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Edited by Victoria Johnson, Jane F. Fulcher, and Thomas Ertman

Excerpt

[More information](#)INTRODUCTION: OPERA AND THE  
ACADEMIC TURNS*Victoria Johnson*

Opera, created in Florence in the 1580s by a group of artistically inclined noblemen and other city notables, has been in continuous production for more than four centuries in Europe, and three in the Americas. Throughout its history, creators and audiences alike have understood opera as a multi-media art form, one that includes music, text, visual elements, and (often) dance. Because of the great expense of opera performance, local political and economic elites have wielded considerable power over its creators, with the strength of these ties depending on the demands of artistic and institutional conventions. Though the distribution and differentiation of labor in opera performance has varied somewhat according to the historical moment, it has nearly always included – even at its sparest – singers, a stage with a set, instrumentalists, and an audience. And even in the context of quite modest production values, opera has required an enormous variety of material and human resources.

The complexity entailed by opera's combination of multiple artistic media – a complexity which arguably surpasses that of any other art form – means that the study of operatic history demands the analytical tools of a variety of academic disciplines. Nevertheless, until recently, scholars for decades pried opera apart into the discrete fragments most susceptible to their preferred methods of analysis: music, words, singers, theatres, directors, audiences. The operatic unity thereby lost is not the unity of words and music, nor is it the sense of dramatic unity sometimes invoked by critics in favorable reviews of individual opera performances. It is, rather, the original historical unity of the specific practices comprising the production and consumption of something conventionally labeled “opera.”

Over the last decade and a half, however, the terrain of opera studies has been dramatically altered by an explosion of interest in opera across

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disciplines as well as by an increased interdisciplinarity in approaches to opera. In the wake of the cultural and historical “turns” that transformed the humanities and social sciences in the 1970s and 1980s, musicologists in particular have turned in increasing numbers to the study of opera, and in doing so they have often drawn heavily on the methods of literary criticism and cultural history. Scholars in a range of disciplines beyond musicology have also made important contributions to this wave of new work on opera. Despite this blossoming of opera studies, however, scholars from the various disciplines concerned have had few opportunities to juxtapose and compare their differing approaches to their common object. The present volume aims to create just such an opportunity and, at the same time, to extend it to a broad audience of readers.

The short introductions to each of this volume’s three sections discuss and compare the various approaches taken by the contributors to the task of re-embedding opera in its social, political, and cultural contexts of creation and reception. In the present introduction, however, I have a different purpose: to situate the current major themes and methods in opera studies through a brief examination of the recent history of the academic disciplines involved, including musicology, history, literature, and sociology. To this end, I offer a series of maps: first, a map of the current division of academic labor in the study of opera; next, a map of the recent intellectual developments – the so-called “turns” – that have helped to transform opera studies in highly promising ways; and, finally, a map of the major paths of inquiry evident in recent work on opera. Depending on the reader’s disciplinary home turf, the territory covered in this introductory essay may at times be quite familiar; more often, I hope, the reader will find the brief introductions to the concerns and recent histories of less familiar disciplines useful and informative.

#### OPERA AND THE DIVISION OF ACADEMIC LABOR

For more than a century, musicology has been the natural repository of opera scholarship, despite the somewhat marginal position accorded the operatic form in a discipline that has often considered “pure” music

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a more legitimate concern.<sup>1</sup> Opera has, until relatively recently, been thought of by many musicologists as a poor relation in the musical family, in large part because of its commingling of music and text. It is precisely this textual element, of course, that has sometimes made opera seem more accessible to non-musicologists than purely instrumental music. For example, literary scholars concerned with drama have occasionally opened libretti to ponder such questions as how Shakespeare's plays were altered when they were wedded to music or how the dominant literary conventions of a given historical epoch were translated into the libretto form.<sup>2</sup> But, in a parallel to the somewhat marginal status of opera among musicologists, the libretto has long occupied a marginal position among the genres studied by scholars of literature, in part because of a perceived subordination of text to music and the concomitant decrease in the libretto's value as "pure" literature.<sup>3</sup>

