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Opera and/as Performance [Review article].


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Review: Opera and/as performance

Jonathan Hicks


‘You’re everywhere and nowhere baby, that’s where your at’ sang Jeff Beck in his 1967 hit Hi Ho Silver Lining. With tongue only slightly in cheek, the same might be said about the study of performance in the humanities. At times, it does seem to be everywhere: whether taken as an object of study, a method for study, or at the least a metaphor used in the course of study, ‘performance’ and ‘performativity’ have become keywords, without which it would be difficult to make the kind of statements (or, perhaps I should say ‘to do the kind of things’) we, as scholars of cultural products and processes, do. In the case of opera studies, it is both blindingly and deafeningly obvious that performance is at the heart of the research agenda, with Carolyn Abbate’s essay “Music-Drastic or Gnostic?” emerging as something of a manifesto for those who would ‘cast [their] lot with performance’. Yet despite all this interest, the discipline of performance studies – which now has a good thirty years under its belt - remains elusive. This is partly because, as Tracy C. Davis puts it, ‘performance studies is a discipline, though rarely a university department’, and therefore lacks the institutional visibility enjoyed by established academic faculties. But it is also because performance scholars work within and across so many fields, using such a range of methodologies and theoretical tools, that any attempt to marshal a definition of performance studies raises more questions than it answers: ‘Just as performance is contingent, contested, hard to pin down,’ says Henry Bial, ‘so too is its study. For the most part those of us who consider ourselves “performance studies people” like it that way.’

Even designations such as ‘performance studies people’, however, can be problematic: three of the writers whose ideas on performance have had the most impact in music and opera studies – J. L. Austin (linguist), Clifford Geertz (cultural anthropologist) and Judith Butler (queer theorist) – do not (or did not) refer to their own work as performance studies, and nor do many of the contributors to the volumes here reviewed. One consequence of this ‘decentred’ body of research is that few scholars (with the notable exception of Richard Schechner) have chosen to write prescriptive, ‘how

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1 Carolyn Abbate, "Music-Drastic or Gnostic?," Critical Inquiry 30 (Spring 2004), 536. Abbate, of course, is not the only scholar to concentrate on musical performance (popular music studies, ethnographic studies of music, music psychology and performance practice all boast a substantial literature on the subject, not to mention an increasing number of research centres and conference events). Nevertheless, Abbate’s essay is remarkable for its intervention into the specific field of opera studies, and will serve as a point of reference throughout this essay.


to’ guides to their subject, preferring instead to leave the notion of performance available for continual re-imagining.\(^5\) There is much to be said for this commitment to openness, but it can sometimes be difficult to know where to look for an introduction to a discipline that, on the face of it, engages with many issues pertinent to the study of music and opera. Marvin Carlson summarizes the problem:

So much has been written by experts from such a wide range of disciplines and such a complex web of specialized critical vocabulary has been developed in the course of this [performance] analysis, that a newcomer seeking a way into the discussion may feel confused and overwhelmed.\(^6\)

The three recent publications under review go some way to remedying this lack of a ‘way in’ to performance studies and in this essay will be treated as a means to explore what performance studies has to offer to musicologists and opera scholars. In part this means identifying common areas of inquiry, but it also involves acknowledging that performance studies might suggest alternative priorities or new approaches to opera and/as performance. First, though, I shall provide a brief introduction to each of the volumes under discussion, with the usual disclaimer that not every chapter or theme can receive the attention it deserves.

The books

The Performance Studies Reader 2\(^{nd}\) Edition (henceforth Reader) is the most clearly signposted of the three volumes for anyone new to the discipline. In the words of the editor, Henry Bial: ‘There are people who already know, or think they know, what performance studies is. This book is not for them.’\(^7\) Although Bial goes on to claim that ‘This book is for people who like not knowing, who find the uncertainty of unmapped terrain exhilarating’, as a collection of foundational texts and subsequent responses, the Reader does a good job of recording the who’s who and what’s what of performance studies.\(^8\) The chapters grouped under ‘What is Performance Studies?’ and ‘What is Performance?’, for example, provide a coherent institutional history and a range of answers to essential questions. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimlett explains that ‘Performance Studies takes performance as an organizing concept for the study of a wide range of behavior’, adding that although ‘Performance Studies sets no limits on what can be studied in terms of medium or culture . . . embodied practice and event is a recurring point of reference within Performance Studies.’\(^9\) In similarly broad terms, Bial describes how ‘We can extend [the] idea of a performance [‘of a play, a dance, or a symphony’] to other events that involve a performer (someone doing something) and a spectator (someone observing something)’.\(^10\)

