

Review

The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Opera, ed. Mervyn Cooke. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. pp. xlvii + 374

A ‘Cambridge Companion’ is like a handbag. A repository for basics, indispensables, credentials and memorabilia, it can be dipped into, pored over or even rummaged through anxiously, when relief or stimulation is needed. Moreover, like its fabric counterpart, a ‘Companion’ tends to function primarily as a practical support, particularly handy for journeys into the unknown. This one is no exception. Pushing 400 pages, and involving the work of nineteen authors, Cooke’s *Companion to Twentieth-Century Opera* is brimming with information on operas from Debussy and Strauss to Britten and Birtwistle: information that, I suspect, will offer both students and scholars background knowledge and possible new avenues of study. Briefly stated, this *Companion* offers a ‘before’, ‘during’ and ‘after’ of opera’s tangled twentieth-century career: Part I, ‘Legacies’, traces an inheritance from late Romantic German and Italian traditions; Parts II and III, ‘Trends’ and ‘Topographies’ respectively, consider the fundamentals of style, aesthetic and ideology in twentieth-century opera itself; and Part IV, ‘Directions’, asks where recent cultural trends and technological developments have left the genre—on stage, on screen, in the marketplace and in the public consciousness.

Such a systematic account is in some ways commendable, making the volume all the more valuable as a pedagogic tool. It is irresistible, though, to indulge in the opening simile once more: to recall that a handbag is primarily of use (though perhaps not solely of interest) to its owner; that its contents, whilst obvious on the surface, are virtually unfathomable as functional items if not first introduced, their purpose disclosed. Cooke’s *Companion*, we might note, is lacking any introductory episode. Part I begins straight off, immediately following Nigel Simeone’s chronology of twentieth-century operatic premières. This (presumably editorial) tactic of launching into the book proper with a sudden splash, might, on one hand, be disarming – an ultimate ‘decentring’ of the *auteur*, if you like. Readers are invited to surf freely between chapters, conjuring their own structural and thematic links, envisaging a disciplinary backdrop against which individual essays and the book as a whole might unfold. But, on the other hand, the tactic seems curious and not a little unsettling. Without a sense of editorial agenda, we are left to rationalise the book’s structure, method and purpose: to wonder about those subdivisions into ‘trends’ (symbolism, expressionism, neoclassicism *e tutti quanti*) and ‘topographies’ (France, Austria and Germany, Eastern Europe, Russia, England and the US), as well as the whys and wherefores of their choosing; about the setting aside of technology, media and commerce until the final, fourth ‘Part’; and about the bigger (and harder) questions of what twentieth-century opera actually is, what sort of musicology it deserves, and what it means to have entrusted to it a ‘Companion’.

One might excuse the lack of introduction as a superficial flaw – the practical consequence, perhaps, of the length and range of the volume – were it not for the fact that the chapters, too, are generally without introductory statements of purpose. Few of the contributors orient the reader to the what, how and why of their research: opening vamps tend more towards description than the laying out of authorial position, with chapters at times reading more like historical survey than criticism – a musicology centred on interpretation. There are, I should add, some lively and engaging surveys. Chapter 11, by Marina Frolova-Walker, offers a particularly thoughtful account of the stylistic and

ideological shifts in twentieth-century Russian opera, stressing throughout a political contingency manifest in both operatic production and reception. Chapter 9, by Guido Heldt, dabbles in a similar issue, describing the various cultural factors impinging on the Austro-Germanic repertory. Elsewhere, though, chapters tend to be less critically subtle. Consider, for example, Chapter 4, in which Caroline Harvey writes about twentieth-century opera's preferred subject matter. Although Harvey's knowledge is impressive, her chapter is little more than a list of operas on sexual, mythological, political, nationalistic, historical and literary themes. The themes themselves are, so to speak, vacuum-packed, with little suggestion of their inter-connections, or the reasons behind their popularity, appropriation and development. (I might add that the focus on subject matter is itself peculiar: the chapter title 'Words and actions' seems to imply something of the verbal and gestural rather than the simply thematic.) Chapter 8, by Nigel Simeone, is another interesting case. Simeone plots a line through French opera (with the odd diversion to Spain and Italy), from Ravel's *L'Heure espagnole* (premièred at the Opéra-Comique in 1911) to Messiaen's *Saint-François d'Assise* (Opéra, 1983); he outlines works' genesis, their position in the compositional oeuvre, their immediate reception and their composers' aims. But this chapter also tends to sacrifice depth for breadth. A more critical approach might have been rewarding, with a deeper digging into national operatic characteristics, into the business of public and artistic response, and particularly into the 'cross-currents . . . [of] Parisian cultural life' invoked on the chapter's first page.

