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Rebecca Harris-Warrick, *Dance and Drama in French Baroque Opera: A History*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. xx + 484 pages. \$135.00 U.S. (hb). Tables, figures, notes, appendices, bibliography, index. ISBN 978-1-107-13789-9.

Review by Edward Nye, Lincoln College, University of Oxford.

When one has the opportunity to see a good modern production of an early modern French opera, one is likely to be bowled over by the musical and theatrical richness of the experience, not to mention the intriguing sense of difference compared to more modern kinds of opera that are more frequently staged. One is also left, though, with quite a few questions about the nature of this form of art that one cannot answer solely as a spectator (for want of productions to see!). Even as a scholar, the questions are difficult to answer for a number of reasons. Like all musical theatre, there is more than one medium to consider, but French opera is especially challenging because each act always contains dance, which is, of course, ephemeral. Being a performance art, the object of study changes with different productions, and so, therefore, does the empirical evidence such as libretti and musical scores. Added to this is the historian's challenge of understanding those matters that contemporaries either took for granted, hardly bothered to articulate, or did not express, because coverage in newspapers and journals was not sufficient.

Rebecca Harris-Warrick has a specific approach to each of these challenges. In contrast to many authors on this subject, she does not treat the different media in isolation. On the contrary, her goal is to consider the music, dance, text, and to a certain extent the scenery in order to identify the glue that holds them together: drama. This only gives a representative picture of French opera because her study has quite a wide chronological sweep, from Lully's first opera in 1672 to the significant and controversial changes that Rameau brought in the mid-1730s. Thus, her implicit objective is also to manage the slippery sources by comparing and contrasting a very large number of them in a systematic manner. Her response to the third historian's challenge is to choose hypothesis over speculation. In other words, where the historical record is empty or inadequate, she extrapolates in small steps, explaining as she goes, not necessarily concluding in the end that the direction is convincing.

The book will appeal not only to readers interested in a detailed and informed account of Lully's operas, but also to those interested in the evolution of opera in the post-Lully age, an unstable but creatively fertile theatrical period adapting to the absence of the greats (not just Lully, but Molière, Racine, even the Comédie-Italienne). Readers with musicological skills will profit from the sometimes detailed, sometimes broad descriptions and interpretations of musical scores. Still others will be interested in the detailed choreographic study and the overarching

view of the genre and period that it provides. Most important, though, is that all these kinds of reader will learn a great deal about the specifically dramatic nature of opera, the author's primary objective. The book is consequently designed for any reader who wants to understand the nature of theatre generally in this period.

The book is divided into two parts of roughly equal length. Part one concerns Lully's operas, part two the evolution of opera until the 1730s. Chapter One, "The Dramaturgy of Lully's Divertissement," offers an outline of Harris-Warrick's central point, in which the author focuses mainly on three operas, but establishes principles which will be important in later chapters. Her point is that dance has unsuspected dramatic value, such as the dance of four "old folks" (p. 20) in *Thésée*, which in some senses is a stock theme, but also mocks the aging Médée's love for Thésée and the love of the similarly aging King Egée for Aglae. Far from being a "parenthetic" or "ornamental" moment, it is a proleptic scene in which dance interweaves with the plot. The next three chapters have a similar format: detailed descriptions of the structure of the divertissements, of contemporary stage dance ("baroque" dance), and of musical characterization, followed by an analysis of the dramatic importance of each. This is a strength of the book. There is a great deal of detailed technical description and explanation, but it is allied to dramatic interpretation. The final two chapters of part one move away from tragic themes to different formats: Lully's prologues and comic operas. Comedy in French opera was as dubious to some contemporaries as it is understudied by modern scholars, but Harris-Warrick shows how the relative freedom from conventions allowed for dramatically innovative use of dance. In *Psyché*, for example, it is hard to imagine from the music and libretto how the physical comedy could have gone very far without being restrained by the conventions of "bienséance." The author suggests that dance was probably the means by which a broader range of effects were included than the sung text or music would allow (p. 179).

In part two, after an opening chapter that analyzes scholarly sources, the author devotes three chapters to various kinds of Italian connection: Campra's invention of the "opéra-ballet" (with librettists such as Houdar de la Motte and Danchet), the influence of fairground theatre, and the knock-on effect of Italian themes on the evolution of comedy in French opera. The sheer quantity and success of Italian themes is startling when presented in the author's systematic fashion, especially considering that, as she points out, genuine Italian opera (sung in Italian by Italian performers) was not, and doubtless could not have been performed on the stage of the Opéra until the end of this period (in 1729). It is also a thought-provoking phenomenon when one considers its significance in terms of the manipulation of cultural identities and acclimatization to foreignness. As the author comments, "the Opéra was not aloof from its environment, but engaged in dialogue with it" (p. 258). This exploration of the two-way relationship between, on the one hand, the Opéra, and on the other hand, the Comédie-Italienne and fairground theatres, is a welcome balance to the wealth of writing about influence in the opposite direction via, for example, parody and pastiche.

The muses of tragedy and dance, Melpomène and Terpsichore, figure emblematically in the titles of the last four chapters, signalling the inherent creative tension of dance in opera that is the author's subject. The genre of tragic opera continued after Lully's death, but it was adapted to include Italianisms, pastoral themes, even nautical *topoi*, while Lully's operas were regularly revived, sometimes according to a growing trend of staging "fragments," single acts from a series of different operas presented in sequence in the same evening's performance. The author suggests that this tendency derived in part from an increasing emphasis on performance and

performers rather than on the work *per se* (p. 283). As for Terpsichore, she goes from strength to strength, producing stars of the stage as never before, particularly women (Harris-Warrick thinks Prévost deserves some of the credit usually reserved for Sallé for innovations in dramatic dance). The book ends with a useful set of appendices, bibliography, and indexes.

Overall, this is an impressive monograph that achieves two goals. It explains and demonstrates with a great deal of supporting evidence how French opera of this period was structured and how it functioned, and it expands to explain its underlying dramaturgical rationale. One struggles to find room to criticize. One could say that there is very little about the spectator's view, but then reception studies of dance in this period are made difficult by the paucity of evidence. One could criticize the author's key principle, that dance is too important to be considered as simply an ornamental part of opera, by citing one of Voltaire's axiomatic statements about the compatibility of scientific writing and poetry: "Is truth so miserable that it cannot bear ornament?"^[1] In other words, it is possible to argue that dance is ornament, that ornament matters for its own sake rather than for its (dramatic) utility, and that this aesthetic was quite a profound aspect of the early modern arts. Although this principle is applicable in some cases cited in this book, there are many more cases when the dramatic purpose of what might appear to be simply ornament makes for a much more plausible interpretation. To return to our opening point in this review, the dramatic unity is confirmed for most spectators when they have the pleasure of seeing a good production of an early modern French opera.

NOTE

[1] Voltaire [François Marie Arouet]. "Voltaire [François Marie Arouet] to Pierre Joseph Thoulhier d'Olivet: Monday, 20 October 1738." *Electronic Enlightenment Scholarly Edition of Correspondence*, ed. Robert McNamee et al. Vers. 3.0. University of Oxford. 2017. Web. Consulted 26 Feb. 2018. < <http://dx.doi.org/10.13051/ee:doc/voltfrVF0890333a1c> >.

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