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Book Reviews

Michal Grover-Friedlander, *Staging Voice*. New York: Routledge, 2022. 129 pp. ISBN 978-1-032-03427-0.

Pieter Verstraete

Among scholars of opera, music theater, voice, and film, Michal Grover-Friedlander is widely known for her academic prose ever since her *Vocal Apparitions* (2005) came out.¹ In that seminal work, she focused on inter-medial questions of opera projected and reflected in the medium of film. Her subsequent book, *Operatic Afterlives* (2011),² concentrated further on methodological questions around the haunting presence of the voice within the history of film. Her now third book, *Staging Voice* (2022) is more personal, even deeply personal: it brings together some of her dramaturgical thoughts on staging voice around three productions she directed with TA OPERA ZUTA (TOZ) of which she is also artistic manager, an ensemble of performers and scholars that grew out of Tel Aviv University's School of Music.

Despite being “only” 130 pages long, this book took Michal Grover-Friedlander admittedly a long time to write as it is the culmination of her decades of exploration. But that concentration of thought makes it a must-read for those interested in practice-based research within experimental opera today, particularly for those with a knack for theory informing practice or the other way around. With great passion for the voice in all its performative manifestations, Grover-Friedlander seamlessly interweaves practice-based research and theoretical reflection on performance of con-

1 Michal Grover-Friedlander, *Vocal Apparitions: The Attraction of Cinema to Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

2 Grover-Friedlander, *Operatic Afterlives* (New York: Zone Books, 2011).

temporary opera. The book is then really meant to elucidate the interested reader on some of her operational ideas on voice in relation to three noteworthy scores: Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's *Der Jasager* (1930), Valerie Whittington and Evelyn Ficarra's *The Empress's Feet* (1995), and Erik Satie's *Socrate* (1919). The intended reader is also situated somewhere between production and research: a perfect match for aspiring dramaturgs and directors of new, small-scale opera and music theater. But musicologists and theater scholars might appreciate the inspirational prose too.

The book consists of one comprehensive introduction and three short chapters, each reflecting on one of the works. If one looks for a main thesis that brings all the parts together it is that voice as medium deserves to be the foundation of staging opera, which Grover-Friedlander claims to have original ontological status in the operatic realm. That, in itself, is rather odd, thinking of the myriad forms of musico-dramatic genres in Western culture that have given the singing voice center stage, too. But there is something to be said about restoring the voice as a central place from which all other aspects of performance emanate. Within the very heterogeneous history of musico-dramatic forms, however, Grover-Friedlander is only interested in contemporary operatic stagings, and then only within the practice of fringe opera. Her argument begs a wider cultural-historical question, though: did opera lose sight (or ears) for the voice, altogether? And is *bel canto* the only tradition that conceives opera primarily through its singing voices?

She hints at this when she discusses how contemporary opera is now more involved with altering "surface elements" by transposing characters, environments, as well as plot to different times and places, updating the original libretti, usually with the employment of new, visual and digital technologies. Even when directors recreate opera stagings approximately to how they were originally staged, Grover-Friedlander seems to suggest that they gloss over the fundamental force of voice in the *here* and *now*. This could be historically placed within opera's general urge for re-theatricalization (in an emphasis on spectacle) since the 1980s, away from its operatic opulence or what Michelle Duncan once called the "operatic scandal" (2004) which the singing voice embodies.³ But when Grover-Friedlander opens this crucial paradox to other contemporary art forms, she makes the rather peculiar observation that "the position of the singing voice at cen-

³ Michelle Duncan, "The Operatic Scandal of the Singing Body: Voice, Presence, Performativity," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 16, no. 3 (2004): 283–306.

tre stage has been overturned by post-dramatic theatre and performance art” (4), mainly due to its reconfigurations of presence, immediacy, and self-identity. German-based scholarship after Hans-Thies Lehmann’s writings on the postdramatic have actually argued that postdramatic theater, in line with the ideas of ephemerality in performance art, has brought the voice as both affective intensity and compositional material back to the center.⁴ If anything, postdramatic remediations of the voice, be it unsettled by technology or by new ways of embodiment in practices of “composed theater,” have only made the call for a renewed emphasis on the voice in opera urgent again, while also the very notion of “opera” has undergone significant redefinitions.

