


REVIEW ARTICLE

## The Labyrinths of Global Opera

Francesco Milella 

University of Cambridge, UK  
Email: [francescomilella90@gmail.com](mailto:francescomilella90@gmail.com)

Naomi André, *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement*, Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2018. 282pp.

Charlotte Bentley, *New Orleans and the Creation of Transatlantic Opera, 1819–1859*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022. 336pp.

Rogério Budasz, *Opera in the Tropics: Music and Theater in Early Modern Brazil*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. 504pp.

In 2017, on the debut of the soprano Hui He in the role of Aida at the Hong Kong Opera, a Japanese finance and business website published a short article to introduce its readers to Verdi's monumental opera and more general issues of cultural appropriation and white-washing related to it.<sup>1</sup> What caught my attention, however, was the headline. Short and concise, it grasped an aspect that might have otherwise gone unnoticed: 'Opera Hong Kong's new production of "Aida" in October will feature a Chinese soprano playing an African princess singing in Italian'. The headline writer was probably more intrigued by the multicultural quirkiness of this event and ignored, for the sake of the readers, its cultural and historical implications. In fact, the article itself succeeded in depicting this event as a proper, if not extreme, moment of transcultural encounters by mingling different cultures – the Ethiopian heritage of the protagonist of the opera, the musical aura of Italian operas and the Chinese nationality of the soprano Hui He, opposed to the location of the Hong Kong opera evoked by a Japanese magazine – under the unifying authority of Verdi's *Aida*. This article seemed to consciously invoke a multicultural dimension built around the perceived prestige of *Aida* and all the debates on imperialism that, from Said to Drummond and Locke, have become attached to it.<sup>2</sup> Verdi's music is safely placed at the centre of a wide transcultural discourse which, rather than undermining the cultural 'authority' of Italian opera, reaffirms it even more strongly as a proper vehicle of 'global uniformity', as Christopher A. Bayly would define it.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Nikkei.com (21 September 2017). <https://asia.nikkei.com/Editor-s-Picks/Tea-Leaves/The-remarkable-ability-of-opera-to-defy-cultural-appropriation>.

<sup>2</sup> John S. Drummond, 'Said and *Aida*: Culture, Imperialism, Egypt and Opera', *Critical Race and Whiteness Studies* 10/1 (2014), 1–12; Ralph P. Locke, 'Reflections on Orientalism in Opera (and Musical Theatre)', *Revista de musicología* 16/6 (1993), 3122–34; Edward W. Said, 'The Imperial Spectacle', *Grand Street* 6/2 (1987), 82–104.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914* (Oxford, 2004).

Shortly after I came across the Aida publication, my internet surfing brought me to a second example which seemed to offer a quite different perception of global opera. It was an amateur video on YouTube showing a square in Mexico City during a neighbourhood party, with a bunch of people dancing in couples to the accompaniment of brass band music. The song was a Cuban *danzón* called 'Rigoletto',<sup>4</sup> composed in the 1960s by the popular brass ensemble Acerina Y Su Danzonera as a potpourri of *Rigoletto*'s most popular tunes (the song became one of the greatest hits all over Latin America for more than half a century). While the video was playing, I scrolled down to read some of the comments left below: 'viva México, viva Cuba' wrote one, echoed by another who typed 'this is the heart of Latin América'. Other users dared to share more personal experiences: 'I have fond memories of this song! I used to listen to it at my granny's house', 'I remember the *fiestas* in my *pueblo* when I was a child with my parents dancing along this song!' Unlike the previous article, this video hurled me into a deeply local dimension that severs any connection with the original context: the neighbourhood party as well as the online comments below the video are proudly rooted in a discourse of personal memories and local traditions: the YouTube users' comments describe the whole scene of people dancing and the brass band on stage as an authentic revival of Latin American culture: an endless flow of nostalgia and pride that eclipse Verdi and his opera, both of which went unmentioned by the contributors.

