

Book review

Rowden, Claire (2020). *Opera and Parody in Paris 1860-1900*. Turnhout: Brepols.

As a child I would hear the distant sounds of Wagnerian opera as I drifted off to sleep (along with the sounds of The Beatles, Mantovani and Count Basie) and would sing along with the poppy bits. I dimly recall my dad taking me to see Siegfried and Brünnhilde along with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra bashing out the last part of the *Ring of Nibelung* (*The Twilight of the Gods*) and being amazed at the volume levels that the brass and percussion could reach, and how the singers would strain to match this. It was a quirky form of early Heavy Metal and a straight parody more akin to the worst excesses of Prog Rock (twenty-minute drum solos) and the biting satirical magazine *Private Eye*, befitting the 1970s. I never really got to the bottom of whether Wagnerian music was serious, and I still do not know.

Opera and Parody in Paris 1860-1900 by Clair Rowden is full of anecdotes and unravels some of the processes and mechanisms used to parody Opera, whether press caricatures and cartoons, popular shows or staged *revue*, and situating these within the broader public sphere in Paris at the time. Underpinning this approach is the way these intertextual and intermedial ‘texts’ function, and how parody operates and for whom. It is bookended by Wagnerian operas and the premiere of *TanHäuser* in Paris (1861) and the *Lohengrin* tour of France (1890-2) with a focus on the *caricature* (cartoon culture) surrounding opera in the 1890s.

There is some useful background on print and stage *revue* shows as well as the mechanisms and theories of ‘reading’ to situate the book, with cameos on important theorists including Mikhail Bakhtin, Pierre Bourdieu, Umberto Eco and Wolfgang Iser, which maybe could have been developed and applied more widely throughout the book. Rowden defends parodic ‘revue’ against formalist and academic approaches to music which belittle satire as degenerate, as these shows were ephemeral and not intended as ‘high’ cultural stuff. They are a type of popular culture in the Bakhtinian sense, that is, a carnivalesque spoof and social event that draws on symbolism that everyone can understand rather than an individual and elitist cultural pursuit. This period was prior to 20th century avant-garde ideas which blasted holes in traditional elitist conceptualisations of art. But Dada word salads and nonsense art alongside Surrealist automatic writing is not such a huge leap from this late 19th century operatic parody.

Although Wagnerian opera, symbolism and mythology is the main focus, the book also includes parodic *revues* and cartoons of operatic productions by Charles Gounod, Giacomo Puccini and Giuseppe Verdi, and the notion of *Faustomania*.

One anecdote concerns a parody of Wagner's *TanHäuser* entitled *Panne-Aux-Airs* (*Breakdown in Arias*) by Frédéric Barbier, a composer of parodic shows and popular chansons. The title is an onomatopoeic pun, which signals one key issue with the book, that is explaining the humour across languages, and whether readers might just not understand the linguistic puns because they are not bilingual (this is further compounded later in the book by the detailed comparison of language between original opera and parody in French, as well as original cartoons in newspapers and programmes of shows in French). Or is this the basic cultural capital required for the book?

Panne-Aux-Airs “is the story of a pretentious provincial bourgeois” (p. 21) Mr Burck (a Wagner fan), whose daughter Estelle is in love with a penniless musician Alcindor and deems that he is obviously not good enough for her. So the lover takes revenge by dressing up as Wagner and with a hired retinue knocks at Burck’s door. The object of fun is the stereotypical ‘Germaness’ presented by Alcindor in all its racist glory (totally lacking in political correctness today). Then Wagner himself farcically appears, compounding the misunderstandings. Barbier even parodies the audience as the *revue* takes place in a music hall venue where the ‘high’ art opera crowd would not commonly be seen. Unfortunately, as Rowden points out, there were few press reviews of these parodic shows, however popular, thereby a lack of evidence of effect.

For Rowden,

there is a common assumption about the nature and volume of Wagner's music, which is attacked for being so great that it deafens everyone or so abstruse that no-one understands it, or indeed, in the end, hears it (p. 27).

She suggests that this genre of revue spectacle,

offer(s) a performance of a version of the opera... as a pretext for broader commentary on Wagner, his national differences, his aesthetic ideas (and especially the “music of the future”), commonly held beliefs about the tedious and hermetic nature of his operas, as well as the eroticism of the story, which is linked to the attention Wagner paid to society ladies (p. 27).

The clash between ‘highbrow and lowbrow culture’ is also present in another parody of *TanHäuser* entitled *Ya-Mein-Herr*, which weaves in popular music alongside Wagneresque parody. Rowden suggests,

The original text contains a certain degree of garbled prosody, which is even more pronounced in the parody: mute ‘e’ endings are almost completely eclipsed and central syllables are swallowed in an effort to make this text fit the pre-existing music (p. 30).

It is difficult explaining such complexities to the reader, and it is difficult for the non-bilingual reader to understand exactly how this humorous process operates.

Rowden goes on to review Hervé’s (alias Florimond Ronger’s) parody of *Faust* (the opera by Charles Gounod) entitled *Le Petit Faust* with a flourish. She reminds the reader that he was a frustrated tenor who had a criminal record for corrupting a minor.