The examples above give some pointers not only towards the book's methodological premise and characteristic discursive mode, but also towards its general focus: Cooke's *Companion*, on the surface at least, is a celebration of works and composers. Indeed, the two can be seen to structure, if not the 'Parts', then certainly the chief matter of several chapters: an example might be Chapter 7, Chris Walton's on neo-classical opera, with its subheadings 'Busoni', 'Stravinsky in the 1920s', 'Schoenberg and Berg', 'Hindemith, Orff and Weill', and 'The Rake's Progress'; or Christopher Mark's Chapter 13, 'Opera in England: Taking the plunge', which is divided into sections on Delius, Holst and Vaughan Williams, Boughton, Britten, Tippett and Birtwistle. In our present (inter)disciplinary environment, this focus might seem somewhat conservative. Recent opera studies are notorious for their promotion of divided agency: of opera as a pluri- and inter-textual organism, intimately embroiled with issues of (to name a few) theatrical experience, audio-visual spectacle, staging, modes of listening, cultural rites, reception history and economic imperatives.¹ To be fair, Cooke's anthology does not wholly sidestep this more interdisciplinary terrain. One or two chapters (including that by Simeone) are peppered with snippets from press reviews; a few more evoke opera's institutional basis (Chapters 9 and 11, as well as Chapter 12, on American opera, in which author Elise K. Kirk notes the economic, industrial and cultural significance of the Met); and several mention staging, décor and production (notably Chapter 5, Philip

¹ The clarion call for a more dialogic or 'polyphonous' opera study was, it might be said, sounded as early as 1956, with the publication of Joseph Kerman's *Opera as Drama*. Later studies, formulated in some sense in response to Kerman's thesis, are too numerous to mention. A selection of the recent crop might include Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, 1991) and *In Search of Opera* (Princeton, 2001); Heather Hadlock, *Mad Loves: Women and Music in Offenbach's 'Les Contes d'Hoffmann'* (Princeton, 2000); Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York and London, 1993); Lawrence Kramer, *Opera and Modern Culture: Wagner and Strauss* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2004); Roger Parker, *Leonora's Last Act: Essays in Verdian Discourse* (Princeton, 1997); and Gary Tomlinson, *Metaphysical Song: An Essay on Opera* (Princeton, 1999).

Weller's on symbolist opera, in an opening anecdote about Valentine Hugo's 1947 production of *Pelléas*). But in the main these matters are short-changed. Simeone's quotes decorate an exposition of facts about the works at hand; Kirk's section on the Met seems incongruous in the context of the stylistic influences on twentieth-century American opera on which she focuses (Wagner, native American music, verismo and film); and Weller's anecdote is sidelined in favour of a description of the aesthetic and musical features of symbolist opera (its resistance to external realism, thematisation of light and dark, orchestral responsiveness to nuance). Curiously, the image accompanying Weller's text (61), like all 'Figures' in the book, goes unmentioned in the main text.

It seems, then, all too easy to mount the cultural high horse and wonder aloud whether opera here is too narrowly defined; whether the critical project of a multi-dimensional, 'humanistic' opera study has been put to one side. Certainly, in general I would like to see more on opera as a cultural pursuit and as institutional 'work'; on how opera of the twentieth century handled the musical-textual-visual-physical conundrum; and on how we, as musicologists, might handle the genre. But I might as easily adopt a different stance, turning back to the 'Companion' format and suggesting the inevitability of any such focus on works and composers. Besides, there might be something to commend about the book's definition, for it results in an overview – refreshingly objective and free from interpretative exaggeration – of a period of operatic composition that has not been much surveyed. There have of course been studies of individuals and works, some of which are stimulating and sophisticated (one thinks particularly of the 'Cambridge Music Handbooks' to Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* and Weill's *The Threepenny Opera*, as well as Carol Hess's monograph on Manuel de Falla), but as for encyclopedic accounts, ones that offer a convenient, one-stop storehouse of historical data, Cooke's volume is outstanding.²

'Whither opera?'

