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Mark Darlow’s Staging the French Revolution is a thorough, in-depth examination of the management, finances, and repertoire of the Paris Opéra, documenting the changes that took place in the institution from 1789 to 1794. Over the course of its eight chapters—divided into two equal parts—Darlow aims to provide a comprehensive and accurate representation of the Opéra during its most tumultuous period. Although some of the book’s content is less accessible to non-specialists, it is overall a well-informed, detailed addition to the existing literature.

Darlow begins by introducing the sociopolitical climate surrounding the Opéra in the years immediately preceding the Revolution. It is in this first chapter that Darlow introduces many recurring concepts such as nationalism, propaganda, and republicanism, beginning with his discussion of the idea of a “national” theater. What is it that makes the Opéra France’s theater, and why therefore does it deserve funding from the government? This question essentially determined the Opéra’s future in the period from March 1789 to April 1790, when the short-lived Commune decided the Opéra’s purpose and how it would be funded. Also, it is in this first chapter that Darlow addresses the question of Revolutionary culture as propaganda and reviews the changes in management and the location of the Opéra in the years immediately
preceding 1789. Having established these details, Darlow moves to the Revolution proper.

The second chapter covers the aforementioned period of March 1789 to April 1790, immediately following the Old Regime. Here, the newly-established Republican governing authorities attempted to decide how to manage the Opéra. The Opéra had a long tradition of being run by the crown through a middleman, but after the Commune abolished feudal rights in 1789, the question was raised as to who should have control. There were three main options presented at the time: for the Opéra to be run by a committee of artists, private entrepreneurs, or the newly-established Republican government. While Victoria Johnson’s book, *Backstage at the Revolution*, focuses almost entirely on artists’ bids for control, Darlow’s account explores “the full implications of the notion of property, of the various modes of governance considered, [and] of the Opera’s place in nascent Revolutionary culture.”1 Darlow’s goals are admirably achieved in this chapter, as he presents each bid for the Opéra’s management—made by various entrepreneurs (most prominently Giovanni Battista Viotti), by artists, and by the municipality—equally.

The resulting handover to the municipality, specifically to Louis-Joseph Francoeur and Jacques Cellerier, was intended to be a temporary solution, yet it lasted from April 1790 until April 1792. Darlow covers this transitory period in the third chapter, with the same logical progression of ideas and attention to detail that he shows in the entire first half of the book, referencing both legal documents and opinion pieces published at the time.

In the final chapter of the first half of his book, Darlow examines the Opéra during the most oppressive period of the Revolution: the Terror. Here, in addition to changes in management, Darlow discusses various pieces of legislation that regulated the Opéra and how this affected the national theater’s repertoire and success.

The second half of the book could itself be divided into two halves: the first concerning finance and the second concerning repertoire. Chapter Five examines the financial situation of the Opéra from 1789 to 1794. Unsurprisingly, the Opéra’s finances during this time could generally be described as “perilous.” Chapters Six and Seven examine the repertoire staged by the institution, divided by genre. Chapter Six covers serious works, with brief summaries of pertinent revisions to previous and contemporary operas and provides in-depth social analyses of a few notable works. Although he does include some excerpts, Darlow generally avoids detailed musical analyses because, to quote the author, his study “is more concerned with a cultural study of the works than a musico-dramatic one” (214). The seventh chapter discusses

the period’s comic and mixed works in the same manner. The eighth and final chapter of this study looks at pointedly political operas, a repertory described by Darlow as “Republican.” In this chapter the question of revolutionary works as propaganda is given its most detailed consideration.

The extensive primary sources used in the study, in addition to frequent references to contemporary literature on the subject, show Darlow’s dedication to providing an accurate and comprehensive overview of one of the most divided and tumultuous decades in the Opéra’s history. Darlow’s attention to detail and strict historical accuracy are one of the most admirable qualities of his work. He avoids common assumptions one might hold, or prejudices one might have, regarding Revolutionary opera, namely that the operas presented during the Terror were little more than poorly-constructed artifacts of government propaganda that furthered the Commune’s ideals. Darlow states in his introduction that the control over theaters during the Terror having been “imposed top-down on an otherwise reluctant theater world” is an idea that “oversimplifies the reality” (12). Conversely, it would be difficult to find a single concept in Darlow’s book that could be considered oversimplified. The chapters covering the management regimes of the Paris Opéra cite letters, pamphlets, arrêtés and other legal documents, and newspapers, among other particularly nuanced primary sources. In addition, Darlow cites contemporary literature on the subject, providing a near complete and tremendously accurate portrayal of the turbulent changes in management during this time. Chapter Five, covering the finances of the Opéra, examines almost every possible aspect—yearly finances, weekly finances, and repertoire by year, genre, daily takings, and popularity—with graphs and tables to illustrate these points. The content was somewhat dry in this section, but Darlow’s writing remained clear and accessible, and again his findings contribute significantly to the existing literature.

Although each chapter has its merits and shows Darlow’s strength for detail, it is the book’s first half that is particularly strong. Other authors, such as Vincent Giroud and Victoria Johnson have covered the Opéra’s reforms during the Revolution, but neither author did so in as comprehensively as Darlow. For example, Johnson covers the same topics as Darlow, but takes only forty-two pages to do so, touching on central legislation and essential bids for the opera’s management during the period in question, whereas Darlow expands his discussion of these points to cover 116 pages. Unlike Johnson, who aims to clarify the reasons for the Opéra’s survival during the revolution

by surveying its history until that point, Darlow clearly aims for an in-depth analytical study of an isolated period in the Opéra’s history, and at that he succeeds magnificently.

