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**Alessandra Campana, *Opera and Modern Spectatorship in Late Nineteenth-Century Italy*.  
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. xvi, 206 pp.**

Alessandra Campana launches her energetic, sometimes dense, always thought-provoking *Opera and Modern Spectatorship* with a disarmingly short statement: “This book claims that opera participated in the making of a modern public in post-unification Italy” (xiii). This is bracingly forthright intellectual ambition, and more follows: “the goal of these pages is to provide an alternative historical account of the aesthetics of opera, one that considers opera’s construction of a mode of spectating” (xiii). On the following page, Campana clarifies that her book is “also about how Italian opera in the last decades of the nineteenth century shaped and responded to the necessities and anxieties of modernity”; she adds that it attempts to “attend to the specificity of Italian culture at this time” (xiv).

I am not convinced that these statements provide an accurate sense of what *Opera and Modern Spectatorship* does best or where its value lies. But I have quoted them here because the expectations and queries they give rise to resonate throughout the book. Take the ambivalence about agency, for instance: who or what, one might ask, were the actual participants in this abstracted “making” of a modern public? Or, with “opera” subsequently identified as an active agent in the creation of a “mode of spectating,” to what extent is this new mode of spectating coterminous with the aforementioned new public of spectators? As in much recent work on the art form during the nineteenth century, opera itself is captured in intimate symbiotic embrace with “modernity”.<sup>1</sup> That term is left geographically vague here;

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<sup>1</sup> Important examples of such work published within the past decade on the Italian repertory include: Alexandra Wilson, *The Puccini Problem: Opera, Nationalism, and Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Arman Schwartz, “Rough Music: Tosca and Verismo Reconsidered,” *19th-Century Music* 31 (2008), 228-44; Gundula Kreuzer, *Verdi and the Germans: From Unification to the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Emilio Sala, *The Sounds of Paris in Verdi’s La traviata* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Emanuele Senici, “Delirious Hopes: Napoleonic Milan and the Rise of Modern Italian Operatic Criticism,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 27/2 (July 2015), 97-127.

the issue of *italianità* appears occasionally, but its promise of geopolitical specificity remains largely unfulfilled.

Despite her opening claims, Campana's project is not for the most part a historical one. The operatic public she is concerned with is rarely more than superficially rooted in a particular place and time. Instead, she approaches that public from an epistemological perspective: one she shares with the media theorist Fausto Colombo, whose 1998 book *La cultura sottile* features prominently in her introduction. Accordingly, Campana's public "emerges as the point of intersection of multiple strategies of address: it is listened to, interpreted, judged and at times prodded by the production process" (13). Small wonder that ambivalence about agency pervades the book's opening: this theoretically knowing approach to historical actors and their capacities to act is not for the faint-hearted. It is also one of the most refreshing and original aspects of the book, and one that has much to offer an opera studies still in thrall, for better and worse, to reception history. Take the following passage, from a review of the revival of Weber's *Der Freischütz* at La Scala in Milan in 1881—"sixty years old, and [it] does not show a wrinkle," marveled the critic—published in Casa Ricordi's house organ the *Gazzetta musicale di Milano*:

We are forced to add with some regret that the public at La Scala in these carnival days is not in the disposition to enjoy the serene beauty of an opera of this sort; on the contrary, during the opening night we noticed a restlessness, a carelessness typical of spectators caught between parties and dinners. Not daring to protest against the music, also because it had been applauded already several times before, they gave way to their uncontrollable desire for laughter during the episode with the specters and with the spoken dialogue of Samiel and Kaspar counting the bullets.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Gazzetta musicale di Milano* 36/10 (March 6, 1881), 95-96; quoted in Campana, *Opera and Spectatorship*, 8.

