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R. J. Arnold, *Grétry's Operas and the French Public: From the Old Regime to the Restoration.* (Ashgate Interdisciplinary Studies in Opera). Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2016. xi + 232 pp. Series editor's preface, figures, tables, bibliography, and index. $132.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-4724-3850-8. $52.16 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-1-4724-3851-5.

Review by Annelies Andries, University of Oxford.

Historian R.J. Arnold opens his book with a description of a majestic funeral procession, which slowly makes its way through the streets of Paris as a 200-person double-orchestra plays a requiem. Reportedly, half of the city's inhabitants had come out to mourn the passing of their beloved composer. Surprisingly, this grandiose funeral was not held for one of the traditional "great musicians" of the nineteenth century (p. 2), such as Ludwig van Beethoven or Gioachino Rossini, but for the Liégiois composer André-Ernest-Modeste Grétry (1741-1813). Grétry was one of the most-performed opera composers in Paris during his lifetime, but today his works are but rarely presented on the world's opera stages.[1] How is it possible that Grétry, seemingly no more than a footnote in our present-day performance circuit, was venerated with such intensity during his lifetime and shortly thereafter? This is the principal question that guides Arnold in *Grétry's Operas and the French Public: From the Old Regime to the Restoration*, which offers an examination of the composer's reception in the eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-centuries.

The book is a welcome addition to currently scholarship on Grétry. While recent scholars, such as Julia Doe and Rebecca Geoffroy-Schwinden, have highlighted the composer's central place in the Parisian musical landscape of the eighteenth century,[2] the latest book-length studies on Grétry are already some decades old: David Charlton's *Grétry and the Growth of Opéra-Comique* (1986) and Philippe Vendrix's edited volume *Grétry et l'Europe de l'Opéra-Comique* (1992).[3] Moreover, Arnold's monograph is more than an engaging new study of this composer. In its rich excavation of the socio-cultural and political environment in Paris between the wane of the Bourbon monarchy and its Restoration (1815-1830), the book offers a window onto the "complex discursive culture of late eighteenth-century France" (p. 6). The author intertwines a study of the composer's reception with issues that are central in current scholarship of the decades straddling 1800, such as the heterogeneity and professionalization of theater criticism, the emerging "great man"-cult and its implications for the composer's public image, and the dialogue between discourses of theater and music and the scientific, economic and social theories of the time.[4]

Throughout the six chapters of the book, Arnold discusses Grétry's public image, as

constructed by his contemporaries and by the composer himself at successive stages in his Parisian career. Arnold interprets this intense engagement with a public image and a composer's legacy as a sure sign that Grétry found himself at the threshold of the Romantic era, with its development of the "great musician"-cults and their trademark grand funerals. As Arnold sees it, the composer contributed to this development in two major, interrelated ways, which map roughly onto the two halves of the book. The first three chapters center on Grétry's approach to music and to the listener, which privileged subjective sentiment, Arnold argues, at the expense of the Enlightenment emphasis on the intellect (p. 208). The second major concern, explored in the final three chapters, is the impact of Grétry's reception and the obsession with his legacy on the rising status of the composer.

The first three chapters reconstruct how late ancien regime Paris was the perfect matrix for Grétry's *opéras comiques* and his aesthetic ideas to thrive. In chapter one, Arnold contends that the immediate success of Grétry's operas was linked to their emulation of two elements central to eighteenth-century sentimental song culture: the existence of a special, interactive rapport between listener and performer (and by extension composer), and an "open discursive culture" (p. 31). The analyses of selected scenes from the early operas *Lucile* (1769) and *Silvain* (1770) show not only that the composer minutely charted the expressive development and abrupt emotional changes of characters and scenes, but also that Grétry's music aimed its energies outward, allowing its significance to be tailored to the public's subjective experiences. The second chapter turns to the composer's copious prose writings, demonstrating that the central role assigned to the listener in Grétry's music aligned with his underlying aesthetic ideals. Excavating how the composer subtly adjusts Enlightenment theories about musical expression and perception in his *Mémoires* (1789-1797) and *De la vérité* (1801), Arnold postulates that Grétry differed from the *philosophes* in at least one crucial aspect: his "pluralist conception of humanity" (p. 63). Grétry did not conceive of musical expression as universal, but as dependent on the "notion of *complicité*" with the listener (p. 73). Grétry trusted that his audiences would find the appropriate meaning in his operas. This conclusion leads Arnold, in the third chapter, to explain why Grétry remained largely above the fray in the famous eighteenth-century *querelles* over French opera. The author instead emphasizes the composer's reconciliatory stance in musical debates, which resulted from his acceptance that the success of his works was dependent not only on a heterogeneous *parterre*, but an equally diverse set of newspaper critics. However, Arnold ascertains that the composer's attitude was not a passive one; for instance, he argues that composing the comic *opéra-ballet La caravane de Caire* (1783) for the Opéra was a conscious attempt to broaden both the theater's generic conventions and the reception of these conventions by the audiences and the press.

