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Catherine Clément. *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*.  
Translated by Betsy Wing. Foreword by Susan McClary.  
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988, 201 pp.

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in 1973. (He had continued as Department head until 1966 when he was appointed composer-in-residence.) Although Frances Adaskin's performing career was curtailed by the move to Saskatoon, she continued some CBC broadcasting and became as she described it "a teacher of singing and a singer on the side."

Their retirement years in Victoria showed no slackening of activities, both having teaching associations with the Victoria Conservatory of Music and the University of Victoria. (One Adaskin piano work, *Ontario Variation*, has not quite "suffered an obscure fate", for it — along with variations by Hugh Hartwell, Godfrey Ridout and R. Murray Schafer — was performed by this reviewer and composer of the theme at the Canadian University Music Society's conference at the University of Guelph in 1984; other performance locales have included London, Ontario and San Diego, California.)

This book is engaging, and though occasionally the reader might wish for greater detail or depth (and may spot the rare misprint or identification error — "John" Ward should be Robert Ward), some sense of Murray's "passion" does shine through. Perhaps the reader will be impelled (as was I) to listen to the Radio Canada International Anthology of Canadian Music devoted to works of Murray Adaskin from 1946 to 1981, among them a two-minute gem of Frances James performing with admirable clarity and diction Murray's *Epitaph* on a text of Apollinaire.

Through these and other recordings, and now this admirable biography which captures both the artistic and human dimensions of Frances James and Murray Adaskin, their legacy which should inspire future generations is assured.

Jack Behrens

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CATHERINE CLÉMENT. *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*. Translated by Betsy Wing. Foreword by Susan McClary. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988, 201 pp.

Despite the adoption of feminist criticism as a viable analytical method within literary and film studies, musicology still approaches gender issues with apprehension. Because publications have applied feminist perspectives to the study of "folk" and sociological "popular" musics within the last decade, one might have expected historical musicology to follow the trend. That, however, has not been the case, and there is a surprising paucity of feminist criticism in this discipline.

The few existing musicological-feminist texts are either anthologies or source readings describing the role of female composers and performers. There has been little delving into a feminist critique of the image of women in music. One notable exception,

however, is Catherine Clément's recently translated study. In her work, Clément, a French feminist, attempts to expose operatic women's types and plots exclusively through libretti, which she considers to be the "forgotten part of opera." By stripping away the music and exposing the patriarchal social structures of libretti, Clément deconstructs the "transcendental" aspects of opera. Through her survey of operas ranging from *Don Giovanni* to *Madame Butterfly* she argues that, time and time again, opera perpetuates women's oppression by demanding either a domestication of the female or her death. For Clément there exists only one storyline for women in which they all "cross over a vigorous, invisible line, the line that makes them unbearable; so they will have to be punished" (p. 59). Stated more simply, "they suffer, they cry, they die" (p. 11). Whether it be their profession, their foreign nationality, their sexuality or other features too numerous to mention, their destruction is essential to maintain society's patriarchal balance.

Worthy of note are Susan McClary's Foreword remarks which successfully prepare the reader for Clément's upcoming psychoanalytical probing. McClary's comments on the youthfulness of feminist musicological research are informative and reinforce the importance of this text as breaking ground for further research. Furthermore, McClary functions as a liaison between Franco-feminist ideas and the North American reader, and prepares us for our exercise in "lire feminine".

In examining text structure, it is apparent that Clément rejects the traditional chapter arrangement by chronology or operatic nationality, choosing instead a division by common operatic plots and types. For example, Chapter Two deals with those "Dead Women" (which includes almost all characters) whom Clément classifies by types of death: "Nine by knife, two of them suicides; three by fire; two who jump; two consumptives; three who drown; three poisoned; two of fright; and a few unclassifiable, thank god for them, dying without anyone knowing why or how" (p. 47). Later chapters address those operas which depict women helplessly caught in the throws of the bourgeois family (including *The Magic Flute* and *La Traviata*) and those "Girls who Leap into Space": women such as Lucia di Lammermoor and Puccini's Mimi who mercifully attain perfection through death. Clément completes her classification by adding a few insightful words about the roles of males who, in comparison to their female counterparts, appear as "Madmen, Negroes and Jesters". They are the men who Clément points out as being "excluded, marked by some initial strangeness" (p. 118). Characters such as Otello, Falstaff and Don José might come to mind. Indeed, what ultimately weakens or estranges these men from their peers is their own femininity: they are vulnerable, and they cry and lament. They are simply too much like women.

Although Clément is grounded in French feminism, Marxism, and structuralism she makes no pretence about her musicological capabilities. The libretto as text is considered as approachable to those who are not musically trained. Because, however, the text in this case is linked to opera, there is room for critical comment on Clément's ideas as they pertain to — or avoid — music itself.

