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Olivia Bloechl, *Opera and the Political Imaginary in Old Regime France*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. xiii + 203 pp. Appendix, acknowledgments, abbreviations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$59.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN: 9780226522753.

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In *Metaphysical Song*, Gary Tomlinson asserts that while the operatic voice was not demystified, per se, in early modern opera, it was nevertheless obliged to contend with the “troubling separation” between the material and immaterial realms. He associates the early modern understanding of the cosmos with a prevailing aesthetic (representation), a political principle (absolutism), and a new subjectivity (unresolved dualism).^[1] The role of representation in celebrating and perpetuating absolutism is the subject of Louis Marin’s influential study of the king’s portrait and Downing Thomas’s chapter on the opera king.^[2] Georgia Cowart cautions that this “iconography of sovereign power” was by no means univocal or uniform, however, emphasizing the potentially oppositional and parodic politics of spectacle.^[3] Its pleasures, Cowart maintains, appealed to the public, whose emotional and ideological investment in what transpired on stage Thomas also explores in his chapter on transformations in theater architecture and spectatorship.^[4] These studies, which span the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, tragedy and comedy, painting and performance, remain, by and large, within the domain of politics and the arts. In *Opera and the Political Imaginary in Old Regime France*, Olivia Bloechl returns to this period to examine the nature of the relationships forged, in tragic opera, among mythology, religion, and politics, the divine and the world order, sovereignty and government. In so doing, she provides an invaluable complement to these previous studies by investigating how early modern French composers, librettists, and their audiences staged and encountered the “state of precarity” in which they lived (pp. 200-01).

One of the most striking and original features of Bloechl’s study is her inclination to superimpose, rather than oppose, mythology, religion, and politics, which converge in the divine right of kings. Tragic opera, she reminds us, frequently features not ordinary but extraordinary circumstances in which “states of emergency . . . threaten the prevailing order” (p. 16). The response of gods and royalty to such situations proves not only revelatory, in terms of character, but emblematic, in terms of (good and bad) models of sovereignty and government. Bloechl emphasizes not the stability but rather the precarity of such regimes, in which order is subject to disruption and fortunes to reversal. Though she focuses primarily on the tragic operas of Jean-Baptiste Lully, Jean-Philippe Rameau, and their contemporaries, she also devotes attention to Christoph Willibald Gluck’s reform operas, suggesting how they internalized or abstracted certain structures characteristic of the *tragédie en musique*. The genre’s relationship to political reality,

Bloechl notes, was analogical rather than mimetic (p. xi), and yet these structures provide insight into the era's political imaginary.

Bloechl's study unfolds in a series of six chapters that can be most readily understood in pairs. The first two are dedicated to the role of the chorus in singing praise or lament. Though the subjects of *tragédie en musique* were frequently taken from Greco-Roman mythology, Bloechl suggests that they established a "theological myth of ruler sovereignty" and a "doxological myth of citizenship," both of which were significant to "Catholic absolutist thought" (pp. 23-24). To explain how this model of citizenship functioned she turns to Giorgio Agamben's "archeology of glory" and to Patristic angelology. Angels, like courtiers, were thought to be divided into contemplative and administrative orders (pp. 24-25, 34-36). The role of the contemplative order (the Seraphim) was to glorify the sovereign, a function that Bloechl, after Agamben, characterizes as "inoperative" (p. 50). This vision of pure being, rather than doing, was widely associated with the ideal state of civil society. Beaumarchais was, accordingly, able to adapt the chorus for the purposes of glorifying a popular sovereign, Tarare, when he made a bid for representative government at the time of the Revolution (pp. 48-49). This parallel between the divine and the world order helps account for the otherwise inexplicable prevalence of the glorifying chorus in the *tragédie en musique*.

The chorus' role in glorifying the sovereign's presence is akin to its role in lamenting the sovereign's loss. Grief, Bloechl remarks, was collective, not individual, in the *tragédie en musique*. She establishes a certain reciprocity between collective mourning on stage and in public life by examining the Mass, burial ceremonies, state funeral processions, and the press, which gave rise to certain behaviors that she suggests were less orchestrated than learned (pp. 59-64). Jean Bérain was set designer for both the Opéra and state funerals, indicating that staged mourning may both have been patterned after funerary ritual and have served to reinforce such collective, learned behavior. Choral laments could alternately second the sovereign's sentiment (emotive voice), enact the ritual of mourning (performative voice), or pass moral judgment (hermeneutic voice) (p. 67). Here, too, Bloechl detects a certain hierarchical organization that distinguishes between noble and ignoble sentiments, contrasting dissuasive models of excess to persuasive models of restraint (p. 77). These choruses became the model, in turn, for the patriotic public in Gluck's reform operas later in the century (pp. 82-83).

