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Newton Prize Submission

I have long been interested in opera history, and intend to go on to study in graduate school next year. It can be a confusing subject, because there are so many different facets and modes of analysis. I have divided my collection into three divisions defined by the journal *Opera Quarterly*: history, performance, and theory. “History” encompasses accounts of composers and early performances of opera, “performance” mostly considers modern performances and performers, and “theory” is analysis of opera. This is the thorniest and most interesting section, because the theoretical literature is so diverse. I have also added a “Humor and Trivia” section, which includes parodies of books in the other sections, plot summaries entirely in limericks, a collection of “musical invective,” and other highly amusing things.

My favorite operatic repertoire is Italian and German opera from around 1780 to 1950, and these books concentrate on those works. The most wonderful, and most problematic thing about books about opera is that they can be written by people with so many different backgrounds. I count myself as both an opera lover as well as a scholar, and these books occupy a wide range of approaches in terms of intended audience and qualifications of the author. I enjoy both kinds of writing for what they are – the connoisseurs for their enthusiasm, the scholars for their analytical and systematic theorizing. There is a subgenre, however, of books purporting to be scholarly analytical approaches that are actually written by connoisseurs who happen to be scholars in other fields and think that their skills in political science or biology combined with their subscription to the Met Opera qualifies them to write about opera in a scholarly way. I have included a few of the best of these books, and there have been fewer of them recently as real musicologists have been writing more quality work on opera, but they are something to beware of. Often their authors have neither the historical perspective nor the musical training necessary for strong work. Anthony Arblaster’s *Viva la libertà! Politics in Opera* is an example to be avoided.

I have acquired these books over a long period of time. I have been interested in opera since high school, but since I’m from upstate New York, far from any major opera company. My main source of opera was a few of these books, primarily the Penguin Guide, Berlioz, and the two Kelly books. My best source has been The Phoenix, a wonderful used bookstore in Lansing, New York (just outside Ithaca). Many of these books are long out of print, and The Phoenix’s good prices has enabled me to have the number of them that I have. I also have bought a number of books at the Ithaca Book Sale, one of the largest used book sales in the country, and Autumn Leaves, another used bookstore in Ithaca. Several were presents from my aunt and uncle, the only other opera fans in my family (who were responsible for me seeing my first opera, *Così fan tutte* on TV when I was 12).

I acquired most of the Theory books more recently. They are mostly not easy reading, but, strange as this might seem, I do pick them up fairly frequently and read them for fun, particularly just before I’m going to see an opera. None were bought as textbooks, though I have used several in research projects, and I’ve read most of almost all of them. I am going to graduate school because I like to read these kinds of books for fun.

## HISTORY

Holden, Amanda, ed. The New Penguin Opera Guide. London: Penguin, 2002.

This is the quintessential “opernführer,” as they say in Germany (literally, “opera guide,” but I like that there’s a dedicated word for it). I’m not sure which section it belongs in, quite, because it blends all three categories, but it’s such an invaluable reference that I think it should come first. The bulk of the book is plot summaries and basic historical information for most of the operas one is likely to encounter, with short composer bios. The information is more detailed for the more popular operas and composers, but includes a good number of rarities (mostly by British composers, unsurprisingly). There are recording recommendations, which are afflicted by a marked preference for British singers and conductors. The most popular of this genre of guides is probably the venerable Kobbé Book of Opera, but Penguin is much more current and scholarly. It is also useful when one is in need of a doorstop.

Mann, William. The Operas of Mozart. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

There are two major authors of these survey books of composers’ operas: William Mann and Charles Osborne. Both go through the opera, number by number, and describe what happens. They were written before supertitles were introduced to the opera house so audiences could follow the plot, but still can be very useful if one is listening to a CD in a foreign language. Of the two, Mann is consistently more historically informed and musically perceptive, and gives much more attention to Mozart’s underrated early operas. There are similar dueling books by Mann and Osbourne on the works of Wagner, Strauss, Puccini, and Verdi.

Berlioz, Hector. Evenings with the Orchestra. Translated and edited by Jacques Barzun. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1956, revised 1999.

Hector Berlioz, one of the greatest French composers, of the nineteenth century, was quite a character, and that character screams at you from every page of this book. It is a collection of stories written by a composer who is hanging out in the orchestra pit of a second-rate French opera house, and tells these stories to the musicians, who are bored to death by the trash they must perform each night. The stories are fantastical, historical, and many other things, but always entertaining. This is an excellent translation by Jacques Barzun.

