

CLAUDIO BENZECRY'S ETHNOGRAPHY of opera fanatics at the venerable Teatro Colón of Buenos Aires is a path-breaking and insightful work of cultural sociology. Aside from offering a nuanced portrayal of how opera lovers think, it launches a frontal and convincing criticism of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of taste.

To a critical appreciation of this work I bring two qualifications. First, I conduct academic research on the sociology of opera. Second, I am an opera fanatic. Like the subjects of Benzecry's study, I have slept overnight on sidewalks, traveled for days to faraway cities, and spent years in search of a rare recording – all to hear a specific opera.

Speaking as an opera fanatic, I can attest that Benzecry's account rings admirably true. After 18 months of intensive interviews with those who inhabit the higher reaches of Argentina's celebrated 103-year old opera house, he has captured the texture of the fanatic's subjective experience. He made good use of linguistic and social advantages to acquire local knowledge, and yet his description of the interior life of Argentine opera fanatics resonates precisely with experiences of those next to whom I have stood in the opera houses of San Francisco, New York, Hamburg and Vienna.

Benzecry's structured analysis of this subjective world, moreover, is insightful and subtle. Most opera fanatics would agree with him that their prime motivation is the search for rare moments of romantic "transcendence", which contrasts with the mundane, ordinary world. His primary metaphor for this – romantic love – fits well here. "Loving opera", he writes, "becomes a particular way of crafting the self in the present, as something that completes us, and in the past [...] despite never having heard opera live before, we have been waiting for something like it our whole lives". The visceral quality of the operatic voice provides an erotic element transmitted through the body ("embodied practice"), to which music adds a more ineffable, sentimental element.

Benzecry persuasively shows that this search for transcendence is an essentially individual experience, though one strengthened by appropriate collective memory and communal life. Recordings provide

* About Claudio E. BENZECRY, *The Opera Fanatic: Ethnography of an Obsession* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2011).

collective standards against which individual responses to live performances are judged. Bitter conflicts over taste arise among fanatics, yet such disputes turn out not to be efforts to maintain relative status (as Bourdieu might predict) as much as defenses against the distortion of individual ideals. Subtle collective support for individual romantic quests parallels similar structures surrounding fans of rock music and other arts, not to mention – though Benzecry hardly alludes to these links – sports fans, nature lovers, religious believers, and other similar social types. An intriguing chapter examines a curious aspect of connoisseurship, namely that study – not just familiarity with aesthetic fine-points, but greater intellectual background – seems to intensify the capacity for emotional response. This, too, seems as true for the appreciation of different baseball pitchers or versions of a Jerry Garcia guitar riff, as it is for various styles of singing Verdi.

In relating all this, Benzecry's target is Bourdieu, who famously treats artistic taste as a means to create and enforce social distinction, hierarchy and status. There may be cultural spaces, notably the world of the Parisian *grandes écoles*, where mastery of cultural discourse fuels everyday conversation and career advancement – an arena epitomized by the search for a *bon mot* that exploits cultural competence so fully that only insiders grasp its true meaning. Yet Benzecry succeeds in demonstrating that Bourdieu's cool, exclusive, essentially literary world is quite foreign to the more naïvely romantic self-understanding and the modest objective circumstances of a typical Argentine opera fanatic.

Yet, in successfully defeating Bourdieu's account, one wonders if Benzecry does not lean too far toward individualism. The simple fact that opera is experienced individually, and is not principally a means to enforce hierarchy, does not exclude the possibility that it is socially constructed – something Benzecry acknowledges but hardly analyzes. His ethnographic method limits what we can learn. It provides us with few instruments to distinguish what is specific to contemporary Argentines, and what is general to opera fanatics. The full range of possible manifestations of opera fanaticism as a social and cultural phenomenon remains obscure. I believe the individualist account, driven ultimately by random conjunctures and private passion, overlooks important trends in how the phenomenon of opera fanaticism (and fanaticism generally) has changed historically, cross-nationally and sub-culturally – in large part because it has been driven by powerful social and cultural forces Benzecry cannot see.

Why, Benzecry might have asked, is opera fanaticism on the decline – even disappearing? He seems unaware that just a generation ago, long

after opera lost its function as the center of aristocratic or bourgeois society and as the dominant popular musical culture of its time, opera fanaticism remained vibrant. In the period from the 1950s to the 1980s, far more opera fanatics existed, and their enthusiasm was correspondingly greater. Standing room lines snaked around city blocks, applause continued through half-hour intermissions, hundreds greeted singers at stage doors, and, even further back, when opera stars were considered as glamorous as movie stars today, and the cars and carriages of performers were pulled through the streets by mobs. What Benzecry observes today is little more than a remnant of this fervor.

To explain this sort of massive historical change, Benzecry might have made more of the fact that opera fanatics are not randomly distributed across cultural space. He devotes a few pages to a rejection of class explanations of fanaticism, but he makes little, theoretically, of his clear finding that opera fanatics have distinct cultural locations. All but one of his interviewees comes from a family that immigrated to Argentina from Europe in the past two generations; others are gay or involved in the music industry. This is significant. In the US, immigrants and their children – not just Italian, but Central European and Russian, often Jewish – accounted until recently for a disproportionate share of opera fanatics. Moreover, modern gay men have been attracted to opera, a cultural affinity immortalized in James McCourt's classic send-up novel about diva-worship, *Mawrdew Czgowchwz*. Amateur classical musicians, especially singers, have enriched the mix. The aging and assimilation of European immigrants, the disjuncture in gay culture wrought by AIDS, and changes in youth taste from classical to popular music, not only help account for the decline in opera fanaticism – but suggest that it has deeply social causes.

Benzecry's individualistic account also leaves him with few tools to explain how subjective experiences are socially constructed by changes in the culture of opera performance itself. He correctly notes, for example, that opera fanatics tend to be "nostalgic" for performances past. Indeed, he rightly observes an odd reversal in the minds of opera fanatics, whereby old recordings have an "aura" – *pace* Walter Benjamin on mechanical reproduction – whereas current performances generally seem "disenchanted". Yet is it correct to treat this view as an individual "style of love", thereby reducing a broad social propensity to a psychological attribute? Perhaps, instead, the "nostalgic" view that great singers of the past are generally better is an appropriate – even a rational – adaptation to the fact that certain types of opera performance are in decline. Opera was traditionally an extemporaneous, even

improvisational art form dominated by singers; opera fanaticism is in part a cult of the greatest singers. Most opera lovers agree that we see a shortage of great singers in so-called *spinto* and *dramatic* roles today – a view that is shared not just by fanatics, but (importantly) by opera performers, critics, and administrators.

That being said, this ethnographic account is both creative and original – and it breaks new ground. It succeeds in understanding a strange and unique culture on its own terms, and successfully challenges an iconic theory in the field. It is, moreover, not only (to my knowledge) the first book by this author, but the first academic book on this topic. One is thus inclined to overlook its weaknesses in situating these beliefs historically, socially and culturally – and developing a strong positive theory of fanaticism. Rather, one is inclined to think that a brilliantly promising, yet problematically open-ended book bodes well for future research on this fascinating topic.

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