We might speculate as to whether this current shortage of, shall we say, more comprehensive treatments of opera's twentieth-century forms – and, indeed, the relatively short shrift given to twentieth-century opera in some recent, interpretative studies – is related to what appears to be the genre's thorniest issue: its instability as a cultural commodity. As several contributors to this *Companion* note, the last century witnessed both the dissolution of opera as a compositional practice and the consolidation of a repertory of older (largely nineteenth-century) works. Arnold Whittall (in Chapter 1, 'Opera in transition') remarks on the similarities between the 1900 Covent Garden season and that of the present-day, before stating that 'it is clear that the core operatic repertory at the start of the new century [the twentieth] was not so much "in transition" – poised to change considerably and constantly in the years ahead – as establishing a kind of steady state' (4). Tom Sutcliffe's Chapter 19 ('Technology and interpretation: Aspects of "modernism"') is a good deal blunter, noting that 'contrary to the previous rule (until c. 1900) that the main attraction in operatic repertories would be new or recently composed works, the rule now is that the public invariably prefers familiar operas – or operas disinterred from the distant past' (321). As for the business of 'dissolution', Virgilio Bernardoni (Chapter 3) describes the 'death', post-*Turandot*, of Italian opera as a compositional phenomenon, yet its afterlife in the form of an operatic repertory (39). Nicholas Payne (Chapter 18, 'Opera in the marketplace')

² See Carol Hess, *Manuel de Falla and Modernism in Spain, 1898–1936* (Chicago, 2001); Stephen Hinton, *Kurt Weill: 'The Threepenny Opera'* (Cambridge, 1990); and Stephen Walsh, *Stravinsky: 'Oedipus Rex'* (Cambridge, 1993).

sums up: ‘Does opera have a future as a living culture, or has it transmuted into a branch of heritage? . . . A pessimist will acknowledge that the golden age of opera died during the twentieth century’ (319–20).

Such assertions of opera’s ‘death’ and ‘afterlife’ are at once familiar. It has long been recognised that opera, as a generative corpus, is historically closed (the usual candidates for the last in the line are *Turandot*, Berg’s *Lulu* and *Wozzeck*, as well as Schoenberg’s *Moses und Aron*); indeed, as Heldt reports in Chapter 9, ‘Whither opera?’ was a ubiquitous question in the German musical press as early as the 1920s. Moreover, the genre’s posthumous existence as a relatively fixed canon has provoked memorable condemnation, notably from Boulez, in his 1968 call for opera houses – at once ‘ghettos’ and ‘well-cared-for museums’ – to be blown up, and from Adorno, who, in his *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* (first published in 1962), spoke of opera as ‘obsolete’, as ‘a species of art that is outliving itself and will hardly survive the next blow’.³ But how and why, we might ask, had opera acquired such an anachronistic aspect? Why did it seem poised to fall at the next blow? Or, as Sutcliffe puts it in Chapter 19: ‘The crucial question that needs to be posed in any operatic history of the twentieth century must surely be why an era of such progressive development and enhanced musical expressiveness witnessed the disappearance of both the hit opera and the professional opera composer’ (325). Cooke’s *Companion* offers several ideas that together might form some sort of response to the above, ideas that suggest the impact of various musical, political, social and cultural factors on opera in the twentieth century. Let me air a few here.

