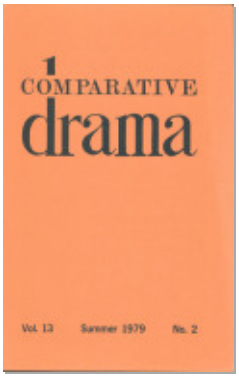
The Walter Scott Operas: An Analysis of Operas Based on the Works of Sir Walter Scott by Jerome Mitchell (review)



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REVIEWS

Jerome Mitchell. *The Walter Scott Operas: An Analysis of Operas Based on the Works of Sir Walter Scott.* University, Ala.: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1977. Pp. xiii + 402. $17.50.

Jerome Mitchell's compendious new book, *The Walter Scott Operas,* is a study frought with problems. And yet, by its method, completeness, and excellently plain style, the book and its author solve nearly all of these difficulties admirably. From the scholarly point of view, the most obvious difficulty is that Mitchell must deal in literary criticism and history, as well as musicology, all at the same time. That is by no means an easy task. He solves that dilemma by being clear-headed in both literary and musical scholarship, and illustrating, from both score and text, copiously. And, to be sure, opera ought to have received more of this sort of interdisciplinary study in the past; after all, as art, opera is surely the most grandly composite and extravagant form we have. Thus Mitchell's multiple approach to the examination of the operas based on Scott's fiction is ambitious, very impressive in and of itself, and expansive as to what he is able to say about a given opera and opera generally.

Beyond the interdisciplinary difficulties, there are other thorny matters with which Mitchell has had to deal. The bibliographical problems, for example, are very involved. There has existed no list of Scott operas until now, and thus much of the search for his material was of a primary sort. In that sense, this book is an elaborate descriptive catalogue, and compiling it involved research all over Europe, in several languages. Mitchell discusses some of these problems in his first chapter, and one cannot help but be impressed with his tenacity. As it turned out, his two main repositories were the British Museum and the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris; seventy-five percent of his materials could be found there, once it became clear what the materials were. But the other twenty-five percent were much more difficult of access.

Two other problems deserve mention: that of definition and of inclusion. There have been, especially in England, musical dramas based on Scott, employing tunes and relying mainly on spoken dialogue. These he wisely dismisses as not being opera. And, plays based on Scott had been dealt with by a previous scholar (H. A. White, *Sir Walter Scott's Novels on the Stage* [New Haven, 1927]). Mitchell proceeds to define opera as "a theatrical production in which music and song are predominant" (p. 2), and that serves as a sound working definition and as a method of exclusion. As to the problems of inclusion, there are operas based on Scott material, but in which that material is enormously transformed. The most famous example is *I Puritani,* but many others had to

be identified. Still others which appeared to be derived from Scott proved on examination to owe their allegiances elsewhere. Of these, the most notable are the Mary, Queen of Scots, operas, which, with one exception, apparently derive from Schiller's play on the subject, rather than Scott's *The Abbott*. Despite his care, Mitchell still does not claim that his list is definitive. "Undoubtedly," he says, "more and more titles will turn up and hopefully the words and music, too" (p. 3).

With these and other difficulties sorted out, the outlines of Mitchell's work, and of the subject, begin to take shape. He has collected, and in most cases examined, over fifty operas based on Scott, mainly on the Waverley novels. Of these, all but one minor student piece are nineteenth-century productions, and the favorite sources for operatic libretti have been *The Bride of Lammermoor, Ivanhoe,* and *Kenilworth*. Probably most interested persons would have guessed *The Bride* as a favorite source; indeed, Donizetti's *Lucia* is, as Mitchell points out, the only Scott opera in the regular repertoire all over the Western world. Perhaps one should have guessed *Ivanhoe,* too, but *Kenilworth* as a third strikes me, at least, with complete surprise. Mitchell examines no less than seven operas based on this largely ignored novel.