Though firmly situated in the present, both examples offer a tangible perspective on what is at stake when European opera crosses its 'traditional' boundaries and becomes a global phenomenon. And it is hard not to feel overwhelmed (but also thrilled) by the potentially limitless possibilities for investigation in the field, both in terms of possible 'case studies' across centuries, as well as the questions arising from historiographical and cultural perspectives. This has happened to the point that today we might well wonder where academic debates on operatic globalisation are going and, also, how these debates can continue to keep the field growing without exhausting its propulsive energy and losing a sense of direction. The risk I see is twofold: the disorientation created by an increasingly expanding global geography and, at the same time, a familiar (if reconfigured) fetishisation of 'exotic distance', a risk that is all the more real in a field that finds its *raison d'être* in the detection of contexts that seem most interesting for being far away (culturally and geographically) from our time and space. The three books under consideration in this review outline interesting answers to such concerns: focused on three different historical and geographical contexts, they all offer diverse solutions and instructions to navigate the expanding geographies of the past and the present without losing sight of the topicality of the wider debate.

In what follows, I adopt a reverse chronological order starting from the present day. The two examples mentioned at the beginning of this review point towards two opposite processes in the current globalisation of opera: the eclipse of the European operatic model and, on the other extreme point, its elevation as a unifying authority in a multicultural context. A possible way to negotiate between these two extremes in the contemporary world comes from *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement* by the musicologist Naomi André.<sup>5</sup> As suggested by the title, the aim of this book is to understand how the operatic stage has recently succeeded in providing Black communities an effective space for expression and emancipation. André describes her aim as searching for ways of 'thinking, interpreting, and writing about music in performance that incorporate how race, gender,

<sup>4</sup> The video is available on YouTube at this link: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7FvhaR\\_kUCw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7FvhaR_kUCw). The author is aware that the contents and comments mentioned here can be changed, modified or removed after the day they were consulted (15 April 2023).

<sup>5</sup> Naomi André, *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement* (Champaign, IL, 2018).

sexuality, and nation help shape the analysis of opera today'.<sup>6</sup> In practice, this ambitious intention narrows down to focus on two specific areas of the globe – the United States and South Africa – to investigate their different articulations of Blackness through opera. André's analysis can also be read through the screens of global studies and cultural mobility: such an approach is vital when discussing how opera was reframed, reinterpreted, exchanged and questioned by Black communities in their struggle to speak out and to be heard.

*Black Opera's* first two chapters act as an overview of the spatial, temporal and methodological boundaries of André's analysis. The author focuses on the recent history of the United States and South Africa and the connections between them to identify similarities and differences in the way Blackness and opera interact in each context. The first chapter, 'Engaged opera', sets out a series of short case studies – from Blackfacing in Verdi's *Otello* to the musical trajectory of divas like Marian Anderson and Leontyne Price – to demonstrate how the production and consumption of operas by Black communities proved effective in giving them a new voice. With the second chapter, André's analysis turns to the history of Black opera in the specific chosen contexts. The author's attention, however, seems to prioritise South Africa: she describes the experiences of Angelo Gobbato, a white Italian-born opera manager in the apartheid years, and Neo Muyanga, a young Black opera composer, and how their trajectories helped Black people find in opera a fertile space of resistance and participation. She closes the chapter with a list of Black South African opera singers who have succeeded in singing for the most prestigious opera houses around the world. This list is followed by an interesting overview of a South African opera company, 'Dimpho di Kopane' (a Sotho word for 'combined talents') founded in 2000, which started the production and local adaptation of Western operas like *U-Carmen* and *Impempe Yomlingo*, Xhosa translations of *Carmen* and *The Magic Flute*.

The following two chapters shift to the United States, each taking a single opera to consider. The first is *From the Diary of Sally Hemings*, written in 2001 by the Pulitzer Prize-winning composer William Bolcom, in collaboration with the playwright Sandra Seaton, to recreate the feelings and emotions of Sally Hemings in her relationship with the American statesman Thomas Jefferson. André embarks on a detailed analysis of the opera which considers its music, lyrics and dramaturgy from perspectives of race, sexuality, gender and identity. Her analysis raises some key questions concerning the narration of discourses of race and gender in the present context of the United States: How do we fictionalise the history and identity of Black people without anaesthetising its meanings or decreasing the impact of opera? Which perspective should be taken to tell this story? Who is entitled to turn it into an opera, and how? The following chapter navigates some of these questions through the better-known example of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* (1935). André builds her investigation around two basic questions – 'what is American?' and 'what is the folk?' – which disclose a transnational scenario of cultural encounters in the context of local and Atlantic migrations into the American region. The role of Black people, as they are portrayed in the opera, emerges as a problematic one: in fact, they stand in an unclear space between the Jewish heritage of their tunes, the stereotypes of the minstrel tradition and the convention of Western opera. André closes the chapter with some final remarks on womanhood in the figure of Bess.