In her "Prelude" or introductory chapter, the author opens with several bold statements denouncing the intrinsic power of music. "He [virtually any traditional male musician

or musicologist] loves to say that music is what provides the meaning, which is false; because, although it accompanies, completes, provokes, or slows it down, it does not give meaning to words, which have their own power and their own internal sense" (p. 17). At least two problems arise from this interpretation. First, it can be argued that music does indeed have extreme potency, enough in fact to do more than merely complete the text: it can denounce, oppose and develop through its own formal schemes which can take precedence over the words. Second, Clément's assumption that opera can be successfully interpreted exclusively from its libretto is disputable. As noted by Joseph Kerman, "A work of art in which music fails to exert the central articulating function should be called by some name other than opera" [Kerman 1988: xiii]. Unfortunately, this is one occasion where musical knowledge might have prevented Clément from overstating her case as a literary critic and dismiss music as inconsequential in operatic interpretation.

Later in the text, Clément's limited musical knowledge places her in yet another predicament. While attempting to expose the "handful" of feminine types, she is guilty of musical reductionism by claiming chromaticism as the exclusive means of feminine representation, of describing "how women are". "Here then is how the rainbow and women are related: they are chromatic beings, that is to say, ambivalent intermediaries between the order of nature and that of culture" (p. 56). It is clear how she came to that conclusion: her choice of operas is limited to a skewed repertoire which features "chromatic" women — Carmen, Isolde, Tosca. But is she correct in proclaiming that there are no other means of feminine musical representation in these operas? What about key relationships and orchestration? Furthermore, one cannot help but wonder how she would have dealt with opera had she seriously ventured into the 20th century (the extent of her 20th-century non-Puccinian analysis includes a stab at *Moses and Aron* and a few sentences on Berg's *Lulu*). Had Clément considered operas outside of her chosen repertoire, other methods of non-chromatic feminine representation could have been addressed.

Perhaps most striking about the author's approach is her unabashed removal of each operatic text from its historical context. This, coupled with the "common plot" organization of her chapters, creates interpretive problems. For example, in her analysis of *Carmen*, she audaciously attributes Carmen's downfall to basic assertiveness. "But what does she do? She acts like a man, that is all" (p. 50). Of course, Carmen does fall into a historical pattern of female operatic deaths. But is it as simple as that? In her analysis of *Carmen*, literary critic Nelly Furman convincingly demonstrates that in order to have a thorough understanding of the opera one must carefully research the work's historical background. One should consider the offshoots of "industrial revolution: . . . economic growth, commercial development, and colonial expansion . . . [resulting in] Bizet and his librettists . . . propos[ing] a psychological explanation for a political and military event" [Furman 1988: 169]. *Carmen* is too entangled in its larger context to be understood exclusively from the libretto. Unfortunately, in removing opera from its historical placement, Clément's comments become discredited.

A few final concerns regarding Clément's confusing use of musical terminology, and the inaccuracy of her facts, should be mentioned. First, in her discussion of *Don*

*Carlo*, she misuses the term “tonality” in claiming the opera is “dominated by masculine tonalities” (pp. 66–67). It becomes apparent later that she was not referring to tonality per se but vocal scoring: three bass voices and a baritone. Here is an instance of how the wrong vocabulary can be quite misleading: the reader will surely assume some sort of underlying patriarchal control. Furthermore, I was surprised by her unqualified disregard for much of the twentieth-century repertoire and shocked that “one of the last operas in history is called *Moses and Aaron*” (p. 14) [completed 1932]. She did not acknowledge the post-1930’s operatic repertoire let alone posit any feminist interpretation. In addition, misspelled and untranslated opera titles (*Othello*, *Rosencavalier*, *La Khovantchina*) hindered fluent reading and more careful editing would have alleviated this problem. Such flaws, while seemingly trivial, serve only to remove the text from serious consideration within musicological scholarship.

Despite many shortcomings, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women* is nevertheless an important step in operatic feminist deconstruction. Clément recognizes that although operatic plots seem “unreal,” the oppressive social structures reinforced therein are not as ineffectual on our psyches as we may believe. Furthermore, she warns us not to underestimate opera’s long-term communicative power: the narratives imparted through this medium do not end with the performance, for the unconscious remembers and perpetuates these ideas “outside the code of the pleasures of opera” (p. 10). Clément has written a poignant and direct critique of the bastion of “high” culture, and I suspect that few readers will respond impartially. Whether you embrace her analysis of plots and types or rebuke it, chances are you will think about her ideas the next time you leave an opera house. It is then that Clément invites you to contemplate not only what you have just seen, but where you have seen it before.

Karen Pegley

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