A Season of Opera: From Orpheus to Ariadne. By M. Owen Lee. Toronto, Ont.: University of Toronto Press, 1998. 264 p. ISBN 0-8020-4296-1 $30.00

Father M. Owen Lee reminds me of my favorite pastor, who would start his sermons with a story of his life, then would weave into his tale both the Gospel message and its meaning today. In much the same way, Lee explains and contemporizes the messages and stories of various operas to a modern audience. His use of anecdotes, analogies, intuitive leaps and, most especially, his extensive knowledge of classical literature brings to life aspects of many well-known operas. Combined with an energetic and easy-flowing writing style, it makes this book a pleasure to read.

In fact, Lee's preface draws an analogy between his collection of essays, which he has written and presented over the years on Met broadcasts and for journals and newspapers, and the odes of Horace. Both authors attempt to give their contemporaries a work that, though built on myths and genres of the past, is palpable to their audience. Lee's observations on operas from the first works of Peri and Monteverdi through those of Gershwin and Richard Rodgers were designed for readers who already have some knowledge of the pieces. However, those who desire to delve more deeply into subjects will be frustrated by the lack of footnotes (which Lee acknowledges is not ideal but consistent with the format of his previously-published books), and annoyed with a few rather naive or excessively broad statements. Some of the essays also vary in quality.

This book is divided into 23 chapters. Both of the first and last are surveys of the origins of opera and the future of the genre, serving as bookends to topics touched on throughout. The themes of the other essays include the story of an opera, aspects of an opera's principal character, contradictions found in a work, and meaning of an opera, as well as the author's observations about some other aspect of a work, genre or composer's style.

The opening chapter, "The Birth of Opera from the Spirit of Orpheus," provides an overview of both opera's beginnings and the genre's long affair with the Orpheus myth. The reader is also introduced to many of the strengths of Lee's writing. His classical knowledge is used to explain not only the use of mythology in operas of all centuries, but that opera itself has created its own myth. His ability to make links is demonstrated in how he sees Orphean themes surface in other operas on other subjects, such as Tristan's bringing Isolde from day/conscious to night/subconscious as a reversal of Orpheus's bringing Euridice from dark/death to light/life. Lee points out connections that probably many readers have already made subconsciously.

On the other hand, the final chapter, "Hurry Up Please Its Time," reveals some of the weaknesses in the style and depth of the book, although certainly the author's literary knowledge is demonstrated, including borrowing the chapter title form T.S. Eliot and revealing Wagner's various influences on writers. Firstly, the use of exclusive language in a sentence later in the chapter. Secondly, Lee's presentation concerning 20th century opera is really about the first half of the period, and in his valiant attempt to mention

every male composer (women composers are ignored altogether), he barely discusses works by Britten, the Russians, and North Americans with the exception of composers of musicals and popular song. The selection of *Ariadne auf Naxos* as the best opera of the century reinforces these criticisms. While *Ariadne* serves as a natural conclusion toa book that begins with Orphean operas, with classical mythology winding like Ariadne's thread through most chapters, the choice is old-fashioned. Lee then focuses on the plot of *Ariadne* and barely mentions the music (a recurrent problem with the book). Surely the selection of the best opera of the century would include the merits of both text *and* music.

The plot summaries range in their usefulness. Chapter 8, about *Il Trovatore*, is probably the best logical re-telling of the story one could ask for. Chapter 16 introduces the little-known *Palestrina* by Pfitzner, while Chapter 15, Lee's acknowledged centrepiece on *Tristan und Isolde*, adds interpretive commentary (via Buddhism as well as Schopenhauer) and analogies (the parallels with Catherine and Heathcliff), that help to make sense of an opera that, as Lee states, drove some to madness or at least to flee the theatre before Act III. Chapter 6, about *L'Elisor d'amore*, although not particularly enlightening, provides a style break from the preceding weightier chapters. The previous one, about *Fidelio*, falls into the principal operatic character group, and begins with a wonderful story about a Met experience Lee had at the top of the Family Circle that introduces the concept that Fidelio is seen by the people of many cultures as a liberator. Chapter 9 does not state anything new about *La Traviata*, but the history of the real person after whom *Rienzi* is named (Chapter 14), makes some ironic statements about the fascist rulers such as Hitler and Mussolini, whose careers and demise were similar to Rienzi's.

