

Reviews

John Jenkins and Rainer Linz, *Arias: Recent Australian Music Theatre*

Footscray: Red House Editions, 1997.

ISBN 0646304038 pp.142, index, bibl., ill. pb.

I remember it well: I and thirty-nine of Douglas Horton's closest friends crammed into La Mama theatre in Carlton in late 1984 to see Monteverdi's *L'Incoronazione di Poppea*. While all around us the Albion, Johnny's Green Room and the Lebanese Palace did a brisk trade, we sat in the grey painted single room looking at a set which consisted of a chair and a doona or two, and on which was grippingly enacted the rise and rise of the archetypal stop-at-nothing, ambitious Dallas-type woman, with its seductions and backstabbing and, amidst much dry-ice smoke, the wedding to the most powerful man in the world. I was reminded of this when I received my copy of *Arias*, as it was with this show that Horton cut his teeth on operatic production, going on to create Chamber Made Opera. But this Monteverdi guy: isn't he, like, dead, and wasn't he Italian? Well yes, but I think it interesting that his was the work which sparked an important development in Australian musical theatre; after all, it was, dare I say it, innovative, at the time (and hasn't stopped being so) and retains its, dare I say, relevance in dealing with ideological issues which just don't go away. Monteverdi is also a salutary reminder that the best composers and other artists associated with music-theatre have always had a critical handle on the medium, and is a more than worthy godfather to recent Australian work.

But I digress. Of course Chamber Made isn't the only specialist company producing new Australian work, and Australian music-theatre wasn't invented in 1984. In the late seventies and early eighties the Victoria State Opera (may she rest in peace) grasped the nettle, bit the bullet and took the bull by the horns in producing two new works by Brian Howard, *Inner Voices* (which was fabulous) and *Metamorphoses* (which wasn't) and for the opening of the new State Theatre we got to see Barry Conyngham's *Fly*. Before that there were pieces by Werder, Sculthorpe, Friedel, Gifford and Dreyfus. Those were the days. But the days which Jenkin and Linz have taken as their subject in *Arias* are those of the last ten years. While the Red House blurb writer has possibly got overexcited in describing 'this theatrical and musical phenomenon which has emerged in Australia over the last decade', the period has seen a proliferation of

small companies dedicated to new work, and a geometrical increase in the number of such works created.

Of these specialist companies, Chamber Made was the first, and has unsurprisingly generated a substantial repertoire. At this point I should say in the interests of probity that my *Medea* is among these works, and that I did have a momentary Groucho-esque qualm about reviewing a book which had me as even a small part of its subject. But there you go. Of the others, *Arias* devotes a chapter each to Sydney Metropolitan Opera (now Music Theatre Sydney), Calculated Risks and Seduction Opera. The Australian Opera (now Opera Australia), the State Opera of South Australia, the Victoria State (now no longer with us) and West Australian Opera are the subject of a single chapter, and chapters 6 and 7 deal, respectively, with part-time companies (or those for whom music theatre is strictly ancillary) and ensembles which also routinely produce music theatre.

In the words of its authors, *Arias* aims to be a 'discursive, rather than critical, documentation of much of the innovative music theatre and chamber opera written and performed in Australia over the past decade.' Now there is a lot of cant in much discussion of theatre and music theatre in this country, and *Arias* is, by and large, refreshingly free of such false pieties. But the word 'innovative', desperately loaded in terms of current arts jargon is telling (is the book's title therefore ironic?): to claim to be 'discursive, rather than critical' in the same sentence sounds suspiciously like having one's cake and eating it, and a cursory glance at pages 24 and following show us where that leads! And when we read that Richard Vella's *The Last Supper* (a fun night in the theatre) was 'more concerned with combining various styles in an innovative and theatrical way, rather than pursuing a consistent musical logic' I am inclined to stick a recording of *Don Giovanni* under the authors' Christmas tree.

There are a few other terms like 'ground-breaking' which recur almost uncomfortably (even in a kind of mise-en-abime on the back cover describing the book itself). Furthermore, a term like 'opera with attitude' will date rather more swiftly than the medium, which, as I said earlier, has tended to be created by artists with an attitude to (for which read 'critical take on') it. Occasionally, too, an embarrassing ideological slip shows: 'Recently the AO has become funded by direct Treasury allocation, which places it beyond pressures exerted by the Australia Council through its Performing Arts Board.' The implication that some kinds of coercion are acceptable is one which shouldn't be lightly made, even if it means more work for people like me.

In general the authors maintain a certain distance when discussing companies and works, and while this is in principle laudable it does create a couple of minor flaws. It allows artists to be taken at their own estimation, and, call me Epimenides, that's not always a good idea, given that a significant minority have no idea what constitutes the ground at which they so earnestly point their mattocks. Secondly, I would have liked to come away from the book with a stronger sense of how any given piece sounded, and that requires a more upfront critical stance, as does, in my humble opinion, the differentiation of works with original scores and those meta-operas (help! I coined a neologism!) which take familiar extant music and subject them to dramatic scrutiny. Certainly the authors are very good at creating a visual sense of the work's impact, but they are oddly reticent, at times, about the noise it makes.

Co-authorship no doubt presents peculiar difficulties, and one of the outcomes is the occasional duplication of information, as in the lengthy section on Chamber Made's *Recital*. It is of great interest to hear what director Horton and composer David Chesworth have to say; the creators' tendency to repeat themselves by way of introduction is easily enough put right with slightly more rigorous editing. The same goes for the sorts of inevitable slip-ups like the attribution to Moya Henderson of *Bride of Fortune* on page 139, despite a lengthy discussion on the work and its actual composer, Gillian Whitehead, on pages 76 and 77.

My only other reservation is one of design: the book contains a wealth of technical material on individual works—such as cast lists and instrumentation—which appears at the head of each section. I'd vote for a contrasting typeface to articulate the text somewhat. But in general it's a handsome volume (thanks, as the publisher graciously notes, to the generosity of designers and the companies themselves). Given the exponential increase in works for the stage, and the lack, hitherto, of any comprehensive discussion of it, this represents a most welcome addition to the shelves.

GORDON KERRY

James Grier, *The Critical Editing of Music: History, Method and Practice*

Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1996.

ISBN 0-521-55863-8. pp. xi + 267, index, bibl., pb.

James Grier's masterly book on music editing can be recommended to anyone who has ever wondered about the sources and authority of a printed page of music; that is, to scholars and performers as well as practising or aspiring editors. The words "Method and Practice" in the title notwithstanding, this is not in a narrow sense a "how to" book. Rather it is a wonderfully wide-ranging study of editing in which Grier, drawing widely on the ideas of philologists, anthropologists and cultural theorists as well as musicologists, develops a theoretical framework for a critical methodology of editing. The book engages in some critical discourse about the nature of editing, but this need not deter the "theoretically challenged". Grier uses discipline-specific jargon with elegance and clarity and, where appropriate, illustrates his points with editorial conundrums from the standard repertoire.

Grier's starting point, espoused in the Introduction (Chapter 1), is that editing is inescapably an act of criticism, a result of "the interaction between the authority of the composer and the authority of the editor" (p.2). He holds critical interpretation and editing to be inseparable. Even what would appear to be the irreproachably well-intentioned practice of searching for authorial authority can be problematic for much repertoire as a composer's authority can be "affected and limited by the social, political and economic institutions through which these sources are produced and disseminated" (p.3).