

Across Australia there is a resurgence to protect such heritage. Noel Pearson writes, 'For the shards of classical culture of this continent to vanish would be a loss not only to its Indigenous peoples but also to all Australians, and to the heritage of the world generally.'<sup>3</sup> Rachel Perkins fears 'we are one generation from losing our [central Arrernte] songs,'<sup>4</sup> echoing Strehlow's 'hour before sunset' assessment of Southern Arrernte songs.<sup>5</sup> *For the Sake of a Song* is not only a treasure trove of the classical Indigenous culture of one part of our nation, but it also illustrates how a project to record and revitalise classical performance arts might look.<sup>6</sup>

This publication is a truly remarkable compilation of songs from one of Australia's unique performance traditions, born from a deep attachment to land. The text, audio, and images are brought together superbly. *For the Sake of a Song* is a must for anyone seeking a greater understanding of Aboriginal music, poetry, and song.

<sup>3</sup> Noel Pearson, 'A Rightful Place. Race, Recognition and a More Complete Commonwealth,' *Quarterly Essay* 55 (2014): 36.

<sup>4</sup> Pearson, 'A Rightful Place,' 34.

<sup>5</sup> T.G.H. Strehlow, 'One Hour Before Sunset' Public talk presented at the University of Adelaide, 16 June 1954 [manuscript], 14 pp.

<sup>6</sup> Examples of Indigenous calls for such a project include the Garma Statement on Indigenous Music and Dance, [www.aboriginalartists.com.au/NRP\\_statement.htm](http://www.aboriginalartists.com.au/NRP_statement.htm) and Rachel Perkins, 'Correspondence,' *Quarterly Essay* 56 (2014): 82–6.

## **Paul Rodmell, *Opera in the British Isles, 1875–1918***

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### **Reviewed by Rachel Landgren**

The music and musical cultures of the British Isles during the long nineteenth century have been the subject of increasing interest over the last thirty years, with academics eager to dispel the long standing claim that Britain was '*Das Land ohne Musik*.' At first glance, the topic of Paul Rodmell's latest contribution to scholarship on nineteenth-century music, *Opera in the British Isles, 1875–1918*, seems a rather sparse subject. The history of opera in England, and more specifically the history of English opera, has long been portrayed as a lost opportunity and one of continued disappointment.

Rodmell, a Senior Lecturer in Music at the University of Birmingham, United Kingdom, has published widely in the field of nineteenth-century British music making. His notable publications included *Charles Villiers Stanford* and *Music and Institutions in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. This latest book is part of a series from Ashgate Publishing, *Music in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, which seeks to explore the 'wealth of music and musical culture' in Britain during this time (p. xv).

Rodmell sets the scene of the study by first limiting and justifying his research scope. He acknowledges that 1815 and 1914 have become canonic in the study of nineteenth-century history

and 1880 has been accepted as marking the emergence of the British Musical Renaissance. In the study of opera in the British Isles however, Rodmell suggests that the year 1875 is seminal for three reasons: the first appearance of Carl Rosa Opera, a significant touring company which competed with Covent Garden in London; the inauguration of a new National Opera House on the Victoria Embankment, which Rodmell characterises as destined for inevitable failure; and the definitive establishment of Wagner's operas in the repertory with the first performance of *Lohengrin* in London. Likewise, the end date of 1918 is chosen rather than 1914 because, despite the outbreak of war, British opera companies, with the exception of Covent Garden, carried on with 'business as usual' (p. 3). Rodmell also clearly defines the boundaries of the study, which examines grand or serious opera rather than operetta or musical theatre. Acknowledging that a 'postmodernist view may be wary of such dividing lines,' he justifies this decision by drawing upon the distinctions embraced by Victorians and Edwardians (p. 3).

The study opens with a survey of operatic life in 1875 London. Rodmell immediately recognises the efforts of Frederick Gye (1809–1878) and James Mapleson (1830–1901), managers of rival Italian opera companies who dominated the English operatic scene. Gye managed Covent Garden and built the company's lasting reputation, while over the course of three decades Mapleson managed Drury Lane and Her Majesty's Theatre. Both companies 'attracted audiences of superior social status (including royalty and nobility), and gave performances of the highest—albeit sometimes compromised—standard available at the time' (p. 6). In addition to these two dominant Italian opera companies, Rodmell's study shows that London had at least four other less prominent companies, which together delivered a staggering two hundred performances a year.