The complaint about an opera audience behaving badly, in this case sniggering at the Wolf's Glen scene, will be familiar to anyone who works on nineteenth-century opera. In this instance, late in the century, we might read the critic's disapproval and his expectation that the audience should behave otherwise as evidence of the era's now virtually axiomatic shift into silent attentive listening in darkened auditoria.<sup>3</sup> But it is the audience's wariness of booing music that had been "applauded already several times before" that catches Campana's eye:

As historians prying into the theatrical contingencies of more than a century ago we might be tempted to see these reviews as a trace left by that audience. But these writings do not voice the public, they judge it: they measure the audience's capacity to manifest understanding and engagement in view of what is expected of a public—that is, the rightful representative of a nation. (10)

Faced with an opera established as canonic (already acclaimed, apparently timeless), La Scala's audience appears to have practiced self-censorship in an attempt to stay on the right side of operatic posterity. As Campana puts it, "the audience is measured as it deals with the aesthetic demands of the opera, under the watchful eye of such a severe witness" (11). We should note, though, that the severe witness in this case is not the critic—the guardian and guarantor of the putative immortality of any work, and a crucial figure in Italy as elsewhere in late nineteenth-century operatic culture.<sup>4</sup> Rather, in another telling reversal of agency's usual direction of travel, it is the masterpiece itself.

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<sup>3</sup> The foundational work on this shift is James H. Johnson, *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). A valuable recent contribution to the debate, which might be read as a stimulating counterpoint to Campana's book, is Laura Protano-Biggs, "'Mille e mille calme fiammelle': Illuminating Milan's Teatro alla Scala at the *fine secolo*," *Studi verdiani* 23 (2013): 145–167.

<sup>4</sup> The literary scholar Frank Kermode articulated this idea with unmatched lucidity when he observed: "Since we have no experience of a venerable text that ensures its own perpetuity, we may reasonably say that the medium in which it survives is commentary"; Kermode, *Forms of Attention: Botticelli and Hamlet* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 36.

Campana offers us a salutary reminder that reviews “do not voice the public”—that there are crucial differences between the professional listener produced and recorded in print and the generally uncharted experiences of “the public.” Such a view challenges us to complicate and enrich our encounters with the column inches of the past. It is in this sense that the nineteenth-century Italian operatic public must indeed emerge, equivocally and partially, as a “point of intersection”; and it is also in this sense that we should read one of Campana’s few attempts to define “spectatorship.” It is a term she uses “to refer to this complex of contingent and potential audience, and for the preoccupation that opera is effective as a cultural product that can both satisfy and educate the public” (14). What remains unclear, though, is whose preoccupation with opera’s efficacy Campana has in mind. While her short, subtle introduction gestures on occasion towards a particular cultural politics of opera in late nineteenth-century Italy and to historical concerns about the nature of the operatic “product,” the remaining chapters take a markedly different approach—one that seems to place center-stage Campana’s own preoccupation with how opera “can both satisfy and educate,” and with the power of the operatic work to discipline its own audience. The source of such power, we infer, is located within the operatic text.

In this book, the operatic text is a capacious, complex entity. Notwithstanding her dismissal of “the generalizing claim that opera is always already ‘technically mediated’” (2), Campana asserts from the start that her project has emerged from the assumption that “there is no such thing as unmediatedness on the stage, and even less on the operatic stage” (1).<sup>5</sup> Ricordi’s *disposizioni sceniche* or staging manuals play an especially important role here: both as a means by which to enrich an understanding of a tripartite operatic text consisting of music, libretto, and staging; and as a previously overlooked source through which to

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<sup>5</sup> The idea that opera is more mediated than other forms of theater is intriguing but not pursued further by Campana.

investigate opera's workings as a medium. What is more, Campana places certain moments of her texts in dialogue with observations from a small band of mostly twentieth-century theoretical heavyweights: Agamben, Lacoue-Labarthe, and Sartre—plus an eleventh-hour cameo appearance from Rancière in the closing pages. Yet the core of the book nevertheless remains a series of sophisticated close readings of moments incarnated in opera scores.

The main body of *Opera and Modern Spectatorship*, then, offers five case studies: Boito's *Mefistofele*; Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra* (as staged in its 1881 Milan revival); the same composer's *Otello*; Puccini's *Manon Lescaut*; and Mascagni's score for a 1917 film, *Rapsodia satanica*. Campana describes this handful of works as a “sample”—of a “group of works produced in Italy at the turn of the twentieth century [that] bring to the fore the very issue of the medium of opera” (2). The hermeneutic urge is strong here, and Campana drives towards bold and sometimes extravagant interpretations. *Mefistofele*, as an operatic reworking of Goethe's *Faust* focused on the “epic demiurge” Mefistofele instead of Faust the “inert spectator,” “becomes *about* the creator's power” while “effect[ing] a medial shift, through which opera redefines its own power as a medium” (24). Paolo's Act 1 narrative (*Racconto*) in *Boccanegra*, in its doubling of and superimposition onto what is already visible on stage “establishes a theatricality founded on vision” (60), so that the opera “engenders a spectator that is susceptible and available to imagining shadows between the lines of reality” (61). *Otello*—an opera whose premiere was given the full Ricordi marketing treatment—is “about the mediatization of the ‘operatic’” (110), but Campana is generally more concerned with how “the portentous theatrical machinery at play in the opera conceals a fundamental anxiety regarding the same fascination it engenders” (136). *Manon Lescaut*'s problematic sequence of acts, meanwhile, “calls into question issues of visuality and spectatorship. [...] its system of representation is organized by the act of looking, with the female protagonist always at its center” (146).