Berger, William. Verdi with a Vengeance. New York: Vintage, 2001.

This is perhaps not the most scholarly of all Verdi books, actually, it’s not scholarly at all. But it is accurate and informative, and an excellent introduction to the oeuvre of one of my favorite opera composers. Verdi is too often considered outside of his historical perspective, or in a too narrowly Italian view ignoring the larger European context. Berger does not do this, and helps make the plots of some of the more ornate operas seem comprehensible, no mean feat.

Kelly, Thomas Forrest. First Nights: Five Musical Premieres. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000.

This is the kind of music history that I would like to write one day. It is an absolutely fascinating historical survey of musical premieres, one of which is Monteverdi's *Orfeo*. Kelly tells us about the composition of the work and its rehearsal, the circumstances of the first performance, who was there, who played it, and what the audience thought. Well-researched and entertainingly written.

Kelly, Thomas Forrest. First Nights at the Opera. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.

A sequel to *First Nights*, taking on five opera premieres – Handel's *Giulio Cesare*, Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots*, Wagner's *Das Rheingold*, and Verdi's *Otello*. Equally good! Kelly is actually a Medieval music specialist, which is probably part of what has given him such outstanding research skills.

Gossett, Philip. Divas and Scholars. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006.

Philip Gossett is an important scholar of 19<sup>th</sup> century Italian opera, and that importance and authority is present on every page of this book. He seems to have been everywhere, talked to everyone, and knows everything. His lack of modesty in his writing can be irritating but is somewhat deserved. This is a marvelous book. It examines the staging of Italian opera today – what do we have to be aware of historically to properly perform these works? Gosset's knowledge is encyclopedic, and consistently interesting.

Gilbert, W. S. The Annotated Gilbert and Sullivan. Edited by Ian Bradley. London: Penguin, 1989.

I adore Gilbert and Sullivan, but sometimes their librettos include a fair number of dated topical jokes. And who can really understand every word of those patter songs? This book contains the librettos for some of their most popular operettas, with explanations for all the references.

## PERFORMANCE

Berger, Manuel. Die Neuen Singenstimmen. Berlin: Henschel Verlag, 2003.

I bought this book at Ludwig Beck, a department store/classical CD store in Marienplatz in downtown Munich (I wish that combination would happen more here). The title translates as “The New Singers’ Voices,” and “new” here means not yet retired. I had just seen a lot of European opera, and had never heard of many of the singers. This book is a survey of opera singers popular in Germany (some of whom are popular in the US as well, some not), mostly biographical information and some gossip (WHICH famous singer gets so many jobs at the Salzburg Festival because his wife has society connections?) Reading it improved my German musical vocabulary a great deal, so I can now say in German “He sang too much Wagner in the mid nineties and now has giant holes in his once-magnificent tenor.”

Fleming, Renée. The Inner Voice: The Making of a Singer. New York: Penguin, 2005.

Renee Fleming is a bit of a puzzle. Her memoir is somewhat like her singing: always professional, but never very personalized or revealing. It’s an enjoyable enough

read, and the writing is much better than some such ventures, and she comes across as down-to-earth and good at what she does. But we never really get to know her inner life.

Fiedler, Johanna. Molto Agitato. New York: Bantam, 2001.

This is a tremendously trashy book, much less respectable and polite than Berger or Fleming. It's a history of New York's Met Opera, one of the largest and most monumental opera houses in the world. Fiedler's sources appear to be mostly disgruntled stagehands and musicians, who share some very questionable gossip and rumors. Fiedler is fond of declaring singers to be untalented, difficult, morally bankrupt divas and divos, with the exception of a few, who are angelic and talented (one suspects they were her sources). All this being said, this book is somewhat impossible to put down.

Fischer-Dieskau, Dietrich. Reverberations. Translated by Ruth Hein. New York: Fromm, 1995.

Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau is an autobiographer similar to Renée Fleming, unfortunately. However, his life has been considerably more eventful than hers, and this book is consistently more interesting. He was (he is still alive but retired from singing) one of the greatest baritones of the twentieth century, and knew almost everyone who was important in music at the time. Unfortunately again, this is a dreadful and almost unreadable translation, showing all the hallmarks of German syntax that don't work in English. Hopefully I'll be able to find this book in German someday.