The next pair of chapters are conceived in terms of confession and judgment. If the model of sovereignty promulgated in tragic opera was primarily a positive one, featuring exemplary behavior and acts of clemency, confession and expressions of remorse (akin to laments) furnished means of exonerating and restituting sovereigns guilty of wrongdoing (pp. 85-86). Here, Bloechl invokes Michel Foucault's analysis of confession as a form of "veridiction," yet perceives confession not as an act of liberation but rather as entering into a dialogical relationship with an accuser, or "confessional other" (pp. 91-92). Whereas in the *tragédie en musique* this confessional other tends to be an external individual or group (the chorus), in Gluck's reform operas this moral authority was gradually internalized, leading to guilty characters' expressions of remorse. This understanding of confession as an act of self-expression and self-regulation coincided with the cult of sensibility. Intriguingly, Bloechl also cites examples of failed confession, when characters deny responsibility, refuse to mend their ways, or privilege the allure over the efficacy of the confession, in which case it becomes another instance—like the glorifying chorus—of "inoperative song," inciting a certain "auditory voyeurism" (pp. 115-18).

Bloechl's first three chapters are dedicated to positive models of sovereignty, government, and citizenship, focusing on the greater glory of clement or remorseful sovereigns and the choruses of praise in their honor or lament for their loss. If these three chapters are persuasive, her last three, focused on negative models, are fascinating. She first turns her attention to judgment and retribution not by a secondary character, nor yet by the chorus, but by the orchestra itself. An outgrowth of the "descriptive instrumental writing" that characterizes operatic storm (*tempête*), oracle, or ghost (*ombre*) scenes, Bloechl identifies instances in which the "envoiced orchestra" passes judgment in response to the sovereign's confession of guilt (pp. 124-25). She traces the gradual emergence of this voice from the seventeenth century on, when the sovereign was considered to be the earthly representative and distributor of divine justice and, consequently, just (p. 127). In the course of the eighteenth century, the role of passing judgment was increasingly allocated to the orchestra, which incarnates disembodied, punitive violence, either seconding or standing in for the Eumenides, or avenging furies (p. 137). The "suicidal air" (p. 148), which, we are given to understand, was written in a heroic register and possessed much of the seductive allure of the failed confession, joins forces with the orchestra, identifying guilty characters' self-condemnation as just in turn. Bloechl associates this development with the cult of the criminal, towards the end of the century, in which sublime evil became as compelling as sublime good.^[5] The rise of the tormenting orchestra, as an external agent of retribution and punishment, thus coincided with increasingly moving expressions of guilt and remorse on the part of sovereigns with an internally-divided sense of self, simultaneously judge and judged.

In the last two chapters, Bloechl turns her attention from celestial and terrestrial to infernal settings, moving seamlessly from scenes of self-accusation to scenes of self-sacrifice. It is worth emphasizing the parallel structure here. If the prevalence of *dei ex machina* in early modern opera can be explained by the emphasis on sovereign clemency, harrowings of hell likewise constitute the intervention of a king or a hero (Orpheus, Theseus) on behalf of another whom he rescues from an unjust fate (premature death). Like the early modern understanding of the heavens, the "imaginative cosmography" of the underworld was informed by the structure of the absolutist monarchical state (pp. 157, 162).^[6] To account for this analogical structure, Bloechl invokes Catherine Kintzler's "vraisemblance merveilleuse," a plausible marvelous in which other worlds are modelled after this one in order to persuade the audience they are possible (p. 163). She argues, however, that the utopian clemency associated with the heavens gives way to dystopian tyranny in hell, lauded and enforced by ministers in the guise not of angels but of demons, or fallen angels (pp. 170-73). The stark contrast between these realms, Bloechl avers, could be perceived as a critique of despotism.

Bloechl's final chapter is dedicated to a variant of the "opera king," the "chthonic other of the clement prince," namely Pluto, absolute ruler and supreme judge of the underworld (p. 174). Rather than opposing Apollonian and Dionysian music, after Friedrich Nietzsche, Bloechl opposes the right-sacred, Apollonian ideal of kingship of the celestial realm to the left-sacred, Plutonian despotism of the underworld, after Georges Bataille (p. 180).^[7] Thought to be impervious to the moral sentiments of love, sorrow, or pity, Pluto required some persuading if he was to suspend his dominion over the lives of his subjects. Hence the lyrical and rhetorical prowess of heroes such as Orpheus and Theseus who intercede on behalf of their loved ones (Euridice, Pirithous). The increased interiority and abstraction that we have seen thus far in Gluck's reform operas can also be found here, as Pluto himself is replaced by his "formidable ministers," the demons, furies, and fates (pp. 194-95). The opposition of confession and

retribution that we encountered in chapters three and four is thus mirrored by the opposition of prosecution and intercession in chapters five and six.

