

REVIEW ARTICLE

The Importance of Being Serious

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Micaela Baranello, *The Operetta Empire: Music Theater in Early Twentieth-Century Vienna*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021. 250pp.

Derek Scott, *German Operetta on Broadway and in the West End, 1900–1940*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. 392pp.

Laurence Senelick, *Jacques Offenbach and the Making of Modern Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 370pp.

What exactly is operetta? As a genre it seems defined by its lack of definition, by its inherent in-betweenness. On an aesthetic scale defined by opera at one end and music hall, revue and burlesque at the other, it lies somewhere in the middle. But where? True, it is difficult to disentangle operetta from the various kinds of variety theatre; it shares their fondness for a chorus line and a catchy refrain. On the other hand, the name *operetta* suggests a love–hate relationship with opera, its high-brow relative. ‘Little opera’ is generally shorter than opera (though what about concise classics of ‘big opera’ such as *La bohème?*), funnier than opera (though what about comic touchstones such as *Il barbiere di Siviglia?*) and less serious than opera (though the satirical bent of some operettas can be taken seriously). Perhaps, then, the difference is that it takes *itself* less seriously, with fewer pretensions to grandeur and more concessions to popular taste. Capitalising unashamedly on its popularity through promotional tie-ins, flaunting musical numbers poised to become well-known hits on the bandstand or on the mechanical piano, and almost invariably giving spectators the happy ending they desire: operetta is selling out, in all senses of the phrase.

Whether or not to take operetta seriously has been a recurring theme in critiques of the genre, not least in the century or so in which it was a major cultural force (c.1850–1950). Such critiques are built into the historiography of the genre itself, with the master-trope of operetta history being the periodisation that divides the genre into a nineteenth-century ‘Golden Age’ and twentieth-century ‘Silver Age’. Golden Age operetta, represented by such notable figures as Jacques Offenbach and Johann Strauss the younger (with an honourable mention for Gilbert and Sullivan), was characterised by a commitment to satire and a tone of ironic detachment. After a period of supposed decadence at the end of the nineteenth century, Franz Léhar’s global megahit *Die lustige Witwe* (1905) inaugurated a new Silver Age, whose works were marked by a turn away from satire and irony and an embrace

of sentimentality and romance. Yet as the terminology suggests, the passage from gold to silver implicitly relates a narrative of decline. Already by the early decades of the twentieth century, contemporary critics spoke of the operettas written after 1900 as pale imitations of their forebears, lacking the noble satirical impulse that supposedly reigned supreme in earlier decades. Given its abundant links with popular music and, by the 1920s, with jazz, operetta came to be seen as the very face of the ‘culture industry’, a frivolous diversion that was empty and meaningless at best, actively pernicious at worst. (It should come as no surprise that arch-grump Theodor Adorno had little good to say about it.)

Equally unsurprising is the near total disregard for operetta in academic circles, given musicology’s formative commitment to an emerging canon of serious ‘classical’ music. After the Second World War, the active tradition of operetta writing ceased. Known increasingly only through the continued staging of a few old favourites (*Orphée aux enfers*, *Die Fledermaus*, *Die lustige Witwe* – and, at least in English-speaking countries, Gilbert and Sullivan’s Savoy operas), the genre calcified into a kitschy caricature of itself, barely on the radar of conventional musicology. Even after opera studies coalesced in the 1980s and clawed its way into respectability, operetta seemed caught in a no-man’s-land: too popular to be considered ‘art music’, too artful to be considered alongside popular traditions, even though operetta’s traffic in both art and pop was evident. Yet since then, as lingering disciplinary prejudices over what constitutes an acceptable topic of study continue to soften, operetta has come into focus, embraced both as a sociocultural artefact with the potential to illuminate musical cultures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and as an object of aesthetic appreciation in its own right. Particularly in the last decade or so, a spate of conferences, monographs and special journal issues – and also, most recently, a *Cambridge Companion* – have given operetta the cultural-historical treatment formerly reserved for the likes of Mozart or the Beatles.¹ Meanwhile, operetta’s recorded footprint continues to expand beyond the old stalwarts already mentioned, making a broad range of works newly accessible to fans and scholars alike.²

The three studies under consideration here – Micaela Baranello’s *The Operetta Empire: Music Theater in Early Twentieth-Century Vienna*, Derek Scott’s *German Operetta on Broadway and in the West End, 1900–1940* and Laurence Senelick’s *Jacques Offenbach and the Making of Modern Culture* – form part of this groundswell of scholarly interest. Taken together, they put the full span of operetta history under the magnifying glass, capturing both sides of the gold–silver watershed mentioned earlier. This historiographical concern constitutes the single biggest difference between the volumes: Scott and Baranello, whose studies are centred post-1900, explicitly challenge the narrative of Silver Age decadence, while Senelick’s investigation of Offenbach implicitly endorses it. Yet what is perhaps more interesting is an ethos that these volumes all *share*: the imperative to ‘take comic opera seriously’, as an apt subheading in Senelick’s concluding chapter has it (295). Baranello, too, concludes with the ringing declaration that ‘studying operetta means taking these mechanics [of operetta plots] and their potential seriously’ (175); and if Scott does not use this phrase exactly, he wraps himself in the mantle of seriousness when he writes of the need to move beyond scholarship ‘of a cataloguing and plot-descriptive nature, rather than interpretive or critical’ that ‘works outside the apparatus of footnotes, and often fails to offer adequate detail regarding sources of information’ (5).

