

BOOK REVIEW

Doug Fullington

Ballet and Opera in the Age of Giselle

Marian Smith (Princeton University Press, 2000)

Marian Smith's *Ballet and Opera in the Age of Giselle* (Princeton University Press, 2000) is not only a triumph of research, written in her characteristically frank and open style, but is accessible to specialist and enthusiast alike. The book is about ballet-pantomimes created for the Paris Opéra in the 1830s and 1840s, a prolific golden age at the Opéra, and opens the door to an era from which several works are still in repertory, but whose true and complex aesthetic has long since disappeared. Organized into six chapters that demonstrate similarities between Parisian ballet-pantomimes and operas, the book emphasizes structure, music, and the integral nature of gesture and words in both genres and culminates in a discussion of the original 1841 production of *Giselle*. All of Smith's conclusions and hypotheses are supported by thorough, varied, and convincing examples drawn from a broad selection of operas and ballets from the particular repertory.

In Chapter 1, "Introduction: Music and the Story," Smith begins by describing the complexity and length of opera and ballet plots. She then moves on to explain the two kinds of music—dramatic or "pantomime" music and dance music—which made up the score of a ballet-pantomime, noting that the original *Giselle* included about an hour of each type. Smith demonstrates that the function of ballet music was to closely accompany and illuminate complex plots. Of course, this is very different from the function of most ballet music today, and although aesthetics associated with ballet music are ever-evolving, perhaps this evolution has proceeded so far that the value of period music has been diminished without an appreciation of its original purpose.

Chapter 2, "A Family Resemblance," examines similarities between operas and ballet-pantomimes in form, subject, characters and locale, staging, and structure. This chapter also includes a detailed comparison of the first acts of *Giselle* and the opera *Les*

Huguenots. Smith next puts forward two reasons for “The Lighter Tone of Ballet-Pantomime” (Chapter 3). Verisimilitude required dance to be rationalized as a practical and natural event within the plot of a ballet-pantomime. Dramatic historical- or political-based plots, in which a pretence for dance would be difficult to find, were rare for ballet. Instead, plots centered around the supernatural, peasants, or dancers themselves. Some ballet-pantomimes were parodies of comic operas. Smith discusses three in detail and compares them with their operatic models.

“Ballet-Pantomime and Silent Language” is a meaty fourth chapter describing the large extent to which ballets depended on words, albeit unspoken. Examples include onstage signs, long and complex libretti, instrumental recitatives that seemed to mimic speech and, most interestingly, the *air parlant*, melodies borrowed from operas that, when heard, trigger the memory of lyrics in the mind of the listener. The *air parlant* was used to great effect as situational commentary in ballet-pantomimes. Not surprisingly, the ballet audience was very opera-literate. As use of the *air parlant* developed, the notes and rhythms of the newly-composed melodies matched the syllables and speech inflections of mimed prose drawn from the libretti and ballet masters’ plans. This completely practical, though long-forgotten, practice of encoding gesture in music forces us to look at mid-nineteenth century ballet scores in a different light. No longer can the music of *Giselle* be considered mere serviceable background music; rather, it is a minutely detailed score, composed to carry the complicated plot in close partnership with mime and dance. Delivered so simply and clearly, the point risks coming off as perfunctory, such is Smith’s utter assuredness in her research and examples. Readers should take note, however, that this revelatory discussion of *music parlant* constitutes a significant advance in the understanding of ballets from the mid-nineteenth century and beyond. Delving further into the co-existence of opera and ballet, Smith next examines “Hybrid Works at the Opéra” (Chapter 5). She focuses on three works, including the opera *La Muette de Portici* (1828), that featured a ballerina in the mimed title role.

The book culminates with an outstanding sixth chapter on *Giselle*, in which previous material is reprised and applied to this most famous of ballets using several key

sources: the original libretto, the autograph score by Adolphe Adam, and a heavily annotated Parisian *répétiteur*. The latter document can likely be dated from the 1840s. It is perhaps the work of ballet master Antoine Titus, who may have transcribed the action and mime of the original production for re-staging in St. Petersburg, where the document is preserved. Smith objectively catalogues the ways *Giselle* has changed from first performance to what is seen on stage today, beginning with the genesis of the ballet and moving through particular scenes that have incurred the most alterations. Using the *répétiteur* as her basis, she describes the action and conversation of mime scenes in detail and provides supporting examples from the score, revealing a depth of content that few would have realized once existed in *Giselle*.

Three subsequent appendices include a list of ballet-pantomimes and operas produced at the Paris Opéra between 1825 and 1850, the *Giselle* libretto and complete cast list in its original French, with an excellent English translation by Smith, and sources for musical examples.

Smith has done for *Giselle* what Roland John Wiley did for Tchaikovsky's ballets. The material could not be presented more clearly or in more organized fashion. As a musicologist and dance historian, Smith demonstrates that the close relationship between ballets and operas of the period transcends the standard compartmentalization of the two genres. She emphasizes the importance of the musical score in an era when music very closely matched stage action. Not only does she illuminate works of the period, but her hypotheses and tools are applicable to ballet, including the repertory of the Imperial Ballet in St. Petersburg, through at least the end of the nineteenth century. *Giselle* is revealed in new and astonishing light alongside contemporary works, such as *La Sylphide*, *Paquita*, and *Le Corsaire*, and later works, such as Petipa's *Pharaoh's Daughter*, *La Bayadère*, *Swan Lake*, *Raymonda*, and beyond. Smith queries whether *Giselle* would succeed today if presented with the mime and action first performed in 1841. Hopefully, we'll get a chance to find out.

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