

Vocal Apparitions: The Attractions of Cinema to Opera. By Michal Grover-Friedlander. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005. (Princeton Studies in Operas; no. 14) xii, 186 pp. \$44.00. ISBN 0691120080

The author of this intriguingly titled book refers to her introduction as a manifesto. The term is well chosen for, without the critical framework of this manifesto, the book would otherwise fall into a collection of somewhat disparate essays. A book dealing with the relationship between opera and cinema might take a variety of approaches, ranging from the encyclopedic to the philosophic. Grover-Friedlander favours the latter:

This book is about cinema's attraction to the operatic voice: not about any and all points of contact between cinema and opera but rather about films that thematize the power that opera has over film—thematize, so to speak, their own "pull" toward opera. I explore cinema's acknowledgment of opera's power over it and account for this extreme attraction to opera. (1)

To make this journey with the author, one must be prepared to accept a view of opera as a medium, as opposed to a musical genre or style. Furthermore, four premises are expostulated which influence the following chapters: 1) the belief that the aesthetic foundation of opera conceives itself through "*the idea* of the operatic voice,"¹ 2) that death is immanent in the operatic voice, 3)

¹ The author explains this concept as follows: "Opera's voices and, with them, *the idea* of the operatic voice are unique to its world; the medium conceives of itself through its voices. . . . [opera] engenders a state in which one is always listening in anticipation of, or listening toward, a place where one knows beautiful singing will take place" (3).

that "operatic deaths replay the medium's primal 'Orphic death'" (the relationship between song, optical elements and death), and 4) that song in opera is ultimately terminated by a visual interjection. These concepts build upon earlier research undertaken by Carolyn Abbate, Stanley Cavell, Catherine Clémont and others who have sought to examine opera from perspectives other than purely musical analyses. Grover-Friedlander admits her concept of the "operatic voice" has inherently Italianate origins and characteristics. Thus the core of her argument becomes less convincing with other operatic traditions. This is likely the reason there is no discussion of Russian film and opera, and the French and German traditions receive but passing references.

The single chapter on silent film deals almost exclusively with film representations of Gaston Leroux's 1911 novel, *The Phantom of the Opera*. While it is true the novel's action takes place predominantly in the Palais Garnier opera house in Paris, and is largely concerned with finding the operatic voice, the work is not an opera. In addition, the choice of examining as a single entity several highly different film adaptations (not all of them silent) complicates issues further.

Other examples could have been taken as the premise for the chapter. Enrico Caruso appeared in the 1918 silent film, *My Cousin*, playing two roles, one of which was an operatic singer. Taking the leading operatic tenor of the day and asking him to play the part of a singer, while at the same time silencing his real voice, would seem a more

potent illustration of the “cinema’s attraction to the operatic voice” than the various adaptations of Leroux’s melodrama. That said, the book is not encyclopedic in nature, and there is likely more to be gained by closely examining a limited number of examples than by listing every appearance of Geraldine Farrar in a silent film or all of the operatic scenes and arias made by Rosa Raisa, Beniamino Gigli and others in sound films.

One of the most intriguing chapters comes with the author’s assessment of the Marx Brothers’ *A Night at the Opera*. This chapter (a reworked journal article) reminds the reader most forcefully of not only the shared comic genius of the Marx Brothers, but also their great understanding of the art form of opera. Grover-Friedlander shows them to be far more than slapstick comics, but possessing the interpretative abilities of “visualizing the performativity of music” (38). The chapter can be read with profit by all students of film and opera.

The next two chapters move in a different direction and deal with divergent film adaptations of Verdi’s last two operas: Franco Zeffirelli’s *Otello* (1986) and Götz Friedrich’s *Falstaff* (1979). In analyzing the two films, Grover-Friedlander examines issues associated with the cinematic production of opera and the degree to which the movie can escape the confines of the opera house to provide differing interpretative perspectives of the original work. Both chapters contain music examples and still photographs taken from the movies. The music examples are used with varying degrees of effectiveness, but the reproduction of the photographs is uniformly poor.

The final two chapters venture farther afield. Chapter 5 examines the relationships between Cocteau’s play, *La voix humaine*, Rossellini’s film, *Una voce umana*, and Poulenc’s setting of the Cocteau play. The telephone is seen as an ally of another machine, the camera, in a work which “participates in traditional opera fantasies of death” (130). Of course, the audience is treated to only one side of a conversation between a woman and the lover who has abandoned her. The audience does not hear the other side, and the machine is used to “manifest the deadly power assigned to the invisible voice of the other (or to the invisible other within the voice)” (115).

After such a wide-ranging discourse, I had hoped for a final chapter that would present a coherent synthesis of the ideas explored. Alas, “Fellini’s Ashes” strays even farther by taking Fellini’s premise that Italian cinema was a “dead” art and linking it to the author’s belief that “since Wagner, opera has been concerned with its own extinction” (132), which strikes me as an arbitrary generalization. Admittedly, Grover-Friedlander states in an endnote that her “aim is not to assess opera’s and cinema’s death in relation to theories about the death of art, but to interpret a moment in which the death of opera erupts as cinema’s figure for its own death” (176)—but assumptions are made which do not bear close scrutiny. Nor does the invocation of Maria Callas’s death really strengthen the author’s conclusion that “film, without allowing opera to die in its place, rises from the ashes of opera” (152).

Although I find this book to be uneven, its best can be very good. A major frustration, however, is the reader cannot locate easily the publications of the authorities whom Grover-Friedlander

discusses. There is no bibliography, leaving the reader to search through twenty-eight pages of endnotes. This is not a long book, and the inclusion of a few more pages for bibliographical references would not have increased the cost of production dramatically. As noted above, greater care could have been given to the reproduction of the photographs. Finally, this is *not* a book

which provides detailed stylistic information on a variety of operas or films, but it might nevertheless serve to encourage the examination of ideas and relationships. As such, it will have appeal for some upper-level undergraduate and graduate students.

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