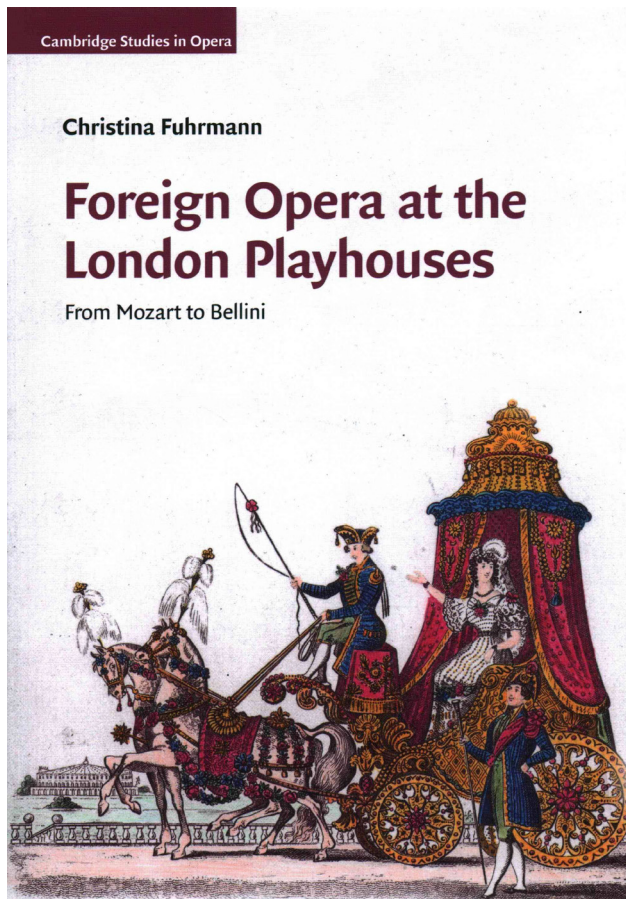




CHRISTINA FUHRMANN, *Foreign Opera at the London Playhouses: From Mozart to Bellini*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge Studies in Opera), 2015, pp. xi+272, ISBN: 978-1107022218.



At the beginning of the nineteenth century, opera production in London was shared between the King's Theatre, dominated by troupes of foreign singers (mainly Italian) performing Italian opera to a socially elite audience, and the patent theatres and minor playhouses offering ballad opera in English with spoken dialogue and relatively simple musical numbers performed by British casts to largely middle-class and artisan spectators. Although ballad opera could be entirely home-grown in terms of both text and music, it was more commonly 'pastiche' opera: an attempt to naturalise foreign works by adapting the libretto to British conventions with a score stitched together from a patchwork of interpolated arias and ensembles from other operas. These curious exercises in cultural approximation and negotiation have received little critical attention to date.

Christina Fuhrmann's new book, *Foreign Opera at the London Playhouses: From Mozart to Bellini*, makes an excellent case for considering the adaptations on the early nineteenth-century London stage in a new light — not as 'mutilations' but as 'important catalysts of change' leading eventually to the more faithful translations that dominated the latter Victorian era. Exploring twenty-five different adaptations of various operas between 1814 and 1833, Fuhrmann argues that these adaptations were vital as a first step in acquainting the audience with foreign operas, thus helping «to bridge aesthetic divides between native and continental opera» (p. 2). Drawing on Linda Hutcheon's theories of adaptation, Fuhrmann contrasts the modern approaches of *Regieoper*, with its emphasis on remaking a work's 'aesthetic identity' in new guise, with the earlier practice of an adaptation that wished rather to adjust that identity to suit specific circumstances and audiences (p. 3). She also identifies an important change in the emergence of a «“work-oriented” model» of the process of spectatorship and listening in place of the previous «event-orientated» model geared towards appreciation of singers and the social aspects of theatre attendance (p. 8).

As Fuhrmann's first chapter makes plain, a defining feature of the London operatic marketplace was the intense competition that waged between the different theatres. Ideas of fidelity and canonicity often played second fiddle to this more urgent rivalry, which had existed in one form or another since king Charles II had licensed two different companies of actors in 1660. Fuhrmann focusses on two different adaptations of Boieldieu's *Jean de Paris* in the patent theatres in 1814: one at Drury Lane, by Samuel Arnold and Charles Edward Horn; the other at Covent Garden, by Sir Henry Bishop and Isaac Pocock. The Arnold/Horn version was very much in the mould of pastiche (indeed, it ended up containing «no Boieldieu at all»), while Bishop and Pocock attempted a more faithful rendering of the original, albeit in substantially altered form. Intriguingly, it was the Drury Lane version, described by Fuhrmann as not so much an adaptation but rather «a new piece based on the same theme» (p. 19), that garnered most popular and critical acclaim. As a «play with music rather than an opera» (p. 20), it accorded with the interests of English ballad opera during the period; Fuhrmann provides useful detail about the kinds of solo numbers preferred by British audiences. The main issue in terms of formal structure was the British rejection of through-composed operas. Distaste for recitative, voiced by numerous commentators on the arrival of Italian opera in the early 1700s, still held sway over a hundred years later.

The importance of rivalry between theatres in promoting adaptations surfaces even more strongly in the discussion of Bishop's later engagement with operas by Mozart and Rossini. These Covent Garden productions were developed precisely in order to capitalise on the success of certain operas (*Don Giovanni*, in the first instance) at the King's Theatre: at times even staged on the same evenings. The adaptations of *Don Giovanni*, *Il barbiere di Siviglia* and *Le nozze di Figaro* between 1817 and 1819 demonstrated the way in which the overriding factors guiding the development process were the conventions of British melodrama. These conventions determined which characters sang and which didn't (neither Don Giovanni, nor Leporello, nor Count Almaviva), the kinds of music attributed to singing characters, and the positioning of certain arias and ensembles within the overall structure. They also shaped content, by confining characters within more acceptable borders of moral propriety: see, for example, the reworking of Cherubino's «Non so più cosa son, cosa faccio», which in both musical and textual terms limits the page's erotic fever. While such changes provoked condemnation by critics anxious to preserve «fidelity», others saw them as a means of bringing foreign operas to British audiences, embedding awareness of the original work within the public. As Fuhrmann points out, «Canonicity was achieved not by an unchanging work, but by a work that could withstand change» (p. 70).

By the early 1820s, however, the output of adaptations had dwindled. Various factors were responsible: the lack of a soprano capable of performing the more testing repertoire of foreign works to the standard of Britain's earlier prima donna Maria Dickons, who had retired in 1820; changes in the management of Covent Garden; a significant move towards native British opera in the form of Bishop's successful *Clari* (1823); and an insatiable public appetite for adaptations of the novels of Sir Walter Scott. New inspiration arrived in the form of Weber's *Der Freischütz* in 1824: an event that proved to be «a turning point in London operatic life» (p. 71). The impact of this dark, wild tale on the public imagination is demonstrated by the seven other adaptations in London theatres that followed the first production by Samuel James Arnold at the English Opera House (later known as the Lyceum

theatre). While introducing the spine-chilling possibilities of music that broke away from the confines of pure melody as well as providing scope for the astonishing technical visual effects much prized by British audiences, the adaptations of *Der Freischütz* also exposed the lack of sufficient singing-actors in the British contingent: in the English Opera House version, the role of Caspar was divided between a singer (Henry Phillips) and an actor (George John Bennett).