Designed as a companion to Schechner’s Performance Studies: An Introduction (2\(^{nd}\) Edition, 2006), the Reader works perfectly well as a stand-alone anthology, but the fact that it is ‘synchronized’ (to quote the back cover) with Schechner’s pedagogical text is significant, and distinguishes Bial’s volume from the other two collections reviewed here. Not only are its thematic sections faithful to Schechner’s eight-part schema, but Bial’s introduction affords Schechner founding-father status - ‘one of the pioneers of the field, the person who coined the very term “Performance Studies”’ – and Schechner’s essay is given pole position at the start of the book.\(^11\) As such, the Reader, despite the rhetoric of ‘ever-present uncertainty’ and a ‘moveable feast of ideas’,

\(^7\) Bial, "Introduction," 1.
\(^8\) Ibid.
\(^11\) Bial, "Introduction," 2. Whilst Schechner’s contribution to the discipline ought not to be under-rated (I still recall my excitement on discovering his Performance Theory (London and New York, 2003) as an undergraduate) there is a danger that one voice can dominate a relatively small field. The omission of Schechner’s work from the list of books reviewed here is not a snub to that author, but a nod to the good health of ‘post-Schechnerian’ performance studies.
is more about consolidation than exploration, just as one might expect from an anthology aimed at ‘undergraduates and beginning graduate students’. For those aware of more recent developments in performance studies, then, some of these chapters will sound like old news, but the expanded second edition does attempt to ‘keep . . . the Reader current with the emerging field’ by including a new essay in each part (seven of the eight written post-2001).

Although one of the advertised pleasures of performance studies is the opportunity to transgress disciplinary boundaries, the Reader’s adherence to Schechner’s clear thematic structure certainly helps with targeted reading. The section on ‘Performativity’, for example, includes five brilliantly selected pieces that allow the reader to survey the definitions and uses of the term from its first deployment by Austin, through direct criticism of Austin’s linguistic theory by Jacques Derrida, to Judith Butler’s re-thinking of performativity in relation to gender and identity, not to mention two further interventions from the 1990s that continue to put performance, language, and identity into productive dialogue. Not every part of the book is this tightly constructed, but the benefit of placing related texts back-to-back is that it makes visible the contested (and hence contestable) philosophical grounding for important performance studies concepts.

Compared to the Reader, The Cambridge Companion to Performance Studies (henceforth, Companion) feels far less like a text book, and the ‘we’ of Tracy C. Davis’s introduction - ‘Since the 1970s, we have marked the “linguistic turn” . . . the “cultural turn” . . . and more recently the “performative turn.”’ - hails a readership of seasoned performance studies academics. As a rule, Davis has commissioned chapters that make an intervention into existing research, rather than summarising the field for the benefit of those new to the discipline. These interventions tend to take one of two forms: either they put performance studies into conversation with a hitherto separate field of enquiry, or they take issue with established methods of thinking about performance. Of the first sort, we might note Della Pollock’s excellent essay on performance studies and oral history, which asks ‘how do performance analytics change our understanding of and approach to experience narrative (oral history, life history, stories of collective experience)?’ Of the second sort, two chapters stand out for the way they respond, albeit implicitly, to the thinkers and arguments given space in the Reader. John Emigh offers a critique of Clifford Geertz’s now-famous field research in Bali during the 1960s, questioning how Geertz could interpret Balinese society in terms of ahistorical play when the country was in the midst of violent political upheaval. And E. Patrick Johnson’s essay considers the limitations of performativity for queer theory, including objections to the ideas set out in the Butler extract chosen by Bial.

As well as the obvious differences between a reader and a companion (one is more instructive, the other more provocative), Davis’s introduction also signals a shift in emphasis from ‘performance studies’ to ‘the performative turn’. Each “turn” [linguistic, cultural and performative] . . . hold[s] in common an oppositional stance toward more “orthodox” approaches . . . In league with widely influential social movements – notably feminism and antihomophobia – and the related activist-academic fields of gender studies, queer studies, and cultural studies, the “turns” have had a momentous impact on the arts, humanities, and humanistic social-sciences.17

