

Michal Grover-Friedlander. *Vocal Apparitions: The Attraction of Cinema to Opera*

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The newest addition to the Princeton Studies in Opera series, Michal Grover-Friedlander's *Vocal Apparitions: The Attraction of Cinema to Opera*, presents an engaging yet at times curious survey of the connection between opera and cinema. "Curious" is the appropriate word here, since the author herself admits that she allows her "idiosyncratic view of the nature of opera and cinema" to emerge throughout her study. She explains that she assigns importance to the "singing voice and to the voice as a more abstract idea" (p. 2). A singing voice appears to imply a voice that can be perceived as separate from the singer. Specifically, Grover-Friedlander explores cinema's "attraction to the operatic voice" and the "acknowledgement of opera's power over it" (p. 1). Here she provides the cornerstone of her study: four ideas that delineate her comprehension of opera. The first idea asserts that the "aesthetic foundation of opera is the operatic voice" (p. 3). In her words, the "operatic voice" is characteristic of that found in Italianate opera, but exclusionary of other nationalities. Within this premise arise other curiosities: Why only Italian? Is the author perhaps referring to the *verismo* style of singing perhaps that is most commonly associated in the popular mind with opera? If so, why no discussion of the contrasting *bel canto* style? Grover-Friedlander clarifies that she is not referring to a style of singing, but rather that the "Italian notion of song" implies that there must be a moment when beautiful singing will take place and

that singers and listeners await that moment. Her second idea, based on the (much less recent) work of other scholars including Catherine Clément, Michel Poizat, Slavoj Žižek, and Carolyn Abbate, maintains that "death is immanent in the operatic voice" (p. 4). This idea, in turn, leads to a third involving the "Orphic death," by which Grover-Friedlander is referring not to the death of Orpheus but rather to "a more complicated system or structure implicit in the myth" (p. 5). Finally, Grover-Friedlander presents her fourth idea: "the notion of an 'Orphic death' of song itself within opera, the idea that song is abbreviated or terminated by a visual intervention" (p. 7).

The book is divided into three parts, each with two chapters, with the intention of illustrating Grover-Friedlander's premises surrounding vocal-visual and 'Orphic' death relationships. The first part, "Silent Voices," begins with the last decade of silent film. In this section, both chapters attempt to "visualize the voices of opera while forgoing its sounds" (p. 8), a strange goal considering that readers must ask themselves how can one visualize something that is only heard. In Chapter 1 ("*The Phantom of the Opera: The Lost Voice of Opera in Silent Film*"), Grover-Friedlander explores whether an image can replace the voice or whether the silent film can replace an opera, specifically within the context of an "operatic" film, using the 1925 silent *Phantom of the Opera* as the subject of her investigation. She believes that ultimately cinema can and does substitute for opera,

and demonstrates through the death of the Phantom that it is sufficient “to see the operatic voice in order to hear it” (p. 9). The second chapter, “Brothers at the Opera,” centers on the Marx Brothers’ *A Night at the Opera* (1935). Though not a silent film, Grover-Friedlander justifies the inclusion by suggesting that this film is an “attempt to think through not only the inheritance of opera, but the way *silent film* inherited opera, or to rethink the transition from silent film to sound by thematizing the relation between film and opera” (p. 34). The Marx Brothers, utilizing characteristic traits of silent burlesque, essentially “rescue” the film from cinematic disaster (the twin plot is that of *Il trovatore*) by avoiding the opera’s unhappy ending. Musicologists studying film may be interested in comparing these chapters to Rudolf Arnheim’s treatment of silent film and absence of sound in *Film as Art* (essays in film theory that were written in Berlin in the 1930s and translated by Arnheim in 1957). Grover-Friedlander’s notion about cinema substituting for opera seems akin to Arnheim’s discussions about the visual aspects of silent film substituting for the aural ones. In contrast, another prominent philosopher of art, Suzanne K. Langer, author of *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (1942), *Feeling and Form* (published in 1953) and *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling* (published in three volumes between 1967 and 1982) argued that such “substitutions” are rarely convincing in art per se. For example, in her discussion about “color hearing” in *Mind*, Langer explained that humans have a tendency to assign meaning to presentational symbols like music, art, and mythmaking. Music, according to Langer, is concerned with time. With color hearing, she concluded that music—certain keys—could not convincingly be symbolic or substitute for a color. It was rather another form of logical expression that enables listeners to experience something.

The second section, “Visions of Voices,” focuses on cinema’s absorption of “opera in its entirety in the form of filmed opera” (p. 10). Chapters 3 (“*Otello’s* One Voice”) and 4 (“*Falstaff’s* Free Voice”) are centered on discussions about film adaptations of Verdi’s last operas. In these chapters, Grover-Friedlander examines Franco Zeffirelli’s cinematic realization of *Otello* (1986) as well as Götz Friedrich’s film version of *Falstaff* (1979), emphasizing how “the operas themselves—not just their cinematic versions—are reflections on visuality in relation to vocality, how the ‘Orphic strife’ between the scenes is built into their fabric: fatally in *Otello*, playfully in

Falstaff” (p. 56); thus, watching the singing “voice” in the former film determines death, whereas by witnessing the singing “body” in the latter causes comedy. Grover-Friedlander suggests that Zeffirelli seems to fear silence, in that he intentionally refrains from showing Desdemona during her critical silent entrance in *Otello*. Friedrich, on the other hand, appears to embrace silence by adding several silent visual interludes between the opera’s scenes. To Grover-Friedlander, these additions demonstrate that the “visual can arise out of the vocal and, even more strikingly, that music can arise out of silent visuality” (p. 11). Some readers, however, will take issue with the fact that opera generally does not come across on screen as well as it does in live performance. Silent visuality may be able to produce the effect of Orphic strife, but it remains up to the reader to decide which performance is more expressive and meaningful.

The third section of the book, “Remains of the Voice,” dissects what Grover-Friedlander refers to as the “sense of the immortality of the operatic voice” (p. 11). Chapter 5, “Opera on the Phone: The Call of the Human Voice,” is an interpretation of Francis Poulenc’s opera *La voix humaine* (1958) and Roberto Rossellini’s film *Una voca umana* (1948), both based on the one-act play by Jean Cocteau. In this chapter, Grover-Friedlander articulates how a film and an opera react to an identical text, in relation to themes of the vocal, the aural, the visual, and death. Poulenc’s opera, for the author, is no more than an “opera-length death song” as the telephone is transformed from the representation of the silent voice of the woman’s lover to the manifestation of her death (p. 122). Rossellini’s film, on the other hand, does not end with death, but rather with birth. Grover-Friedlander notes that while Rossellini does not alter the finale of Cocteau’s play, he does offer an additional film, *Il miracolo* (also 1948), which is thematically linked to *Una voca umana*. Music from *Una voca umana* is heard during the opening credits of *Il miracolo* as well as during the film’s climactic birth sequence. The sixth and final chapter, “Fellini’s Ashes,” is an interpretation of Fellini’s *E la nave va* (1983) as a “spectacle of the afterlife of the operatic voice” (p. 12). In this chapter Grover-Friedlander highlights the scene in the film where the diva’s ashes are scattered into the ocean, accompanied by the voice of Edmea Tetua. This is the only moment in the film in which Tetua’s voice is heard (through a gramophone recording), thus serving to “relate the reproduction of the operatic voice to essentially the nostalgic nature of the cinematic image” (p. 12). Juxtaposed in

this discussion is the possibility that Fellini's ashes are those of Maria Callas (p. 143), which impels an examination of Zeffirelli's film *Callas Forever* (2002).

The book is furnished with thorough endnotes (in lieu of a bibliography) and index, as well as several illustrations that help demonstrate Grover-Friedlander's premises of "vocal-visibility." Readers can view for themselves the diva's reaction to the masked and unmasked protagonist in the *Phantom of the Opera* (pp. 26-27) as well as what Grover-Friedlander deems the "visualization of music" as demonstrated in the Marx Brothers' *A Night at the Opera* (pp. 40-41).

In *Vocal Apparitions*, Grover-Friedlander has reexamined the boundaries between opera and cinema, thereby providing scholars with fresh perspectives on issues previously considered in earlier film scholarship and film theory. The eclectic and broad coverage (almost too broad) leaves plenty of room for future scholarship. For instance, it might be interesting to apply Grover-Friedlander's ideas to a work originally conceived as an opera and later adapted to film by the same composer (*The Medium* [1951] by the recently deceased Gian Carlo Menotti comes to mind) to witness how the same individual might or might not alter his work for either opera or film. But too often the theoretical ideas are treated as fact. *Vocal Apparitions* makes one wonder whether

Grover-Friedlander achieves her goal of providing a "scholarly conversation that is full of life" (p. 16), a conversation that should appeal to both opera and cinema aficionados, but here seems too conflicted by ideas the author *wants* to find in the boundaries between opera and cinema.

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