Hervé pays homage to the official genres of *grand opéra* and *opéra-comique*, genres in which he would have liked to succeed, with extended choruses and concertante ensemble writing, recitative, coloratura cadenzas, and stratospheric climaxes for singers but with the chorus and characters commenting on the musical function as they perform it, garbled prosody, onomatopoeic sounds, imitating brass instruments or even barking dogs, and directions to singers to breathe in the wrong places or just sing badly. Hervé’s parody is free-falling and mad, and his use of musical parody comes at the most incongruous and unexpected moments to provoke surprise (p. 37).

Besides similarities with the early avant-garde ideas of Dada and Futurism, I would have been intrigued to know why Hervé (and Barbier) created parodies of opera and whether this had a more social and political rationale rather than the impression given that he was driven by personal retribution for a blighted musical career.

The slackening of press censorship laws in 1881 and the growth in the publication of caricatures and satire due to the cheap reproduction of images “were marshalled in the service of a more inclusive, democratic and modern conception of the relaying of information to an

increasingly diverse readership” (p. 55). Wagner had a huge following in Paris at this time and his large fan base also was the butt of the satire, and Rowden suggests his popularity was qualified by the number of parodies of his operas. Nonetheless, “his works were commonly viewed as an incurable disease, one that had pushed Nietzsche over the edge of reason, and was likely to do the same to all those who liked them too much” (p. 57).

In Chapter Four, Rowden refers to a deeper and wider notion of operatic parody that looks beyond the small world of opera, linguistic puns and spoof storylines. These social and political understandings (more akin to the function of early avant-garde thinking) pre-figured the modernist turn, however whimsical. It foregrounds the racist-cum-nationalist reaction to Wagner with his fans derided as snobs and fanatics, set into the anti-Germanic feeling at the time, mainly as a result of defeat for France in 1870 in the Franco-Prussian war, and the annexation of Alsace-Moselle which affected a generation of ‘French’ children.

The opera cartoons, part of the ‘caricature’ of the 1890s that are presented in the text, appeared in three journals (*Le Triboulet*, *Le Chavari* and *Le Journal Amusant*), created by Maurice Marais and Stop (alias Louis Retz). These cartoon parodies are not translated from French, some of which Rowden explains in the text. Moral decline is a continual theme and Wagner is portrayed as an ageing prostitute, which alongside homo-erotic imagery reinforces the anti-Germanic feelings in Paris associated with parodies of *Lohengrin*. Parody is often politically incorrect and maybe Rowden could have engaged with this political incorrectness more transparently. The social and political understanding ‘outside opera’ includes reference to a thriving counter-culture in Paris and satirical journals such as *Le Balai*, *Le Don Quichotte*, *Le Troupier*, *Le Pilon* and *Le Grelot*.

John Morreall (1987) distinguishes between different theoretical approaches to humour, and in particular between theories of Superiority and Incongruity. Rowden tied these ideas together describing some of the snobbery (superiority) and madness (incongruity) of the staged *revues* and cartoons. Humour is a tool which can be used for a range of individual, social and political purposes, and, as I have suggested, like the arts it can be ambiguous and resist easy interpretations and answers (Clements 2020). Parody can catch us out and the satirist can unknowingly become the satirised. Rowden constructed some elaborate understandings of the different visual, literary and musical parodies giving a good idea of the complexities of humour.

Much parody in the arts is about laughing with the artist or composer, which Jennifer Higgie (2007) refers to as the “art joke”. This confers cultural capital and is highly elitist regarding knowledge of the art form. In the book, Rowden details how parody qualifies the success of the original opera, hence the need for it, with the opera lessened without attention from the *revue*. This is wrapped up in Bourdieu’s (1984) complex notion of *taste* and I would have been interested in the extent to which the operatic parody and lampooning of the composer was a display of quality cultural capital or just base mockery of the artist and opera. Also, whether the parody is tightly controlled by the caricaturist, writer or composer’s intention, or of a much looser design thereby encouraging active audience interpretation. Further areas to probe and future research might be the machinations of superiority and (counter)-cultural capital and the relationship between them in regard to opera parody. It begs the question of how ‘popular’ these staged *revues* were. Vic Gattrell (2006) highlights the class divide surrounding humour in 18th century London, demarcating an enlightened culture from the common culture.

Finally, I was intrigued by the lack of any reference to another key social, political and historic event in Paris at the time in which the book is set, the great Paris Commune rebellion of 1871. How did popular operatic parody (for the people) respond to this momentous social and political upheaval (for the people)?

Overall, the book was well researched and Rowden unearthed many primary and hitherto unpublished sources, which offered some useful background to understanding operatic parody, including some tasty anecdotes.

Paul Clements

Goldsmiths University
p.clements@gold.ac.uk

References

- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, London: Routledge.
- Clements, P. (2020). *The Outsider, Art and Humour*, New York: Routledge.
- Gattrell, V. (2006). *City of Laughter. Sex and Satire in 18th Century London*, London: Atlantic Books.
- Higgle, J. (ed.) (2007). 'Introduction/all masks welcome', in *The Artist's Joke*, London: Whitechapel Gallery, pp. 12-19.
- Morreall, J. (1987). *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humour*, New York: University of New York Press.