There is, however, a third way, according to Grover-Friedlander, namely staging opera as an investment in the voice as such, away from traditional opera that is first and foremost “a metaphysics of the voice, an ontology as well as an ideology” (4). This insight offers the key to unlock the case studies she discusses in the subsequent chapters, that all in their own respect had broken with the past. As such, she calls for a general re-enchantment of the voice within the true sense of *bel canto*, as a “discovery of a world where meaning is entirely established through the singing voice’s expressing itself” (2). It is a bit unclear, however, if she advocates for a nostalgia to a mythic source of opera in the voice as medium, which would also attest again to a certain metaphysics, ontology, and ideology of voice; or if she rather embraces the most recent redefinitions of opera within the post-operatic. She claims that her approach is close to Nicholas Till’s writings on the matter of a self-critical “post-operatic” scene, which “accepts the constituents of opera but challenges the dramaturgical and ideological assumptions underpinning its forms.”⁵ In Till’s own practice she finds affinity with how the audible can determine both the shape and the concept of the staging.

Grover-Friedlander’s book refocuses then our attention “to heighten our awareness of voice and to intensify what singing comes to” (1). To evoke that acute attention and complexity, she first initiates her reader further into a kaleidoscopic introduction on the state of the art of voice studies with a keen eye for its purposes for opera staging and research. Her aim there is to “re-conceive voice” away from traditional opera’s preoccupations with

4 See, for example, David Roesner and Matthias Rebstock, eds., *Composed Theatre: Aesthetics, Practices, Processes* (Bristol: Intellect, 2012), or Jenny Schrödl, *Vokale Intensitäten. Zur Ästhetik der Stimme im postdramatischen Theater* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012).

5 Nicholas Till, “Stefano Gervasoni’s *Pas si*: Staging a Music Theatre Work Based on a Text by Samuel Beckett,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 23, no. 2 (2013): 223.

virtuosity. Voice studies is, however, much broader than what the operatic can cover, which would need to encompass a longer history of also linguistic, physiological, neurological, pragmatic, communicative, affective, psychological, medial, political, and legal approaches,⁶ intersecting with both sciences and humanities which is much further reaching than a general sociology and philosophy of voice in performance. Even a simple question “What is voice?” cannot be unanimously answered in these disciplines. It is a pity that Grover-Friedlander does not engage further with the plethora of approaches that current voice studies as part of Practice as Research (PaR) in the UK have established, despite her two full paragraphs on Thomaidis and Macpherson’s defining book *Voice Studies*,⁷ and many other sources in her very rich bibliography. Her own suggested framework of “modes of staging voice” actually overlaps with quite a few principles that the contributors in that volume have addressed, be it in other contexts. Her focus on *staging* rather than composing or listening is then rather an extension or deferral (re-referral?) that would enrich voice studies from the point of view of a discipline to which voice studies have generally taken somewhat distance, namely opera as the repertoire of highly conventionalized voice practices.

The difficulty with unravelling the complexity of staging voice, for all its in-betweenness and multiplicity, into any classification is that it gives a false promise of abstracting practice into general, structuralist principles that will always fall short of the lived experience. Grover-Friedlander distinguishes eleven of such modes: “all ears” in visually deprived stagings, composed staging, visual staging, choreography of voice, musicalizing matter, voice as object/matter/body, in betweenness, vulnerable/exposed voice, vocal disturbance, hollowed-out voice, voicelessness or vocal muteness. Some of them are heavily specific; others have larger bearings. She does caution the reader that her intention with these categories is only to demonstrate the huge potential of staging voice. She does not systematically engage further with them in her case studies to describe or “codify” her own directorial choices, which leaves the proposed framework somewhat hanging in mid-air. As a system, her qualifications obscure also what belongs to the staging and what to the production of voice on stage. No doubt,

6 See, for instance, Jody Kreiman and Diana Sidtis, *Foundations of Voice Studies: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Voice Production and Perception* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

7 Kostantinos Thomaidis and Ben Macpherson, *Voice Studies: Critical Approaches to Process, Performance and Experience* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015).

voice as both mediality and materiality intersects both aspects of staging and production, and a phenomenological approach would make it hard to distinguish them. From the point of view of *making*, one could argue for a distinction, which makes the initial classification inevitably flawed. The suggestions speak, however, to both the maker's and reader's imagination—built on decades of experience, they are food for students and practitioners' thoughts to take them critically further.

Before leading the reader onto the actual chapters, she makes a remarkable comment on how her unique position as both musicologist and director makes this book the first of its kind. One needs to nuance that a bit, since most scholars of contemporary opera and music (in) theater who I have met also have that experience as practitioners. Grover-Friedlander refers to Till's staging of Stefano Gervasoni's *Pas si* as a theater scholar. David Levin's *Unsettling Opera* (2007) is mentioned, which brings in the perspective of the dramaturg-scholar. And David Roesner is also a gifted musician who brings in that applied perspective in both his pedagogy and scholarship of composed and theater music.