The success of *Der Freischütz* led to Covent Garden's commission for another opera from Weber, this time written specifically for British singers and audiences: *Oberon* (1826). But it also energised the search by the minor theatres for other German operas that could be adapted. In 1829, Arnold's English Opera House drew on works by Marschner (*Der Vampyr*) and Ries (*Die Räuberbraut*). Fuhrmann describes how although the libretti were again adjusted to suit British conventions, the approach to the scores by the theatre's music director, William Hawes, set a «new precedent for fidelity». Now only relatively limited cuts and alterations were made, while much of the operas' «lengthy, polyphonic ensembles, adventurous, chromatic harmonies and free forms» were retained, introducing audiences to a greater complexity of musical expression than had hitherto been accepted (p. 100). While critics largely praised this apparent elevation of «national taste» (p. 106), they also raised concerns about the lack of melody – regarded as an integral element in both British music and the Italian style that had so long served as a model on the London operatic stage. Neither work achieved the success of *Der Freischütz*. Perhaps not surprisingly, Covent Garden's next adaptation, Sir George Smart and William Ball's version of Spohr's *Zemire und Azor* – itself based on a French source, Grétry's *Zémire et Azor* – offered a work noted for its Rossinian influence and greater emphasis on easy, flowing melody and possibilities for theatrical spectacle. Less effective was Drury Lane's effort the following year, Bishop's adaptation of Spohr's *Der Alchymist*. Where Smart and Ball had largely adhered to Spohr's original, Bishop and his librettists (Thomas Haynes Bayly and Edward Fitzball) had reverted to the earlier practice of pastiche, interpolating seventeen 'borrowings' from five other Spohr operas. The production garnered one critic's description as «the silliest, the worst, and the dullest opera of the day» and was withdrawn after only three nights.

Various factors could influence the adaptation process. In the case of Rossini's *Guillaume Tell*, the nine versions of the story of William Tell that had already played on London's stages between 1794 and 1829 was regarded as reason to rework the opera as a setting of a quite different uprising led by Andreas Hofer in Tyrol, 1809. Adapted by Bishop and James Robinson Planché for Covent Garden in 1830, this version was regarded as the London première of Rossini's opera, despite its considerable variation in terms of plot, characterisation and music from the original score. At times, political contexts shaped adaptations. William Dimond and Christian Kramer's adaptation of Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* at Covent Garden in 1827 shifted the action to a Greek island occupied by the Turks, keying into Greece's struggle for independence. Indeed, only a month before the opera's first night, international support from Britain, France and Russia had enabled the Grecian victory at Navarino.

As Fuhrmann points out, the sheer number of adaptations of foreign works and their popularity with audiences inevitably reduced the opportunities for British operas. For example, the «flood of French imports», comprising «almost half» of the adaptations in the 1820s and 1830s, provoked the accusation from one critic that such practices were leading to

«the utter extermination of original native dramatic genius» (pp. 146-7). The impact of French works is most notable in the adaptations of Auber's *La Muette de Portici* and Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable*. The politically incendiary features of the former were toned down in the different versions staged at the Coburg Theatre and Drury Lane, but was nonetheless a «resounding popular success» with London audiences – not least because of the spectacular effects of a volcano eruption (p. 157). *Robert le Diable* appeared in five different adaptations between 23 January and 12 March 1832, followed by a further staging supervised by Meyerbeer himself at the King's Theatre in June of that year. Curiously, it was that final production, the most faithful to the original score, that did least well, running only for six performances and failing to recoup the cost of the production.

British theatres adopted a primarily pragmatic approach towards adaptation: «Change was often preferable to fidelity if it produced a better result» (p. 10). What emerges through Fuhrmann's discussion are the ingredients sought after by the managers of London's stages to create that «better result»: the possibilities for imaginative and impressive spectacle, an increase in comic characterisation, a villain in melodramatic mode (often a speaking role), a careful adjustment of any aspects of the work that might suggest eroticism, loose morals or political revolution, and a preference for predominantly melodic writing or music that was at least highly coloured in dramatic terms. While the numerous adaptations expanded the audiences' frames of reference, these essential elements remained a fairly constant factor for box-office success.

Fuhrmann offers a thorough contextualisation of her topic in terms of theatre history, debates concerning fidelity and canonicity, copyright issues, audience composition, and the various approaches and political biases of the press. As she notes, the discussion is sometimes limited by the availability of sources. While the libretti were lodged with the Lord Chamberlain's office, music was rarely included. Some manuscript scores have survived, but in incomplete form; printed vocal scores similarly often contained «only the most popular numbers» (p. 12). Nonetheless, Fuhrmann succeeds in developing a fascinating and persuasive picture of the adaptation process and product in a book that is beautifully written: concise, measured and immensely informative. It provides an invaluable and very welcome contribution to our understanding of the operatic stage in Georgian Britain.

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