Other academic specialists who might fruitfully contribute to the study of opera have been even less attentive than musicologists and literary critics to the history of opera. The most important reason for this inattention is the timidity with which non-musicologists approach musical works. The apparent non-representational nature of music (itself the subject of centuries of heated debate) and the technical difficulty of learning to read music have combined forcefully to discourage scholars not fluent in the language of music from putting their analytical tools to work in this area. And a further obstacle to the production of rigorous non-musicological work on opera, as the historian William Weber has pointed out regarding his own discipline, is the long-standing habit among humanities scholars of examining artistic movements from within a narrow "history of ideas" paradigm.<sup>4</sup> This paradigm has limited the ability of historians to examine thoroughly the relations between the political and the philosophical ideas of a historical era and the translation of these ideas into artistic movements, including those that have structured the world of opera over the centuries. Where opera has seemed to bear explicit political messages, or where its composers were themselves directly implicated in national politics, historians have indeed ventured to comment on opera.<sup>5</sup> But they have largely remained unable or unwilling to come to terms with

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the importance of opera as a site of social, cultural, and political interaction in modern European history.

Still other disciplines have been no more proficient or prolific in the analysis of opera, sometimes for the same reasons that confront historians, but sometimes for reasons specific to particular disciplinary trajectories. For example, despite Max Weber's early contribution to the sociology of music and Theodor Adorno's extensive mid-century writings, sociologists have shied away from examining the specifically musical content of musical works in favor of explaining the social and economic structures behind their production.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, sociologists have been no more confident than historians about directly confronting the difficult questions surrounding the relation between musical content and social context. Despite the textual element of opera, this sociological reluctance towards the study of music in general has done nothing to encourage attention within the discipline to the operatic form. And there is a further obstacle to the study of opera facing sociologists, an obstacle that derives from the discipline's own history. Having once (in the 1960s) taken up the gauntlet thrown down by the Frankfurt School in its diatribes against the American "culture industry," sociologists of art have for decades been engaged, on the one hand, in the fruitful work of specifying the precise mechanisms by which commercial interests shape popular culture, and, on the other, in documenting the liberating powers of popular culture.<sup>7</sup> "High" culture forms such as opera have largely remained in the shadows, except when they have appeared in their modern incarnations in organizational studies of non-profit institutions.<sup>8</sup> European and American operatic history has therefore received almost no attention at all from American sociologists since at least World War II.<sup>9</sup>

Disciplinary divisions of labor, internal disciplinary concerns, and the apparent impenetrability of musical works have thus served to hamper the analysis of opera production and consumption by specialists in literature, history, and sociology who in principle have much to contribute to such an analysis and whose own disciplines stand only to gain thereby. In the last twenty-five years, however, a set of linked transformations in scholarly concerns and methods throughout the

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humanities and social sciences has laid the groundwork and provided the inspiration for a wave of innovative new works on opera, including musicologist Jane Fulcher's *The Nation's Image: French Grand Opera as Politics and Politicized Art* (1987), musicologist Carolyn Abbate's *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (1991), and literary critic Herbert Lindenberger's *Opera in History* (1998). The *Cambridge Opera Journal*, launched in 1989 with an inaugural issue featuring contributors from the disciplines of philosophy, musicology, literary criticism, and history, heralded – and has since nurtured – the new spirit of opera scholarship. These scholarly undertakings, and others like them, bear witness to the interest within many disciplines in new kinds of cultural and historical analysis as well as to a new degree of disciplinary cross-fertilization. The intellectual developments that made these and other similarly innovative works possible are often referred to today as the cultural and historical “turns.” In the following section, I briefly trace the origins and effects of these developments in history, sociology, literary criticism, and musicology – all key disciplines in the study of opera – before examining the major lines of inquiry that have emerged in opera studies with the help of the turns.

#### THE TURNS IN THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

These turns, by no means smooth or unilinear processes, are the unevenly achieved result of a set of loosely linked critiques of traditional methods and objects of study that cut a swath through a wide range of disciplines from the 1970s onward. However contradictory and fitful these developments have been, their end product has been a massive reorientation of scholarly concerns and methods in history, sociology, and literature.