Vickers, Hugh. Great Opera Disasters. New York: St. Martins, 1980.

Any art as complicated as opera is going to have its disastrous moments, and this book collects some of the most dramatic and amusing examples (some apocryphal, but nonetheless entertaining). The most famous is probably from *Tosca*. At the end of the opera, Tosca kills herself by throwing herself off the ramparts of the castle. One Tosca had gotten the stagehands mad somehow, and they substituted the mattress she was supposed to fall on with a trampoline. Hilarity ensued as Tosca bounced back up above the castle, in full view of the audience.

Pratchett, Ann. Bel Canto. New York: Harper, 2002.

This is a fairly well-known and beautifully written novel about a state dinner in a South American nation that goes horribly wrong when guerillas take the entire government and VIPs hostage, including a famous opera singer who was to perform that evening. Strange relationships develop between the hostages and their captors, and of course it does not end well. The singer is supposedly based on Renée Fleming, who helped Pratchett get the details right (Pratchett returned the favor by polishing Fleming's prose in *The Inner Voice*).

## THEORY

Kerman, Joseph. Opera and Drama. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956, revised 1988.

This is the granddaddy of all opera analysis books. The title is a nod to Wagner's "Opera and Drama," and was the first major attempt to integrate analysis of the dramatic and musical material of opera. Kerman is too much of a purist and throws many repertoire babies out with much bathwater (such as Strauss's *Rosenkavalier*, and he even goes as far as to criticize *Don Giovanni*). This is a recently revised edition, with some of the more incendiary comments toned down (the first edition is in Underhill, I once compared the two to interesting effect). His opinions may be dated and irritating, but his mode of analysis has been too influential to ignore, and some of his insights can be

Abbate, Carolyn. In Search of Opera. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.

Carolyn Abbate is today's leading opera scholar, and this book shows us why. She is not historically oriented like Kelly, and treats opera somewhat like a close reading literary theorist might. But she fully accounts for the music's role in an opera's proceedings. Her theories center around the concept of "voice" in performance, and the tricks composers can play when they put music into their characters mouths. It's a complex theory that can't be done justice here, but cannot be ignored.

Conrad, Peter. A Song of Love and Death. New York: Poseidon Press, 1987.

A major problem in opera scholarship is that many books are written by non-musicians, such as Peter Conrad here. Many opera lovers who are scholars in other fields consider the librettos but do not have the training or inclination to analyze the music. Conrad is not the most egregious example of this, and comes up with some interesting observations, mixed in with a certain amount of gushing. His writing on Mozart is particularly insightful. A book on the border of appreciation and scholarship, but perceptive and original enough to belong in this category.

Robinson, Paul. Opera and Ideas. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985.

Robinson is a historian, not a trained musician, but while his main point of entry into opera analysis remains the libretto he accounts for the music far more thoroughly than most, and this book is well worth reading. Opera and Ideas concentrates principally on political and social theory in operas by Mozart, Rossini, Verdi, Wagner, and Strauss, with an excellent side trip into art song for a chapter on Schubert's *Winterreise*. Sometimes Robinson's analyses wander into the nether-regions of interpretation, but are always insightful and plausible.

Lindenberger, Herbert. Opera, the Extravagant Art. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984.

Herbert Lindenberger is almost a musician, and writes about music quite well. His book is more historically based than most of the others in this section, and Lindenberger's wide reading in 19<sup>th</sup> century literature and philosophy serves him well. Sometimes the seemingly random organization of this book can be irritating, but the index is decent.

Zizek, Slavoj, and Dolar, Mladen. Opera's Second Death. London: Routledge, 2001.

Zizek is kind of heavy going, but penetrating his prose is really worth it. (Dolar's section is more comprehensible.) He takes a highly theoretical, primarily Lacanian approach to analyzing opera from around Mozart to Berg. His central thesis is brilliant: opera's first death was just as it was being born, opera has always been a "dead" art and all composers have been concerned with reviving it. Opera's second death happened somewhere between the late works of Wagner (my favorite marking point) and Puccini's *Turandot* (1920), and is closely related to the rise of psychoanalysis.

Poizat, Michel. The Angel's Cry: Beyond the Pleasure Principal in Opera. Translated by Arthur Denner. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986, this translation, 1992.

Poizat is similar to Zizek in style, but considers things from more of a theatrical and less of a psychological point of view, and would probably count his primary influence to be Foucault rather than Lacan.