It is perhaps unsurprising – particularly given the work/composer focus of the book – that, of the factors cited, Richard Wagner comes across as the most influential. In Chapter 2 (‘Wagner and beyond’), John Deathridge offers a persuasive case for Wagner’s impact, the inevitable elusiveness of which, he states, owes in some part to a temporal displacement between the publication of Wagner’s writings and the performance of his music. Deathridge diagnoses Wagner’s musical tendencies, outlines his pseudo-‘Ten Commandments’ (the programme for the future of ‘drama’, as put forward in a speech of 1873) and traces a Wagnerian and anti-Wagnerian pedigree, asserting in conclusion that ‘if reflection on Wagner’s influence can teach us anything, it is that he raised the stakes of opera to such a pitch that it proved extremely difficult for those after him to choose convincing forms of musical dramaturgy in a spectrum of possibilities which in no small measure due to his own example had become much broader, and to reconcile that choice with the heavy demands placed on works of art in the modern era’ (25). While this talk of stake-raising and musical dramaturgy needs no rehearsal here, it will be useful to linger momentarily on one aspect detailed earlier in Deathridge’s account: Wagner’s notion of artistic synthesis – specifically, the interaction of music and drama. Deathridge discusses the significance of the music–drama marriage in Wagnerian ideology, noting how the principle of a cohesive, continuous and flexible audio-visual relation not only dictated several of the ‘Ten Commandments’, but helped contribute to the demise of the so-called ‘number’ opera – what Deathridge describes as, ‘a series of items performed exquisitely by renowned singers for the sake of sheer enjoyment and in which meaningful drama (at least according to Wagner) had only peripheral status’ (20). Whilst these thoughts might seem persuasive enough, they sit somewhat uncomfortably alongside a comment quoted later in the *Companion*. In Chapter 8, we find Stravinsky denouncing opera for having achieved the very synthesis of music,

³ See Boulez, ‘Opera Houses? – Blow Them Up!’, *Opera*, 19/6 (1968), 32–40; and Adorno, ‘Opera’, in *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* (1962), trans. E. B. Ashton (New York, 1989), 71–84, at 71 and 83.

poetry and stage action that Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* had aspired to. 'I dislike opera', Stravinsky declared in 1913: 'Music can be married to gesture or to words – and not to both without bigamy. That is why the artistic conception of opera is wrong and why Wagner sounds best in the concert-room' (quoted on 129).⁴

To Stravinsky, then, there was something overwhelming – confusing, even – about Wagner's mélange of sight and sound. He points to the exclusivity of music's dramatic capacity: that music can attend either to a gestural or a textual project, its expressive potential unable to stretch to both. The invocation of 'gesture', though, is evocative: Stravinsky speaks not of visuals or spectacle in the abstract, but of an on-stage body-language, one that, he implies, tends to obscure opera's 'artistic conception' and is best removed. To follow this thread might be to consider the prominence of the bodily, the physical and the gestural in theatrical cultures of the early twentieth century; to remember, even, Nietzsche's 1888 description of Wagner as 'essentially a man of the theatre and an actor, the most enthusiastic mimomaniac, perhaps, who ever existed', an idea quoted and explored by Mary Ann Smart in her recent study of music and gesture in nineteenth-century opera.⁵ Smart's argument is too subtle and intricate to unfold fully here, but it turns on an idea of Wagner's gestural 'obsession' (his yoking of music to movement) and sets it against, initially, contemporary tastes for erotic, sexualised stage bodies, as well as bodies less readable and less overtly exhibitionist, but seething nonetheless with 'alluring and dangerous secrets'.⁶ As Smart notes, the objectified body became increasingly prominent in opera after about 1850 or 1860, owing in part to artistic movements towards naturalism and exoticism. Extending this claim, we might add that by the turn of the century, a preoccupation with the body characterised not only music theatre but, to some extent, fine art, literature and science, not to mention an evolving capitalist society. The body, newly penetrable owing to medical invention, was a source of fascination, a site of experiment and obscurity; it was pored over for its internal processes and outward physicality, and celebrated for its perceptual abilities. In line with this bodily fixation, gesture received new attention, appropriated as a literary theme by drama, poetry and prose fiction (consider the meditations on dance by Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Valéry, or the 'dance plays' of W. B. Yeats) and developed as an art form itself.⁷ Artists such as Frank Wedekind, Max Reinhardt and Hugo von Hofmannsthal were famously keen to explore the expressive capabilities of bodily movement through pantomime, to investigate the body as a locus of highly individual yet transcendental meaning.⁸

The most famous 'theatricalisation' of gesture of the period, though, was of course offered by Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. The Russian troupe's gentrification of theatrical dance is well known: choreography, once largely a matter of stylised mime and dramatically

⁴ Stravinsky, interview with the *Daily Mail*, 13 February 1913.