12 Ibid., 1. The target market for the publication is specified on the back cover.
13 Ibid., 3.
14 Davis, "Introduction," 1.
16 Nicholas Cook, who has written extensively on performance, often uses the term ‘performative’ in relation to musical analysis. The ‘Performativlum’ is dealt with explicitly in his "Epistemologies of Music Theory," in The Cambridge History of Western Music Theory, ed. Thomas Street Christensen (Cambridge, 2002), 91-99.
17 Davis, "Introduction," 1.
By positioning performance studies in a broad field of progressive and socially-aware research, Davis suggests an alternative map of the discipline (and, according to Davis, performance studies is a discipline) to that presented in the Reader. Whereas Bial’s volume is very much plugged into Schechner’s network of institutions (which includes NYU’s Performance Studies Department and The Drama Review: A Journal of Performance Studies Research), Davis, who is best known for her work in theatre history (she is, in fact, the current president of the American Society for Theatre Research), emphasises the widely-dispersed nature of current performances studies: Performance scholars can be found under the mantle of philosophy, ethnography, art history, political theory, media studies, music, rhetoric, theatre, and literary studies, though this is by no means an exhaustive list. Wherever the performance scholars are, at this point in time, is of less consequence than what they recognize in common.18

Aside from Davis’s introduction, however, the question of what performance scholars recognise in common is broached only in passing, and we must turn to the third book under review for an example of the sort of shared agenda Davis invokes.

*Considering Calamity: Methods for Performance Research* (henceforth, *Methods*) is, in some ways, the odd one out among these publications. It is neither a pedagogical anthology, nor a critical companion, but a conference volume that shows performance studies (or ‘performance research’ as it is called here) *in action*. It does not set out to survey or introduce an academic discipline, but creates a forum that: ‘encourages the various theoretical perspectives to coalesce in a compelling dialogue and illustrate the intersection of performance and calamity’.19 As with the *Companion*, the model of academic labour is one of loosely associated individuals in temporary groupings, and the objects of inquiry range widely: from *The Tempest* (Thomas A. King) to the ‘Black Holocaust Museum’ (Harvey Young) via the rites of the Cold War fallout shelter (Davis). *Methods* also responds to the activist-academic impulse to which Davis refers in the *Companion*, with Sonja Arsham Kufitinec considering the ‘potential for [theatre] performance to re-imagine community and animate ethical relationships’, and the final two chapters exploring the role of performance in public remembering (or ‘memorializing’) of calamitous events: slavery and lynching, respectively. The great strength of this collection, however, is that it offers the reader a pocketful of tangible methods (not to mention motivations) for *doing* performance studies. A fairly straight-forward example is Patrice Pavis’s chapter, ‘Staging Calamity: Mise-en-scène and Performance at Avignon 2005’, which considers a number of performances at a theatre festival, instead of focusing on a single work, as is more typical of theatre (and opera) research. Susan Leigh Foster’s essay proposes an altogether less conventional methodology, in which she ‘focus[es] on representations of earthquakes as a way of detecting the constructed nature of bodily experience and the equally constructed technologies of sympathy through which one body claims to know what another is feeling’.20

The most provocative suggestion I took from reading *Methods* – which may come as a surprise, given the ‘no boundaries’ mantra in much performance studies literature - is that performance has its limits. This idea does arise elsewhere: Marco de Marinis, for example, considers the ‘delimitation of the performance text’ in the *Reader*.21 And Davis, in her introduction to the *Companion*, endorses Stanley Cavell’s claim that ‘Performatives may fail to fit the facts in

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18 Ibid.
the way statements do’, an observation that makes for a ‘brake on the ubiquity of performance’. But in Methods the limits of performance come to the fore: at the social level, the possibility that certain types of performance can make an intervention into traumatized lives implies that sometimes they will not succeed; on the conceptual plane, Davis uses her essay on ‘Rehearsing Nuclear Civil Defense’ to develop a subtle distinction between the terms ‘performance’ and ‘rehearsal’ that challenges Schechner’s much-quoted definition of performance as ‘restored’, or ‘twice-behaved behaviour’. After reading so much about ever-expanding fields and open-ended methods of inquiry, it is refreshing for someone to venture an opinion as to what performance isn’t.