The final two chapters respond symmetrically to the previous ones with a closer look at South Africa. André again concentrates on a pair of works: *Carmen* (1875), together with its recent adaptations, and *Winnie: The Opera* (2011). And again, she seeks to touch on a vast range of topics (perhaps too many): she examines, for instance, how *Carmen* continues to have meaning along the themes of 'race and ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic

<sup>6</sup> André, *Black Opera*, 9.

levels, sexual desire, and according to changing definitions of nation'.<sup>7</sup> She embarks on this examination with a comparative analysis of the production of the film adaptation of *Carmen Jones* (1954), the MTV production *Carmen: A Hip Hopera* (2001), and the South African adaptation, *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha* (2005). The last chapter takes *Winnie: The Opera*, composed by Bongani Ndodana-Breen and premiered in 2011. This work, 'the first full-length, fully orchestrated opera by a black South African composer', prompts a comparative examination on how the United States and South Africa have relied differently on the operatic genre to make Black voices heard.<sup>8</sup> It becomes clear that in both scenarios opera continues to be a white domain, although the latter has recently shown some significant steps forward, as suggested by the examples outlined in the first chapter.

Although all André's examples are from the past century, it might be helpful finally to bring her analysis into contact with the cover image chosen for the recent publication, edited by Axel Körner and Paulo Kühl, entitled *Italian Opera in Global and Transnational Perspective*. In this image – *Vue de la salle de spectacle sur la place do Rocio, à Rio de Janeiro* by J. Arago and published in 1824 – a group of Black men are portrayed enslaved and in chains. As Körner and Kühl suggest, they 'take centre stage, clearly standing out against the orthogonal frame created by the theatre and emphasising the contrast between the great building, as a sign of the Portuguese court's civilising project, and the misery and violence of slavery, seemingly as a by-product of the continent's Europeanisation'.<sup>9</sup> André overturns this relationship, narrating a story that seeks to fill the distance that for so long tended to keep Black people away from the operatic stage. Her book fleshes out all the processes and narratives that, over the last century, allowed Black persons to enter the theatre and to claim their space as audiences, singers, composers and/or producers. Though rarely discussed in explicit terms, mobility and globalisation emerge as an aspect of novelty in all the examples discussed by André. On the one hand, this perspective casts a new light on the connections between South Africa and the United States that Western debates on musical mobility have often ignored by prioritising networks more directly connected with Europe. On the other, it also puts under a clearer light one of the most intriguing and problematic points of discussion of Black opera, raised, among others, also by Christopher Ballantine in his chapter 'Opera and the South African Political': the decision by Black communities to interact with the white world and its tradition, rather than delinking from it and building an independent and autonomous space for expression and emancipation.<sup>10</sup> This tension is perhaps inevitably not resolved in André's book – not even in the extensive conclusion where she suggests some strategies for a more inclusive operatic scene – but through her research it acquires more compelling meanings through continuous references to some of the current racial conflicts so visible in the modern world.

While firmly situated in the present, *Black Opera* is continuously underpinned by references to previous colonial and postcolonial periods, when the traumas of social segregation and racial discrimination started in both South Africa and the United States. A more detailed exploration in this direction comes from the recent volume, *New Orleans and the Creation of Transatlantic Opera, 1819–1859*, by Charlotte Bentley.<sup>11</sup> Issues of race and

<sup>7</sup> André, *Black Opera*, 100.

<sup>8</sup> André, *Black Opera*, 137.

<sup>9</sup> Axel Körner and Paulo M. Kühl, eds., *Italian Opera in Global and Transnational Perspective: Reimagining Italianità in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2022), 2.

<sup>10</sup> Christopher Ballantine, 'Opera and the South African Political', in *The Oxford Handbook of Sound and Imagination*, vol. 1, ed. Mark Grimshaw-Aagaard, Mads Walther-Hansen and Martin Knakkegaard (Oxford, 2019), 290–311.