Arnold's focus on the listener-composer relationship in the first half of *Grétry's Operas and the French Public* is productive. It opens up new ways of considering how the intellectual and artistic environment of eighteenth-century Paris impacted the manner in which Grétry's operas were listened to and appropriated. This leads at times to unexpected discoveries: a review of *Lucile* in an economic journal, for example, which uses the opera to discuss matters of land management (p. 9). Despite this rich contextualization, it remains unclear whether the reception of Grétry was as unusual for the time as Arnold makes it seem. Little attention is given to contemporaries like Pierre-Alexandre Monsigny (1829–1817) and François-André Danican Philidor (1726–1795). While Arnold establishes that Grétry's productivity was higher than Monsigny's (p. 109) as was his pension (p. 124), no comparison is made between the language and content in reviews of Grétry's works and the discursive tropes in contemporary

opera criticism more broadly. And even though the *querelle* between the Gluckists and Piccinnists plays an important role in the third chapter, little mention is made of how Gluck and his contemporaries were received outside of the *querelle*. The source selection and discussion at times also seems to give a biased view, emphasizing those voices that highlighted the composer's impact and novelty. For instance, the examination of *La Caravane de Caire* rests largely on a lengthy and detailed analysis of the review by Jean-Baptiste-Antoine Suard (pp. 87-95), with only a few sentences dedicated to the more critical notes in other journals (p. 95). In consequence, Arnold's promise to sketch the "complex discursive culture of late eighteenth-century France" remains at times incomplete (p. 6).

The second half of Arnold's book offers a refreshing reconsideration of Grétry's life and reputation after 1789. It is here that Arnold treads the most new ground. Previous studies have given short shrift to the composer's works and legacy after *Guillaume Tell* (1791), largely because it was the last of his operas that attained a considerable success.[5] In fact, Grétry had not become unproductive after the fall of the Bastille--he wrote 21 operas between 1789 and 1803. Instead, as Arnold asserts in chapter four, operatic culture in general suffered from the political instability after the Revolution, as plots and ideas that were politically auspicious one day could be anathema the next. Moreover, as Arnold expertly shows with the example of "Ô Richard! Ô mon roi!" from *Richard Coeur-de-lion* (1784) (pp. 124–136), audiences' proclivity to read political meaning into works whether intended or not could also lead to censorship or withdrawal orders from the government. Arnold's most interesting contribution in this chapter is his analysis of how Grétry was increasingly perceived as "a beacon of national culture" (p. 139), thanks to the continued success of his "songs" (such as "Ô Richard! Ô mon roi!"), as well as the public persona that the composer cultivated for himself as a standard bearer of private virtue and intellectual artistic opinion.

