Review of Backstage at the Revolution: How the Royal Paris Opera Survived the End of the Old Regime

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The question at the heart of Victoria Johnson’s book is an intriguing one: how did the Paris Opera, or the Académie royale de musique as it was known during the Old Regime, avoid disbandment during the French Revolution? If any pre-revolutionary institution exemplified the luxurious consumption and aristocratic privilege decried by the revolutionaries, the Opera was it. Yet the Paris Commune, which took over governance of the Opera from the Maison du roi in February 1790, worked hard to re-organize the institution for the glory of the new regime, and Maximilien Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety, in the midst of the Terror in the spring of 1794, approved the troupe’s relocation from a venue on the outskirts of town to a more commercially viable site in the heart of the city. Although they agreed on little else, almost all political partisans during the revolutionary decade believed that the government needed to sustain the Paris Opera because of its importance to the vigorous cultural nationalism of the period; in 1804, Napoleon recast the institution as the Académie impériale de musique, restoring most of the privileges the company had enjoyed before 1789.

Johnson, a sociologist and a professor of Organizational Studies at the University of Michigan, turns to theories from her field of study to resolve the dilemma. In particular, she resorts to an idea known as “imprinting,” which stresses the enduring importance of the institutional forms and practices created at the founding of an organization in its subsequent history. In the specific case of the Paris Opera, she argues, the circumstances of its founding as a royal academy under Louis XIV in the 1669-1672 period account for the institution’s survival more than a century later. The Opera’s academic status distinguished it from competitors such as the Comédie-Française and the Comédie-Italienne, which were not classified as academies although they enjoyed somewhat similar privileges under the Old Regime. Furthermore, the repertory created for the theater in the 1670s and 1680s by its most famous director, the wily Italian courtier Jean-Baptiste (Giovanni Battista) Lully, remained on the company’s stage throughout the eighteenth century. At the onset of revolution in 1789, Johnson suggests, France’s new cultural arbiters, accustomed to the Opera’s academic status and the glamour of its repertory, had difficulty imagining a French nation shorn of its indigenous Opera tradition. Although the company’s new masters insisted on works that substituted soldiers and commoners for kings and aristocrats, they continued to subsidize this expensive institution during the most difficult moments of the Revolution.

Historians will find much to like in Johnson’s treatment of the two moments in the history of the Paris Opera she explores in depth, the company’s founding in the 1669-1672 period and its fate in the early years of the Revolution. The notes are full of references to the work of Robert Isherwood, James Johnson (no relation to the author), Elizabeth Bartlet, Jérôme de la Gorce, and other recent scholars of seventeenth and eighteenth-century French Opera. She has mined the relevant archives for these two periods, and digested the printed primary material, including many revolutionary
pamphlets. Against the strength of the Lully “foundational” legend, she emphasizes the importance of Pierre Perrin, a seventeenth-century poet who became convinced of the need to establish a French lyric theater tradition to combat the contemporary Italian supremacy in the field. It was Perrin, not Lully, who conceived the idea of establishing a French “academy” of music along the lines of the already existing academies of letters, painting, and natural philosophy, and it was Perrin who sold the idea to Colbert and Louis XIV. But Perrin was a less able businessman than he was a poet or cultural visionary, and he was ultimately forced to sell the academic privilege to the Opera to Lully during a stay in debtor’s prison in 1672. Lully was the more successful musician and administrator, but it was Perrin who hit upon the academic idea that Johnson argues was vital to the Opera’s survival over a century later. Similarly, Johnson’s detailed history of the administrative oversight of the Opera during the constitutional monarchy phase of the Revolution (1789-1792) elegantly sorts out the complex and often baffling institutional history of the company in this period.

Readers of this journal, however, may find the structure of the book somewhat puzzling. After an introductory chapter devoted to a review of the relevant organizational studies literature, Johnson turns not to the 1669-1672 interlude, but to the early Revolution, which gets two full chapters. She then abruptly plunges into the seventeenth-century Perrin/Lully interlude, lingering over it for three more chapters. Next, the century between these two episodes receives cursory treatment in a single chapter, followed by a conclusion that summarizes the fate of the Paris Opera from the proclamation of the Republic in September 1792 to the imperial coronation of Napoleon in 1804. This structure presumably addresses the issues raised by Johnson’s decision to use the Opera as a case study for the “imprinting” thesis debated by organizational studies specialists, but it will leave historians unsatisfied. The chapter on the intervening century of the Opera’s history hints at the struggles over administrative control, evolutions in repertory, and the place of the Opera in the political culture of its performers, composers, spectators, and administrators, but it raises more questions than it answers. The work of scholars such as James Johnson and William Weber suggests that other developments over this century were more important to the prestige of the Opera than its initial creation as an Academy. Similarly, might not the survival of the Opera during the 1790s have as much to do with the fluid politics and ideologies of the decade as with the academic prestige of the institution? As with so much of the cultural history of the Revolution, one senses that issues raised during the Directory (1795-1799) may loom far larger in this story than Johnson lets on. That said, however, students of the cultural and institutional history of the Old Regime and Revolution will find much of interest in this searching exploration of the fate of the Opera after 1789.

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