Grover-Friedlander does nuance her position a bit when she renames her directorial input as “voice choreography,” which observes how “the initial translation of voice marks an entry into movement and a dispersal in space” (24). Her writings are then not clear directions of *do's and don'ts* for future practitioners but rather dramaturgical afterthoughts, interpretations of her own stagings and practice. The scholarly aspect in this book is, therefore, strong as it takes an integral part in the practice, before and after, to question the works in an infinite hermeneutic chain. It reminds me somehow of what Gotthold Ephraim Lessing did with his *Hamburg Dramaturgy*: it provides context of certain voice staging practices whilst advocating for their vitality in a Western European tradition that is in constant need for such revitalization. The locus of Grover-Friedlander's practice is Tel Aviv, which is perhaps an unexpected place for such staging experiments. Coming from the periphery, making high-art music theater in Hebrew translation, the book gives an insightful yet vulnerable account of the potential of staging voice as surprising realizations of works that also exist outside the canon. The three works she discusses are not operas in their fullest sense, though, since they rather carry such designations as school opera, monody, symphonic drama. Yet, they help Grover-Friedlander to look critically back to the medium of opera and its voices from outside the opera traditions, from the fringe of the fringe.

What follows is then a sustained reflection on voice stagings and direct-

ing. Chapter one focuses on Grover-Friedlander's directorial concept of the Brechtian Schuloper *Der Jasager* (*The Yes Sayer*, 1930) by Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht,⁸ which thematically concentrates around the idea of ambiguity integral to the Yes-saying or consent. The modes of *in betweenness*, *vulnerable or exposed voice*, and *voicelessness or vocal muteness* formed the basis of this staging. After a brief historical contextualization of the work (based on a Noh play) pointing to different artistic interpretations by Brecht and Weill on the notion of consent, Grover-Friedlander goes deeper into a musicological analysis of rhythm and harmonies. The analysis is meant to show how the play with voices and chorus produce gestures of a consent that is felt as both voluntary and coerced. This is then paired with a common tactic of music theater, namely the splitting of parts between two or more voices, also called "doubling," which is paired with moments of mute acting out what is sung. The latter becomes a gesture of a certain core muteness in the voice. This leads Grover-Friedlander to discuss the different notions of gesture with an emphasis on Weill's interpretation: "*gestus* is the social 'rendered' musically" (47). She then argues further for the nature of gestures of being between the musical and the visual, constantly morphing, as she also explored with bodily shadow-play-like gestures on the stage. She ends the chapter with a reflection on schematization and abstraction through repetition of gestures, causing estrangement. This was highlighted in the performance by the voiceless gestures of a mute acrobat figure giving a condensed compendium of all the gestures in the performance. Grover-Friedlander's prose is compelling and thought-provoking. She writes though as if the performances she directed write themselves on paper. It is as if she takes her own agency away and takes a Brechtian pause to reflect back on her work and its dramaturgical thought processes.

The second chapter reflects on her directorial choices in staging Ficarra and Whittington's *The Empress' Feet* (1995):⁹ a fully a cappella opera that gives voice to feet, so to speak, "that makes feet sing" (57). The estrangement in this opera concentrates on sleepwalking feet in an origin story of foot-binding, which through singing voice their will to walk. This idea sparks the directorial idea to treat the stage as a self-enclosed space, trapping the listener between dream and nightmare, where "nothing exists that

8 The video of this production is available online: Ta Opera Zuta, "The Yes Sayer | Der Yasager | רמזותה," YouTube video, uploaded on April 15, 2016, https://youtu.be/CzjWIBVB-Bp8?si=RtOxeA1_KrsV8QWO.