Arnold delves more deeply into this construction of a public persona in chapters five and six. First, the author situates this self-fashioning in the context of attempts to reconstruct stability in France from roughly 1795 onward. He explains that Grétry continued to actively nurture his reputation as the composer of French sentimental music that touched the heart (rather than the mind). *Anacréon chez Polycrate* (1797), for instance, demonstrates "a reliance on simple, strophic song" (p. 152). Elsewhere, the composer helped to resuscitate the *romance*, an often sentimental, strophic song form that had been central to the eighteenth-century sociability of the salon. Because Grétry's music was experienced as "familiar and deeply comforting" (p. 159), Arnold argues, the composer came to be perceived as a true son of France. (And Grétry propagated this image himself, painting himself as a successor of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and retiring in the *philosophe*'s former residence at Montmorency). Finally, in the last chapter, Arnold frames the increasing nationalistic character of the commemorative outpourings following the composer's death as evidence for the tendency to attribute to the "great" composer a key role in discourses of national and local identity. Arnold's argument is particularly convincing in his discussion of the legal battle over Grétry's embalmed heart. The composer's relative, Louis-Victor Flamand-Grétry claimed the composer for France, the country that had so generously accepted and idolized him; the newly foreign city Liège (after 1815 a part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands), hoped that the return of the heart to the composer's birthplace would "bolster the self-respect of the region" (p. 198), spawning hagiographic rhetoric rife with allusions to royal traditions and the *sacré-coeur* (p. 201). Arnold's discussion throughout the book of how Grétry's reception contributed to the creation of the "great musician"-cult are a significant contribution to scholarship on celebrity culture--a topic more often discussed in musicology from the

perspective of Beethoven and Germanic culture.[6]

Arnold's *Grétry's Operas and the French Public* is a thorough exercise in the debunking of eighteenth-century hagiographies: the author does not put the composer on a pedestal nor does he lament his absence from present-day concert life. Yet, the absence of comparisons with other composers somewhat undercuts this stated goal, magnifying the impact of Grétry. This contrasts with other recent research, by Rebecca Geoffroy-Schwinden, among others, which has highlighted how the elevation of the musician around 1800 was effected by a variety of individuals, including performers, composers, men of letters, and critics.[7] Arnold also does not take the opportunity more broadly to discuss Grétry's membership of the Institut de France, which he only references in passing. Still, this learned society (founded in 1795) was the first in France to admit composers among its members, and Grétry regularly partook in its interdisciplinary debates and presented his writings to the other members.[8] The magnifying glass issue is of course not unique to Arnold's book, but common in studies focused on one composer. Perhaps it also serves as a strategic corrective to the relative neglect in scholarship of lesser known figures such as Grétry.

In this respect, it may be surprising that Arnold does not glorify Grétry's music but appears to be doing the opposite. He emphasizes that the composer is no Beethoven (p. 175) and informs us, seemingly with regret, that his music "seems to offer little of the formal and stylistic innovation, textural complexity, or demands on the listener that might be valorized by students of the Western musical canon" (p. 4). These excerpts indicate that when making aesthetic judgments Arnold strongly relies on the now somewhat old-fashioned music historiographic narratives that sought to glorify the "great composers" of the musical canon through a close study of scores. This is also reflected in the way that he distinguishes between Romanticism and the term "romantic." Seeking to make such a distinction, Arnold lays bare some of the issues of periodization and teleology. Even though these terms are not clearly defined in the book, the adjective "romantic" seems to be used for phenomena in a hierarchically lower position: predecessors to or aesthetically less valued manifestations of Romanticism. Such notions in turn seem to have influenced Arnold's analyses of Grétry's music, where the score is at times too straightforwardly interpreted. An engagement with performance practice theory and the recognition that these scores are merely scripts, which allowed considerable room for the interpretation of the performer, could have further nuanced his discussion of Grétry's music. After all, he champions that its impact "depended on a unique alchemy between creator, players and audience in the moment of performance" (p. 4), and he maintains that, ultimately, the musical experience was "greater than the sum of its parts, producing an evening in the theater that was somehow more satisfying than its literary or musical qualities might alone suggest" (p. 34). That not every detail of the performance is recorded in Grétry's score gave much more freedom to the performer and may even have engendered the flexibility with which audiences listened to, adapted, and appropriated his music.