These chapters about contradictions in particular operas also nothing new about the partial reforms in this opera, and surely Gluck would shudder to be called a German. However, instrumentalists will appreciate when an opera writer dwells in an orchestral movement (Elysian Fields). *Don Giovanni* and its contradictions is an excellent example of the flow and beauty of Lee's writing, which is so easy to absorb that it is possible some readers may actually accept the comment that all men wish they were as promiscuous, treacherous and murderous as the "hero" himself. While one can appreciate most of Lee's observations about Berlioz's *Les Troyens* (Chapter 13), it is unclear that the divergence of the plot from Virgil's story and the lack of historical metaphor detracts in any way from an opera that has such a unique and sensual musical style along with the wonderfully balanced outer acts that juxtapose the passion of the two principal characters, Cassandra and Dido. On the other hand, Lee's enthusiasm for Virgil and his presentation of Berlioz's adaption may incite a desire to read *The Aeneid.*

The same kinds of inconsistencies also pervade those chapters on the meaning of an opera, as well as those that present personal observation. Chapters on *La forza del destino* (Chapter 10), *Falstaff* (Chapter 12) and *Salome* (Chapter 17) were not particularly enlightening. However, Lee's discussion of the meaning of *The Magic Flute* (Chapter 4) and *Dialogues of the Carmelites* (Chapter 20) are excellent and concise. His observations about the unjustly ignored history of popular song in America and its relationship to *Porgy*

and Bess (Chapter 21) as well as *Oklahoma!* (Chapter 22) are valuable additions. However, Chapter 18, about *Manon Lescaut*, was neither clear in point or in musical evidence, and I found myself wanting to argue with parts of Chapter 19 devoted to *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Lee "quotes" Debussy without references, makes some misleading comments (Debussy detested being described as an impressionist), and doesn't really make a point. The most rewarding essays are Chapter 11, in which he draws an analogy between *Anthony and Cleopatra* and *Aïda*, and Chapter 7, which demonstrates how Whitman's poetry helps encapsulate humanity's love of *bel canto*.

The two additional segments labelled "Further Reading" and "Recordings and Videos" are helpful. The former provides succinct descriptions of the contents and usefulness of each book or series named, while the latter offers Lee's preferred performances in each medium with justification.

In spite of some unevenness in quality of content and originality, this charmingly-written book, which completes Lee's three-volume opera series, will provide opera lovers with essays on most of the nineteenth-century repertoire and some outside. Lee succeeds much like my pastor in making the connections that a contemporary audience needs to relate to many of these works. The author's enthusiasm for classical studies and opera cannot help but make itself felt to its readers.

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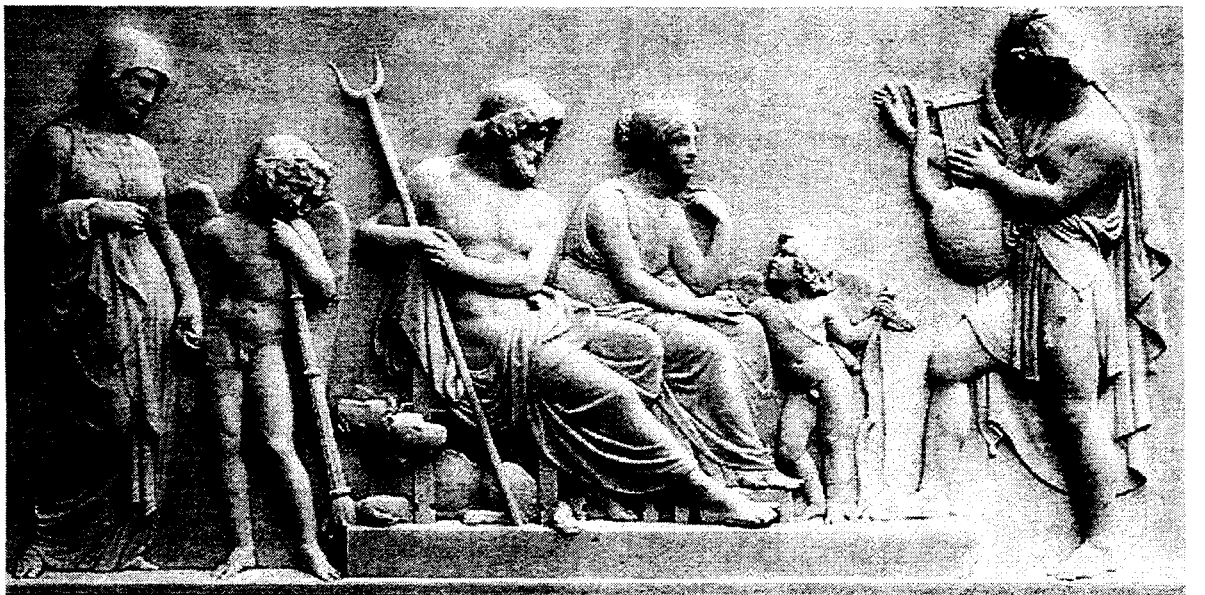

H. W. Bissen, 1798-1868: Orpheus pleading with Pluto and Proserpina to restore Eurydice to him. Photo © Maicar Förlag - GML.