⁵ See Nietzsche *Contra Wagner*, 1888; rpt. in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (Harmondsworth, 1968), 665; and Mary Ann Smart, *Mimomania: Music and Gesture in Nineteenth-Century Opera* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2004), Chapters 1 and 6.

⁶ Smart, *Mimomania*, 166.

⁷ See Mallarmé, 'Ballets' (1886), *Crayonné au théâtre*; rpt. in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. G. Jean-Aubry and Henri Mondor (Paris, 1945), 303–7; and Valéry, *L'Âme et la danse* (Paris, 1923). Valéry returned to the dance theme in his later writings *Degas Danse Dessin* and *Philosophie de la danse* (both 1936). Of Yeats's 'dance plays', *At the Hawk's Well* (1916) and *The Dreaming of the Bones* (1919) are perhaps the most well known.

⁸ Harold B. Segel offers a comprehensive overview of the early twentieth-century fascination with silent drama in his 'Modernist Pantomime and the Retreat from Speech in Drama', in *Body Ascendant: Modernism and the Physical Imperative* (Baltimore, 1998), 14–79.

superfluous virtuosity, became subservient to stage action; the *corps de ballet* was foregrounded as an expressive rather than purely decorative entity; the danseur began to topple the ballerina.⁹ There is, though, a less familiar aspect of the Diaghilevean endeavour, one that, as reported here by Frolova-Walker, might help bring these ideas of gesture, drama and artistic synthesis to a head. As Frolova-Walker notes, Diaghilev's 1914 production of Rimsky-Korsakov's opera *The Golden Cockerel* was marked by a distinct audio-visual breach. At the suggestion of Alexandre Benois, the singers sat during the performance, leaving the dancers alone to provide the drama. According to Benois, this technique, later appropriated by Stravinsky in productions of *Renard* and *Les Noces*, represented the 'destruction of the synthesis' of opera (quoted on 181). With singers dislocated from the stage action, their voices akin to a cinematic voice-over, gesture was unveiled as a principal semantic and allegorical agent in modernist art, physical 'speech' and its expressive undertones focusing audience attention.

It is, I think, but a small step from here to questioning the significance of gesture for the fate of opera in the twentieth century: of gesture as a dramatic medium to rival the sung (and spoken) word; of the potential for audio-visual cohesion or (as Stravinsky seemed to imply) confusion between operatic parameters. This step, though small in terms of critical distance, might reap large rewards. Not only are matters gestural, physical and bodily somewhat *à la mode* in current musicology (largely, I suspect, owing to evolving interdisciplinary interests – in particular, the rise of feminist theory, with its implicit positing of subject–object bodily relations);¹⁰ they might help extend interpretative terrain. To focus on gesture might be to consider new types of visual spectacle, bodily comportment and extra-sensory experience; new signifying systems (the mimetic, pictorial and metaphorical); new concerns for stage realism and the business of staging itself; new ideas of the 'voice' and its dramatic potential; and new interactions between the theatrical genres of opera, ballet, cabaret, theatre, pantomime and even circus. Moreover, a consideration of gesture might pave the way for a more extensive account of the influence of the twentieth-century modernist project, of which an enthusiasm for non-verbal theatre was but one aspect. Cooke's *Companion* touches only briefly on the idea of a specifically musical modernism, Sutcliffe describing how the turn of 'serious' music away from 'the familiarly melodious' impacted the popularity of opera: 'As the common lyrical language of earlier times grew more and more distant and faint, many new operas have simply not registered in the memory as an experience of song' (328). But more, perhaps, is to be done, over and above the noting of a modernist 'melodic handicap'. It seems curious that, as one of the defining modes of twentieth-century experience, modernism is sidestepped – silenced, even – as an influence on opera.

Influences that receive a more focused attention, Wagner aside, tend to cluster around a notion of cultural flux: in short, the idea that (to quote Payne) 'during the course of the twentieth century the context [of/for opera] has changed' (318). Precisely what aspects of this context held sway over opera's twentieth-century being, however, seems harder to pin down. Payne notes a deterioration in musical education: a 'widespread ignorance of the fundamentals of an art-form with such deep roots in historical culture' (319). The

⁹ Lynn Garafola, *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes* (1989; rpt. New York, 1998), remains the most authoritative voice on the history and productions of the Russian company.