**Common ground**

As will already be apparent, much of the intellectual landscape of performance studies is easily recognizable to musicologists and opera scholars. Take Richard Schechner’s call to ‘expand our vision of what performance is, to study it not only as art but as a means of understanding historical, social, and cultural processes’. Could this not also be a summary of what many people in theatre (and opera) studies have been doing for a long time? Similarly, when Nicholas Ridout enthuses about the ability to ‘think of performance – whether it is theatre or sport – as something that forms part of the entire ensemble of social relations rather than as an autonomous viewpoint from which the culture of the society in question may be interpreted’, I am reminded of Gary Tomlinson’s contextual musicology with its insistence that all performing acts take place within a ‘web of culture’. Part of the reason for this last similarity is that both writers draw on Geertz’s cultural anthropology, and there are many other instances in the volumes reviewed of performance scholars invoking fashionable theorists (Kristeva, Arendt, Haraway, Benjamin, et al) who are widely read across the humanities. One may even surmise that certain theoretical conceits – such as the new historicist chorus that representations of society not only reflect, but also construct social reality – have become so much part of the academic furniture (found in performance studies, opera studies, musicology, you name the subject) that few still care who used them first.

In terms of technical vocabulary, the sorts of concerns performance scholars may have when faced with musical notation in opera research simply do not apply the other way round. If anything, the commonality of terminology is such that opera scholars may experience a disappointing sense of déjà vu. This familiarity, however, can be deceptive, since it is common in performance studies to find everyday words - ‘performance’, ‘theatrical’, ‘role’, ‘staging’, ‘voice’, ‘body’, ‘public’, ‘everyday’ - deployed within complex theoretical frameworks. This brings its own problems and opportunities: On the one hand it is easy to misread statements (‘I thought you were talking about “staging,” not staging’), but on the other, these terms can allow for a slow simmer of conceptual development that would be cut short by over-determined technical vocabulary. Indeed, it is mainly in chapters using these open-ended terms that performance and opera studies intersect. For the present, I shall consider three related themes - embodiment, non-text-based knowledge, and liveness - but it goes without saying that the two disciplines have many shared concerns: narrative, mediation, gender, identity, voice, audience-ship, and theatricality to name but a few.

Embodiment first: As has already been noted, Davis’s introduction to the Companion links the performative turn to the cultural turn, and hence performance studies to cultural studies. After quoting what she calls ‘as good [a] definition as any of the abiding concerns of cultural studies’

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22 Davis, "Introduction," 7. Incidentally, Abbate claims Cavell (along with Lydia Goehr and Naomi Cumming) as a fellow traveller; a philosopher who ‘point[s] to performed music’s presence as a promise of life’. See Abbate, "Music- Drastic or Gnostic?", 533. zx

23 There are seven page numbers against ‘Schechner, Richard; restored behaviour’ in Bial’s Reader, and in my first scan of the volume I found even more references to his idea.


Davis asks ‘What does performance studies add?’ Her response is as follows: ‘Emphatically, in performance studies “bodies” are corporeal not merely textual, and “speech” emanates from people with corporeality as well as identities.’ This alertness to being-in-the-body resonates throughout the rest of the Companion and beyond. Amelia Jones, for example, bemoans the fact that ‘until the 1990s, the discipline of art history . . . refused to acknowledge the crucial role of the body in the production and reception of works of art.’ Jones’s chapter (though overly reliant on denigrating ‘modernists’ and ‘formalists’) is a significant attempt to historicize ‘the suppression or erasure of the live or inhabited body in institutionalized versions of art discourse and in art institutions’. Largely thanks to the art history-savvy Richard Leppert, musicologists and those in opera studies are already aware of such concerns.

Moving from art history to dance studies, Susan Leigh Foster’s chapter in the Companion begins engagingly by asking ‘What do you feel, physically, when you watch another body performing?’. Leigh Foster goes on to ‘emphasize the sensations of our bones, muscles, ligaments, tendons, and joints’, justifying her focus by claiming that ‘for those of us in dance studies . . . the sensory experience provided by these corporeal elements . . . [is] a predominant aspect of aesthetic experience.’ No doubt she is right, and, as Elizabeth Le Guin and others have demonstrated, corporeal sensation is an aspect of musical experience whether or not dancing is involved. As such, Leigh Foster’s chapter, which considers embodied perception in both cultural and physiological terms, would make an excellent point of departure for a study of kinesthesia in the audition of opera.

