

Books

Thomas G Kaufman *VERDI AND HIS MAJOR CONTEMPORARIES: A Selected Chronology of Performances with Casts* Garland Publishing (New York and London 1990), 590pp

It is evident that there is a new conscience in operatic research. And not just because information technology complacently stores and selects data with a patience beyond (or beneath) mere man. There is a new scrupulousness in checking facts in such a way that the whole foundation of musical scholarship is under constant review, evermore comprehensive reference material is made available and duly printed. As the world shrinks in terms of mysteries and arcane lore, so libraries nudge closer, musicologists cross barriers (not too willingly, it should be observed) and begin to share knowledge. New statistics accumulate allarmingly nowadays, old sources are dumped in the face of chronologies as infallible and detailed as possible.

This is where a *studioso* like Tom Kaufman comes in; for so many years an absolute beaver into forgotten facts and dates, an avid delver into primary sources - especially newspapers and journalistic ephemera, with a critical spread almost everyone in this field would envy yet never allowing sheer enthusiasm to extinguish a passion for the truth, he has long been a first and last resort for the hard-pressed researcher.

His field is the nineteenth-century in the broadest terms, with references right up to our own day. For once, in this large book, he supplies us with an adequate musical context in which to measure the achievement of Giuseppe Verdi against his contemporaries. The hagiographic processes which foster fame have always suppressed those works that impinge upon the uniqueness of a work of art, we cannot judge how *original* even is the most famous of his melodies without having lived at the period of its gestation, what strikes us as singular probably had no such impact on his contemporaries. It has been in the interest of his publishers to play down his rivals as we know well, all sorts of operas thrived in his shadow and have been effaced - not just by time or by the failure of their music to survive the quality test imposed by changes of taste - but by simple suppression on the part of those who would make money from the greater composer. Obviously the "Major Contemporaries" in this book exclude Rossini (operatically silent), Donizetti (exiled), and Bellini (dead). The following are included:

Giuseppe Apolloni	Luigi Arditi
Arrigo Boito	Giovanni Bottesini
Alfredo Catalani	Franco Faccio
Antonio Carlos Gomes	Filippo Marchetti
Saverio Mercadante	Emanuele Muzio
Otto Nicolai	Giovanni Pacini
Carlo Pedrotti	Achille Peri
Errico Petrella	Amilcare Ponchielli
Federico Ricci	

As will be appreciated, this list excludes the *veristi* in full flower (though they were certainly contemporary with Verdi's last offerings), the listing concentrates on that period when the most dense cloud of musical uncertainty prevails. Verdi's own chronology of performances is given more-or-less to date and in several cases with a complete performance history - his perennial scores are given a more general coverage: (as Tom Kaufman says "it was possible to identify only 24 productions of *Alzira*, while it could be estimated that a repertory opera such as *Il Trovatore* or *Aida* probably had 10,000 to 25,000".) Thus, for *Il Trovatore*: "only city and opera house premieres are given".

The operas of his contemporaries are in some cases listed complete (those of Apolloni for example, or Nicolai), others (like the intollerably fecund Giovanni Pacini) are given as feasible a coverage as possible. The information supplied for each opera is precise, including the original

cast (names in full) and that of subsequent revivals (names with initials) together with dates and venues. The flow of information is logically deployed but is best described as overwhelming. It is not a book to be read from cover to cover, though I must confess I find it hard to put down once opened. Shelf space has to be found for this book by every serious scholar of operatic history, serious operagoers will find it invaluable, those curious about neglected scores and fabled productions will have it open on their desks. It "corrects" (as Tom Kaufman is wonted to observe) almost every other current source and supplies a sense of the scale of musical performance world-wide, for nineteenth-century opera, as no other publication can or is likely ever to do.

Alexander Weatherson

.....