Rodmell explains that unlike many opera companies on the continent, opera in Victorian Britain was a commercial business receiving no subsidy. This influenced repertory selection heavily, as impresarios had to cater to the wishes of patrons, who above all desired 'star' performers and Italian opera. It is no surprise then, that both Gye and Mapleson's opera companies were structured on the 'star' system, with both men vying for the most popular prima donnas of the day, including the 'Swedish nightingale' Jenny Lind (1820–1887), Marietta Alboni (1826–1898) and Adelina Patti (1843–1919). Focusing on the repertoire selections of Gye and Mapleson, Rodmell provides an in-depth and concise survey of the operas that were and were not popular. For example, between 1871 and 1874 the most popular operas at Covent Garden were Gounod's *Faust*, Rossini's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* and Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. Other popular composers included Meyerbeer, Verdi, Donizetti and Bellini. Presented through tables, this repertoire selection illustrates the overwhelming dominance of Italian opera during this time. Rodmell continues to use tables effectively when illustrating statistical information throughout the book. For lovers of tables (there are thirty-one!), these not only make for a fascinating read but also allow the facts to speak for themselves, and provide a useful resource for further study.

From the outset of the opening chapter, Rodmell's intention is clear: to dispel immediately the long established idea that there was no significant operatic culture in Britain during this period. Within the confines of Italian opera this period was in fact one of 'high performance standards, innumerable and unrivalled star singers, and unsurpassed social opulence' (p. 5). It may not have been the operatic tradition British composers and musicians desired, but it was nonetheless significant.

After his opening description of opera in the British Isles in 1875, Rodmell goes on to structure the book thematically instead of historically, with chapters exploring Opera in London 1876 to 1896, Opera in London 1897 to 1918, Opera in the Provinces, and of particular interest 'The Operatic Problem,' which explores the 'dissatisfaction' with the failed establishment of a native operatic repertoire (p. 185) and the proposed solutions to mitigate this issue. This is followed by a list of all the operas by British and Irish composers premiered between 1875 and 1918, with details including composition, plot and performance history. The book concludes with a summary of opera in the British Isles in 1918. This all makes for an engaging read and provides some surprising insights.

The extent to which the provinces were exposed to opera is particularly astonishing: Rodmell identifies an extraordinary thirty-four different touring companies active during this period. As in London, the repertoire was not adventurous and mainly consisted of Italian opera. Nevertheless, the various touring companies provide a colourful image of the provinces with their slap-dash productions and locals assisting in the chorus and orchestra. Unsurprisingly, most did not survive long before going bankrupt, as it was near impossible to meet the public demand for star performers without subsidy.

Despite the overwhelming dominance of Italian opera in London and the provinces, Rodmell carefully documents a substantial number of British operas composed and premiered at this time. This is once again presented in a number of tables. While Covent Garden premiered only a handful, other companies, such as the Carl Rosa Opera Company, were far more adventurous. Unfortunately, these works were never established in the repertory as most were given only one outing, possibly with good reason. Rodmell recognises that the unsuccessful efforts to establish a native operatic genre were viewed as systemic of the wider challenges facing British composition at the time. He suggests, however, that this 'failure' should also be considered within its broader context, proposing that it was not simply reflective of British opera composition at the time but also indicative of general programming, which was characteristically unadventurous and even stagnant, especially when compared with the continent.

Rodmell's research reveals that by the turn of the century the stagnation of the repertoire and its almost exclusively Italian focus had started to shift, with English audiences embracing the works of German composers, in particular, Wagner. From 1897 there was a marked 'surge in the popularity of Wagner,' which Rodmell charts through programming changes from 1897–1914 (p. 81). This table illustrates that 'the resistance to Wagner observable in the early 1880s had dissolved' and London audiences had become, in less than twenty years, the 'perfect Wagnerites' (p. 83).

While 'contemporaneous commentators and later advocates of British music may have felt that the country's operatic life did not measure up to their aspirations or ambitions' identified through questionable operatic standards, restricted repertoire and a lack of native talent, Rodmell's rigorous research illustrates that there was 'no shortage of activity' (p. 4). Opera was found not only in London, which at any given time boasted at least one internationally recognised opera company, but also throughout the provinces, with touring companies bringing opera within reach of a vast majority of people.

Rodmell's impressive piece of research is the only definitive source on operatic life in Britain during this period and will be invaluable for anyone interested in the field. More significantly, it has, I hope, once and for all dispelled that long standing claim that Britain was the land without music.