

Georgia Cowart. 2008. *The Triumph of Pleasure: Louis XIV and the Politics of Spectacle*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Reviewed by Amber Youell

The dichotomy between pleasure, frivolity, and spectacle and rationality, profundity, and seriousness has been a major framework for scholarly understanding of Western art music. Traditional narratives of music history lionize composers who appear to eschew superfluous ornament, extravagant showmanship, and dazzling virtuosity in favor of some more pure version of aesthetic truth. Genres designed for unabashed entertainment are often missing from Western art music histories, despite their significance in historical actuality. This is a serious omission not only for the sake of the historical record, but also because, as Georgia Cowart has demonstrated in her new book *The Triumph of Pleasure: Louis XIV and the Politics of Spectacle*, aural pleasure and compositional frivolity often disguise serious issues, and spectacle often communicates important messages that contradict the apparent message of accompanying text and discourse.

This scholarly bias towards the serious and rational in Western art music is especially apparent in accounts of the court of Louis XIV, where, traditionally, Jean-Baptiste Lully and Philippe Quinault are depicted as constructing a highly rational, monolithic musical institution with the singular aim of promoting the king's sovereignty. Lully appears in these music histories as Louis's unwaivering representative, lording over the French music establishment with an authority echoing that of the king himself. However, as colorfully depicted in Gérard Corbiau's film *Le roi danse* (2000), a much more complicated relationship existed between the king and his composer, a relationship fraught by Lully's libertine socio-political inclinations and dangerously hedonistic musical tendencies. Perhaps inspiring Corbiau's film, a flood of literature appeared in the 1980s and early 1990s questioning the monologic nature of the king's image-making apparatus and revealing the "fabricated" nature of Louis's absolutism (Marin 1981; Apostolides 1981; Henshall 1992; Burke 1992; Duindam 1994). The fabrication of monarchy relies on its fabricators—artists, composers, writers, and performers—who in a sense overturned the hierarchy of power by making Louis dependent on spectacular productions that could subtly resist the dominant ideology of power (Burke 1992).

Echoing these nonmusicological approaches, Cowart's revisionist ac-

count traces the evolving uses of musical pleasure and spectacle at the court of Louis XIV through the last half of the seventeenth century, including rarely explored genres such as *opéra-ballet*, *comédie-ballet*, and *théâtre de la foire*. Her self-described aims are threefold: to examine the politics of pleasure and spectacle at the court of Louis XIV, to reveal the artists' agency in promoting or undermining sovereignty, and to shed light on a widespread political shift in the late 1600s, when the celebration of monarchy was replaced by a utopian celebration of the public sphere (xv). A critical application of Habermas's notion of the emerging public sphere (1989) allows Cowart to deftly draw large-scale sociological conclusions from analyses of individual artistic works in their contexts. Cowart's book presents a tour-de-force of musical, literary and artistic analysis, mythological allusion, biographical investigation, and political imagery. Despite the unity of the book's message, the author continually recognizes the multiplicity of conflicting discourses that existed within and between individual works.

Cowart's well-researched book is firmly grounded in her previous work on the emergence of musical criticism in France and Italy (Cowart 1981, 1989) but taken to a new level of pointed socio-political interpretation.¹ The book is related to Martha Feldman's recent publication, *Opera and Sovereignty* (2007), which similarly deconstructs usual narratives about opera seria as an uncomplicated offshoot of absolutism and refigures opera as a multifaceted, dialogical form of communication negotiated by multiple audiences with varying political agendas. Both books deal with repertory often dismissed as superficial and frivolous—in the case of Feldman, post-Handelian opera seria—and recapture the powerful social meanings that lie beneath the pleasurable musical exterior.

Cowart's chapters are organized by chronology and genre, beginning with the court ballet of the 1650s in which Louis featured prominently as a dancer. Emphasizing spectacle over plot, the court ballet was "largely untouched by the propaganda of sovereign power" (6). Rather, the court ballet in this period reflected the interests of the aristocracy, for whom pleasurable *galanterie* was a political privilege and a source of social identity. Bucolic idylls and idealized love supplanted the previous military ideals of courtly chivalry. In these court ballets, consisting of a series of loosely related *entrées* separated by sung *récits*, we are introduced to the symbols, drawn from Classical imagery, of pleasure and resistance to absolutist glory that play an important role throughout Cowart's book: Venus, Cupid, Cythera, the Temple of Love, the Muses, and the musician Orpheus. As Cowart describes, the court ballets exhibit a high degree of reflexivity—entertainment-within-entertainment—that would be characteristic of French spectacle throughout the period under discussion, amplifying the possibility for

artistic self-representation onstage. Symbols of pleasure existed not only in mythological and textual allusion, but also in purely musical forms. One source of inspiration for musical *galanterie* was found in the *air de cour*, with its flexible rhythms and elegant ornamentation; another can be found in burlesque styles, with their discontinuities, dissonances, and extremes, privileging sensual pleasure over rational clarity (21). Cowart's thorough and insightful analysis of the musical imagery of burlesque and irrational frivolity in the 1658 *Ballet d'Alcidiane* reveals a fascinating musical subversiveness at work in the court-sanctioned ballets.

One of the most important contributions of the second chapter—and the book in general—is Cowart's revelation of pleasure as a politically-charged commodity that can only be possessed by certain privileged classes:

While the ballet continued to serve as entertainment and recreation for the king and court in the 1660s, then, it also reflected some deeply encoded questions as to who would control pleasure, who would be represented, and how. (47–48)

Cowart's second chapter presents a transition where noble *galanterie* was increasingly tempered by messages of sovereignty in the court ballet (41). The king's roles in the ballet were increasingly marked, setting him apart from the galant nobles in terms of his heroism and glory. Cowart ties this artistic trend to increasing political resistance to the king as evidenced by contemporaneous political tracts (45). Increased seriousness and political representation were accompanied by an increase in the amount of vocal music (its textual nature easier to control than ephemeral spectacle) and formal structure in the court ballets (47). The political resistance found in the court ballet was necessarily subtle and elusive, drawing on the imagery of pleasure established in the 1650s and carefully combining criticism with overt praise (51). In this chapter Cowart argues for a new voice of lament amidst the voices of pleasure and glory in court ballet—lament at the loss of the artists' free agency. Through the mouths of Armide, Anthony and Cleopatra (*Ballet des amours déguisés*, 1664), Orpheus (*Ballet des Muses*, 1666), and the goddess of love herself (*Ballet de Flore*, 1669), Cowart argues, artists secretly interwove their own outlets for their frustrations and political agendas.

Lully's and Molière's comédie-ballet *Le bourgeois gentilhomme* (1670) ridicules the pretenses of the *nouveau-riche* and the rising middle class, but, as the author argues, it also contains a subtle criticism of the pretenses of Louis and his court, particularly in its often-omitted divertissements and spectacle. Cowart's third chapter untangles the web of allusions found between the comédie-ballet and its more serious, propagandistic counterparts,

particularly the 1666 *Ballet des Muses* discussed in the previous chapter. Cowart explains that “much of the ideological content of the comédie-ballet may be traced to the song and dance of its ballet entrees, what Molière called ‘the ornaments of fête’” (86). Drawing on methodologies used by Mark Franko (1993) and other dance scholars, Cowart explains how improvisation, spectacle, and burlesque undermined the legibility of sovereign propaganda. Lully’s subversive criticism of his own court ballets reveals another side of the composer, which has been traditionally overshadowed by exclusive focus on his *tragédies en musique*: Cowart explains, “Because of the greater fame of his later oeuvre, Lully’s comic genius has not been fully recognized as the equal of Molière’s and an important component of a satirical ideological strategy that would be taken up by composers in future generations” (117). Cowart’s investigations into Lully’s broader oeuvre are invaluable in suggesting that music historians might revise interpretations of his most famous compositions.

The fourth chapter strikes at the heart of the usual narrative of operatic image-making—the *tragédie en musique* of Lully and Quinault. While acknowledging their ritualistic and propagandistic power, Cowart locates subtle resistance in the prologues, music, and plots of the operas. The prologues of *Cadmus et Hermione* (1673), *Alceste* (1674), *Thésée* (1675), *Atys* (1676), and *Isis* (1677) all beg the king to turn his attention from war to the pleasures and arts associated with peace. Further, Cowart convincingly connects Lully to libertine circles centered on the Dauphin and his court known as the “Temple.” After 1685 and Lully’s disenfranchisement with the king, the composer’s operas become increasingly critical of the ideology of power espoused in earlier operas. For example, in Louis Lully’s *Orphée* of 1690, the artist-musician Orpheus triumphs against the tyrant Pluto, who is represented by over-the-top military fanfares usually associated with the king. The opera alludes to the *Ballet des Muses* of 1666, in which Orpheus, danced by Lully with a violin obbligato, represented a moment of individual expression against tyrannical absolutism. Expanding her web of intertextual allusions, Cowart explains that Orpheus had been used as a symbol of artistic freedom against political subjugation since Tristan l’Hermite’s literary *Orphée* of 1641, revealing how a broad contextual base is necessary for a deeper understanding of these operas.

Subversive satiric reversals at the Paris Opéra in the early decades of the eighteenth century are the subject of Cowart’s following pair of chapters. They investigate the symbolic realms of Cythera and Carnival respectively (although, since they deal with a single repertory, Cowart might have avoided confusion and repetition by combining the two chapters). The opéras-ballets of the early eighteenth century presented utopian, egalitarian

pleasure, peace, and freedom counter to the sovereignty ideology of glory and military heroism. Glorifying either love or folly, both sets of symbols identify the Paris Opéra as a liberal “countercourt” to that of Louis. As Cowart explains, “because of their apparent frivolity, the ballets of Campra and his collaborators have never been examined as vehicles of social critique or political ideology” (167). Yet, in their loose plots and spectacular nature, the opéras-ballets were ideally situated to subtly break down monarchical propaganda in a multivalent, complex manner that would have been difficult for censors to contain, while remaining legible to the audience (171). Italian style functioned as a politically charged musical language that would have been understood by a wide audience; Cowart argues that da capo arias with florid coloratura celebrate not only pleasure for its own sake, but a political and artistic utopian ideal based around the emerging public sphere. Cowart’s discussion of *italianisme* as a type of exoticism that acted as a public-oriented political resistance to the crown’s aesthetic control is convincing, but may have been strengthened by drawing on Susan McClary’s body-oriented analysis of the same subject (McClary 1998).

In these chapters Cowart admits that the complexity and subtlety of the symbolism of the ballets make it difficult to determine whether one is dealing with intended commentary or mere coincidence; this is a caveat that could apply to her entire book. Her connection of early eighteenth-century opéras-ballets with court ballets from nearly half a century earlier at times seems tenuous, especially when musical allusions are completely lacking. Yet the consistency of the imagery of Momus, Venus, La Folie, Cythera, Carnival, and other characters, and the continuous intertextual allusions found between the various operas suggest that the artists were self-consciously drawing on a stable, common language of political symbolism.

Intertextual connections are stretched furthest in the final chapter, in which Cowart ventures outside music to visual art, connecting the *Fêtes galantes* of Watteau to the spectacle of the operatic stage, a project that Cowart is continuing to explore as a 2007–2009 art fellow at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Watteau did indeed have connections to the visual artists at the Paris Opéra, and documentation suggests that he himself worked at the Opéra around 1702. Cowart draws fascinating connections between Watteau’s *Pilgrimage to Cythera* (1717/1721) and the frontispieces for La Barre’s *Le triomph des arts* (1700) and Bourgeois’s *Les amours déguisés* (1713), which echo connections made by art scholars between other theatrical works and the Watteau painting; she also uses Sarah Cohen’s (2000) invocation of the minuet in Watteau’s painting as further evidence for a balletic parallel. Cowart argues that Watteau’s painting exhibits a utopian image of the Opéra as an egalitarian celebration of

pleasure, mimicking the hierarchical seating of the theater united through the harmony of dance. While the reader's credulity might be somewhat strained by such direct connection, Cowart's argument at least convincingly situates Watteau's artistic output and contemporaneous opéras-ballets in the same context of political resistance and subversion, sharing a common language of symbol, spectacle, and pleasure. It will be interesting to follow how Cowart's arguments evolve as she continues to work on this topic; Cowart is guest curator for the Metropolitan Museum of Art's exhibition "Watteau, Music, and Theatre" (September 22–November 29, 2009), which will be accompanied by an exhibition catalogue.

The interdisciplinary, kaleidoscopic, overlapping nature of Cowart's book seems to mirror the multifaceted discourses found within the musical works themselves. If the book is occasionally redundant, I believe that the style, intentionally or not, functions as a further commentary on the nature of spectacle and excess as a form of communication. The sections within Cowart's chapters shift almost abruptly between hermeneutic reading, biography, comparative literary analysis, and other approaches, yet a unified message emerges from the multiplicity of sources, not unlike the opéras-ballets, court ballets, and comédies-ballets about which she writes. For example, throughout her book Cowart constructs an intertextual narrative of the role of the Muses in French spectacle during Louis's reign, tracing them from the court *Ballet des Muses* (1666) in which they obsequiously subjugate their arts to Louis's whim, to *Le bourgeois gentilhomme* (1670) in which the 1666 ballet is subtly and irreverently parodied, to Lully's tragédie en musique *Isis* (1677) in which they champion pleasure and protest monarchical glory, to Campra's opéra-ballet *Les Muses* (1703) in which the ideology of the 1666 ballet is reversed and the Muses become servants of the libertarian Cupid instead of the absolutist monarch.

Although opera, opéra-ballet, and ballet form the primary subjects of Cowart's investigation, her aims are ultimately socio-political, as reflected in her title. Music and spectacle serve as the lens through which Cowart explores changing notions of sovereignty, the emergence of the public sphere, pleasure as a medium for political resistance, and spectacle as a form of communication. Much of the prose is dedicated to textual and plot analysis, with occasional musical examples treated rather superficially. Cowart's methodological choices ensure that the book is accessible to a wide audience outside music. However, as the question of whether music itself can act as a form of political commentary has been raised in recent scholarship, it might have been useful if Cowart had confronted the issue directly (Eubanks-Winkler 2003; Hume 1998).

Cowart's book lays the groundwork for a wide variety of other methodological approaches to explore this repertory further. For example, although Cowart features a wide variety of actors and agents in her narrative, performers and their performing bodies are surprisingly absent in a study of spectacle. Much work has been done on the disciplined bodies of the French *ancien régime* court and stage (Franko 1993; Melzer and Norberg 1998; Cohen 2000; Porter 2004), using performance theory to more closely approach the ephemeral and nontextual aspects of spectacle. Cowart occasionally follows performers as they move between genres and venues (most prominently the singers and pedagogues Pierre Niert and Hilaire Dupuis), but in a study of danced genres much more work could be done, *pace* Mark Franko and Sarah Cohen, to explore the impact of bodies onstage, the shift from royal to professional bodies as performers, and notions of bodily control vs. free expression. Cowart's project might also be furthered by a more rigorous interrogation of the notion of pleasure itself as a politicized, historically-specific construct, following the work of Roy Porter (1996) and others. Recognizing that pleasure and pleasurable bodies might have entailed something very different in the late seventeenth century than they do today might catalyze a sharper investigation of the nontextual elements of opera and ballet.

In opening these avenues for scholarship, in reversing our understanding of a repertory often depicted as either monologically propagandistic or pointlessly superficial, and in replacing well-worn narratives about French culture and music, Cowart has created a document that might also be deemed subversive. Her book is a testament to the importance of interdisciplinary and intertextual approaches to music history and analysis. Cowart's celebration of pleasure as a sophisticated and meaningful social construct hopefully adumbrates a general trend in musicology, in which genres and music too long ignored or belittled—opera seria, Hausmusik, operetta, virtuosic showpieces—will be recognized, valued, and included in music-historical narratives.

Note

1. Earlier versions of two of the chapters have appeared in previous publications (Cowart 2001a, 2001b).

References

- Apostolides, Jean-Marie. 1981. *Roi-Machine: Spectacle et politique au temps de Louis XIV*. Paris: Editions de Minuit.
- Burke, Peter. 1992. *The Fabrication of Louis XIV*. New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press.
- Cohen, Sarah. 2000. *Art, Dance and the Body in French Culture of the Ancien Régime*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.

Current Musicology

- Cowart, Georgia. 1981. *The Origins of Modern Musical Criticism: French and Italian Music, 1600–1750*. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Press.
- . 1989. *French Musical Thought, 1600–1800*. Studies in Musicology 105. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Press.
- . 2001a. Carnival in Venice or Protest in Paris? Louis XIV and the Politics of Subversion at the Paris Opera. *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 54 (2): 265–302
- . 2001b. Watteau's *Pilgrimage to Cythera* and the Subversive Ideology of the Opéra-Ballet. *Art Bulletin* 83 (3): 461–78.
- Debord, Guy. 1967. *Societe du spectacle*. Paris: Buchet/Chastel.
- Duindam, Jeroen. 1994. *Myths of Power: Norbert Elias and the Early Modern Court*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Eubank-Winkler, Amanda. 2003. O Ravishing Delight: The Politics of Pleasure in *The Judgment of Paris*. *Cambridge Opera Journal* 15: 15–31.
- Feldman, Martha. 2007. *Opera and Sovereignty: Transforming Myths in Eighteenth-Century Italy*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Franko, Mark. 1993. *Dance as Text: Ideologies of the Baroque Body*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Goodman, Dena. 1992. Public Sphere and Private Life: Toward a Synthesis of Current Historiographical Approaches to the Old Regime. *History and Theory* 31: 1–20.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1989. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press.
- Hoffmann, Kathryn. 1997. *Society of Pleasures: Interdisciplinary Readings in Pleasure and Power during the Reign of Louis XIV*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Hume, Robert. 1998. The Politics of Opera in Late Seventeenth-Century London. *Cambridge Opera Journal* 10: 15–43
- Marin, Louis. 1981. *Portrait du roi*. Paris: Editions de Minuit.
- McClary, Susan. 1998. Unruly Passions and Courtly Dances: Technologies of the Body in Baroque Music. In *From the Royal to the Republican Body: Incorporating the Political in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century France*, edited by Sarah E. Melzer and Kathryn Norberg, 85–112. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Melzer, Sara E. and Kathryn Norberg. 1998. *From the Royal to the Republican Body: Incorporating the Political in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century France*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Porter, Roy and Marie Mulvey Roberts. 1996. *Pleasure in the Eighteenth Century*. New York: New York University Press.
- Porter, Roy. 2004. *Flesh in the Age of Reason*. New York: W. W. Norton.