For a group of performance scholars associated with University of Paris VIII, the study of embodiment has led in an alternative direction. ‘Ethnoscenology’, as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett explains, ‘rejects mind/body dualism and integrates the cognitive and the somatic . . . [It] does not take text as its point of departure, but rather the “knowing body” and the corporeal dimension of performance.’ This raises another key theme in performance studies that intersects with an ongoing concern in music and opera research; namely, how might we approach non-text based knowledge. Of course, the view that aesthetic performance enables access to a realm of knowledge (or way of knowing) beyond words has a long history in musical thought, and (especially in the guise of ‘absolute music’) has come in for considerable criticism. The arguments advanced by performance scholars, however, make a refreshing contribution to this somewhat tired debate. Whereas musical hermeneutics (heavily influenced by Derrida and Geertz) have tended to interpret music as a ‘cultural text’ from which meaning might be ‘read’, a number of performance scholars have built on the media theory of Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong to question the textual monopoly on meaning. Dwight Conquergood, for example, argues that:

The hegemony of textualism needs to be exposed and undermined. What gets squeezed out by this epistemic violence is the whole realm of complex, finely nuanced meaning that is embodied, tacit, intoned, gestured, improvised, coexperienced, covert – and all the more deeply meaningful because of its refusal to be spelled out.

This last sentence could easily be taken as a call for non-score-based opera scholarship, but Conquergood insists (following Michel de Certeau) that ‘promiscuous traffic between different ways of knowing carries the most radical promise of performance studies research’. Though less

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26 Davis, “Introduction,” 6. The definition Davis quotes outlines Roger Chartier’s ‘three areas of reality.’
30 Ibid.
concerned with advancing a ‘radical’ agenda, W. B. Worthen arrives at a similar conclusion: ‘no simple opposition between text and performance – or . . . between the “paradigms” we constitute to frame them – will be sufficient to capture the rich, contradictory, incommensurable ways that they engage one another’. 34 Viewed in this light, the stark choice Abbate presents in ‘Music-Drastic or Gnostic?’ between the meaning culture of text-based hermeneutics and the presence culture of musical performance looks like a false one: if Worthen is right, the distinction between performance and text is not sustainable; if Conquergood is right, acts of performance are not nearly as remote from meaning as Abbate suggests. 35

One important variation on the theme of de-privileging (without denying) the textual production of meaning, is the analysis of liveness. For Baz Kershaw, this means considering ‘the ephemerality of performance . . . [as well as] its documentary traces’, and Diana Taylor explores a similar binary – the ‘archive’ and the ‘live’ – in her Companion chapter on ‘Performance and intangible cultural heritage’. 36 Once again, there are obvious parallels with Abbate’s essay, and her call to acknowledge ‘performed music as an ephemeral object, subject to instantaneous loss’. 37 This time, however, it is not Abbate’s distinction between presence and meaning that is drawn into question, but her opposition of the real and the ideal: After opening her essay with the question ‘What does it mean to write about performed music?’ Abbate immediately adds the qualification, ‘About an opera live and unfolding in time and not an operatic work?’ Whilst performance studies has little to say about the work concept that has not already been said (a hundred times) by musicologists and opera scholars, it has devoted much thought to the other side of Abbate’s binary. Significantly, neither Taylor nor Kershaw seems interested in pursuing the ephemerality of performance down the tunnel of infinite regress Abbate opens up. Rather than affording the performance event privileged status (as prior to, and fundamentally more desirable than, documents or ideas about that event) Taylor and Kershaw prefer to hold a potentially contradictory pairing in creative tension. None of this refutes Abbate’s argument, but it does suggest alternatives to an enterprise founded on mourning ‘vanished live performances, musicology’s perpetually absent objects’. 38 Indeed, liveness, as theorised by performance scholars, is scarcely isolatable from all those things Abbate arranges as other to ‘real music in real time’, and the search for ‘immediate [unmediated?] aural presence’ may be one grail quest that opera studies could do without. 39 Philip Auslander:

[W]e cannot treat the qualities traditionally assigned to live performance that putatively differentiate it from technologically mediated performance as inherent or ontological characteristics . . . Live performance is historically defined in that both our experience of liveness and our understanding of what counts as a live performance change continually over time in response to the development of new media technologies . . . It is also the case that, culturally, the categories of technologically mediated performance and live, unmediated performance are not mutually exclusive. 40

Once again, the strength of performance studies is its engagement with media theory. (And, lest we forget, writing is only one of the more successful media technologies). As I sit here, with the

35 Karol Berger has expressed similar reservations about Abbate’s separation of the drastic performance from gnostic meaning. See his "Musicology According to Don Giovanni, or: Should We Get Drastic?," The Journal of Musicology, Vol. 22, Issue 3, pp. 490-501.
37 Abbate, "Music-Drastic or Gnostic?," 532.
38 Ibid., 532, 514.
39 Ibid., 511, 532. N.B. This music is also presumably performed in ‘real space’, since Abbate goes on to discuss the ethical implication of ‘encountering a present other at point-blank range’ (532).
facility to listen online to last night’s ‘live’ broadcast from the BBC Promenade concerts, with a flyer for ‘live’ opera broadcast from the Met at my local cinema, and ‘live’ performances of operas available on DVD, Auslander’s comments seem to have a lot to offer to the study of opera and/as (technologically mediated) performance.