With such a bulk of material to handle, and the necessity of dealing both with literature and music, Mitchell's study would not have been manageable without clear and consistent method. The book is organized in eighteen chapters based on the chronology of the Scott works being used. And while Mitchell refers back and forth among the chapters, each is also conceived as a discrete unit. In every chapter he offers bibliographical data and a performance history for each opera. His emphasis is weighted on the literary side, despite his knowledge and citation of musical examples. He announces his major questions to be: "what happens to the novel (poem, novella, or historical work) when it is turned into an opera. What does the librettist do to the original story—how does he reshape it—to make it something the operatic composer can feasibly handle?" (p. 5). Those questions control the major part of his discussions; in each of the eighteen chapters he is concerned with the wide variety of ways in which the Scott material gets altered. On this point, he makes it clear that there is no formula for success. Some operas stick more closely to the original than others and succeed (e.g., MacCunn's *Jeannie Deans),* while others depart in radical ways and likewise succeed (again, *I Puritani).* But failure may also lie in either direction. If there is any consistency of approach, it is that the particular Scott story must be reduced and simplified for operatic treatment. Thus the librettist's major problem, given the wide scope of Scott's novels, is deciding what to leave out. This also makes good sense in terms of opera generally; though it can deal in profusion of detail, especially in comic opera, the central story in most cases must be simple. In fact, Mitchell points up an interesting problem with some of the Shakespeare operas which, he thinks, stick too closely to the original. Because there is a certain sacrosanct quality to Shakespeare's language, the librettist and composer are loath to make the liberal changes, reductions, and simplifications which the medium of opera demands. No such restraint has been

visited on the adapters of Scott materials and, for the sake of the operas, that is good.

In like manner, there seem to be no musical formulas for success in treating Scott fiction. Some make use of Scottish folk melodies, but many, including *Lucia di Lammermoor,* do not do so at all. Amusingly enough, there are some musical details that turn up rather often, and one of them is the music of the hunt, rendered either orchestrally or by chorus; when it is there, which is often, it is usually in 6/8 time. But, such odd bits of information aside, the variety of musical treatment is what is most interesting.

From the literary and dramatic side of the subject, the most striking aspect of Mitchell's analysis is the marvelous variety of ways in which librettists have altered their material. Minor characters and sub-themes are frequently excised. Occasionally even a major figure is dropped: Lady Ashton, for example, is dropped in Donizetti's *Lucia,* changing, as Mitchell points out, the temper of the whole story. Or two, even three or four, character functions may be amalgamated into one character. For plotting, the same principle may be employed in amalgamating scenes in order to simplify the original, or in the interests of dramatic effect. Once the reducing has taken place, however, a contrary principle may operate: inflating one character or scene. Adam's *Caleb de Walter Scott* retains only the minor character Caleb Balderston, in *The Bride of Lammermoor,* making him the central figure of the opera. In Donizetti's treatment of the same novel, the celebrated "mad scene" is based on one simple line from the novel. In fact, by these examples, one may say that the best and most vivid parts of Mitchell's book are those in which he has several operatic versions of the same story to compare. Thus, the chapters on the three novels most often treated operatically offer the richest study. I confine myself to examples here from the chapter on *The Bride of Lammermoor,* not only because the famous opera derived from it is so well known, but because Mitchell's method works at its best here, where he has six operatic versions of *The Bride* to discuss. Moreover, one may see one of the reasons, perhaps, why Donizetti's opera has lasted so well, over and beyond the famous mad scene. Donizetti had probably three of the earlier versions, all discussed by Mitchell, to learn from. He and his librettist focus their version on the love story alone and excise all else. Thus, beyond the musical brilliance and appeal, there is a tightness and unity to the libretto and to the whole.

In his "Conclusion," Mitchell discusses interestingly the obvious question to which his study leads. With the fact of Scott's immense influence on nineteenth-century opera established (and it is clearly an influence much greater than has been known to date), Mitchell may ask why this occurred. What is it about Scott that was so attractive to the makers of operas? He offers six qualities that seem particularly usable on the operatic stage. Scott's novels abound in static pictorial elements: castles, battlements, and, certainly, grand or gloomy mountains. These may be rendered convincingly by set designers. Further, Scott deals often in "broad-canvas" scenes which become good choral or concerted passages in opera. More interestingly, his novels contain a number of skillfully

drawn, deliberately flat characters, governed by one or two interests, as in caricature. These give vocal and musical variety, and may be rendered more easily than intellectually complex characters. Another technique in Scott, speeches of direct discourse (comparable to soliloquies in Shakespeare), is immediately usable as material for arias. These passages lend themselves even structurally, Mitchell thinks, to the pattern of recitative, cavatina, and cabaletta. Then, too, Scott knew very well how to draw certain kinds of inherently dramatic scenes: rescues, trials, etc. These may be turned to good operatic and dramatic effect. Finally, and to my mind the most interesting and important of all, Mitchell points out quite rightly that the emotional core of Scott's novels is usually an unresolvable conflict of two forces, whether cultural or ideological, or both; and between these, the central character is trapped. Such characters will have allegiances to both sides of the conflict, and this will add interest and intensity to their actions, or sometimes their inactions. *The Bride* is an example, *Old Morality* an even better one (although a more difficult one to turn into an opera, as Mitchell shows), *Heart of Midlothian* still another (not to mention the other two favorites). That structure of conflict allows for ready simplification and treatment in operatic format.

