Eighteenth-Century Music 6/1 © 2009 Cambridge University Press
doi:10.1017/S1478570609001791 Printed in the United Kingdom

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THE DRAMATIC WORKS OF CATHERINE THE GREAT
Performance in the Long Eighteenth Century: Studies in Theatre, Music, Dance
Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006
pp. xiii + 226, ISBN 978 0 7546 5628 9

Ashgate's newly launched series 'Performance in the Long Eighteenth Century: Studies in Theatre, Music, Dance' provides scholars interested in the interdisciplinary aspects of the arts of the period with a perfect opportunity for exploring topics that might otherwise be considered too esoteric for publication. Until recent times, studies in the Russian arena have been found only in a handful of dissertations, many of them unavailable to scholars. Moreover, works that cross the disciplinary boundaries (such as the present volume) have been equally difficult to locate. Consequently, O'Malley's valuable study of the literary contributions of one of Russia's greatest rulers, Tsarina Ekaterina (more commonly known in the West as Catherine the Great, but born Sophia Augusta Fredericka von Anhalt-Zerbst), fills an important historical and cultural gap in the history of a period that saw Russian influence in European politics grow exponentially.

Catherine's position in historical and cultural contexts has always been ambiguous. Born a princess of Saxony-Anhalt, she was, by virtue of her upbringing, part of the German nobility in a central European court. She was thus trained in the philosophy of the Enlightenment and highly educated in a plethora of arts. Related to the ruling families of more powerful states, such as that of Prussia, she was in the perfect position to become an influential spouse of a hereditary ruler, much as her aunt Louisa Ulrika had become queen of Sweden. The familial links and alliances formed by these marriages were often crucial to the spread of Enlightenment cultures and the growth of political blocs in various lands on the periphery of Western Europe. In 1745 Catherine's distant cousin Tsarina Elisabeth Petrovna arranged for her to marry her son, Grand Duke Peter (later Peter III), and she was transported from the culturally stimulating minor court of her youth to a large centre of empire, which had both a culture and a religion that were alien to her. The marriage was unsuccessful, but Catherine adapted well to life in the Russian court – perhaps too well, for not long after Peter had become emperor in 1762, she conspired to overthrow him and thus assumed the Russian throne, ruling as empress for thirty-four years. During her reign, Catherine was able to merge the European cultural tastes of her background with her perceived need for a distinctively Russian national identity. This project of 'Russification' made the country a major world power, but the fact that it was a foreigner on the throne who was driving it is a historical circumstance that Russian scholars have found difficult to reconcile with their own nationalist agendas, particularly during the Soviet era.

Since the break-up of the Soviet Union almost two decades ago, however, new research has opened a window on to the life of this enigmatic ruler, and O'Malley's work must be seen as part of this scholarly renaissance. Rather than tackle the many, sometimes contradictory, aspects of the empress's life and often bizarre behaviour – she mentions on the first page a case of Catherine cross-dressing as a man and courting a woman in 1763 – the author focuses on the comedies written by Catherine, using the vast array of documentation that the empress left behind as supporting evidence for her literary ambitions. But O'Malley does not let these archival sources, or her lengthy analysis of Catherine's political ambitions, dominate the study. For once, we have a work that seems to accept Catherine's comedies as autonomous literary works that were inspired, but not overshadowed, by a larger political agenda. O'Malley divides these comedies into three categories: the early works, the late works and – as if they were a genre apart – the comic operas. The entire study is prefaced by a brief essay on the empress's life and other writings to set the context within which the works were composed, and there is a brief four-page epilogue that attempts, in a sort of potted fashion, to position Catherine within the greater realm of Russian literature that followed. The core of the book, however, is a lengthy discourse on the influence of Shakespeare on her works, taking as a point of departure a 1787 depiction of the empress by John Sinclair (121). This traveller noted that Catherine was

reading the English playwright in German translation and that she herself wrote comedies inspired by her reading, such as *This 'tis to Have Linen and Buck-Baskets* (here I eschew the transliterated Russian title), based upon *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

For musicologists, O'Malley's work is useful in two respects: first, it establishes a literary context within which one can approach Catherine's librettos for Russian operas; and second, it provides a perspective on the position of her librettos within the history of Russian theatre music. This being said, it is clear that the author's perspective is more attuned to the literature than to the music; unlike studies such as Evangeline Vassiliades's 'Overture and Symphony in Eighteenth-Century Russia' (PhD dissertation, New York University, 1977) and Marina Ritzarev's *Eighteenth-Century Russian Music* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), O'Malley's volume has no music examples, and there is little sense of how the practical, performative element embedded in Catherine's texts appealed to Russian audiences of the time. While it is telling that her early comedies, almost all of which are political in content, lack the musical portions, her later works – after a thirteen-year hiatus (1772–1785) during which she wrote nothing – are most heavily focused on the play with music and the opera. O'Malley's reasons for this 'gap' seem to imply that the empress was preoccupied with personal circumstances (71) or political events (such as the Pugachev Rebellion), but she does not expand on why Catherine avoided the genre for so long.