9 Yoav Bezaleli, "Empress's Feet," YouTube video of the Ta Opera Zuta production, uploaded on January 28, 2015, <https://youtu.be/1OYtN3fD9xo?si=rEEBjg8cdWZcEeyY>.

is not derived from the voice” (59). After a short contextualization of the work and the meaning of sleepwalking through history (missing somehow the rather obvious political undertones), Grover-Friedlander looks closer into the score revealing its main compositional technique of units of music-and-text in a truncated way, as if “halted in the midst of a breath” (61). The socio-political content lies, however, totally within the aesthetic realm of the musical language that the score produces, where sleepwalking serves as a placeholder for dreams of freedom, and for a new ending of wish fulfillment on the part of the Empress figure carried home by beautiful feet. Grover-Friedlander shifts then from the old Chinese custom of foot-binding, as discussed by Julia Kristeva,¹⁰ to the modification of the voice in the tradition of castrati (manifested in the voice of a countertenor). She ultimately links that to her modes of staging *voicelessness*, *soaring voice*, and *hollowed-out voice* through whispers performing the suppression of sleepwalking. The figure of the acrobat returns also in this performance in the air, soaring above the audience’s heads, as if weightless, non-material, a figment of imagination. The countertenor is his material counterpart. And so is Grover-Friedlander’s prose in this chapter with associative citations from Steven Connor and Kristeva:¹¹ her staging ideas are perhaps grounded in theory but take flight from the page.

The final third and longest chapter is dedicated to yet another remarkable staging by TOZ, Erik Satie’s *Socrate* (1919). It is almost a *mise en abyme* for the entire book as it gives account of an extensive thought process. It also asks some metaphysical questions related to ancient philosophers about the intelligible realm of ideas and death: “Can music, or singing, be that ethereal body or evanescent material presenting the figure of the philosopher who cheerfully accepts such death? ... But how to stage and express this relation of music and matter?” (81). For that, Grover-Friedlander chooses the mode of *vocal disturbance* by inserting a Renaissance madrigal staged as self-referential sound in opposition to Socrates’ image of a swan song. This somewhat hermetic work is contextualized historically before Grover-Friedlander unpacks its tripartite structure full of references to Socrates’ *Symposium*, the myth of satyr Marsyas challenging Apollo, Plato’s *Phaedrus*, *Phaedo* (depicting Socrates’ death scene), and Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy*. Her dram-

10 See Julia Kristeva, *About Chinese Women*, trans. Anita Burrows (London: Marion Boyars, 1977).

11 See Steven Connor, “Writing the White Voice,” transcription of the talk given at the *Sound, Silence and the Arts* Symposium, Nanyang Technological University (Singapore, February 28, 2009), accessed December 1, 2023, <http://stevenconnor.com/whitevoice.html>.

aturgical explorations also include art historical reflections on Cubism and minimal whiteness, Satie's *musique d'ameublement*, versions of the piece by John Cage and Merce Cunningham in 1944 and 1969, sculptures by Constantin Brâncuși from 1922, and paintings on the subject by Georges Braque and Jan Cox. It reads almost as a stream-of-consciousness befitting the abstract excursions of *Socrate*, which are about the intense relationship between philosophy and music as central to the modernist context when literature was exploring similar themes. In this work, the countertenor as disembodied voice returns to cast a man-in-woman's voice as "white voice," based again on an idea voiced by Connor by analogy of white light encompassing all possible frequencies: "it is, so to speak, *vocality itself*, without the distinguishing grain that would tie it to a particular space, time, or body."¹² Although this idea is very potent for Grover-Friedlander's desire for a pure, aesthetic staging, I cannot but help noticing the white-washing ideology behind this idea in a critical race frame, which Western/Eurocentric aesthetic debates have long ignored. So, this last chapter is perhaps the most contentious one, if one separates stagings of the voice from its potentially political meanings, in its particular time and place. The ending section on "Staging Socrates' death" is then particularly disappointing as the capstone of this book. It focuses on the insertion of a seventeenth century lament by Gibbons, *The Silver Swan*, to the philosopher's death scene, in an attempt to fill in what Satie left out. It ends with a dancer putting his hands into cooled, melting wax in water, transforming it into a death mask. What a strange and enigmatic gesture to end this book, as if it mutes or transfixes the very voice it wanted to sound through the staging.

Nevertheless, the comprehensive introduction makes up for the increasingly cryptic philosophical explorations as materials for staging equally enigmatic but visually stunning music theater productions for the ears. The theoretical framework of the modes of staging voice did offer some guidance in Michal Grover-Friedlander's dramaturgical thinking and staging ideas as artistic director-researcher. Her idea of voice choreographies also become more palpable towards the end. Even so, the book is unreflective of the time and place of the stagings in Tel Aviv and its audiences. It remains somewhat trapped in its own aesthetic and discursive confinements of modernist art music, leaving aside other more post-critical music theater forms, outside the opera scene, that are breaking through the proverbial fourth wall. The voice is likely indeed the medium that can cut right through it.

12 Connor, "Writing the White Voice." Italics mine.

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