Among the many concise, persuasive examples that Bloechl draws from a wide range of libretti, scores, and engravings to illustrate her analysis of tragic opera's political theology is an extended discussion of Rameau and Pellegrin's *Hippolyte et Aricie*, sustained over four chapters. Phaedre hears the choral lament of Hippolyte's death as an implicit accusation, provoking her confession and expression of remorse, which the chorus rejects as "superfluous" (pp. 73-76, 100-05). While Pluto and Neptune dictate the terms of Theseus's punishment, banishing him first for his harrowing of hell then for his misguided accusation of his son (pp. 188-92), Phaedre's is levied first by the tormenting orchestra, which "intrudes on the diegetic reality," then by her own hand (pp. 133-38). Phaedre thus joins the ranks of the divine and royal sorceresses and seductresses who neither resemble their male counterparts nor necessarily incur their wrath, condemned instead to madness, suicide, or destruction by forces of nature or magic as counter-examples to state-sanctioned modes of conduct and consequences (pp. 128-30).^[8]

While the notion of the *terrible* or terrifying topic that she adapts from David Buch and Wye Allenbrook respectively would benefit from further development in order to be more readily recognizable as a category, Bloechl perceptively extends it to include the musical vocabulary for judicial scenes (p. 124).^[9] Her addition of wonder, awe, glory, love, remorse, and horror to the affects traditionally associated with spoken tragedy (terror and pity) considerably enriches critical discussions of lyric theater. Not only does she acknowledge the centrality of the marvelous (*merveilleux*) to the subjects and staging of tragic opera, but she broadens the designation to encompass both the Greco-Roman and the Christian varieties. Rather than positing a sharp distinction between the *tragédie en musique* and Gluck's reform operas, she is attentive to how the operatic tradition was sustained, transformed, and inflected. Her analysis thus aligns in interesting ways with James Johnson's study of why audiences fell silent in *Listening in Paris* and with Dror Wahrman's investigation of the shift from the ancien régime of identity to the modern sense of self.^[10] Bloechl's original, compelling, and convincing exploration of tragic opera's political imaginary should henceforth constitute essential reading for those interested in eighteenth-century French culture, history, musicology, and statecraft.

NOTES

[1] Gary Tomlinson, *Metaphysical Song: An Essay on Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 34.

[2] See Louis Marin, *Portrait of the King* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988); and Downing Thomas, *Aesthetics of Opera in the Ancien Régime, 1647-1785* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), chapter 2.

[3] Georgia Cowart, introduction to *The Triumph of Pleasure: Louis XIV and the Politics of Spectacle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), p. xvii.

[4] Thomas, *Aesthetics of Opera*, chapter 8.

[5] Consideration of this development in tandem with Yann Robert's recent study of trial not by orchestra but by theater would be of interest. See Yann Robert, *Dramatic Justice: Trial by Theater in the Age of the French Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

[6] Here, Bloechl adapts Edward Said's notion of "imaginative geography" for her purposes, to designate "relationships between [opera]'s celestial, terrestrial, and infernal realms" (p. 157). See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), p. 54.

[7] See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (London: Penguin Classics, 1994), and Georges Bataille, "Attraction and Repulsion I: Tropisms, Sexuality, Laughter and Tears," in *The College of Sociology (1937-39)*, ed. Denis Hollier, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. 103-12.

[8] Further consideration of this topic can be found in Mary D. Sheriff's *Enchanted Islands: Picturing the Allure of Conquest in Eighteenth-Century France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); and in Juliette Cherbuliez's *In the Wake of Medea: Neoclassical Theater and the Arts of Destruction* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020).

[9] See David Buch, *Magic Flutes and Enchanted Forests: The Supernatural in Eighteenth-Century Musical Theater* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 175-78, for the characterization of *terrible* or "terrifying" musical style, and Wye Allenbrook's introduction to *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart: "Le Nozze di Figaro" and "Don Giovanni"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), for the definition of musical *topoi* or "topics."

[10] See James Johnson, *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); and Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), which includes a suggestive extrapolation to pre- and post-Revolutionary France.

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