<sup>11</sup> Charlotte Bentley, *New Orleans and the Creation of Transatlantic Opera, 1819–1859* (Chicago, 2022).

segregation, as we will see, play a pivotal role in her analysis, in ways that help us to address some of the historical context evoked by André. This book, however, also looks at a larger picture to prompt a wider discussion on the idea and practice of transatlantic opera during the nineteenth century.

In this respect, the introduction lays impressive foundations for rethinking the field of operatic mobility in general terms. Bentley's analysis invites us to think about New Orleans and its urban landscape – from the French Quarter and the American sector, with their respective communities and cultural habits, to the rural areas and surrounding forests – as a unique yet paradigmatic operatic place in the context of the nineteenth-century Atlantic: a small but lively city between North and Latin America, deeply connected both with the Caribbean and with Northern cities, where Black and white people interacted in areas divided between English and French communities. Introduced – or so the legend goes – in 1791 by Louis Tabary, an early refugee from the Haitian Revolution, opera grew quickly in the following years under the cultural influence of France, which continued even after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 when Napoleon sold the territory to the United States. By 1808, the city had two theatres – quite a feat, Bentley notices, 'for a town of only 15,000 people'. Her story, however, begins with the opening of Théâtre d'Orléans in 1819 by John Davis, not the first venture of that name in the city, but certainly 'the most ambitious and by far the most enduring'.<sup>12</sup> Bentley does not ignore the multiplicity of perspectives that such a context invites, and turns to global microhistory as the most effective historiographical ground for deciphering the New Orleans operatic scene. In this frame, she takes into account the local dimension defined by people and objects, but also situates them in the wider flux of transatlantic connections: the author takes a microhistorical approach and progressively expands it towards a more global dimension – zooming in in order to zoom out, as Bentley suggests – to understand how opera and the city contributed to shape perceptions of global mobility.

The book follows a thematic structure organised in five chapters. The first, "'Un théâtre est une machine difficile à mouvoir": Developing a Transatlantic Cultural Institution', focuses on the challenges that John Davis and his son Pierre, the two main operatic impresarios in New Orleans at the time, faced in creating and running the local theatrical machine. Bentley masterfully juggles a vast quantity of documents and stories to weave a polyphonic story of contracts and singers, loans and debts, press reports and recruitment processes. The chapter provides a detailed overview of the mechanisms and people that created, supported, but also hindered the local operatic scene. Particularly compelling are the historiographical questions that Bentley raises in her interpretation of local sources: What can small, often seemingly irrelevant details tell us about the Atlantic connections of New Orleans and the amount of goods these mechanisms and people moved across the ocean? How did these objects contribute to shaping a more cosmopolitan imagination of operatic elites of New Orleans? How did they become a space of negotiation between international aspirations and local habits?

The second chapter takes a closer look at local performances, with particular attention to the differences between the French Quarter with its Théâtre d'Orléans and the American sector with its anglophone American Theatre, then run by James Caldwell. Bentley focuses on the *grand opéra*, one of the most successful genres in nineteenth-century New Orleans, with two examples from Meyerbeer's repertoire, *Robert le diable* and *Les Huguenots*, as they were performed and received in both theatres in the 1830s. Her comparative approach takes into consideration the two stages in New Orleans and Paris where these operas were premiered, in 1831 and 1836 respectively. This chapter marks a turning point in the debate on transnational operas for two reasons. First, by

<sup>12</sup> Bentley, *Transatlantic Opera*, 2.

eschewing any privileging of the Parisian original, Bentley explores the dramaturgical, linguistic and musical transformations that these operas faced in their transatlantic travels from Paris to New Orleans and within New Orleans itself. Second, she offers new perspectives and vocabularies for rethinking one of the most influential categories of musicological debate in recent decades: that of reception. From Bentley's perspective, reception raises questions that go beyond the traditional Dahlhausian approach, and can help understand not only how New Orleans' elites reacted to a specific work but also how they used it to project themselves into a more cosmopolitan dimension. The role of *grand opéra* in New Orleans is then revealed as twofold: if, on the one hand, it opened new outlets for opera criticism and modified the composition of local troupes to accommodate the genre, on the other it also allowed local elites to assert the position of their city as a cultural leader in the francophone Atlantic world by emulating, but also questioning, the influence of Paris.

