

Norman, Buford.

Touched by the Graces: The Libretti of Philippe Quinault in the Context of French Classicism. Birmingham, AL: Summa Publications, 2001. Pp. ix + 402. Paper.

This first full-length study of the opera libretti that Quinault composed for Jean-Baptiste Lully in the 1670s and 80s provides a useful complement to Buford Norman's recently published, two-volume critical edition of them. Since these libretti were among the best-known and best-loved dramatic texts of the *Ancien Régime*, often read on their own without the music, and since the Lully-Quinault tradition, in addition to the long-lasting popularity of individual works, would exercise a decisive influence over French taste for well over a century, the libretti deserve careful scrutiny. Besides their major significance for the history of French culture, they possess genuine merit as works of literature.

Buford Norman has done an outstanding job of combining various perspectives on these libretti and of synthesizing a voluminous amount of scholarly material. Much of that material is factual in nature. For example, he carefully explains what literary sources Quinault used for his plots, how he altered them, and what he added. He provides information about performance histories, noting, among other things, uncertainties that persist about the dates of some of the premieres, and he indicates revivals of the operas and resettings of Quinault's texts by other composers. He critically examines the topical allusions and political allegory that contemporaries found in these works, indicates whether Quinault is likely to have intended them, and evaluates their importance - a complex matter since the operas were in fact royal commissions and to a certain extent intended as royal propaganda.

The superb introduction presents a number of important theoretical issues about the aesthetics of opera. Norman, building on the work of recent critics, especially Catherine Kintzler, Philippe Beaussant and Herbert Lindenberger, makes a compelling case for the Lully-Quinault style of opera as a successful fusion of inspired music and inspired text, fully deserving of the current revival of

interest. In addition, he briefly reviews the prehistory of French opera and explains how the formulas found by Lully and Quinault managed to captivate French audiences, even at the same time Racine's spoken tragedies were achieving recognition as preeminent examples of drama. Carefully negotiating the debate concerning the labels of classicism and baroque, he argues that the two notions are compatible, if the former is seen as a narrower focusing (but not repudiation) of the latter.

The remaining chapters, discussing the prologues as a group and then each of the eleven libretti in turn, provide sensitive and balanced analyses, combining a variety of perspectives and not ignoring any of the operas' basic components (poetry, drama, music, dance and spectacle). Norman analyzes the musicality of Quinault's texts, focusing especially on the use of lines of different lengths, phonetic considerations (repetition of sounds, frequency or absence of harsh or of gentle sounds), apt word choice, and simplicity of syntax. He pays careful attention to the means Quinault employed for producing intense emotional effects, while using plot and spectacle to build or reduce tension. He also combats the charge that the works are too similar and formulaic, demonstrating that Lully and Quinault's constant desire to experiment with new possibilities, both structural and thematic, led to a rich and varied corpus.

One of the book's great strengths is that it is very well written and enjoyable to read, and is easily approachable for people with no knowledge of opera in general, or of Lully's works in particular. Musicological considerations are not neglected: there is, for example, some interesting discussion of Lully's use of keys and of repeating bass lines as unifying devices, and of the distinction between Lully's three main types of vocal settings: *récitatif*, *arioso* or *récit lyrique*, and *air*. But the emphasis remains primarily on literary and theatrical matters. The bibliography, especially rich and thorough, is an enormously valuable reference for those interested in exploring any aspect of French baroque opera.

The only notable flaw is the unfortunately large number of typographical errors (some involving proper names); there are a few

awkward slips (for example, “acts” when “scenes” is meant), and even one factual error (the author of the comedy *L’Ombre de Molière* is Brécourt, not Brébeuf). But none of these problems (many of which occur in footnotes) detracts in any serious way from a most helpful addition to French seventeenth-century scholarship.

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