¹⁰ Seminal amongst recent books and articles on the gesture–body–music relation are Stephanie Jordan, *Moving Music: Dialogues with Music in Twentieth-Century Ballet* (London, 2000); Simon Morrison, 'The Origins of *Daphnis et Chloé*', *19th-Century Music*, 28 (2004–5), 50–76; and Marian Smith, *Ballet and Opera in the Age of 'Giselle'* (Princeton, 2000).

implication, it seems, is that public unfamiliarity with what Payne calls the ‘basic areas of Western cultural knowledge’ (he cites sonata form and fugue, as well as Greek mythology) deters a potential opera audience: as Payne writes, ‘the task of the opera educators is therefore massive’ (318). But this might be to scrape the surface: what, we might ask, can a fluctuating public awareness betray of broader cultural influences? and what, for that matter, determines ‘basic knowledge’? Stephen Banfield (Chapter 17, ‘Popular musical theatre (and film)’) offers another idea, describing a ‘new audience contract’ drawn up prior to 1900 largely on the basis of opera’s evolving ‘seriousness’: ‘No-one on stage smiles in Bizet’s *Carmen*, and no-one in the audience applauds or laughs out loud to disturb the musical continuum in Verdi’s *Falstaff* or Wagner’s *Meistersinger* . . . Opera, in short, lost its wit’ (291–2). But did spectatorial silence, along with a lack of stage smiles, really usher in the silencing of opera itself? Less debatable, and perhaps nearer the mark, is Heldt’s thesis. His discussion of Austro-Germanic opera pivots around the idea of a post-World War I cultural, social, political and economic instability. To outline in brief: the dissolution of monarchies led former court opera houses to seek national, state or municipal subsidy; subsidies, however, were low, and opera expensive to produce, thus theatres resolved to popularise programmes, reinforcing an existing trend towards operetta. Besides this, post-war inflation crippled large parts of the educated bourgeoisie, the core pre-war audience, sparking a transformation in audience structure from a cultural elite to larger groups – the ‘new middle classes’ (147). World War I, in short, heralded the end of most of the conditions that had, for about 300 years, produced opera in Europe: hierarchical class systems; conservative traditions in politics, religion and education; an aristocratic ideal of *noblesse oblige*; a notion of national destiny.

Heldt’s argument is compelling, his ideas taking on new urgency in light of recent disciplinary interest in opera’s political encoding.¹¹ But I am more struck by an unexpected swerve in his account, one that illuminates an additional facet of that cultural flux, swapping notions of war and politics for those of more abstractly technological developments. To put it briefly, Heldt raises the idea of opera’s media contingency, in particular, of this contingency as in some way double-edged. While, as he implies, the development of ‘new media’ – mass-circulation newspapers and magazines, radio, film and television – clearly contributed to a socio-aesthetic climate in which newly composed operas were passed over by an increasingly consumerist, atomised public, media forms also helped facilitate opera’s subsistence, transforming (first) its musical, (then) its textual and visual parameters into durable commercial entities (see 157). Payne describes a similarly ‘bilateral’ effect: not of media at large, but of sound-recording specifically. On the one hand, he argues, recording is conducive to the public dissemination of opera; but on the other, it undermines the need for communal, theatrical experience, threatening opera as real-time activity (313).

These antithetical views of technology’s potential, like predictions and declarations of opera’s demise, remain unresolved despite having been in circulation during much of the twentieth century. Ever since Edison introduced the wax cylinder, technological utopians have come up against doomsayers wary of technology’s dehumanising, commodifying influence. The American bandmaster John Philip Sousa, for example, predicted that

¹¹ The most frequently cited example of musicological thinking on the business of opera and politics is course Jane Fulcher, *The Nation’s Image: French Grand Opera as Politics and Politicized Art* (Cambridge, 1987). Of later scholarship on the subject, *Reading Critics Reading: Opera and Ballet Criticism in France from the Revolution to 1848*, ed. Roger Parker and Mary Ann Smart (Oxford, 2001) is particularly stimulating, offering several adjustments and counter-narratives to Fulcher’s thesis.