What next?

Whilst it is clear that there are many meeting points for performance and opera scholars, there are also points of disagreement, even confrontation. In 1988 Schechner argued that:

In too many American theater and dance departments there is an almost bitter resistance to the broad spectrum approach. Academic inertia crushes thinking that goes beyond the Western traditions of drama or dance and beyond the idea of the performing arts as activities that take place on theater stages.41

There are good reasons to resist (or develop alternatives to) performance studies’ broad spectrum approach, and scholars of drama, dance, or opera may wish to point out the geographic and stylistic broadening of repertoire in their own curricula and publications since the 1980s.42 But twenty years on from Schechner’s complaints, performance scholars are still marking the distance between their own work and that of their colleagues in related disciplines. As Davis explains:

One common refrain is the lack of two-way interaction between adherents of performance studies and academics in other disciplines who claim performative territory, making use of the power of “performance” as an explanatory metaphor without regard for the implications of such claims, especially any “limits” to the performative.43

If opera studies is (and I do think it is) one of those ‘other disciplines’ that occupy performative territory without recognizing performance studies, the question to ask is whether or not that is a desirable situation. What does opera studies stand to gain (or lose) by a more sustained engagement with the work of performance scholars?

In the most extreme scenario, opera studies could lose its most cherished aesthetic objects. Some performance scholars are scathing about what they see as old-hat, elitist categories, and would happily do without them. In the opinion of John Bell:

[T]he idea of performance offers concepts, means of analysis, and methods of action which can help us figure out where we are and what we ought to do – certainly better than concepts of “art” or “drama” and “theater,” which seem to be, consciously or unconsciously, now scrupulously estranged from the things of import that happen around us.44

As I say, this is an extreme (and under-argued) case, but the more general point that scholars may choose to focus on other sorts of performances than those which take place in specially-designated aesthetic zones (such as theatres or opera houses) is worth taking seriously. If this appears to put opera scholars out of a job, then a comparison with research into another musical-dramatic genre may settle some nerves: melodrama has been studied by specialists in literature, theatre and social history (to name but a few), with the result that it is now used as much as an interpretive category as a generic description. This has opened the door to understanding a whole range of cultural practices as somehow ‘melodramatic’, which raises the question of what might be considered ‘operatic’. My first responses are luxury, grandeur, and excess; but a more subtle argument might build on the new historicist principle that narrative strategies in works of fiction can structure (or at least provide resources for) social action. According to this line of reasoning, there may well be situations in

42 This journal, for example, boasts on its website that it ‘not only contains material on all aspects of the European canon, it has now widened its scope to publish high-quality essays on American opera and musical theatre, on non-Western music theatres, and on contemporary works.’
which operatic strategies provide that structure or resource. Do reactions to earthquakes in Naples (to return to Susan Leigh Foster’s topic) owe more to Mascagni’s operatic fictions than has thus far been recognised? In fact, this application of specialist aesthetic knowledge in the course of cultural or ethnographic research seems to be exactly what Geertz was calling for in an essay that mulls over the widespread use of ‘[t]he drama analogy for social life’. His conclusion is that ‘some of those fit to judge work of this kind ought to be humanists who reputedly know something about what theater and mimesis and rhetoric are’.45 Since the previous paragraph had Geertz comparing Balinese ‘mass ceremonies’ to ‘political operas of Burgundian dimensions’, one assumes Geertz would have welcomed the expertise of a bona fide opera scholar in fine-tuning his own opera analogy for social life.

