging into a sophisticated allegorical play. (Could the latter have happened, I wonder, with Neuenfels's production?) The experience of DVD viewing and that of theater are—to repeat—radically different, making value judgments about the one not transferable to the other.

Further insight could have emerged had Levin reflected more insistently on the fundamental differences created by the production process of the video-recording he chose to analyze. Was it made from one live performance, or was it a cut and paste of the best bits? Was it recorded in the theater or in a studio? In the case of the former, was the audience present at the time of recording? How much of the theatrical infrastructures, the audience, the orchestra, does the video show?[4] This last question is of pressing importance for Levin's discussion of Sellars's *Figaro*. Here the camera focuses strictly on the happenings onstage—in particular on the characters and their expressions—in a manner strongly reminiscent, as Marcia Citron (2002) has remarked, of soap-opera. Read in this light, Sellars's decision to update Beaumarchais's historical context to the gloriously yuppified Manhattan of the late 1980s takes on an entirely new dimension, as does the type of audience Sellars must have imagined for his DVD release. Another possible pathway is closer consideration of the medium of DVD. Emanuele Senici has remarked recently on the readerly quality of a DVD's division into chapters, a slicing up that implies the obliteration of the temporal dimension of the

show into discrete, "skippable" chunks (Worthen 2007:228–47). The list of possible angles on the topic goes on; the dialectic between live opera and DVD is not only fascinating in its own right but would, perhaps, have added a further dimension to the fine conceptual correspondences Levin is so good at tracing.

Yet Levin's aim is not limited to the appraisal and examination of opera in performance. As mentioned earlier, in the last third of the book (chapters 5 and 6) he emancipates himself from the academic role of "reading" productions and turns to the active task of examining the opera text (music, libretto, and staging instructions) in order to produce practical ideas for *mise-en-scène*. Levin's reasoning makes sense on paper: the academic study of performance usually focuses on the past, and it's about time we started dealing with the present. Yet this is a difficult path. After all, historical performance practice studies were accepted into academic practice because they involved the type of niche research (old scores, the collection and piecing together of evidence retrieved from libraries and archives) that has characterized historical musicology. They were not pure hermeneutic exercises; had they been, the performers would have rightly complained that an academic's imagination is not necessarily better than that of the performer. It is no coincidence that the performer and the researcher of historical performance have sometimes been the same person—we only need to think of performers like Thurston Dart, Christopher Hogwood, Robert Levin, and John Hsu, who held or still hold prestigious academic appointments. The combination of the academic and the practical has always been one of the most difficult intellectual negotiations, one that is either done individually or through very close collaboration. Levin knows this. He describes the team effort that always goes into the creation of a *mise-en-scène*: someone comes up with ideas, and they are measured against the requirements of the players, singers, conductor, director, and budget. Thus the ideas of any musicologist regarding *mise-en-scène*, no matter how clever, are of little use to either academics or directors unless they become part of the joint effort that takes place in the opera house.

Chapter 5, "Between Sublimation and Audacity," which centers on Verdi's *Don Carlos,* is a telling example of the issues at stake. The quality of Levin's insights is influenced, I believe, by the purpose and readership he is imagining for his chapters. The stimulating interpretive efforts he made in the previous chapters—characterized by an awareness of the historical context and performance practices of the opera—are here replaced by a somewhat gruff Freudian reading. Don Carlos has oedipal "issues" with former fiancée-turned-stepmother Elisabeth: both sublimate their repressed desire for each other by devoting themselves to higher causes and by singing

wonderful music. We are, alas, far from the allegories Levin drew in chapter 2 (between Wagner's project for the theatre, the practice of dramaturgy in the late twentieth century, and the song-contest in *Die Meistersinger*) or chapter 4 (between actor and singer, speech and song, the voice as "law" and as "expression"). My suspicion is that here, Levin is sacrificing scholarly insight for the type of interpretation that could lend itself to staging. Yet I am not sure it is a sacrifice that can yield substantial results. The somewhat underdeveloped practical suggestions for staging found at the end of the chapter seem to demonstrate that practical ideas for *mise-en-scène* are not well-suited to the demands of scholarly writing.

For all this, Levin's book is thought-provoking because it proposes a domain where academia can hope to not only grasp and evaluate cultural phenomena, but to actively influence them. Yet the problem with many academic publications talking about practice is that, by their very nature, they shrink from direct confrontation with the concrete reality they seek to describe and perhaps alter. The clash between academia and cultural phenomena—or an academic stepping into the workshop of a theatrical/operatic production or of a musical performance—opens up a new field: one marked by unpredictability, headaches, doubt, or as Levin might have it, "unsettledness." This is a field for which Levin is perfectly suited, and yet one which he stops short of entering fully.[5] He does, however, point us (and perhaps himself) towards his goal: boldly, and with an eloquence wholly to be admired.

Notes

1. Both productions were presented in Berlin in June, 2004. Verdi's *Don Carlos* was presented at the Staatsoper Unter den Linden, in a production by Philipp Himmelmann. Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* was presented by the Komische Oper Berlin in a production by Calixto Bieito.

2. Dolar refers to a Jewish religious musical instrument, the shofar, when talking about the valence of the voice of the father. A voice is an archaic force that turns the word into Law by enacting it, but it is not itself a speaking voice: "So shofar, whose sound is louder than all the thunder, is there as the voice without content that sticks to the Law [. . .] it seems that the voice, as a senseless remainder of the letter, is what endows the letter with authority, making it not just a signifier, but an act" (54–55).

3. On the other hand, in *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, Philip Auslander suggests that our notions of what is "live" and what is "reproduced" have been much confused by the medium of television (2008). This does not mean that the DVD recording of an operatic performance is equivalent to the "live" performance, but rather that the very faculties that allow us to discern what is "live" from what is not are forever changing, and that they should be examined closely, perhaps especially in the context of Levin's discussion.

4. These are some, but not all, of the excellent questions raised by Emanuele Senici's forthcoming article in *Il saggiatore musicale*, "Il video d'opera 'dal vivo': testualizzazione e *liveness* nell'era digitale." I would like to thank Senici for allowing me to read a pre-publication version.

5. Levin has already done some work in this area, and I am puzzled that he has decided not to incorporate it into this particular book. See Levin (2004).

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