Steinberg, Michael P. Listening to Reason. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

Michael P. Steinberg is a brilliant theorist (though a different person from the Michael Steinberg who wrote *The Symphony*). In this book, he considers the influence of Enlightenment thought and definitions of 'reason' on music in the "long" nineteenth century (the French revolution to World War I, or, musically, from Mozart to Bartòk). He can somewhat vague sometimes, but his occasionally complicated and vaguely explained ideas are almost always worth untangling.

Magee, Bryan. The Tristan Chord: Wagner and Philosophy. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001.

It's hard to find good books on Wagner. Most authors either are disciples or hate him utterly. Magee is more of a disciple, but this book is still worth reading for its explanation of the influence of Schoepenhauer's philosophy on Wagner's works. I find his writing on *Parsifal* somewhat unconvincing, but I find anyone who can enjoy that five and a half hour snore somewhat incomprehensible. I am forever indebted to hi, however, for his *Ring des Nibelungen* section.

Wagner, Richard. Art and Politics. Translated by William Ashton Ellis. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995.

Once one has done some background reading on Wagner, the best place to go is the man himself. His writings fill a number of volumes, which are arranged thematically. I find "Opera and Drama" most interesting, but I have this one because it was remaindered and cost \$7 instead of the usual \$28. This is an excellent translation, and as much as I hate Wagner the man, this book contains some of his most influential writings.

## HUMOR and TRIVIA

Körner, Wolfgang. Der einzige wahre Opernführer. München: Wunderlich, 2003.

I bought this book in Thalia, a bookstore on Mariahilferstrasse in Vienna. It is a parody of the “Opernführer,” (the title translates as “The Only True Opera Guide,” meaning the only truthful one) a German sort of opera guide similar to my Penguin Book of Opera. The plot summaries are questionably accurate and parodic, and each summary is followed by the number of characters who are dead at the end of the opera, whether you should go and see it or not, and what musical highlights or tunes to listen for (for the more modern of the operas, the reader who wants to hear tunes is dismissed as, literally, a silly goat). For some “one hit” operas, the operagoer is reminded to “close the door *gently* as you leave” after the one big number.

Harris, Kenn. The Ultimate Opera Quiz Book. London: Penguin, 1981.

This book makes me feel kind of stupid. I don’t know most of the answers. Most of the quizzes are kind of fun, though. I think it’s aimed at people who have subscribed for 30 years to an opera house whose repertoire is about 25 operas, which they have seen over and over again. Then, they can remember the name of the page who brings Elisabetta a letter in Act III scene iv. Check back with me in 20 years, maybe I’ll be doing better then.

By the way, the author of this book is a quite visible presence on the Internet. As might be expected, he is a rather irritating know-it-all.

Groover, David and Conner, Cecil. Skeletons from the Opera Closet. London: Moyer Bell, 1994.

This is a very odd book, but not unenjoyable. Sometimes the style is somewhat impenetrable, and it seems to be written for a tremendously specific audience, namely sardonic opera fans in their elder years (most likely opera queens – a non-derogatory term for gay men who love opera). It is a collection of anecdotes of both composers and performers, some of somewhat dubious historical authenticity. The organization seems random, but almost everything is interesting in some way. Sometimes Groover and Conner can be a refreshingly sarcastic break from the more earnest, ambitious, and academic Conrad, Robinson, and co., but I would never use this book in a research paper. They do say some things that no one else seems to dare to, such as that no one wants to see a fat singer.

Slominsky, Nicholas. Lexicon of Musical Invective. New York: Norton, 2000. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed)

This book has a simple but brilliant concept: bad reviews of works by great composers. It is a collection of horrible, insulting, and sometimes perceptive pannings by music critics famous and obscure, of composers from around Beethoven to the mid-twentieth century, of works famous (mostly) and forgotten (a few). They are fun reading, and a god reminder that the present day and history may have differing opinions.

Parrott, E.O., ed. How to be tremendously tuned into opera. London: Penguin, 1991.

This is an oh so British collection of opera humor, some of it depending on in-jokes I don’t always quite get but most of it hilarious. The main section is a motley

collection of plot summaries – many in verse of various meters (particularly limericks), others in odd genres (Verdi's *Falstaff* as an advice column, *Cosi fan tutte* as relayed by Damian Runyan). Not quite as irreverent as Körner, but more imaginative.