Of course, there is no need to throw La Bohème out with the bath water, and despite the tut-tut of Davis’s introduction (in paraphrase: ‘if you’re going to study performance, then study performance properly’) a pick-and-mix approach to performance studies could be perfectly justified. In terms of methodology, one obvious suggestion is for performance as research to play a more central role in the study of opera. Far from a new venture, in the role of the dramaturg there is already an established position that fuses practice and research, and both Abbate and Nicholas Cook have already worked as or with dramaturgs in the course of their performance research.46 In terms of repertoire, opera scholars (especially those who already work on music theatre) might devote more attention to performance art, which emerges in the volumes reviewed as (by far and away) the favourite genre of performance studies. The musical-dramatic sensitivity that opera scholars could bring to the work of, say, Laurie Anderson (whom Abbate discusses briefly towards the end of “Music-Drastic or Gnostic?”) or Marina Abramović would both complement and challenge the writing of performance scholars with literary or ethnographic backgrounds.

Performance as research and performance art as repertoire are two cases that illustrate a broader observation made by Richard Schechner: ‘Theoretically, performance studies is wide open; practically, it has developed in a certain way’.47 Judging by the three volumes reviewed, we might add to the list a historical (even anti-historical) preference for performances from the late 20th Century onwards, and a geographical bias (certainly shared by opera studies) toward performances in urban locations. But the characteristic feature of performance studies that no reader of these volumes could fail to notice is the almost ubiquitous rhetoric of radical-democracy and social progressivism. We have already seen Davis speak of ‘activist-academics’ whilst defining the performative turn as ‘oppositional’, and Baz Kershaw makes extraordinary claims on behalf of performance art: ‘a global icon of creative freedom opposed to all forms of oppression’.48 Furthermore, unlike any book on opera I can think of, the first chapter in the Companion asks the question ‘What is democracy?’, and both Methods and the Reader contain chapters exploring politically-themed theatrical performances.49 It goes without saying that there have been (and, no doubt, will continue to be) politically-themed and politically-influential operatic performances. Just as there have been, and will continue to be, radical or progressive interpretations of operatic works

45 Clifford Geertz, "Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought," in The Performance Studies Reader, 68. See also Catherine Bell, “‘Performance’ and other analogies,” in The Performance Studies Reader.
46 The biography printed in Critical Inquiry states that Abbate ‘worked as a dramaturg on the Metropolitan Opera’s new production of Don Giovanni, which premiered in March 2004’ and Cook’s forthcoming book Performance: New Perspectives Across the Disciplines is co-edited with the dramaturg Richard Pettengill.
and practices. But it is fair to say that academia-as-advocacy has been far more integral to the project of performance studies than it has been to opera scholarship. Why?

One answer to this question focuses on the contrasting objects of performance and opera research: Whereas performance studies, according to John McKenzie, is pre-occupied with ‘cutting-edge practices, fringe groups and marginalized peoples, border crossings, transgressions of boundaries and limits’, opera studies is dedicated to an elite form of entertainment famously pronounced twice dead.\(^{50}\) Even accounting for the much-vaunted shift from praising composer geniuses and great works to studying opera singers and reception history, the discipline is still frequently concerned with courtly, aristocratic or upper-middle-class taste and audience-ship. As such, the notion of a radical-democratic opera studies may seem, if not oxymoronic, at least problematic. But, to turn the argument on its head, is it wise to take the progressive credentials of performance studies for granted simply because the literature is replete with examples of marginal groups and ‘resistant’ strategies? For McKenzie, the relatively consistent (even homogeneous) political priorities of performance scholars have ‘made liminality into something of a norm’, and, in the following chapter of the Reader, Shannon Jackson flags up the same predicament by exploring the paradox of institutionalizing claims to marginality.\(^{51}\) As such, opera scholars may feel disinclined to adopt a model of politicized research that, in the worst instances, conforms to a radical comfort zone and a fetishized object of liminality.

Nevertheless, the three performance studies volumes reviewed provide a valuable opportunity to measure the assumptions and ambitions of opera studies (political or otherwise) against those of a not-too-distant academic cousin. There is no doubt that the performative turn has already had an impact on musicology and opera studies, but there is, I think, a danger that the ready availability of musical actors and objects beginning with the word ‘perform...’ may inadvertently curtail the impact of performative thinking in the discipline. The sort of realignment described above – from composers to performers, from works to performances – is all well and good, but imagine, for comparison, if an ‘interpretive turn’ in French musicology had the net result of shining the spotlight on interprètes (‘performers’ en français) without fully engaging the other implications of interpretation. Since the study of opera and as/performance seems here to stay, now is a good time to explore the detours (and dead-ends) of opera studies and/as performance studies.


\(^{51}\) Ibid.