Nonetheless, Arnold's candid aesthetic judgments also usefully open up disciplinary questions about musicology. Since the 1990s, an uneasiness about determining the aesthetic value of music has manifested itself in much of our music scholarship. This was in part a reaction to what Gary Tomlinson has discussed as the self-interest of aesthetic judgment, meaning that our own aesthetic appreciation of certain musical works too often informed the development of our methodologies and the selection of our objects of study--repeating and reinforcing an exclusionary Western musical canon.[9] While recent scholarship has considerably broadened

the objects we consider appropriate for musicological investigation, the absence of music appreciation from our scholarship has made music historians such as Nicholas Mathew and Mary Ann Smart pause. After all, it was the "artworks and musical practices that lured musicologists into their line of work to begin with."[10] An important consideration in Mathew and Smart's essay is that "for a scholar talking about anything at all is always performatively a form of advocacy."[11] Yet, *Grétry's Operas and the French Public* suggests that scholarly advocacy and aesthetic appreciation do not have to align: while Arnold does not recommend reviving Grétry's operas, he does champion the inclusion of this composer and his *œuvre* in music and cultural history as central to understanding the developments of discursive culture in France (and to some extent Europe).

NOTES

[1] Grétry does not make the top-100 of most performed composer in the last decade on Operabase, a large database gathering performance data from opera houses and companies around the world. According to their database only eight of his operas were performed between 2009 and 2019, with a marked concentration of performances in the years leading up to the bicentenary of his death in 2013. The majority of these performances took place at Opera Lafayette, which specializes in opera from around 1800, and the Opéra Royal de Wallonie, which is located in Grétry's birthplace Liège. https://www.operabase.com/newandrare/en (accessed 21 April 2019).

[2] See for instance Julia Doe, "Marie Antoinette et La Musique: Habsburg Patronage and French Operatic Culture (1770-1789)," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 46 (2017): 81-94; and Rebecca Geoffroy-Schwinden, "Music, Copyright, and Intellectual Property during the French Revolution: A Newly Discovered Letter from André-Ernest-Modeste Grétry," *Transposition: Musique et sciences Sociales* 7 (2018): 1-17.

[3] David Charlton, *Grétry and the Growth of Opéra-Comique* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Philippe Vendrix, (ed.), *Grétry et l'Europe de l'Opéra-Comique* (Liège: Mardaga, 1992).

[4] Several historians have documented the development of a "great man"-cult in France around 1800, and especially its connection to prominent figures of the French Revolution and to Napoleon. See, for instance: Matthew D. Zarzeczny, *Meteors that Enlighten the Earth: Napoleon and the Cult of Great Men* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013); Philip G. Dwyer, "Napoleon Bonaparte as Hero and Saviour: Image, Rhetoric and Behaviour in the Construction of a Legend," *French History* 18, no. 4 (2004), 379-403; and Jean-Claude Bonnet, *Naissance du Panthéon: Essai sur le Culte des Grands Hommes* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1998).

[5] See David Charlton, *Grétry and the Growth of Opéra-Comique* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

[6] While many studies on celebrity culture in music focus on Beethoven's environment, the development of this culture in France has recently started to spark interest as well. See for instance Fabio Morabito, "Évaluer le génie sur son lit de mort: la biographie critique de Méhul par Luigi Cherubini," in Alexandre Dratwicki and Étienne Jardin (eds.), *Le Fer et Les Fleurs:*

Étienne-Nicolas Méhul (1763-1817) (Sinzig: Actes Sud, 2017), 481-508.

[7] Rebecca Geoffroy Schwinden, "Politics, the French Revolution, and Performance: Parisian Musicians as an Emergent Musical Class, 1749-1802" (Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 2015).

[8] A brief discussion of the Institut de France's importance for the status of composers in France can be found in Annelies Andries, "Modernizing Spectacle: The Opéra in Napoleon's Paris, 1799-1815" (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 2018), 57-65.

[9] Gary Tomlinson, "Musical Pasts and Postmodern Musicologies: A Response to Lawrence Kramer," *Current Musicology* 53 (1993): 18-24.

[10] Nicholas Mathew and Mary Ann Smart, "Elephants in the Music Room: The Future of Quirk Historicism," *Representations* 132/1 (Fall 2015): 61-78, quotation: 72.

[11] Ibid. 67.

Annelies Andries
Magdalen College, University of Oxford
annelies.andries@magd.ox.ac.uk

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