The third chapter breaks the fourth wall to look at the sociocultural composition of operatic audiences and publics in New Orleans. The distinction between the two is not accidental. Bentley argues convincingly that whereas musicological scholarship has often used these words interchangeably, they refer to two different categories: audiences 'are formed as a consequence of individuals' interactive responses to a specific stimulus' (a performance), while publics refer to self-organised groups independently of a specific event and 'coalesce around an issue'.<sup>13</sup> Once again, her analysis starts from a careful observation of contemporary practices through a detailed reading of sources: she aims to identify cultural, social and even psychological mechanisms that defined the musical society of New Orleans. The first part of the chapter is devoted to the economic and social composition of the audiences and publics as well as their behaviour. Particular attention is paid to the role of Black communities within and around the theatre: despite Davis's efforts to accommodate them within the auditorium, Black people were relegated to the margins of the event, often as service personnel. The lack of sources, Bentley warns us, should not stop us attempting an 'important historiographical exercise' to imagine what and how these people could hear during a rehearsal or from behind the door. The chapter's second part addresses the issue of the press and the role it played in creating a public dimension for opera. Bentley looks for those mechanisms that transformed the local press into a key instrument in the narrative construction of New Orleans as a cosmopolitan city on a par with European capitals.

The fourth chapter takes this research further to investigate New Orleans and its musical society within private and domestic spheres. Bentley focuses on two different categories of objects: sheet music based on opera transcriptions made by the German author Herman Edward Lehmann, and the opera librettos printed by Louis Fiot between the 1830s and 1850s. Drawing, once again, on exceptional archival research, Bentley provides a thorough analysis that looks both at the social function of these objects as souvenirs and operatic memorabilia, and the practices related to them, from domestic playing to social dancing in local ballrooms. This analysis, however, works as a general foundation of a much wider discussion around these objects: scores, librettos and their covers are discussed through the lens of what the author calls 'global intimacy'. This concept looks at the ways in which these objects contributed to creating a repertoire of experiences and imaginations that projected New Orleans elites beyond the confines of their city.

While the third chapter discusses the local press and its tendency to fictionalise facts in an attempt to strengthen the reputation of New Orleans, the fifth and final chapter brings literary fiction and the world of opera into even closer proximity. Here Bentley flips the lens and looks at operatic New Orleans through the gazes of foreign travellers

<sup>13</sup> Bentley, *Transatlantic Opera*, 79.



from both sides of the ocean. The first is the French writer Charles Jobey, author of the novel *L'amour d'un negre* (1860) and a short story, 'Le lac Cathahoula' / 'Souvenirs de la Louisiane' (1861, which Bentley includes in the Appendix). The second is the North American traveller Edward Henry Durell and the memoirs of his journey between 1835 and 1836 to the American south, entitled *New Orleans as I Found It* (New York, 1845). These texts offer assorted narrative examples, including a novel about Charles Roger's disastrous love affair in New Orleans, a tale about a singing troupe's adventure in the forest around the city and, finally, a travelogue of an American citizen. As Bentley duly points out, neither of the original authors was a tourist (a 'fleeting visitor'): a 'status' which allows them to work and live in the city.<sup>14</sup> While in Durell opera is a 'gateway to a unique personal experience' which transports him 'to Scotland, back to Paris, to Greece, to eastern lands, all in the course of an evening', Jobey's fictional works, eventually printed in Paris, portray opera as place for dialogue between Europe and New Orleans:<sup>15</sup> it becomes a 'means through which aspects of the European self are both centered and decentered, repeatedly destabilized in more or less unfamiliar settings'.<sup>16</sup> The innovative aspect of this chapter lies in the blurry narrative dimension that permeates each one of these books: fiction and reality overlap on each page in ways that, far from undermining the position that New Orleans occupies in the new operatic geography of the Atlantic, reinforce it and make it even more clear as it is processed through foreign eyes. The book closes with a short epilogue that recounts the last operatic events after 1859: a series of events – some glorious, such as the arrival of Adelina Patti – that ended with the French operatic model being eclipsed by the Italian and German models in a cycle of new impresarios and companies that stands in stark contrast to the relative stability of the years of the Théâtre d'Orléans' existence under the control of John and Pierre Davis.

The significance of *New Orleans and the Creation of Transatlantic Opera* is both historical and historiographical. Bentley casts a new light on a city that has traditionally been left on the margins of musical history of the nineteenth century. With exquisite narrative skills, the author takes us through the venues, objects, emotions, professions and sounds that animated the operatic life of New Orleans between 1819 and 1859. The aim of this *tour de force*, however, is not limited to describing the musical life of the city: Bentley embarks on a thorough exploration of how New Orleans and its people listened, interpreted and adapted opera through its material and imaginative dimensions. Opera stands out as an unpredictable and iridescent yet indispensable protagonist of the urban space: it moves through different places and social classes while offering them a solid terrain to stimulate imaginations and negotiate identities. At the same time, this book provides solid grounds to safely relocate New Orleans within the wider geography of the nineteenth-century Atlantic and its political dynamics. Zoom in to zoom out: internal threads are carefully connected to a global dimension in which the imperialist aspirations of France, England and the United States intersect with the political transformations of the new Creole republics of South America. New Orleans sits precisely on the border, or perhaps at the centre, of these political and cultural areas: it is the bridge that connects, probably for the first time in musicology, Europe, South and North America. These historical contributions lead also to more theoretical discussions. Although focused on a single city in a limited time span, Bentley's book calls into question a wide range of issues concerning the globalisation of opera more broadly: it challenges the understanding of opera houses outside Europe as mere 'mirrors', instead emphasising their ability to produce different but autonomous meanings and forms. It also resituates opera's material culture as a crucial

<sup>14</sup> Bentley, *Transatlantic Opera*, 139.

<sup>15</sup> Bentley, *Transatlantic Opera*, 163.

<sup>16</sup> Bentley, *Transatlantic Opera*, 156.

analytical source to explore the intimate relationship that people established with music and how it helped feed their fantasies and build a more complex imaginative dimension to escape the limits of reality. At the same time, it reaffirms the importance of the circularity of gazes in the processes of operatic globalisation: if the imaginative dimension opens the door to the fantasy of a borderless geography, it is only the gaze of the Other that brings us firmly back to reality by defining roles, spaces and limits that are difficult to perceive from within. As Axel Körner suggests in his back cover blurb to Bentley's book: this is truly a milestone in transnational opera studies, and its contribution cannot be ignored by anyone wishing to explore the fascinating relationships between nineteenth-century opera and the city in a global perspective.<sup>17</sup>

With Rogério Budasz's *Opera in the Tropics: Music and Theater in Early Modern Brazil*, we move south from New Orleans while taking another step back in history: to the world of colonial Brazil and its operatic life.<sup>18</sup> As the title suggests, the word 'opera' is taken in its broader sense to include all the forms, habits and places that colonial Brazil developed in relation to intersections between music and theatre. Budasz situates his analysis in a complex transatlantic context that spans from Portugal, with frequent incursions into Spain and Italy, to various Latin American contexts around Brazil and its urban centres. Analogously to André and Bentley, this approach discloses a complex system of international networks and encounters that carried, transformed, translated, adapted, and reimaged the operatic genre in a complex overlapping of microhistorical and global dimensions. Unlike André and Bentley, however, Budasz looks at a much larger chronological context that encompasses the colonial period of Brazil in its entirety, from the sixteenth century until the arrival of the Portuguese court at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

This macrohistorical colonial focus requires, I believe, some initial clarifications to better understand the historiographical relevance of this volume. Although conventionally associated with the tradition of the French *Annales*, this approach here finds a new methodological relevance. Budasz gets rid of any teleological aspiration or 'grand narrative' aimed at celebrating the uniqueness or even greatness of national contexts, which some Latin American scholarship, especially when funded by local governments, is currently trying to pursue. His approach invites us to reflect, instead, on how colonial Brazil, often forgotten by musicological explorations in favour of Peruvian or Mexican experiences or the Jesuit missions, can help us rethink the relationship between music and colonialism from new perspectives. At the same time, the author's colonial perspective does not seem to reconstruct the musical history of colonial Brazil in order to 'provincialise' the Old World, but rather to understand the uniqueness of colonial Latin America in the postcolonial paradigm, and to reaffirm the centrality of Europe, namely Portugal and the entire Iberian Peninsula, not only as a colonising force but, also, as a source and vehicle of cultural languages ready to interact with local communities. Brazilian colonialism appears, then, as an open system with a form of government and subjugation that fosters, whether consciously or not, an extraordinary cultural diversity.

*Opera in the Tropics* is particularly hard to summarise. Each chapter focuses on a different material aspect of the Brazilian operatic scene from its foundation (chapter 1) and the arrival of Portuguese crafts (chapter 2) to the 'Musical Sources and Archives' available today (chapter 3), its 'Venues' (chapter 4), 'People' (chapter 5) and 'Uses' (chapter 6). Unlike chapters of other monographs of this kind, however, each section of this book covers large time frames, often across several centuries, by stitching together collections of different microhistorical case studies. Far from being confusing, the result of this

<sup>17</sup> Bentley, *Transatlantic Opera*, back cover.

<sup>18</sup> Rogério Budasz, *Opera in the Tropics: Music and Theater in Early Modern Brazil* (Oxford, 2019).



approach reveals a coherent and colourful mosaic of voices, venues, people, documents and events. Budasz navigates this mosaic with a confident methodology which evokes in more than one respect what Carlo Ginzburg and Carlo Poni defined some decades ago as ‘nominative’ (and similar in many ways also to the ‘zoom out to zoom in’ approach suggested by Bentley)<sup>19</sup>: the author follows individuals, episodes, small fragments, objects, to push his research towards the orbit of global history with its intertwined webs of people and ideas in motion. Each tile is put into place, to gradually build an ever more extensive and polyphonic narrative, until the entire mosaic is completed both in its global dynamics and local mechanisms. Such a process is made possible also by exceptional archival and cataloguing work, most of which is included in three helpful appendices at the end of the book: one appendix is dedicated to opera chronologies between 1565 and 1807 and 1807 and 1822, one to the numbers of the Luso-Brazilian pastiche *Demofonte in Tracia* (1780) and the last to ‘Abbreviations, Spelling, Pitch System, Currency, Conversion Rates, Cost of Living, Glossary’.

Given the nature of the book, I will not try to offer a chapter-by-chapter summary, but will instead identify its underpinning themes and debates, among which connectivity and mobility stand out as the most persistent. Each chapter points to a broad Atlantic space where music travelled at extraordinary speeds back and forth across the ocean. This connectivity, fuelled by colonial policies from Portugal based on civilising and social control, brought to Brazil a wide variety of social professions and operatic repertoires, from Spanish *zarzuelas* and celebratory *loas* for the royal family to Metastasian operas imported from Italy. Budasz’s gaze gradually becomes more local as opera gets closer to the Brazilian shores and fits into the fabric of local communities. Here, the author privileges the performative aspect: his depth of archival research allows him to delve into scores and props in search of the ways in which seventeenth- and eighteenth-century operas were adapted, reimagined and performed all over colonial Brazil. Another key factor is his focus on the power relations that musical theatre established in colonial Brazil. Over the course of time, opera becomes an increasingly porous and liquid form, capable of moving out of traditional contexts to circulate within a variety of other urban environments. Brazil’s colonial society adapted and reinterpreted operatic forms from Europe in a constant tension between two forces: the preservation of imperial dynamics of domination and dependence and the Brazilians’ propensity to appropriate the language of opera as a space for self-representation.

*Opera in the Tropics* fills an important gap in contemporary discussions on operatic mobility. First of all, it identifies the reception and production of opera in colonial Brazil as a crucial process within colonial Latin America. In doing so, it also expands a musicological debate too often centred on Spanish contexts. Second, this book invites us to take a closer look at the Latin American operatic world of the colonial era: a subject still understudied, despite the exceptional work of scholars such as Louise K. Stein and Leonardo Waisman. Today, colonial opera in Latin America remains almost unknown in comparison to the sacred and instrumental music of the same period, even though it played a pivotal role in the strengthening and dissemination of European empires.<sup>20</sup> I would also like to add a third point that, although it may seem obvious, makes Budasz’s book a novelty in the current debate: *Opera in the Tropics* offers an impressive

<sup>19</sup> Carlo Ginzburg and Carlo Poni, ‘il nome e il come: scambio ineguale e mercato storiografico’, *Quaderni storici* XL/40 (1979), 181–90.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Louise K. Stein “‘La música de dos orbes’”: A Context for the First Opera of the Americas’, *The Opera Quarterly* 22/3–4 (2006), 433–58; Leonardo Waisman, ‘Schmid, Zipoli, y el “indígena anónimo”’: Reflexiones sobre el repertorio de las antiguasmisiones jesuíticas’, in *Música barroca del Chiquitos jesuítico*, ed. Bernardo Illari (Santa Cruz de la Sierra, 1998), 43–55.

amount of musical information alongside the historical contexts, all of it judiciously catalogued and analysed by the author throughout the various chapters and in the final appendices.

\* \* \*

I began this review by identifying two risks connected to the current academic debate on operatic globalisation: first, the disorientation possible within a geographical space that often escapes our historiographic categories, as well as our geographical and historical knowledge and, second, the fetishisation of the exotic. These three books offer some effective tools to escape these risks. Although situated in very different temporal and geographical dimensions, Budasz and Bentley show the importance of exploring local contexts that continue to be deemed marginal, if not irrelevant, in the history of Western music. Why is it important to talk about opera in New Orleans in the 1830s? Why do we discuss opera performances in Salvador de Bahia or Rio de Janeiro during the eighteenth century? What do these contexts tell us about us? Reading Bentley's and Budasz's work, I encountered the same social mechanisms that continue to this day to drive the cultural interaction between the two sides of the ocean: the profound sense of admiration for everything that contains the 'Europe' brand, the desire to make it one's own version of the original and, therefore, to transform it by adapting it to one's own needs and aspirations. In this sense they both seem to lay the historical foundations not only of André's discourse but also of those global dynamics we have seen with the two examples from the internet that opened this review. The opposition between the stability of European opera and its aura in contrast to the malleability of its forms and realities, which Benjamin Walton theorised in relation to nineteenth-century operatic mobility, claims its validity also beyond that context.<sup>21</sup>

As far as the second risk is concerned – that of feeling disoriented in an expanding geographical space – all three books find in global microhistory perhaps the most appropriate answer, albeit with varying degrees of awareness: it is only through such an approach – they all seem to argue – that we can eventually push our research towards the orbit of global history while keeping it rooted in its local dimension. There is, however, another solution, which looks at the role that Europe played as an imperial force from the sixteenth century onwards: a solution that all three books implement in the same way. What do we do with Europe in global history? The operas examined in these books, as well as their cultural references, refer to models that are European. Provincialising the historical role of Europe, as some scholars of postcolonial studies propose, is as risky as it is historically misleading when adopted as a scholarly mission: it might imply the risk of underestimating the problematic role of Europe – both as a geopolitical reality and as a world imagined by non-Europeans as a result of processes of injected and internalised colonialism – in fuelling the cultural processes that led opera to become a global phenomenon.<sup>22</sup> By the same token, the celebration of Europe as the cradle of the culture that imperialism put upon a pedestal evokes polarisations that, albeit associated with old historiographical debates, continue to survive in some musicological arenas. The wide range of power dynamics across the Atlantic discussed by these books – from forms of political control and cultural influence (colonial Brazil) and the supplying of models and repertoires for a new cosmopolitan imagination (New Orleans) to a more contradictory relationship of dependency, violence and emancipation (North America and

<sup>21</sup> Benjamin Walton, 'Epilogue', in *Italian Opera in Global and Transnational Perspective*, ed. Axel Körner and Paulo M. Kühl (Cambridge, 2022), 298–303.

<sup>22</sup> Olivia A. Bloechl, *Native American Songs at the Frontiers of Early Modern Music* (Cambridge, 2008), 5–7.

South Africa) – does not provide a solution, but offers solid case studies to allow us to calibrate what new stories we can tell about the various forms taken by the inescapable presence of Europe: we need to discuss and question its authority, but we cannot ignore it as a historical problem in relation to operatic history.

One further question arises from all these reflections: What do these books tell us about the future of studies of operatic globalisation? Although none of the three authors dares tackle this question explicitly, each of them offers, more or less indirectly, new perspectives on the matter. Their answers, I believe, point at new ways of restating an old idea regarding the value of historical research as the way to understand our own times. Sometimes we forget that the reality of operatic mobility in the twenty-first century has its own history, whether lying behind a performance of *Aida* in Hong Kong or heard through a *danzón* inspired by *Rigoletto* played in a square during a neighbourhood party in Mexico City. The future of such research, then, lies not in the search for more exotic and quirky places around the world where opera landed and exerted its power. Rather, these books seem to suggest, it lies in the ways in which the study of all operatic contexts can together help us untangle current dynamics of culture in a constantly changing and expanding present.