In the sixth and final chapter, Campana positions Mascagni's involvement in *Rapsodia satanica* as "an experiment of cultural policy that overlaps in several ways with the production of opera described in the previous chapters" (172), arguing that the film itself "condenses and displaces contemporary anxieties about the medium of film, its uncanny ability to constitute an audience, and the role of artistic production" (173). Is this enough to justify the leap forward from the 1880s and '90s to 1914? Perhaps to ask that question is to miss the main point of the book, which is—once again—not fundamentally historical. But what about the leap from opera into another medium, albeit with a verismo figurehead as the conduit? That jump is harder to make sense of in a book otherwise so closely engaged with opera's medial particularities. Indeed, in her brief "Postlude," Campana insists only on her project's "multifariousness": "each chapter sketches the broad and always potentially broader and mutating contours of what might be entailed in the relation between the performative instances of an opera and its public" (192). We have traveled some distance from those opening claims.

What this book has to offer above all is an admirable demonstration of just how sophisticated the close-reading of operatic texts can be—and of what might be gained when questions of historicity are laid aside from time to time. Campana's intellectual nimbleness is most consistently on show in the chapter on *Manon Lescaut*, which makes important new sense of the opera's famously problematic fourth act. What is at stake in this act set almost in a void, Campana proposes, "is a fundamental change in how the opera engages its audience, how it asks its spectators to look" (154). She sifts through the *disposizione scenica*, demonstrating its obsession with how characters look at each other earlier in the opera and pointing out the "theatrical vacuum" of Act 4, in which the stage manual "retreat[s] into silence" (152); she hears the act of looking written into Puccini's score, and explains how, motivically, his music contributes to a binding together of all this staged beholding with the

gaze of the opera's audience; she turns to the twin notions of the "gaze" and "suture" as figured by Sartre and Lacan, and repurposed by Lacanian film theory in the 1960s; she returns to the opera, to Manon's Act 2 scene at the mirror and her sudden transformation as she watches herself; and finally she leads us into Act 4, whose emptiness now "symbolize[s] the dissolution of the symbolic" (168). There is no more onstage looking. The opera's audience, Campana suggests, is forced, ashamed, to confront the fact that its previous sense of visual mastery over the scene was an illusion. What is more:

this purposeful divesting of theatricality and the adamant erasure of the spectacular have the effect of admitting how opera functions, how the theatrical and spectacular elements are activated. Act 4 reveals how the operatic machinery is necessarily founded on voyeurism (169–170).

Here as elsewhere, Campana applies significant hermeneutic pressure to aspects of opera which are, among other things, highly conventional. This is one of the book's great strengths: it takes seriously the identity and affordances of late nineteenth-century opera as a *medium*. Campana's case studies do not, as she states explicitly, add up to a single, powerful argument about operatic spectatorship or anything else.<sup>6</sup> Instead, and perhaps more valuably, *Opera and Modern Spectatorship* presents a challenge to its reader: to join dots scattered by its author, to intervene, to re-interpret; and to become, like Campana herself, a more fully "emancipated spectator,"<sup>7</sup> a figure not seated silently beyond the proscenium arch, but rather an active, crucial participant in the ever-shifting contingencies of operatic meaning.

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<sup>6</sup> As she writes on the book's penultimate page: "The reader who has reached these last pages has surely realized that this book does not aim at propounding one theory of operatic spectatorship" (192).

<sup>7</sup> I borrow here, of course, the term coined by Jacques Rancière, who is mentioned only in the final pages of Campana's book but whose deconstruction and refiguring of the active actor/passive observer binary have clearly influenced her thinking elsewhere; Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009).



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