O'Malley also dilutes the discussion of several principal works of Catherine's second period by placing them outside the chapter on her later comedies. The clearest example of this is the opera *The Beginning of Oleg's Reign*, produced in 1790. To be sure, in the work's focus on Oleg's attempt to invade Constantinople there is a parallel with Catherine's own prolonged war with the Ottoman Empire (which took place over many episodes between 1768 and 1791). But to chalk all of this operatic creativity up to the 'inherently mixed nature' of opera and its advantageous 'splendid production values; such as spectacle' (145) is to ignore the fact that Catherine was merely following the example of her cousin, Gustav III of Sweden, who in 1786 had premiered the first of a series of 'historical' nationalist works, *Gustaf Wasa*, following an even earlier model found in Denmark (such as J. E. Hartmann's *Death of Balder* in 1778). Even the use of a 'Greek' play within the opera – a work set in rather unusual fashion by Giuseppe Sarti – was based upon Swedish precedents, in particular the 1774 *Birger Jarl*. A letter from the Russian ambassador to Catherine shortly after the premiere described the success of this type of opera, and the empress acknowledged this achievement in a letter to her cousin (but this is a source that O'Malley seems to eschew). Thus Catherine's work, a strange sort of exotic-historical mélange, was in essence an imitation, and one for which the reviews were mixed (although O'Malley regards them as 'generally positive') when it finally received a production some three years after its publication in 1787 (146). O'Malley takes some licence when she links the opera with Catherine's Shakespearean influences, defining *Oleg* by means of a non-sequitur quotation from a letter of Catherine to Melchior Grimm in Paris about her interest in English plays. It is telling, however, that Catherine did not finish another opera of this historical type, turning rather to comic operas with folk-like characters.

It would be easy to criticize the rather perfunctory musical descriptions devoted to the comic operas themselves, found in chapter 4 (156–157) and in the last chapter. Given that Catherine's works have never been performed or recorded, despite the fact that in many cases the musical sources still survive, it would have been good to see at least a short score of the various songs and dances noted by the author. For instance, O'Malley observes that Vicente Martín y Soler was commissioned to write the bulk of the music for *Woeful Knight Kosometovich*, Catherine's rather nasty satire on Gustav III, penned in a fit of pique at his starting a war with her, a war that Sweden technically won, or, at least, in which it obtained a stalemate (187). She notes, somewhat absurdly, that the 'orchestral arrangement' (in other words, the score) has survived, calling a rare example of a published keyboard reduction 'a score' (187). This is the sort of simple mistake scholars unfamiliar with musical terminology often make, and here it is compounded by the various descriptions of the music as glosses. For anyone intrigued by the music that underpinned the text, this provides little or no help. Music is not, however, the purpose of the study, for the focus on text demonstrates the importance of the dramatic, comic and descriptive material in Catherine's work. While one may debate the extent of Catherine's own interest in music – O'Malley notes that people have said she was not 'a great devotee of

music' (156), a view that is contradicted by the several musical compositions that have been attributed to her – there is no doubt that music was an integral part of her conception of comic opera. The examples of Catherine's writings, as well as the running historical context the author provides, usefully illustrate the empress's contributions to the development of Russian opera. Although there needs to be a further study that integrates both text and music of these works, O'Malley at least provides a stepping-stone towards the placement and contextualization of Catherine the Great's contributions to eighteenth-century theatre and music.

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Eighteenth-Century Music 6/1 © 2009 Cambridge University Press
doi:10.1017/S147857060900181X Printed in the United Kingdom

ELEANOR SELFRIDGE-FIELD

A NEW CHRONOLOGY OF VENETIAN OPERA AND RELATED GENRES, 1660–1760

Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007
pp. vi + 778, ISBN 978 0 8047 4437 9

The scholar of Venetian opera of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries faces three major obstacles to research: the dearth of musical sources, the fragmented and scattered state of archival documentation pertaining to theatres that no longer exist, and the lack of secure dates on which to build a reliable chronology of performed operas. Eleanor Selfridge-Field's most welcome *New Chronology of Venetian Opera and Related Genres* addresses the last of these three problems, providing secure ordering for about 800 operas and 650 related works performed in what was arguably the most important European operatic centre between 1660 and 1760.

Ambiguities of year are caused by the coexistence of two timekeeping systems throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (until the collapse of the Republic in 1797): government documents usually conformed to the Venetian year, which started on 1 March, while church documents conformed to the papal year, which began on 1 January. Theatrical documents relied on either one of these systems indiscriminately. Selfridge-Field resolves these ambiguities not by drawing on printed librettos, which relied on fluid notions of theatrical seasons, but rather on thousands of unpublished weekly news-sheets and other manuscript material from Venetian and other European archives that provide exact opening dates for most operas performed in Venice. On the way, she digs out a wealth of exciting additional information concerning singers, patrons, opera management and related events.

The main chronology, consisting of about 800 entries, provides factual information about the operas, including titles, names of composers, librettists and theatres, genre and the presence of incidental items, such as *balli* or *intermezzi*, and, of course, date of first performance (or 'sorting date'). It also provides background information and documentation, comments on the subject, cast and sources for dating, first-hand reports of the performances (when they exist), not to mention bibliographic citations for surviving music and catalogues. A variety of icons is used to convey further information and cross-references. The primary objective of providing more accurate dating for most operas performed in Venice between 1660 and 1760 is achieved successfully. Selfridge-Field's identification of 'theatrical periods' brings a new perspective to opera productions and finally dispels confusion about operas performed during winter (after Christmas, or the St Stephen's period) and during Carnival. Her numerous figures and tables present data in different formats and allow the reader to form new perspectives on theatres, repertory and genre distribution.

Scholars of Venetian opera will be grateful to Selfridge-Field for finally resolving centuries-old ambiguities, and most should find the chronology easy to navigate. However, one needs to be aware of the almost inevitable errors that such a monumental enterprise can carry. Secondary and corollary information is not