Although Darlow is focused on a short five-year period, his presentation of the years preceding the Revolution add to his study’s credibility. The events that occurred from 1789 to 1794 were not isolated incidents, and did not arise without precedent. Reforms were being enforced at the Opéra even before the ancient régime was overthrown. As Darlow writes in his article, “Repertory reforms at the Paris Opéra on the eve of the Revolution,” “the 1780s had seen a raft of reforms to the Paris theatrical world which had relaxed – rather than tightened – privilege.” Darlow addresses these changes in the first chapter of his book, while maintaining focus on his main topic by relating them back to the subject at hand.

Another one of Darlow’s successes in this study is the distinction he makes between government-supported works with Republican themes presented during the Terror and pure propaganda. This is particularly evident in Chapter Four, “The Opéra during the Terror,” and Chapter Eight, “Republican Repertory (1792-1794).” Although government officials required libretti to be approved (and possibly edited) prior to performance, and Paris theaters were required to stage a certain amount of Republican repertoire, Darlow proves that the government’s laws were not universally enforced nor were authors always penalized. In any case, the content presented by the opera reached only a small population and did not affect mass culture—because, as Johnson notes, “the daily income for a labourer in 1785 was less than one livre, the Opéra’s prices were simply out of reach for many Parisians,” with tickets costing between three and forty-eight livres. Although Roger Chartier’s book, The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution, concerns itself more with literature than music, Johnson’s point regarding the accessibility and propagation of opera remains. According to Chartier’s research, “rather than reaching the more ‘popular’ readers, political pieces were primarily bought by those – as potential actors in a movement of resistance to royal power or the possible victims of political change – whose social status directly depended on events.” In fact, many works about political revolution do not present one side as morally right and the other as morally wrong. As Thomas Grey notes in “Opera in the Age of Revolution,” “from the years of the Terror through the emergence of French grand opera between 1830 and 1848, opera repeatedly explored the experience of revolution…without

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4 Johnson, Backstage at the Revolution, 41.

necessarily promoting any particular political agenda.” If an opera avoids explicitly extolling a political agenda, it only becomes propagandized when it is read with a particular viewpoint in mind. Thus, although the Revolutionary government may have supported operas during the Terror, they were not ipso facto propaganda, as common assumptions would have it.

While Republican works may not have held wide-ranging influence in France at the time of their publication, Republican operas gained influence abroad in later years. German Romanticism, with its emphasis on the individual and on liberty, would find an early predecessor in French Revolutionary opera. According to John Bokina, the “rescue operas” popularized during the Terror featured plots that were resolved by “deliberate actions by the hero or heroine with the assistance or acclaim of the operatic chorus,” rather than the deus ex machina endings of many eighteenth-century comic operas. With such individualist ideas, it should come as no surprise that Beethoven’s only opera, Fidelio, drew inspiration from the Republican operas of Luigi Cherubini and Étienne Méhul. These associations are not only drawn by Bokina; Dean Winton also argues in his article, “Opera under the French Revolution,” that the period in question saw the real birthplace of Romanticism, rather than the German-centric origins of Romanticism popularized by early musicologists. Winton states that “when [the operas of Cherubini and Méhul] remind us of other composers, it would be of their successors rather than of their predecessors.” In fact, I would have liked to see more analyses of the effects of Revolutionary operas on later iterations of the genre in Darlow’s study. He presents predecessors of Revolutionary opera, so it would make sense if he also presented their successors as well. Doing so would have given the study a greater sense of symmetry and would have better placed the operas in a larger historical context.

The only other shortcomings in Darlow’s volume are, surprisingly enough, a lack of detail in certain areas. Darlow frequently mentions the opera Charles IX as an example of a censored work, yet does not mention until the final chapter what the plot and reasons for censorship of the work even were. Omissions such as this speak to the highly specialized knowledge Darlow’s work requires of the reader. As a member of the uninitiated, however, I ended up mostly confused. Furthermore, in Chapter Six, when describing the tragic operas of the Revolution, all connections to the actual politics of


the revolution seem to be hastily tacked on as an afterthought to the end of Darlow’s description, with certain seemingly insignificant aspects of the works’ descriptions receiving a disproportionate share of the word count. The rest of the chapter, however, provides more than enough information on serious opera during the Revolution.

It is hard to imagine a reader coming away from this study feeling unfulfilled. From beginning to end, Darlow’s book offers a detailed and comprehensive view of the internal workings of the Paris Opéra during the French Revolution and how these were affected by Republican thought and legislation. Over the course of the book’s eight chapters, Darlow effectively traces various changes in the institution’s management from 1789 to the end of the Terror in 1794, presenting all the options and opinions for each administrative regime and showing how these shifts affected the finances and repertoire of the organization. Darlow’s admirable attention to detail and comprehensive historical accuracy make this book a strong addition to the field of literature about the Revolutionary period by providing the most thorough analysis of the management of the Paris Opéra during the French Revolution until the end of the Terror.

For further reading:


