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Raymond Warren. *Opera Workshop: Studies in Understanding and Interpretation.* Aldershot, Hampshire: Scolar Press, 1995. x, 279 pp. ISBN 0–85967–970–5 (hardcover).

Raymond Warren begins the introduction to his, *Opera Workshop*, with the following statement:

> Much has been written on the meaning and history of opera, but comparatively little on how the medium actually works ... looking in particular at how their workings are to understood by those involved: the singers, conductors and producers (p. viii).

Within this context, Warren hopes to provide a 'user's guide' for the active participants, as well as a resource book for a general readership of opera lovers. The premise behind such a daunting task is intriguing—to work with operatic productions available on videotape, analyzing those things which work and, more importantly, those things which do not. Unfortunately what 'does not,' in this case, is much of the book itself. It is not that the concept behind the book is without merit, or that Warren has nothing of value to say. Quite to the contrary, sections of the book do contain useful and insightful comments. Other aspects of this volume tend to diminish its value, especially in light of the author's stated purpose.

Opera Workshop is organized in three broad sections: "The Orchestra Supports the Singer," "The Orchestra Enlarges the Stage," and a 'catch-all' section labelled simply "Further Studies." Within each section (roughly organized chronologically), specific productions of individual works are examined under a variety of headings. The first section, for instance, deals with orchestral support in recitative, aria and ensemble, in a range from Monteverdi's *Orfeo* to Britten's *Peter Grimes*. Here, the author demonstrates considerable analytic skills. In particular, the section examining Mozart's link of recitative to aria in the approach to the Countess's aria "Dove sono" is excellent. His analysis of the patterns of rhythm and key structure, the affective structure of an actor's sub-text contained in Mozart's music, and the inevitability of the move from accompanied recitative into full aria are all clearly laid out, and in a fashion useful, both to a soprano learning this role, or a stage director approaching, with some trepidation, his first production of Mozart.

In a like manner, "The Symphonic Dimension in Wagner" (found in Part II of the book) charts the harmonic structure of the first scene of Wagner's *Das Rheingold*; Warren's subsequent discussion of *leitmotif* throughout the opera is as clear and concise a discussion of these topics as could be hoped for in a work aimed at a general readership. In other parts of the book, the author makes a similar contribution. He acknowledges a debt of gratitude for his understanding of opera to Benjamin Britten, and his treatment of various sections of *Peter Grimes* is excellent. Even when Warren digresses to other works for purposes of comparison or corroboration, these excursions are of value. On the other

hand, it is lamentable that a scene such as the death of Wozzeck should be reduced to one brief paragraph, a concession likely necessary to keep the book on a manageable scale.

What does not work nearly so well are the author's comments on the physical staging of opera. Here, Warren displays a layman's appreciation for the craft involved; however, his ideas are limited, to say the least. When he paraphrases Metastasio's statement on a preference for stage positions that reflect the social rank of the characters, remarking that these positions were "presumably static" (p. 5), and concludes from this that, in *opera seria*, "the music simply wasn't written for the demanding realism of the twentieth century theatre" (p. 5), he ignores a couple of fundamental ideas. First, the detailed work that has been done by scholars such as Australia's Dean Barnett has demonstrated that the recognition of social rank is not merely a notion of Metastasio, but a standard made necessary by the court venue where these works were presented. Second, productions that aim at historical accuracy, by companies such as Toronto's Opera Atelier, have demonstrated that following the conventions of the period is anything but static. In fact, it makes for a theatrical experience potentially as exciting today as it was in the eighteenth century, with the codified gesture of the period adding to, rather than detracting from the enjoyment of the form. In addition, there have been modern productions of *opera seria* that have pursued the very realism of which Warren claims that the form to be incapable. Frequently these ventures have met with an equal, though different kind of success.

Much of Warren's comment on the staging of later operatic works is so obvious as to be useless to all but the most incompetent of operatic stage directors. Worse yet, it is misleading in some cases to the general readership which has been so well served by the corresponding musical analysis. Two examples from *Rigoletto* will demonstrate the problem. In his discussion of the dialogue between the Countess Ceprano and the Duke in Act 1, the author makes the observation that the Countess's "I must follow my husband," with a grace note on "sposo," denotes a cold response to the Duke, and the grace note is "an emphasis of loyalty to her husband" (p. 144). This may in fact have been the intention in the ENO production used as the example, but it is presented as the 'right,' and perhaps the only approach. This whole passage can be seen in a different light if we make the assumption that the Countess is flirting with the Duke, as much as he with her. It makes more sense of her capitulation within twenty short measures, and gives her husband a greater range of emotion to play in his subsequent confrontation with Rigoletto. In the same manner, when referring to the arrival of Monterone, Warren asserts that on hearing Monterone offstage, "Those on stage will surely 'freeze' when they hear his voice and turn in his direction as he enters" (p. 148). Surely these people, as guests of the Duke, are aware, not only of his ways, but of all his latest conquests. Why would they not gossip amongst themselves, and take delight at the coming confrontation, which they might see as adding a little spice to the party? To take one director's options, as gifted as that director may be, and present

them as 'correct' is to do readers who may not be aware that this is simply one set in a potentially infinite variety of choices a grave disservice.

This leads to the question of the author's choice of video productions for this project. Clearly they reflect works that are easily available, although it should be pointed out that, if the cost of the videos were added to that of the book, the price of following Warren's thought would be substantial. Presumably they also reflect his tastes, and that tends to be on the conservative side. Of the eleven productions chosen, only two could be seen as outside of the most traditional approach to staging. What might be more effective is a choice that included contrast within specific works as a means of generating comparative study. While you may not agree with Peter Sellars' staging of *Don Giovanni*, an examination of that production, contrasted to the more traditional Covent Garden production, both available on videotape, would open the doors to a discussion of staging that would more fully serve both the readership, and the stated intention of the book's introduction.

It is possible that what has gone wrong here is that one person has attempted the work of several, and succeeded only as far as any one person might reasonably be expected to succeed. What is needed to fulfil the stated objective is an editor capable of assembling a panel of experts to comment on, perhaps in greater detail on fewer works, the technical problems addressed by their chosen disciplines. Were this coupled with highly partisan views of productions currently available on electronic media, the resulting discussion could be both enlightening and helpful to the target audience—people who want to "share in the quest for a more intimate understanding of this most exciting but elusive of musical forms" (p. viii). Ironically, considering that Raymond Warren began his introduction by stating that a new history was not his intent, the end result may well be a book that is best suited to an undergraduate history of the development of opera. The works chosen, and their availability on videotape, make an appropriate starting ground for such a course. Even in its current form, this book would be a useful addition to currently available resources. Reorganised along chronological lines, with a little more depth in the digressions to other works, the author's concise analyses of the broad strokes of operatic style would answer a clear need for a text in this area.

Reid Spencer