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Alexandra Wilson, *The Puccini Problem: Opera, Nationalism and Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), ISBN 978-0-521-85688-1 (hb)

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REVIEWS

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Alexandra Wilson, *The Puccini Problem: Opera, Nationalism and Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), ISBN 978-0-521-85688-1 (hb)

‘The Puccini Problem’? Today’s opera lovers and *aficionados* might well ask ‘What Puccini problem?’, given that his operas, helped by the global success of such operatic ‘hits’ as ‘Nessun dorma’, seem to have gone from strength to strength in terms of public popularity and status within the staple performing repertory. Puccini’s place in musicological circles, however, has always been a far more contentious issue. At the end of her volume (227–8), Alexandra Wilson introduces us to the half-century old inspiration for her title, Claudio Sartori’s comment that ‘the Puccini problem, if a problem exists, doesn’t concern so much the Maestro’s life and works as the critical method used to evaluate his oeuvre’.¹ This is the premise with which Wilson begins (and ends) her study, which aims to pinpoint the early public and press debates that polarized opinions about Puccini’s works – different ‘camps’ using the same evidence to demonstrate diametrically opposed ideological viewpoints about the composer and art in general – and demonstrate how the dichotomies presented were irreconcilable, and remain so to this day.

The reception of Puccini’s operas in Italy from the 1890s to the 1920s provided a public forum for political and ideological debate, for the process of nation-building (irrespective of Puccini’s own personal commitment) and for the expression of fears over artistic and social decadence. The Italian reception of Wagner’s music dramas from the 1890s onwards supplemented discussions of a national operatic style with debates about musical modernity and an Italian *Zukunftsmusik*, leading inevitably to the question of whether Puccini’s *italianità* was compatible with the vital notion of progress in the ‘new’ century. Puccini also became a symbol in gender and class debates, alternately hailed as the ideal Italian male or as a degenerate aesthete, the voice of the bourgeoisie whose rise after reunification in 1861 was seen, by the turn of the century, to have emasculated Italy. Wilson’s narrative focuses on the premières of a loosely chronological selection of the Puccini ‘greats’ – *La bohème*, *Tosca*, *Madama Butterfly*, and the posthumously staged *Turandot* – whose critical receptions crystallized ideas not only about the composer and his music but also about artistic and societal ‘merit’ in general. In addressing recurring themes in Puccini reception in this way, Wilson also demonstrates how these debates evolved over time and in different social, political, and aesthetic contexts. The strength of Wilson’s narrative lies in its homogeneity, and the extended train of thought she manages to keep on track throughout the book. And

¹ Claudio Sartori, ed., *Giacomo Puccini* (Milan: Ricordi, 1959), vii.

despite the inherent danger of this strategy, namely the risk of becoming repetitive, she invariably manages to sustain the main thread of her argument, by offering subtle reformulations, sophisticated analysis, alternative conclusions, and further clarification of the issues at stake each time they are revisited.

The first two chapters deal with degeneracy, that *fin-de-siècle* notion *par excellence*, and the Italian nation's fear that internationalism and modernism were far detached from national traditions. The search for an heir to the ageing Verdi was highly prevalent as an idea, with all commentators on a quest to find a messianic musical figure to reinvigorate a beloved national tradition and lift Italian opera out of its decadence and its corruption by foreign (both French and German) imports (17–22). *La bohème* was received in the wake of the first Italian performance of *Götterdämmerung*, and it was the first time that modern Italian opera had been judged explicitly in terms of foreign music, continuous music drama, and organic unity (40–43). Wilson's analysis of the reception of *Tosca*, premièred in 1900, demonstrates how these concerns persisted, for *Tosca* seemed to disappoint many critics who desired, even needed, a 'turn of the century' opera by Puccini to sum up past tradition and point to the future vibrancy of the genre (95–6).

With the reception of *Madama Butterfly*, Wilson turns her attention to the notion of Puccini as a purveyor of superficial and decorative music, a master of attention to detail that supposedly masked a lack of deeper substance and large-scale musical and dramatic structures (97–105). The popularity of *japonaiserie* in the decorative arts fuelled such analysis, which brought with it further accusations of affectation, decadence, and effeminacy. Wilson aptly points to the parallels between such vocabulary and that of the highly gendered Massenet criticism in France during the 1890s. The reviewers' charges concerning the fragmented and ornamental nature of Puccini's music in *Madama Butterfly* and their criticism of the 'surfaces' of Puccini's work as signifying a reluctance to engage with a troubling modernity find counterparts in Italian reviews of Ravel and Strauss (121–3). Indeed, as almost a by-product of her study, Wilson paints a fascinating history of music criticism in Italy from the 1850s until the 1920s, with useful appendices of publication details of selected newspapers and journals, as well as a *dramatis personae* of the figures mentioned throughout the book (229–53). She highlights the discipline's increasing professionalization which, as elsewhere in Europe, went hand in hand with an increasingly elitist and right-wing view of what true 'Art' should be (particularly 59–68). The foundation in Turin of the scholarly *Rivista musicale italiana* in 1894 by Luigi Torchi was indicative both of this new seriousness and of a 'historicist mindset' (67) that was generally out of step with public opinion and seemed embroiled in arid, aesthetic debates over the value of what still remained a genuinely popular art form. Wilson also addresses the way in which academics might suitably make use of reviews from the more low-brow dilettante publications.

The centrepiece of Wilson's monograph, and the culmination of many of the issues discussed, is her analysis of Fausto Torrefranca's 1912 vitriolic assassination of both Puccini's music and his character. Wilson deftly demonstrates Torrefranca's heritage as a writer, from the work of philosopher Benedetto Croce, particularly his 1902 *Estetica*, which advocated the clear alignment of content and technique in the work of art (110–11), to the eminently

popular psychological, criminological, and sexological texts by such figures as Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Max Nordau, and Cesare Lombroso that played upon society's neuroses and set out to demonstrate the effeminacy, decadence, and anti-nationalist tendencies of their chosen 'victims' (126–8). Like the *Rivista musicale italiana*, which (along with all the aforementioned authors) was published by Bocca Fratelli, the aristocratic Torre Franca was against art for the masses. His anti-bourgeois, anti-democratic, and misogynist ideas found a home in the far-right newspaper *Idea nazionale*, mouthpiece of the Associazione Nazionalista Italiana, for whom he worked as music critic and where his concerns were as much political and ideological as aesthetic (128–9). Wilson not only demonstrates Torre Franca's intellectual lineage and his gendered attacks on Puccini, largely drawing on Otto Weininger's 1903 misogynist tract *Geschlecht und Charakter*, but also points to the similarity of his rhetoric with that used by the Italian far right in the lead-up to World War I, particularly the writer and journalist Giovanni Papini (130–33). Contextualization of ideas is, indeed, one of this book's great strengths. Torre Franca saw Puccini's art as degenerate, tarring it with the brush of such implicitly gendered notions as the childlike, fragility, and disease, and accusing the composer of a partially assimilated internationalism – a charge redolent of Wagner's anti-Semitic invective (let's not forget that the right-wing nationalist Vincent d'Indy had also indicted the Catholic Massenet in his accusation of the Jews as cause of the decadence of French opera; see 139–42). Like his French counterparts, Torre Franca saw only the dangers for national stability (aesthetic and political) of a corrupted genre, preferring the Early Music Revival as a way of invigorating a nationalist discourse (144).

Wilson's discussion of operas premièred in the wake of Torre Franca's diatribe focuses on the idea of internationalism versus nationalism during and immediately after the First World War. By this time Puccini was seen as representative of the institutionalized bourgeois entertainment that was opera (168). Puccini, therefore, represented all that the Futurists held in contempt, and Marinetti did not fail to promote the image of Puccini as a cowardly neutralist in his refusal to sign an artists' petition against the German oppression of Belgium and the bombardment of Reims (172). From the 'American' and musically innovative *La fanciulla del West*, which was perceived as un-Italian in both its subject and its musical treatment (159–66), to the operetta-like *La rondine*, premièred in 1917, whose preponderance of Viennese waltz rhythms was perceived as both lightweight and unpatriotic in time of war (172–6), Puccini's position at the head of the national school became increasingly contentious. Only with *Gianni Schicchi*, the last 'act' of *Il trittico*, did Puccini achieve recognition across the political spectrum in Italy. An opera buffa that was based on a story by Dante and looked back to the masters Rossini and Donizetti whilst nevertheless containing a sophisticated network of orchestral leitmotifs could not fail to please even the right-wing nationalists, who hailed the work as a second *Falstaff*, as an artistic phoenix rising from the ashes of the First World War (180–84).

Whilst Wilson points out the irreconcilable nature of the diverse strands of Puccini criticism, she also demonstrates how they were indeed quickly and uncomfortably reconciled in the obituaries that followed Puccini's death in 1924 when, under a Fascist régime, biographers and hagiographers glorified Puccini as a force for Italian unification, an antidote

to decadence, a guide for the continuing greatness of Italian opera, and an ambassador for Italy, both at home and abroad (185–93). Yet more was still to come. Wilson’s analysis of the *Turandot* reception in 1926 highlights some of the fundamental debates that have influenced Puccini reception and, moreover, Puccini scholarship for nigh on a century. In taking on Gozzi’s play, its masks, and its inexpressive heroine, Puccini was engaging with modernist (and Futurist) aesthetics concerning the superiority of puppets and mechanical figures for the expression and articulation of true drama (195). Thus both the opera itself and its critical reception were ‘engaged in a reflexive dialogue about the merits of the old and the new’ (196). Yet through his inclusion of the almost stock-in-trade Puccinian sentimental heroine in the character of Liù, Puccini satisfied neither the modernists nor his long-term supporters (211), for he was seen to be merely ‘dabbling’ with the modernism that rejected bourgeois theatre and its so-called psychological realism and sentimentality – in other words lapsing back into all that his previous operas were generally seen to represent (206). Through her discussion of the press debates, Wilson highlights an essential question which was indeed implicit in Benedetto Croce’s 1902 tract *Estetica*: was the Italian operatic tradition incompatible with a musical modernism that favoured instrumental genres, and hence, was the substance of the opera *Turandot* fatally ‘dislocated from the technique with which it had been elaborated’ (213)? The importance of this issue cannot be underestimated when assessing Puccini’s place in modern music history. Puccini’s popularity was at odds with mainstream twentieth-century music during the first quarter of the century, and it is for that very same reason that Puccini’s operas remain outside ‘serious’ musicology of the twentieth century (222). For while Puccini and his music have been a respectable subject of scholarly inquiry within the field of Italian opera, and even more so in the last ten years as many Verdi scholars have turned their attention to Puccini,² it is his place within the larger musicological picture that is disputed. And as Wilson notes, in his recent *Oxford History of Western Music*³ Richard Taruskin laments musicology’s neglect of Puccini but ‘even he – tellingly – relegates Puccini to the nineteenth-century volume of his study’ (224).

Wilson briefly suggests some new ways of thinking about Puccini’s music – for instance as soundtrack in that eminently twentieth-century medium of cinema (225–6) – as traditional methods seem to have yielded little fruit, and many critical inquiries remain dogged by the highly ambivalent and polarized nature of the arguments that Puccini’s operas were embroiled in at the times of their premières (227). It is therefore both important and significant that Wilson’s welcome new volume be reviewed in this journal, as some sort of belated acknowledgement of Puccini’s place within the repertoire and the history of twentieth-century music.

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2 Twentieth-century Puccini research extends from Mosco Carner’s 1958 pioneering biography in the English language to the work of William Ashbrook, Fiamma Nicolodi, Michele Girardi, Julian Budden, Roger Parker, Laura Basini, Helen Greenwald, Mary-Jane Philips-Matz, and Linda B. Fairtile, to name but a few.

3 Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, vol. 3: *Music in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 664–74.