#### History

History's “cultural turn” took place in the 1970s and 1980s and had its origins in a reaction to two important currents of historical

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scholarship: traditional political history and the social history inaugurated by the Annales school in the 1930s and carried on in a more Marxist vein by a second generation of French historians such as Albert Soboul and George Rudé.<sup>10</sup> The success of this reaction is evident in the broad influence of the school of historical studies known as the New Cultural History, whose most prominent representatives are the French historians Roger Chartier and Jacques Revel and the American historians Natalie Zemon Davis, Robert Darnton, and Lynn Hunt.

In the 1970s and 1980s, these French and American scholars found themselves dissatisfied with the huge gaps left in the explanation of historical processes and events by historians' dependence on two sources of historical information: on the one hand, the published, learned texts of politically and socially prominent figures, and on the other (with the inception of the Annales school), quantifiable information about social and economic life. Influenced by E. P. Thompson and Michel Foucault, among others, the new culturally oriented historians began to explore alternative ways to capture the experience of the past by mining unconventional historical sources such as accounts of popular festivals or visual representations of public and private life. These sources guided scholars toward new answers to old questions – particularly those that have never ceased to surround the causes, trajectory, and effects of the French Revolution – and they often raised utterly new questions as well. A central accomplishment of the New Cultural History has been to show how cultural practices are embedded in a relation of mutual constitution with social and economic structures, an approach that stands in stark contrast to traditional understandings of the historical role of “culture” once prevalent among left-leaning and conservative historians alike.<sup>11</sup> The cultural turn in history was accompanied by another kind of turn, this one – strange as it might seem – historical. Unhappy with the Annalistes' failure to take seriously the power of actors to alter social structures, historians such as Pierre Nora and Lynn Hunt made the event and other processual and temporal categories central to historical analysis and explanation.<sup>12</sup>

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## Sociology

Like history, American sociology has also undergone both a cultural and a historical turn, though these were initially separate lines of influence which have only in the past decade begun to join into a single current of sociological inquiry. Sociology, deeply historical in the hands of its founding fathers, had by the 1960s become focused on contemporary American social structure and social problems. However, a new school of sociology, initiated in large part by the historian and sociologist Charles Tilly, imported some of the concerns and methods of the Annales school (itself deeply sociological in its methods) into the study of perennial sociological questions such as the origins of revolutions and the nature of modernization.<sup>13</sup> Tilly, along with Theda Skocpol and other influential historical sociologists, has since trained several generations of students to think about sociological questions from a historical perspective.<sup>14</sup> However, some of these students (and in fact some of the teachers) came to believe that historical sociology as practiced in the 1970s was not “historical” enough. A major complaint of this “third wave” of historical sociologists was the ahistoricity of the quantitative and comparative methods initially developed in order to help legitimize historical sociology as a sociological subfield.<sup>15</sup> In the 1990s, historical sociologists such as Andrew Abbott and William Sewell, Jr., argued that historical sociology had not yet taken time and temporality seriously, while Craig Calhoun suggested that historical sociology had allowed itself to be “domesticated” instead of using its tools to analyze the “historical constitution of basic theoretical categories.”<sup>16</sup>

This historical turn in American sociology was accompanied by a cultural turn. By the time Tilly began trying to acquaint sociologists with historical methods and concerns, American sociology had already experienced a small revolution against the dominant sociological paradigm of the mid-twentieth century, American structural-functionalism. Sociologists of culture were appropriating the revision of Marxism generated from within British Cultural Studies, along with the work of anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz, as they attempted

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to develop convincing critiques of the critics of mass culture.<sup>17</sup> Some sociologists of culture gradually began to revise their own assumptions about their central concept and to expand the definition of culture to include practice, discourse, and symbols. From France, the various poststructuralist critiques of Levi-Straussian and Saussurian structuralism, especially those of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, made their way into American studies of popular culture and also inspired culturalist studies of social spheres that had previously been considered outside the purview of cultural sociology, such as banking, railroads, or the insurance industry. For certain American sociologists, “culture” has become as ubiquitous and powerful a tool for explanation as it has for the founders and the inheritors of the New Cultural History, no longer viewed as a mere emanation of economic and social structures nor as a severely circumscribed sphere of artifacts in modern society. The multiple influences of poststructuralism, Geertzian anthropology, feminism, and cultural studies have combined to produce a set of aligned, if not always compatible, definitions of culture in sociology as a potential locus of political struggle and as a producer in its own right of social and economic structures.

