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At first glance, Marcia J. Citron’s book, Opera on Screen, appears to be a scholarly study of filmed opera, but it is perhaps more accurately described as an homage to several film-operas made in the twentieth-century. Citron is so enthusiastic in her critiques of the works of Franco Zeffirelli, Elijah Moshinsky, Brian Large, Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger, Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, Francesco Rosi, Joseph Losey, and Peter Sellars that she could convince any reader that film-opera is an expressive and exciting art form. In a time when technology intrudes into every aspect of life, Citron’s optimistic view of what can be achieved by combining new technologies with old art forms is encouraging and inspiring.

Opera on Screen is neatly organized and written using terminology even non-experts can understand. Citron separates her discussion into six distinct sections. The first chapter introduces Citron as an author and how she came to write her book. Citron also uses her introduction to outline the specific works discussed over the course of the book and to establish the elements in each work she will focus on before evaluating their effectiveness as films. Some of these elements include the function of the camera, the directors’ use of non-musical noise, and the role of music in these films. Citron addresses opera’s multi-disciplinarity upfront, admitting that while she applies theories from many different fields to her study, she is a musicologist at heart (3).

The second chapter of Opera on Screen briefly and efficiently outlines the history of filmed opera and the connections between opera and film as art forms. Citron explains the different uses of filmed opera and how these uses differ between cultures,
such as opera-films of the United States and those of Europe. Citron does address the worry of many scholars that film-opera will someday replace live opera, but also includes arguments by several scholars who claim that the filming of operas has forced opera performers to improve their acting skills. Harrison Lawler, in an article for The Etude in 1936, “predicted...that the Metropolitan Opera would turn to Hollywood for its talent”(30). Lawler claimed that the Metropolitan Opera would begin hiring Hollywood performers instead of seasoned opera singers, resulting in job loss for trained professionals. Citron uses Lawler’s claim to imply performers would feel pressure to appeal to the audience and cameras to avoid being replaced by Hollywood actors, therefore improving the experiences of both in-house audiences and viewers of the films. By addressing the criticisms of some scholars and logically countering with opinions from other experts, Citron strengthens her own argument that film-opera is a legitimate and exciting art form, one that does not threaten the genre of live opera, but complements it.

The remaining four chapters study films based on the operas Otello, Les Contes d’Hoffman, Parsifal, Carmen, Don Giovanni, Giulio Cesare, Le nozze di Figaro, and Così fan tutte. For some of the works, such as Otello, Citron examines multiple films based on the same source opera to show the different directions in which filmmakers took the material. She pairs other films based upon the elements they share, such as her choice of adaptations for Carmen and Don Giovanni, both of which incorporate outdoor settings. Citron dissects specific scenes to show how the films’ directors interpreted or changed the original works. She also discusses the personal and professional backgrounds of the directors themselves, to explain the artistic choices they make. The only information on filmed operas not covered in Citron’s study are the histories and synopses of the original source material. Because of this omission, a reader unfamiliar with any of the operas studied may have difficulty following the scene discussions without supplementary reading material. The final chapter’s most intriguing aspect is its discussion of the future of filmed opera with respect to the development of technology used for filming and viewing the works. Citron’s observations and predictions help to clarify her views on the subject, but merit further expansion, given she condensed them into only one, short paragraph. Most of Citron’s book supports her main argument, but does not reference it directly, so a stronger conclusion would have tied all of her points together.

In his review of Opera on Screen, Jeongwon Joe states that, although opera and film are deeply connected art forms, there have been very few full-length books that examine their connection.¹ This makes Citron’s study incredibly significant. Moreover, widespread worries that film will someday replace live opera have caused many opera

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enthusiasts to write scholarly journal articles and books that discuss the shortcomings of filmed opera. Citron, on the other hand, maintains an optimistic view of the benefits of filming operas. She uses her study to show that films made from operas need not replace the original source material but can become works of art in their own right.

One valuable device Citron uses to demonstrate how film directors have turned operas into their own works of art is by connecting elements of the films to the directors’ personal lives. For example, Citron discusses the images of Catholicism incorporated by Franco Zeffirelli into his version of Otello. The character of Otello mentions prayer at one point in the opera, and Desdemona sings a prayer in another scene, but the original source material makes no other reference to religion. The set pieces of Zeffirelli’s version contain many Catholic icons and crucifixes. Citron explains the additional imagery by alluding to Zeffirelli’s own religious beliefs, writing “he has made a conscious effort to thematize religion in his productions ever since a serious automobile accident in 1969” (93). Another example includes Citron’s highlighting of the parallel between Don Giovanni’s refusal to repent before his death and the life of director Joseph Losey, who was blackballed from Hollywood in 1951 after refusing to provide names for the House Committee on Un-American Activities (178). These anecdotes brilliantly show how deeply the directors were able to insert themselves into their works, due to the artistic freedom provided by the new medium. This inclusion of background information also shows Citron has carefully studied not only the films themselves, but also the people who made them.

