

Claudio E. Benzecry

Paul Atkinson, Everyday Arias. Oxford: Altamira Press, 2006, 225 pp.

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Book reviews

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While opera was a central topic for modern cultural analysis during its early days (consider the place it had in Gramsci's analysis of the reasons why Italy did not have popular romance literary genre; or the way in which it was used as the key example to understand the growing reification of the aesthetic experience under the capitalist regime by Theodor Adorno), the disciplinary division between social sciences and humanities had the latter (represented by cultural studies) "inheriting" the study of opera. This had a few consequences: its inquiry was centered mostly on texts (either primary texts like libretti or secondary sources, like the literary musings of diverse characters in novels and movies); identity politics became central to understand its modes of consumption and representation; that the meaning of the practice was not looked for in the diverse mediations that made it work, but was rather reified and passed as the representation of melodramatic excess. Finally, even when a sociological concept (like class) was called to intervene, it was only to say that opera was just an excuse for the display of status.

The work by Atkinson helps us to move away from these key tenets, and invites us to look for the production of the meaning of the operatic experience in the production process itself; in the work it takes to perform an opera. As such, his book inscribes itself within a fructiferous line of inquiry within sociology, that of the art worlds by Howie Becker and in the work of sociologists of the production of culture such as Robert Faulkner. The text actually joins Becker (and others) who have taken a second turn, and instead of just focusing on the context and the conditions of production – as an outside, an organizational context that allows the work to be – sees the work of art itself as a never ending process. While the move is well known in the sociology of culture it is almost revolutionary for the study of opera.

The book embraces this perspective while trying to exhaustively answer one question: what kind of work produces an experience considered as extraordinary as going to the opera? His answer could be summarized as "routine work" but doing this would actually do little justice to the multi-layered explanation Atkinson proposes. The first part of the answer, as I've anticipated, has to do with how meaning is mobilized, with how it is performed, put together by menial and repetitive acts. Instead of focusing on the disembodied texts I have already alluded to or on the names of the great singers, he participates intensively and extensively in the rehearsals of the Welsh National Opera (WNO), showing the everyday production of the extraordinary.

His analysis of the WNO production of Giuseppe Verdi's *Simone Boccanegra*, for instance, is a great example of how the meaning of the work can not be just found on the libretto, it can not be just found on the reference to a particular "original" (though the work of art has a central place in his explanation, as I will discuss shortly) but is actually found on the ensemble of its performance taking all of the former into account. The palimpsest we see as the final work (through Atkinson's eyes) is produced by many interventions by the stage director and his team. Some of them are referential (the division

between *grandi e popolo* within the story, the place of charisma in securing legitimate authority); others are more obvious to a contemporary gaze (like the sexual division of roles); a few point to the intertextuality with other operas by Verdi; or to other operas staged by the same director. The production also privileges certain readings of the work as afforded by themes present in the script, putting in doubt the existence of an “original” to be analyzed by the sociologist. On the contrary, this particular staging is not just a case or a variation of, but a work produced anew within the constraints afforded by the script and the score. In this sense, his perspective is a departure from schools like symbolic interactionism and “production of culture,” as it moves the focus away from the emphasis on how general processes of coordination unfold, into the study of the content of the work. This move forces the sociologist to be someone other than an expert in organizations, institutions or networks and actually become actively engaged with the necessary knowledge to understand the particularities of the social world they study and its products.

To the emphasis on the actual production made possible by “the work,” Atkinson adds another level of analysis, the work of coordination required to synchronize singing and acting, two activities that are not “naturally” simultaneous. The text focuses on Mauss-like “techniques of the body” to make sure we understand singers embody a particular stage character through minutia and menial details. It is at this point of the text where the author embraces performance as his favorite metaphor and makes it work on three different levels: as the work of putting together strategies for impression management within a particular production; as the work of a company as a team to impress its patrons as to have them donate more money; as the autobiographical self that appears outside the stage, when singers describe themselves to the sociologist (or to an audience) tying together their life stories with a disembodied voice, that seems to have a life of its own, which they need to control and master.

The third part of the answer, then, is advanced by the effort he makes in bringing the dramaturgical perspective back to the analysis of the theatrical life, reversing Goffman, as he calls it. Though sociology has made of social life a *theatrum mundi*, for Atkinson it has not taken seriously the performative analysis of performance and shown the double agency of the theatrical self. It is at this point where the analysis falls a bit short. The main problem is that his scrutiny of the performances never appears from the point of view of the audience. While we do see the toil it takes to impress and conceal, the understanding of performance appears almost as one-sided as a con game, not allowing us to see the interaction between performance and its audience. Instead of extending his perspective, which de-naturalizes the idea of an original and makes the work live in a permanent process of social semiosis, the book stops short, by making the performer the author of a particular original and the audience just the passive canvas for the impressions of the performer. More scenes where we could have witnessed the pair in the interaction, would have actually given us a richer idea of what a performance is and whether it worked or not. Alluding to a “collective suspension of disbelief” by the members of the audience ignores the intense labor of love and preparation amateurs partake in, as the work of Antoine Hennion has taught us.

The second way in which the metaphor of performance is not allowed to unfold to its full extent is by negating its relationship with particular cultural models from the

past. A performance is always something performed for the nth time, a series that aims for the re-presentation of an original. Though we learn certain particular characteristics of the WNO, it might have been illuminating to understand which cultural models are its stage directors, conductors and singers replicating. Is it the young, skilled and unproven singer? The patient yet didactic Maestro? Is it the not so scandalous yet “modern enough” stage director, who takes advantage of the limitations in resources to avoid staging plays in a too traditional way? Despite its attention to organizational factors (like its lack of home stage, its private character, its dependence on wealthy patrons – especially local celebrities), the book misses the possibility of connecting between performance (of the cultural and organizational models of the WNO, as the author shows in his chapter on “performing the company”) and the performances (on stage).

Despite these last two criticisms, this is a very valuable book, which opens an avenue for inquiry, one we can only hope other musical sociologists will soon follow, as to provide us with comparative material about the ordinary work of putting together a cultural product deemed extraordinary. In this sense, this text is a welcome departure from early takes on the production of practices categorized as “high culture,” which allowed organizations, networks and entrepreneurs do the work cultural sociologists should do: to understand thoroughly “the work itself” (and the work that goes into producing it), as one of the necessary elements for a complete explanation, not as something that exists only as a black box, as the support of status claims, capital exchanges, or particular institutional arrangements.

Claudio E. Benzecry
University of Connecticut