Situating Opera: Period, Genre, Reception, by Herbert Lindenberger.
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Situating Opera: Period, Genre, Reception is a collection of essays by Herbert Lindenberger, published in 2010 by Cambridge University Press. The primary theme explored in this book is the interdisciplinarity of the burgeoning field of opera studies. Each of the nine essays considers the study of opera through a variety of different lenses, demonstrating the many ways in which one can come to understand the art form. The diversity of perspectives Lindenberger presents in these essays are a compelling demonstration of the author’s knowledge, but may leave the reader initially confused as to the book’s central content. The subject of each essay is often distinctly different from the last, demanding from the reader an attentive mind to draw the necessary connections. Despite its often-obfuscated central point, Situating Opera is a rich and eclectic book that is both informative and entertaining. As one progresses through the book, Lindenberger’s central point becomes more intelligible, and any initial confusion subsides into triumph.

The book begins with a prologue in which the author engages in a dialogue with himself, discussing the essays to follow. This section is quite comical and acts to welcome the reader. I particularly enjoyed the opening two lines in which the author, demonstrating a mature self-awareness, asks himself: “Still another book on opera?” to which he replies, “You mean by me or in general?” (1) The dialogue is a mixture of Lindenberger defending himself from his own criticisms in a rather comedic fashion and a brief explanation of the purposes behind the book.
Continuing with the personal tone established in the prologue, the book begins with the essay entitled: “Anatomy of a Warhorse: Il travatore from A to Z.” This essay features a variety of the author’s opinions on Giuseppe Verdi’s opera under an assortment of provocative subheadings. Examples of these subheadings include: “Foursome,” “Kultur,” and “X-Rated.” One feature I found interesting was Lindenberger’s use of embedded brackets within the text to guide the reader to other subheadings and essays, for instance: “(See: Gesamtkunstwerk).” Often times these brackets send the reader to material deeper in the text or back to what was previously read, suggesting a bidirectional ordering of concepts. Overall, Lindenberger’s first essay provides an interesting look into some of his own beliefs regarding Il travatore, but this text also carries with it a sense that the real depth of the author’s knowledge awaits in later essays. In another display of self-awareness, Lindenberger finishes the essay with the subheading, “Yawn,” as if to recognize how dull this initial essay is compared to the ones to follow. It is debatable whether this is an intentional detail implanted by the author, or a coincidence of the alphabetical ordering of subheadings. Given Lindenberger’s experience and artistic knowledge, I suspect the former.

Shifting from the friendly and welcoming tone of the first essay, essay two, entitled: “On Opera and Society (Assuming a Relationship),” begins exploring deeper social meanings in opera. Here, Lindenberger expands his examination of opera beyond his own personal views and begins to reference many other scholars. I cannot emphasize many enough, as the plethora of references in this essay is quite impressive. In this piece the author engages with opera studies through the lens of sociology and cultural studies, mentioning thinkers such as Theodor Adorno, Michel Foucault, and Pierre Bourdieu. I particularly enjoyed the discussion of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s use of Turkish music in his opera, Die Entführung aus dem Serail, and how this opera has come to be understood following the publishing of Edward Said’s Orientalism. The delicacy and expertise with which Lindenberger approaches the theme of orientalism in Mozart operas is echoed by Herbert Josephs in his review of Lindenberger’s work, Opera in History: From Monteverdi to Cage. The vast breadth of authors and themes explored in the second essay of Situating Opera is indicative of Lindenberger’s knowledge, but I am given the impression that to fully comprehend the author’s point, the reader must become familiar with a great deal of material outside of this book. I believe the level of depth, although no doubt informative, impairs the intelligibility of Lindenberger’s text, and in some ways contributes to an initial sense of confusion. This appears to be a common problem in Lindenberger’s work, as author W. G. Regier points out in a review of Lindenberger’s previous book, Opera: The Extravagant Art, that “The book’s comprehensiveness is at once its greatest source of compliment and complaint.”

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Opera as well, a fact made clear quite clear in the second essay.

The third essay entitled: “Opera and the Novel: Antithetical or Complementary?” explores the relationship between music and literature, providing a rather different perspective from the previous essay. Lindenberger demonstrates his expertise in comparative literature, exploring opera as it contrasts the novel and questions whether the two mediums are truly in opposition, as many writers have argued. For instance, Friedrich Nietzsche argued in *The Birth of Tragedy* that opera’s attempt at engaging both the musical and conceptual faculties through mixing music with text violated the Apollonian and Dionysian dichotomy necessary for true drama.³ Lindenberger also considers the controversial criticisms of opera by Theodor Adorno. Adorno’s criticisms are particularly stinging, as his views directly challenge Lindenberger’s own. Adorno believed opera, unlike literature, did not engage the mature intelligence, and that *Il travatore* should be performed at a children’s matinee (65). In what I would regard as a glorious retort, Lindenberger defends the unity of the two art forms by referencing Northrop Frye’s view that opera is essentially inspired by the romance novel (72). The part I enjoyed most in this essay was Lindenberger’s description of his travels to Morocco as a graduate student and the Arabic bards he witnessed in the streets there. This experience, the author writes, influenced him to view opera and the novel as part of a much larger tradition of “the narrative” that would encompass the story-telling traditions of all cultures (76). This is an interesting prospect that provokes further thought.

Shifting perspectives entirely in the fourth essay, entitled: “Opera by Other Means,” Lindenberger explores the various ways in which operatic characteristics are exhibited in seemingly un-operatic mediums. He does this through the lens of dramaturgy, examining the ways stage production has come to influence our understanding of opera. Lindenberger’s conception of opera appears quite liberal in this essay. I particularly enjoyed his exploration of the rock-opera version of Green Day’s successful album, *American Idiot* (96-102). Lindenberger’s analysis of this work makes him seem quite sympathetic to rock-opera and even optimistic for its survival. I feel this essay presents another instance in this book, however, in which depth obscures intelligibility. The author presents a number of examples in which untraditional stagings challenge our conceptions of opera (such as John Cage’s *Europeras*) but without prior familiarity with these works, such examples remain quite abstract. Lindenberger recommends books by David J. Levin, specifically *Unsettling Opera*, as supplementary material to further explore the relationship between dramaturgy and opera. Lindenberger praises Levin’s work multiple times in his own text, noting Levin’s ability to raise awareness of the blurry distinction between traditional and innovative opera productions (106). Without reading such material, however, I feel as though I cannot fully

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³ Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, and Raymond Geuss, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 89.
appreciate this piece.4

The fifth essay, entitled: “Opera and/as Lyric,” provides another radically different perspective from that of the previous text. This essay explores the relationship between opera and literature. Being a professor of comparative literature, Lindenberger’s talent shines brightly here. In this essay the author engages in an informed and elegant way with one of the most controversial questions in the history of opera: Which is more important: music or text? The author is quite sympathetic toward the view that both are equal, pointing out that “lyric” comes from the word lyre, the instrument played during recitations of poetry in Ancient Greece. I rather enjoyed the reference to Edgar Allen Poe’s observation that there is no “long poetry,” because of the tendency for attention to falter after a modest amount of poetry recitation (117). Lindenberger notes in a highly provocative insight that through opera, poetry can be extended to great lengths. The author follows up with an analysis of this phenomenon from a psychobiological perspective. He mentions studies of the experience of chills when listening to music, as well as brain scan studies that attempt to demonstrate which parts of the brain become activated when experiencing opera (118). Overall, this essay provides another interesting lens through which to examine the genre in question. Lindenberger comes across as not only competent in explaining the relevance of specialized fields such as psychobiology to the study of opera, but also as resistant to the limiting biases of his own field.

Expanding on many of the themes of the previous essay, essay six, entitled: “Aesthetics: From Separatism to Union,” offers an examination of the history of aesthetic thought and explores the disparity between the various arts such as sculpting, painting, literature, and music. Lindenberger highlights the historical supremacy of literature in the hierarchy of the arts. To bolster this view, he points out how the masters of literature were typically aristocratic (usually by birth), whereas this was not the case for the masters of music. He uses the examples of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Voltaire compared to George Frideric Handel and Joseph Haydn to argue his point (143). In all, it is an interesting demonstration. While it had occurred to me that music has its fair share of aristocratic individuals, to think of literature as being “more aristocratic” than music is a curious insight. Before finishing, Lindenberger presents another case for the supremacy of literature. He argues that the ability for classical literature to survive in a way that the music of “classical” (antiquity) could not greatly affected how the two were understood, particularly in the university. He ultimately recapitulates the views expressed in essays three and five, in which he sees the separation (and thus hierarchy) between the various arts as antiquated and that a more interdisciplinary approach is becoming the norm. He credits this trend to the shift toward modernity beginning in the late Romantic period, when artists of all genres sought further territories of expression by blending the arts together.

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The seventh essay, entitled: “Toward a Characterization of Modernist Opera,” continues many of the same themes presented in the previous section. Here, Lindenberger explores the difficulties in defining modernity in opera. He uses works such as The Rake’s Progress by Igor Stravinsky and Porgy and Bess by George Gershwin as examples to argue that modern opera is an approximation of opera. He argues that The Rake’s Progress breaks the traditional mould of opera by expecting the audience to be aware of the history and aesthetics of opera to fully appreciate the humour in the work. Lindenberger also argues that Porgy and Bess is anti-operatic because of its jazz instrumentation (176). And yet, he argues it may be the closest thing to early Venetian opera because of its lack of distinction between high and low culture (177). I found this latter observation to be rather interesting, and at first glance, I agree. One of the ways in which jazz interests me is its blurring of high and low culture, and I had not previously considered opera in this respect. Lindenberger then moves on to note that the modernist conception of opera is largely defined by its “shock value,” either theatrically, such as Richard Strauss’s Salome, or musically, such as Arnold Schoenberg’s Moses und Aron. Lindenberger poses the question: What is the future of postmodern opera, if shock value is becoming less realizable? He points out that opera houses are now museums of pre-Modern works, and looks quite optimistically to the “opera by other means” discussed in the fourth essay as perhaps the future of the genre.

Many of the same themes from the previous section are once again extended in the eighth essay, entitled “Anti-theatricality in Twentieth-Century Opera.” Lindenberger explores operas such as Claude Debussy’s Pelléas et Mélisande and Arnold Schoenberg’s Moses und Aaron, arguing that they represent a trend of anti-theatricality in twentieth-century opera. Lindenberger defines anti-theatrical as something that challenges traditional conceptualizations of theatrics. The author notes that Debussy believed there was too much singing in the opera house and wished to deviate from this tradition in his only opera. I particularly enjoyed the presentation of Olivier Messiaen’s views that opera is divided into two categories: those “that are good theatre and bad music, and those that are good music and bad theater” (212). This view challenges some of Lindenberger’s thoughts from essays three, five, and six, and provides for some much needed contrast. Lindenberger ultimately defends his argument quite successfully in my eye, showing that the supposed anti-theatricality of twentieth-century opera is instead an entirely new tradition of theatrics. He points to the “anti-theatrical” almost-operas discussed in essay four as indicative of the trajectory of this new tradition.

The final essay, entitled: “A Brief Consumer’s History,” is a thematic departure from the previous excerpts, and explores the relationship between opera and the consumer. Here, Lindenberger identifies what he regards as pivotal moments in the history of opera that highlight this relationship. He chooses for an example the original stagings of Monteverdi’s La Favola d’Orfeo, and discusses the many endings associated with the work. He speculates that
these multiple endings came about as a response to the preferences of multiple audiences. This speculation is informed by the “thoroughly Christianized” ending (in which the hero of the story is taken to heaven to be reunited with his wife) only appearing in the score published two years after the work’s premiere, despite the original libretto calling for a tragic ending (222). There is no definitive answer for this change, but Lindenberger speculates that it may have occurred because the audience for the second performance was all female, or because the Duke of Savoy was present for the third performance. Overall, this essay poses a variety of interesting questions, but does not necessarily provide any answers. I suspect this was a deliberate move by the author, leaving the reader to pursue the answers her or himself.

The book ends much as it began, with an epilogue in which Lindenberger engages in a dialogue with himself. Here, the author recapitulates his main points, essentially defending himself from himself once again. It is in this closing that Lindenberger makes clear the primary purpose of this collection of essays: that the study of opera, or “opera-studies” is a ripening interdisciplinary field. Lindenberger is not blindly optimistic about the emergence of such a holistic study, and in this epilogue he greatly qualifies his position by recognizing the work that still must be done. He makes clear his awareness of the historical tensions between various fields of study, resulting from differences in deeply rooted institutional and methodological traditions. Yet, overall, he remains optimistic concerning opera-studies and points toward the faltering of positivist methodologies, and the ever-increasing blending of studies to support this optimism. Indeed, other writers, such as Linda Hutcheon, who is greatly influenced by Lindenberger, also notes the decline of positivism in musicology in her journal article appropriately titled, “Interdisciplinary Opera Studies.”

From sociology to psychobiology to literary studies, Lindenberger situates opera through the lenses of many disparate fields to illustrate the myriad ways opera can be examined. I believe, to fully appreciate his text, one would have to look into the many scholars and sources presented by Lindenberger to build his argument. The book’s immense depth is both its greatest asset and its greatest flaw. With active engagement with the text and its additional sources, however, the reader should be able to form the necessary connections. I recommend Situating Opera to anyone looking to expand her or his understanding of opera beyond traditional means.

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For Further Reading:


