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Jacqueline Letzter and Robert Adelson, *Women Writing Opera: Creativity and Controversy in the Age of the French Revolution*. Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2001. xvii + 342 pp. Illustrations, appendix, bibliography, notes, and index. \$48.00 US (cl). ISBN 0-520-22653-4.

Review by William Weber, California State University, Long Beach.

The study of women continues to open up vital social and political questions beyond the subject of women itself. Similarly, a topic such as opera, often approached in a narrowly institutional fashion, can come alive in a variety of ways when the issue of gender is raised. In *Women Writing Opera*, Jacqueline Letzter and Robert Adelson pose focused questions about women's access to high careers but in the process explore productively the problem of what determined such careers in general. While they are mostly concerned with what prevented women from having works performed, they also give us a rich picture of the factors that governed these matters: family background, patronage, training, social networks, ideological assumptions, and gender patterns. In addition, they tackle intellectual aspects of gender with regard to opera and authorship.

Jacqueline Letzter's background in French and Robert Adelson's in music signal the complementary expertise that the authors bring to their study. Nevertheless, the intellectual history here is on the whole more fluently stated than the social history, and a social historian would find the analysis rather naïve in places and not closely related to the scholarship in that field. But taking on both the intellectual and social aspects of a subject with some success is unusual in the present state of historical writing.

The book focuses upon eleven women, ranging from Marie-Emanuelle Bayon-Louis (1746-1825) to Sophie Gay (1776-1852), following the latter's career into the 1830s. As one would expect, almost all the women who produced works in the musical theater came from families involved in the profession or had well-educated relatives who introduced them into that world. Jeanne-Hippolyte Devismes (1765-1834?), for example, was a daughter of a director of the opera in the 1770s. But a long chapter is devoted to Isabelle de Charrière (1740-1805), a woman of high Dutch family who tried to make her way in musical theater as an outsider on a variety of counts--as a woman as well as a foreigner without direct professional connections. The authors' attempt to make her career, about which there are unusually rich sources, into "a test case for the democratization of opera" (p. 138) is not entirely productive, since her case is so unusual and the argument is not well developed.

Letzter and Adelson trace the cases where women had librettos or opera settings, or both, performed from 1685 to 1818, showing patches of early activity before a growing stream of works began in the 1770s. Specifically, the authors found seven works between 1670 and 1720, twelve from 1720 to 1770, and fifty-four from 1770 to 1820. The number of these works--whose impact was equivalent to a best-selling book today, they point out--had no match in the nineteenth or the twentieth centuries. Around 1900 Augusta Holmes distinguished herself as an opera composer in Paris, as did Ethel Smyth in London, but these women had far fewer colleagues than in the pre- to post-revolutionary periods.

The main limitation facing women was that their activity was mostly confined to *opéra-comique* and *opéra-ballet* rather than *tragédie lyrique*. Hierarchies of genres have been all-powerful in the opera world

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in a variety of ways. A similar situation of social exclusion by nationality held sway in Britain for a long period of time. From the founding of the Italian opera in 1708 to the middle of the nineteenth century, composers of British background were almost entirely denied access to performance in the main theater (the King's Theatre), as was not the case of Gluck in Vienna or Hasse in Dresden or Berlin. Comic opera served as the idiom where female composers in Paris and British composers in London had to base their careers, which shows how important were the relatively few cases where French women did break into the "serious" opera during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The most important factor that brought women into musical theater was the 1791 declaration of freedom and the ending of privileges for theaters. By 1793 there existed five times as many halls as in 1789, and the volatile nature of public life led to a demand for new kinds of works. Also, new laws for intellectual property rights promulgated in 1793 made the potential financial gains from writing librettos or setting them musically far greater. This book illustrates how women took advantage of these opportunities, in most cases to earn a living and not just as a side-line.

Like Carla Hesse in her recent work, *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women Became Modern*, Letzter and Adelson take a positive view of the impact of the Revolution on women's access to the cultural marketplace.[1] Hesse found a doubling in the number of books published by women in the periods just before and during the Revolution. The present book also provides evidence of a growth in women's works during the two decades before the Revolution—twenty-two librettos or settings by women between 1770 and 1788, compared with twenty between 1789 and 1800. In an article in the *Journal of Modern History* in 1984 (not cited in this work) I demonstrated how the growing instability of the *ancien régime* during the 1770s and 1780s had a major impact upon the *Opéra*, leading to a reorganization of authority (an *assemblée générale*) and a major recycling of repertory.[2] It is therefore interesting to find works by women appearing during other unstable times, such as 1693-95 (three works) and 1752-58 (six works).

The fact that women's works became much less common after 1820 confirms the argument that the instability of the revolutionary period was responsible for the efflorescence of their activity. Again a British comparison is interesting: women composers began to become prominent there in the 1860s, in large part as a result of the crisis of the old order that brought about fundamental changes in musical life. But, by 1900, women's careers began to wane as a new musical world was established and as popular genres within which women wrote ceased to be proper among "serious" composers. In both cases political instability opened up opportunities that subsequently disappeared with the restoration of stability.

The discussion of authorship yields a particularly fascinating set of ideas, which I do not have space here to discuss at length. The notion of "transparency," the common identity of author and work, is developed in fascinating terms in an extended analysis of the influence of Rousseau upon musical thinking about women. Moreover, Letzter and Adelson show that there was militancy for the cause of women as librettists and composers at a remarkably early stage in the rise of ideas about women's careers. Prior to reading the book I saw British theater women far ahead of the French, since there was no clear parallel in Paris to the high respect afforded Mrs. Robinson in the 1780s and Mrs. Siddons in the 1810s. But now we know that in musical theater the French moved much faster than their counterparts, which is no surprise of course given the deep problems of national identity in British musical life.

A number of other important points should be mentioned. One is the early high proportion of women in the *Conservatoire* at its founding in 1795, making music the first field where women had formal training of a professional nature. A second point is the high degree to which all theaters and theater people were politicized during the later years of the Revolution, which I do not believe has yet been shown in the

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literature. Finally, the idea of "exceptionality" applied to musical genius served as a means by which men limited the roles of women. Again, hierarchies served to exclude unprivileged groups.

## NOTES

[1] Carla Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women Became Modern* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).

[2] William Weber, "La musique ancienne in the Waning of the Ancien Régime," *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 56, no. 1 (March, 1984), 58-88.

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