One controversial device used by film-opera directors is vocal dubbing. In many cases, directors make this choice so the audio track can be recorded at the highest quality possible while the singer is free to perform for the camera uninhibited by “proper” posture and vocal technique. Citron assumes a unique approach to this topic, highlighting examples where performers are dubbed not only for practical purposes, but also to reveal characteristics of the story or characters. For example, in chapter four, Citron discusses how two separate actors portray the titular character in Hans-Jürgen Syberberg’s Parsifal, each lip-synching to an audio track recorded by another singer. One of the actors is a “feminine” boy, while the other is a “masculine” young woman (148). Alternating actors shows how the character of Parsifal develops over the course of the opera. Citron states that the male actor’s lip-synching is crude, but he may be using the lack of synchronization between lip movements and audio intentionally to reflect the innocence of his character (153). The result, she effectively argues, is not a poor performance, but a human puppet show, incorporating yet another art form into this multi-disciplinary presentation.

One of the most important issues Citron examines in her book is how, in some cases, the medium of film can provide more artistic freedom for directors and performers than the medium of staged theatre does. The fifth chapter of Opera on Screen
discusses Francesco Rosi and Joseph Losey’s uses of outdoor filming locations in their versions of *Carmen* and *Don Giovanni*, respectively. Citron states that when directors enfold nature and architecture in the filming process, the scenery can actually shape the meaning of the drama (161). Outdoor settings and camera angles can also create distance between the spectator and the characters. With close-ups, filmmakers can establish a more intimate familiarity between viewers and performers than on a theatrical stage, but the use of long shots in an exterior setting can have the reverse effect. As Citron states, “The avoidance of close-up affirms separation” (171). This separation between the audience and performers diminishes the characters, presenting them as representatives of their social class or race, rather than beings with their own personal stories.

One issue with Citron’s writing is her use of the term “diegetic music.” According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, diegetic music is music of or pertaining to a narrative, or more simply music that takes place within a story. All dialogue is sung in most operas, so a distinction must be made between whether a character is singing to express their feelings and reveal plot points, or if they are singing to themselves or other characters within the scene. Diegetic music would be that which the characters are aware of as the scene unfolds. Citron, however, defines “operatic” music as diegetic and the accompaniment or background music as non-diegetic (22). This leads to some confusion when she makes the distinction between “diegetic and non-diegetic singing” in Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger’s *Tales of Hoffman* (123). Fortunately, Citron does not spend much time focusing on the distinction between the two types of music, but the resulting confusion from the passage dedicated to this issue greatly diminishes the effectiveness of her analysis.

In Citron’s scholarly journal articles, "'An Honest Contrivance': Opera and Desire in 'Moonstruck',' and "A Night at the Cinema: Zeffirelli’s *Otello* and the Genre of Film-Opera," the article that inspired *Opera on Screen*, she uses several visual aids to illustrate her arguments. One tool she uses in these texts to highlight the specific passages she discusses is the inclusion of score excerpts. Citron includes no such excerpts in *Opera on Screen*, yet the study frequently becomes so specific that following her observations without visual assistance requires intense concentration. Indeed, because her study is focused on film, the most useful supplementary aids would have included video clips. Obviously these cannot be incorporated into a book, so Citron should not be blamed for

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this issue. Perhaps Citron’s work could be improved if it was linked to a companion website that featured access to such videos. She does include several stills from the films she discusses, but not effectively, as the images do little to support any of the arguments she makes. Illustrations of specific scenery pieces she discusses would have been more helpful than the images of the performers she does include.

The uniqueness of Citron’s book is perhaps best appreciated after reading several other studies on similar topics. For example, W. Anthony Sheppard’s article "Review of the Metropolitan Opera’s New HD Movie Theater Broadcasts" focuses on the experience of an audience member viewing a filmed opera in a cinema. Although he does mention Citron’s study and the ways in which the camera alters the viewer’s perception of the drama, Sheppard does not mention ways film directors enhance or alter original operas. He instead compares and contrasts the atmosphere of the cinema with that of the opera house, discussing the level of formality and the audience members’ comfort with voicing their opinions. Other texts, such as “Television and Opera” by Kenneth A. Wright, focus on practical adjustments directors must make when filming operas, such as ensuring a location is lit brightly enough for the camera to capture the scene, and cutting out some of the original score to ensure the film’s duration is shorter than the audience’s attention span. These articles compare the technical aspects of the different art forms, but unfortunately do not promote the benefits of filming opera. Citron does spend some time examining the practical changes directors make, but the main focus of her book is to show artistic options the medium provides for filmmakers. As a result, she establishes film-opera as an art form separate from opera and validates the argument that one art form need not replace the other.

Although the lack of visual aids and information on source materials make Citron’s writing hard to follow at times, Opera on Screen is overall very clear and persuasive. Citron makes her purpose in writing this book apparent, and takes the time to explain exactly why the subject matter is so important to her. She describes certain scenes from film-operas in such reverent detail that she entices the reader to unearth each video she mentions for his or her own viewing pleasure. Now that thirteen years have passed since the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is surprising so few music scholars have embraced film-opera and examined its potential, especially when the Metropolitan Opera House is so intent on making filmed opera accessible to everyone.
Hopefully more writers will add to the discussion Citron has begun, as time continues on and more opera scholars realize the artistic potential this hybrid genre holds.

For Further Reading:


