

## European performance histories

Randi Margrete Selvik, Svein Gladsø and Anne Margrete Fiskvik, eds., 2020. *Performing arts in changing societies: Opera, dance, and theatre in European and Nordic countries around 1800*. Routledge: Abingdon & New York. 233 pp. ISBN 978-0-429-28167-9 (e-book).

This collection of thirteen essays is based on papers delivered at the conference ‘Plays, Places and Participants’ that was held in Trondheim in November 2013. The chapters cover a wide range of topics relating to opera, theatre and dance between 1770 and 1850, with an emphasis on the Nordic region, though it also includes chapters that focus on Paris, Berlin, London and Vienna. In their introduction, editors Svein Gladsø and Randi Margrete Selvik point to genre developments as a unifying conceptual framework for the volume, while acknowledging that the old neoclassical genres (tragedy, comedy and their various combinations) lost most of their normative force during the period in question. In my view, this emphasis on genre is not entirely appropriate, however, since hardly any of the essays deal with genre in the classical sense, though many of them deal with popular forms such as *opéra-comique*, *Singspiel*, *syngespil*, melodrama and pantomime, not to mention more obscure forms such as rope dancing and equestrian drama. What struck me as the real common denominator – at least of what I thought were the most interesting contributions – is a reliance on approaches drawn from Cultural Studies, which has led to investigations of amateur practices and itinerant performers, often drawing on original archival research. This marks a refreshing departure from the traditional writing of music and theatre history in the Nordic countries, which for a long time was focused exclusively on national repertoires and artists, often structured around simplistic labels such as ‘classicism’, ‘enlightenment’, ‘pre-romanticism’, ‘realism’, etc. Though the present volume is not entirely free from the old periodizing, the latter has become laudably secondary.

The first essay in the collection is a model example of the type of insight we can gain from looking at amateur rather than professional practices. David Charlton’s essay on domestic performances of *opéras-comiques* in eighteenth-century France shows that works dealing with socially and politically sensitive themes, which it was impossible to mount professionally, could be played in private homes. His key example is *Annette et Lubin* (1762) by Jean-François Marmontel and Jean-Benjamin de La Borde, which was written exclusively for private consumption, dealing as it does with the controversial topic of children born out of wedlock, even showing a pregnant woman on stage. When the number of theatres exploded in Paris in the years after the Revolution and such themes became commonplace on stage, the many new professionals were often people whose scenic experience derived from such amateur productions. In this way, Charlton invites us to consider the difference between amateur and professional theatre as well as that between pre- and post-Revolutionary theatre.

The four following essays, which deal with different forms of music theatre as well, tread more familiar historiographical ground. Märten Nehrfor Hultén examines the depiction of the ruler in two little-known operas by the Berlin composer Johann Friedrich Reichardt: the *opera seria Brenno* from 1789 (about Brennus, the Gallic chieftain who invaded Rome in 387 BC) and the singspiel *Die Geisterinsel* from 1798 (based on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*). T. Sofie Taubert studies the premiere London production of Carl Maria von Weber's opera *Oberon, or The Elf King's Oath* (1826), which became the prototype of the musical depiction of elves and fairies in nineteenth-century German opera. Cecilie Louise Macé Stensrud looks at the predilection for the Danish *syngespil* within Norwegian amateur dramatic societies around 1800. Stensrud is more interested in the genre as an alternative to opera than in its broader cultural significance, but her brief discussion of Enevold Falsen's and F. L. Æ. Kunzen's *Dragedukken* (1797), which apparently deals with adoption as a social problem, seems like a case similar to *Annette et Lubin* discussed by Charlton; it would have been interesting to see this connection explored further. Vera Grund also aims to bring a neglected genre into the light, providing an overview of Viennese productions of melodramas, by Georg Benda and others, between 1772 and 1803.

The next three chapters focus on the careers and professional and financial circumstances of performers during the period. Owe Ander provides an overview of the very diverse duties and activities of Swedish court Kapellmeisters in the decades before and after 1800, while Karin Hallgren offers an economic and political perspective on the first fifty years of the Royal Swedish Opera (1773–1823). I was particularly intrigued by her accounts of the economic challenges facing the institution in the transition from being a primarily royal to being a primarily public institution, and of the use of royal propaganda under the Vasa and Bernadotte dynasties, respectively. Sarah McCleave adopts an economic perspective, too, in her archival study of the careers of female dancers in London theatres between 1770 and 1810, which reveals vast differences in wages and professional fortunes.

The three following chapters, by Elizabeth Svarstad, Anne Margrete Fiskvik and Ellen Karoline Gjervan, constitute a nicely unified set. Together, they bring a new perspective on the history of performance in Norway, based on original archival studies, which centres on cultural practices and popular forms that have received little attention traditionally. Svarstad shows how dance education at the Military Academy of Christiania in the early nineteenth century was used not only to provide the cadets with graceful social manners but also to create a unitary group of officers out of young men with quite diverse social backgrounds. Fiskvik studies the repertoire of the itinerant British rope-dancer Michael Stuart who performed in the Nordic countries, mainly in Norway, between 1750 and 1771, and Gjervan gives a lively impression of the spectacular pantomime acts performed in Trondheim by the itinerant Gautier family troupe in the winter of 1839–1840. She argues convincingly that a broader understanding of the theatrical activities of such troupes will help 'expanding the history of theatre in Norway as well as embedding the itinerant repertory within a common-European theatre culture of popular entertainments' (p. 185). Indeed, all three chapters can be said to contribute to such an enterprise, enhancing awareness of the exchange between the national and the international.

This is less the case with Alette Scavenius' chapter, which is the only Danish contribution to the collection. Though promising to provide a study of the dramatic societies in Denmark between 1770 and 1850, which would have been a welcome complement to the chapters by Charlton and Stensrud, it mainly offers an overview of Danish theatre history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The last chapter, by Astrid von Rosen, is valuable above all for its tantalising excerpts from a recently discovered manuscript source: the diary of the wealthy Gothenburg theatregoer Patrick Alströmer, which covers the period 1774 to 1792. Alströmer's accounts of acrobatic acts he saw at the local Sillgateteatern match Fiskvik's study of similar

performances in Norway, giving further proof of the interrelatedness, or even inseparability, of Nordic and European performance histories.

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