recording would lead to the demise of music: that something was lost when live, performing bodies gave way to reproduced, acousmatic ones. As Sousa explained, ‘the nightingale’s song is delightful because the nightingale herself gives it forth’.¹² Sousa was clearly on to something. As Walter Benjamin so famously observed, ‘even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be’. Benjamin calls this eliminated element – ‘that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction’ – the ‘aura’ of the work of art: it represents something of tradition and authenticity, historical placement and ‘cultic value’; its ‘decay’ betrays ‘the desire of contemporary masses to bring things “closer” spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction’.¹³

Benjamin’s words resonate neatly with our present concern, offering a fertile terrain on which ideas of opera and its audio(-visual) recording might be projected. What, we might ask, defines the ‘aura’ of opera? (Or should we be speaking instead of opera-going, of activity, recreation and ritual?) How might we codify opera’s ‘cultic’ value? What about the mass longing for a ‘closer’ subject–object relation? There is, I suspect, something of that longing behind the recording industry at large, LPs and CDs bringing music into the home, making it a private business, a domestic sound-track, even. And what if we turned the tables, asking not what was ‘lost’ during reproduction, but rather what was gained? As Benjamin (and later Adorno, in a 1969 essay) notes, reproduction inspires a process of reactivation, awakening a work to new contexts and new arenas, sparking new dialogue between work and listener.¹⁴ It is difficult not to wish that this dialogue had involved a greater number of Cooke’s contributors. Discussion of the effect of recording on opera is found mainly in the chapters by Heldt, Payne and Sutcliffe, none of whom devote more than anecdotal airtime to the subject. In all fairness, one could argue that Chapter 16, by Cooke himself, is entirely embroiled with the hows and whys of recording. This is an essay about opera and film (opera as film, opera on film, and opera as filmic topic), one in which the author, citing extensively from a filmic corpus, enthuses over opera’s media malleability. But here, in particular, the conceptual dimension – the business of what recording (filming) ‘does’ to opera – seems skimmed. An initial setting-out of the defining features of the film medium might not have come amiss, with leading questions about their impact on opera. I wonder especially about film’s manipulation of point-of-view: how camera-centric film can offer interpretative guidance, showing us where to look and what to feel, whilst fastening each visual image to synchronous sound. Or we might think of film as a form of ‘writing’: as an interpretation of an operatic discourse – not just an ‘original text’, but traditions of performance and reception.

If I take issue with Cooke *et al.*, it is because the issues they raise – from the impact of film and recording to the larger business of opera’s extinction and second coming – are difficult, bound to strains of cultural influence that impinge profoundly on twentieth-century experience. It is tempting to envisage an alternative ‘Companion’ with these issues at its centre: a ‘Companion’ structured by ideas, themes, trends and concepts. A different title might be needed, swapping *Twentieth-Century Opera* for *Opera in the Twentieth Century*. But any such tweaking might be encouraged, prompting further questions, enquiries and frames

¹² Quoted in Alex Ross, ‘The Record Effect’, *The New Yorker*, 6 June 2005.

¹³ Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, 1936; rpt. in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (London, 1992), 211–44, at 215–17.

¹⁴ See Adorno, ‘Opera and the Long-Playing Record’, 1969; rpt. in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2002), 283–7.

of reference. What's more, these 'prompts' might help us embrace more fully the present and future of opera. There is, in the end, a whiff of something apocalyptic about Cooke's compendium. Sutcliffe speaks of a potentially 'debilitated' operatic world, a past that is 'unlikely to be displaced by future novelty'. Audiences, he argues, will continue to 'feed' on operatic masterworks, satisfying their 'obsessive' interest in the canon (340). Might these thoughts of opera's debilitation and of spectators' gorging be succeeded by ones that celebrate the genre's posthumous forms? As Mladen Dolar quipped, 'the more opera is dead, the more it flourishes'.¹⁵ In some future space, perhaps this flourishing will bring forth a 'Companion' of its own.

Davinia Caddy

¹⁵ See Dolar, 'If Music be the Food of Love', in Dolar and Slavoj Žižek, *Opera's Second Death* (New York and London, 2002), 3.