### Literary criticism

For its part, the discipline of literary criticism, by definition already a deeply “cultural” one in the narrower sense, underwent a historical turn marked by the ascendancy of the “New Historicism” in the early 1980s. Literary criticism’s historical turn was, in spite of individual differences in emphasis and outlook, above all a reaction to the brand of literary analysis that had dominated since the late 1920s, the “New Criticism.”<sup>18</sup> American literary scholars working in this tradition, whose foremost representatives were Cleanth Brooks, John Crowe Ransom, and Robert Penn Warren, chose to bracket the historical context of literary works in favor of attention to the texts alone. These scholars shared a conviction that literary works held the key to appropriate understanding between their covers and that criticism should be deployed for the close analysis of texts without recourse to



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extra-textual information. Attention to historical context was largely eschewed in the quest to understand the work on its own terms, an approach which often served to identify innovation or creativity as emanating from the author alone.

The “New Historicism” marked one current of reaction to this sort of autonomous understanding of the text. Scholars working in this vein began to explore the historical contexts in which literary works were created to examine how their authors were beholden to contemporary modes of discourse and other collective social phenomena for the structure and content of their supposedly autonomous literary creations.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, another strain of reaction to the New Criticism was triggered by the influential reinterpretation of Saussurian semiotics by Roland Barthes, which opened up a whole new range of “texts” to be “read” by critics, including pictures, social practices, and the objects of daily life.<sup>20</sup> To this expansion of subject matter, British Cultural Studies and the many varieties of French poststructuralism contributed a revised understanding of the individual text as permitting multiple and equally valid readings and as thus exhibiting “multivocality.” By the 1980s, the kind of textual interpretation practiced by the New Criticism had largely been replaced by a new flexibility (or laxness, depending on one’s perspective) of method, a new set of questions, and a new range of literary “sources.” As we shall see, it was these developments in literary theory that were to have the heaviest impact on the study of opera, contributing to a wave of new works on the subject in the 1980s and 1990s, both within musicology and beyond its borders.

## Musicology

It has frequently been noted that musicology has been the discipline most resistant to, and even ignorant of, the dramatic changes in the humanities and social sciences that began to make themselves felt in the 1970s.<sup>21</sup> The transformations in methods, sources, and concerns that were profoundly altering the study of literature hardly touched musicology for at least a decade, as the discipline remained curiously

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impervious to the kind of cross-pollination that made sociologists and literary critics alike claim Raymond Williams and Roland Barthes as their own, or that made Foucault at one and the same time an anthropologist, a literary theorist, a historian, and a sociologist. One of the long-standing exceptions to this rule of disciplinary insularity, Leo Treitler, has suggested that musicology, troubled by its lack of documentary sources before the medieval period – compared, for example, to the ancient documentation available to scholars of literature and the visual arts – has been resistant to the new academic currents because it has focused most of its energy on securing its own tradition through the painstaking reconstruction of historical facts and sources.<sup>22</sup> Though these studies have vastly expanded our historical record of musical life, they have usually made only a limited contribution to questions about the place of music in the history of human societies. While many musicologists have moved beyond the traditional “internalist” study of musical works to the documentation of extra-musical phenomena such as markets and politics, many of these same musicologists have continued to treat the musical works themselves as objectively autonomous entities, rather than examining the way such autonomy is socially constituted (or blocked). Like non-musicologists who may romanticize music as a fundamentally difficult and mysterious art form, musicologists have often implicitly endowed music with a timeless autonomy that discourages them from posing questions about the relations between musical form and content and extra-musical context at all.

Gradually, however, beginning in the mid-1980s, a series of unusual conferences and the research of a few bold musicologists resulted in the publication of several pathbreaking volumes that have questioned the assumptions behind the dominant concerns and methods in American musicology as well as exploring possible approaches to questions rarely posed by musicologists about music/society relations. These works include (but are not limited to) *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology* (Joseph Kerman, 1985); *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance and Reception* (edited by Richard Leppert and Susan McClary, 1987); *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality*