

FOUNDED / 1924

COMMONWEAL

June 14, 2002 | Volume CXXIX, Number 12

Summer Reading

Commonweal

New York

June 14, 2002

Authors: Andrew Moravcsik
Volume: 129
Issue: 12
Pagination: pp. 23-25
ISSN: 00103330
Subject Terms: Novels

Andrew Moravcsik on Opera

Operatic plots are notoriously silly. Many people dismiss outright such melodramatic melanges of improbable coincidence, mistaken identity, lurid villainy, poisoned chalices, magic flutes, and magic swans. Yet those who have heard Father Owen Lee's Metropolitan Opera radio commentaries know that he can counteract such skepticism. No one explains more compellingly why every human being should care about the stories of the great operas.

[IMAGE ILLUSTRATION]

A Catholic priest and professor of classics at the University of Toronto, Lee informs his commentaries with great intelligence and erudition, yet wears his learning lightly. The twenty-four essays in *A Season of Opera* (University of Toronto Press, \$18.95, 241 pp.), covering works from Monteverdi's *Orfeo* to Rogers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!*, average less than ten pages and aim at the general reader.

The result is revelatory. It is neither uncommon nor difficult to discern a deeper spiritual message in Beethoven's *Fidelio* or Wagner's *Tristan and*

Isolde—though Lee brings exceptional insight to both. Yet who else so convincingly illuminates the links between Donizetti's *Lucia di Lamermoor* and Walt Whitman's poetry; the simple human message underlying Verdi's meandering *La Forza del Destino*; or the reasons why Wagner's rarely performed *Rienzi* is his most characteristic work?

These operatic vignettes promise satisfying summer reading for all. Knowledgeable buffs, with the music in their heads or their CD rack, will devour them all and emerge ready to reengage a new season of old warhorses. Casual opera-goers may enjoy a few of their favorites, peruse the succinct selection of recommended recordings, and set the book aside to consult before a future performance. In either case, readers will come away reassured that opera speaks not just to our visceral passions but also to our deepest spiritual essence.

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Puccini's *Tosca* is among the most popular of operas, yet critics hate it. They condemn Puccini as politically unsophisticated, musically incoherent, and crudely sentimental. In Joseph Kerman's famous phrase, this lurid story of love, lust, and political reaction in Napoleonic Rome is a "shabby little shocker."

In *Tosca's Rome* (University of Chicago Press, \$19, 335 pp.), Susan Vandiver Nicassio, a former soprano (indeed, a former *Tosca*) turned academic historian, stands up for Puccini. Through historical anecdotes as fascinating to an Italophile or history lover as to an opera buff, she recreates Rome in 1800, where *Tosca* is set: the free and flamboyant lives of the

prima donnas, the struggles of impoverished painters, and the brief flowering and brutal suppression of independent pro-Napoleonic republics. Puccini, Nicassio argues, portrays the period rather accurately, albeit through the critical lens of liberal anticlericalism that he and many in his late nineteenth-century audience shared.

Ultimately, however, *Tosca's* enduring success reflects not its historical verisimilitude but its universal emotional appeal. Here, Nicassio reminds us, Puccini's populist genius is fully engaged. He renders the tale universal, even to the religiously devout. *Tosca* lives, in her most famous words, for art, but she is also a believer. Throughout the opera the clever composer underscores the ways in which her sinful life parallels Roman Catholic ritual—as when, having murdered (and thus damned) the reactionary Police Chief Scarpia, she then forgives him, places a crucifix on his breast, and sets candles around his corpse. Nicassio underscores Puccini's popular appeal by reinterpreting the opera's controversial final bars—in which a sentimental love theme accompanies the heroine's last leap—as an enduring message about the fleeting beauty of sincere belief and romantic love in a political world hostile to it.

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James McCourt's recently republished novel, *Mawrdew Czgowchwz* (New York Review Books Classics, \$12.95, 221 pp.), is set in New York City a half-century ago. In those days, each operatic diva had fiercely partisan fans. They published newsletters, organized cliques, insulted rivals, snuck illegal tape recorders into performances, followed

their favorite across oceans, and, if lucky, were granted a backstage audience or the privilege of accompanying her to dinner after the show. (In real life, McCourt's *diva assoluta* was Victoria de los Angeles.) Such enthusiasm was contagious: standing-room lines encircled city blocks, listeners were moved to tears and shouts, and curtain calls numbered in the dozens.

By the time this novel first appeared in 1975, diva worship was on its way out. Disheartened by the retirement of the last great divas, diluted by the rise of pop culture, dispersed by the rising price of Manhattan real estate, and finally decimated by AIDs, diva worshipers are today all but extinct.

McCourt has written an elegy to this last great era of diva worship. It recounts the climb, collapse, and comeback of Mawrdew Czugowchwz (pronounced "Mardu Gorgeous"), a fictional singer of indeterminate nationality, very loosely modeled on Maria Callas. Czugowchwz is a diva of divas, commanding the entire female range from deep contralto to coloratura soprano, the stamina to attempt forty different roles in a year, and dramatic engagement so passionate that it drives listeners to ecstasy.

Any true diva remains a mystery, and McCourt tells us appropriately little about Czugowchwz. We experience her instead through the eyes of a small band of her worshipers, who dedicate their lives to the cultivation of aesthetic sensibility. They drink only the best whiskey, swoon over things French or Italian, enliven their parties with clever

operatic parodies, and propound refined artistic opinions. Their rapid patter is a nonstop string of multilingual alliterations, catty epithets, literary allusions, and scatological innuendos—opera queens doing James Joyce.

In the end, worldly concerns recede and only art remains. A wealthy patron erects a theater on an island off the Maine coast, where Czugowchwz and her merry band launch a summer festival. No *Aida* in the arena for them, but seven nights of rare lieder, modern dance, and opera aimed at the true aficionado. The week culminates in the premiere of a new opera about personal liberation from dominant fathers and passive mothers. Then they dance all night.

This sort of thing can be cloyingly precious, self-indulgently gay, and, in its Freudian undertones and chintzy neo-Victorianism, very 1950s. The prose is sometimes overwrought, and often obscure for those without some knowledge of opera. Yet does any other piece of modern fiction better capture the all-consuming, near-erotic passion opera can induce, and the intense cult of personality that listeners, whatever their lifestyle, construct around that passion? For those who remember the times and the singers McCourt celebrates, and for any opera buff (there are many) who dreams of a fantastic world where we can eternally relive and recount our most intense operatic memories, Mawrdew Czugowchwz makes essential and uplifting reading.

Andrew Moravcsik is professor of government at Harvard University's Center for European Studies.