There is one further element of Scott's fictive world that seems to me to deserve greater emphasis. Mitchell discusses *Robert Bruce,* a Scott-based libretto set to bits and pieces of earlier Rossini music by the Swiss composer Niedermeyer. A passing comment Mitchell makes here may allow for amplification. Though Niedermeyer had never written "a genuine Scott opera, he was at least familiar with the matter of Scotland" (p. 350). I suggest that, as with various "matters" of medieval tradition, what caught on in so much nineteenth-century opera was a set of conventions and themes that fitted together under a Scottish banner, and were represented most obviously in Scott's fiction. Some of the elements of this "matter" are easily identifiable as important nineteenth-century concerns: the sense of renewed nationalism; the individual facing a choice between major alternatives, with nothing but his own sense by which to judge—especially some conflict between new values and old, or aristocracy and commoners. Even the scenery associated with the "matter of Scotland" fits into larger, familiar nineteenth-century interests: for example, the fascination with the wilder aspects of nature, from Byron on, had partly to do with the necessity of nineteenth-century man's facing nature anew. And there was the appeal of gloomy ruins which often stood as sad reminders of the rift between the present culture and the past. These—and there are others—are elements of the "matter of Scotland," and Mitchell's apt phrase is too good to pass by so quickly.

Thus this apparently specialized book comprehends a wide subject matter and opens itself to much wider cultural, aesthetic, musical, and literary concerns than one might think. If it has faults—and there are places where it seems to move slowly, moments when one wearies of obscure operas never to be heard—these are well absorbed by what the whole subject of the book suggests. The very thoroughness of the scholarship is worthy of high praise, and adds substance and conviction to what Mitchell can say about opera generally, about the management of the-

atrical effects and plots, and about nineteenth-century tastes in theatre. The problems he encounters are multiple, but they are well overcome.

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Marie Axton and Raymond Williams, ed. *English Drama: Forms and Development. Essays in Honour of Muriel Clara Bradbrook.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977. Pp 263. $15.95.

Lo, here is a *Festschrift* appropriate for and worthy of its dedicatee, not a gathering of casual and unrelated pieces. Its unusual cohesiveness derives from all contributors being former colleagues of Muriel Bradbrook in the Cambridge English Department; the book commemorates her official retirement. Raymond Williams's Introduction goes far toward making the book into a manifesto of Cambridge English. He notes that the Cambridge "school" shares not only an emphasis on practical criticism, for which it has become known, but that, in spite of individual differences, three other features can be considered characteristic: a correlation between literature and social history, a sensitivity to the relationship between imaginative literature and moral and philosophical ideas, and a concern with dramatic forms and their conditions of performance. The latter feature, of course, has been dominant in Bradbrook's own work, beginning with her prize-winning Cambridge undergraduate essay, *Elizabethan Stage Conditions* (1931), and her pioneering *Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy* (1932); it has led up to such magisterial studies as *Shakespeare the Craftsman* (1969) and *The Living Monument: Shakespeare and the Theatre of his Time* (1976).

Williams's four components of the Cambridge school appear in various degrees and mixtures in the individual contributions. The first two essays are strong on social contexts. In "Folk Play in Tudor Interludes," Richard Axton shows how the vanishing folk play left its traces in the "sub-texts" of humanistic or propagandistic interludes. The author of *Calisto and Melebea,* subjecting the rich prize of the Spanish novel *La Celestina* to the cruder form of the interlude, availed himself of medieval analogues, such as *Dame Siris,* to make the story palatable and instructive to his audience. And John Bale still used the tune of Robin Goodfellow for the speech of Infidelity in *A Comedy Concerning Three Laws.* In "The Tudor Mask and Elizabethan Court Drama," Marie Axton distinguishes between the essentially fluid Henrician masque forms, in which conventions for portraying the king's divided self could be explored, and the Elizabethan masques, which began with wishful images Elizabeth's courtiers created for her prospective marriage and led up to her apotheosis as Cynthia and Diana. Henry, participating in the disguises, could impersonate both forester and hermit, light-hearted youth and feeble old man on alternate occasions, so to express his