¹ See, for instance, a themed issue of *Opera Quarterly* on operetta, guest edited by Flora Willson and Carolyn Abbate (2017); and Derek Scott and Anastasia Belina, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Operetta* (Cambridge, 2019).

² A regularly updated page on the website *Operetta Research Center* tracks new recordings: the last two years alone have seen multiple releases in an expanding operetta series on the German record label cpo, including Emmerich Kálmán’s *Gräfin Mariza* (2021) and Leo Fall’s *Die Rose von Stambul* (2020); 2020 also saw the first CD reissue of Léhar’s *Die lustige Witwe* recorded by the original German cast in 1906/7. See <http://operetta-research-center.org/category/media/on-the-record/>.

What does it mean to take operetta seriously in twenty-first-century musicology? Baranello, Scott and Senelick all present different answers to this question, as I will discuss in greater depth in the following text. These differences speak of the enormous potential of operetta studies as a flourishing sub-discipline, but are also revealing of the challenges that operetta presents, and will continue to present, to music scholars in decades to come.

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To put the differences between the three authors in context, it is worth first setting out the overall scope and aims of each volume, starting with Derek Scott. The 'German' operetta in Scott's title is, in fact, German-language operetta, whether it comes from Berlin or Vienna; Scott triangulates between its production on the Continent and its reception in the Anglosphere, with a particular focus on the theatre districts of New York and London. The book falls into two halves, of four chapters each. Part 1 examines operetta production, with chapters dedicated to the musical style of operetta (Chapter 1); the adaptation of operettas for new markets (Chapter 2); the business practices of the operetta industry (Chapter 3); and a grab-bag account of 'producers, directors, designers and performers' (Chapter 4). Part 2, on the other hand, is dedicated to operetta reception, starting with a more focused case study of the titular Broadway and the West End (Chapter 5). The remaining three chapters are more thematic in nature, covering intermediality (Chapter 6), modernity (Chapter 7) and cosmopolitanism (Chapter 8). As Scott himself notes, though, the binary scheme of production and reception cannot always be sustained and functions more as a loose framework than a strict methodological distinction: there are too many instances where the reception of operetta was essentially built into its creation. Chapter 7, on intermediality, captures this tension well: operettas were produced in the sure knowledge that their appeal, and consumption, would extend far beyond the bounds of the theatre in which they premiered. As one critic wrote charmingly in the *New York Times* in 1913, summing up the complexity of the cultural transactions underpinning Scott's study, 'Viennese operetta waltzes are produced in New York restaurants long before they reach the New York theatres' (191).

It is to Scott's credit that he tries to grapple with this complexity throughout the book. There is some attempt to theorise the adaptation process using the term 'transcreation', a borrowing from the world of advertising that Scott considers more precise than mere 'translation' or 'transformation' – the latter word apparently going 'too far', because 'the different versions of stage works often remain fundamentally the same' (55). This represents something of a contradiction, given that elsewhere in the book Scott declares the search for 'original' versions of certain operettas to be a fruitless task precisely because of the drastic changes made to individual works as a result of their adaptation. In the end, though, this contradiction does not matter: 'transcreation' is only lightly exploited in the rest of the book. Rather, the primary engine of Scott's study is a kind of communal biography: the narrative profiling of a vast array of figures – among them people, institutions and technologies – many of whom Scott treats like old friends. There is a winning familiarity to Scott's writing when talking about Daly's theatre, a key operetta theatre in the West End and one of Scott's touchstones throughout the book, or George Edwardes, Daly's canny manager between 1894 and 1915. Despite the forty-year period defined in the title of the book, then, this is not really a linear narrative of operetta's development over that four-decade span, but a looser attempt to take operetta in the round – to paint a sort of genre portrait – and one of the strengths of *German Operetta* is its author's immersion in a vast array of source materials that a more traditional narrative might have left by the wayside.

Laurence Senelick's study of Jacques Offenbach is also in some senses a biography – not so much of Offenbach himself, though an interleaved life-and-works account is provided in Chapter 1, but rather of his reputation. It is a lengthy study of 150 years of Offenbach productions across six continents (there has been no Antarctic Offenbach – yet): a global Offenbach-mania whose astonishing reach Senelick documents with meticulous care. Accordingly, the primary engine of Senelick's study is reception history, with a particular focus on a handful of important works – principally, *Orphée aux enfers*, *La belle Hélène* and *Les contes d'Hoffmann*, though *La Périchole*, *La Grande-Duchesse de Gérolstein* and a few others crop up frequently as well. Written commentary on these works, especially in the press, has been combined into a complex collage that captures the multifaceted reactions to Offenbach's music over time. This collage spirals outwards from Paris, Offenbach's adopted home and anchor of his musical and cultural identity. In Chapters 3–8 we turn to Offenbach's reception in Vienna, England, America, the Russian Empire, the entirety of continental Europe and, finally, the rest of the world. In a similar fashion, Chapters 9–12 consider the reception of Offenbach's works after the composer's death in 1880: first in Germany (up to the Third Reich), followed by Soviet Russia, Third Republic France and, finally, the Anglosphere after c.1900. In Chapters 13–14, a final, shortened loop examines Offenbach in Germany after the Second World War, before turning to the composer's works in other media (e.g., film adaptations) and in the modern day.

Despite hailing from theatre studies, Senelick is the only author under discussion to focus on a composer. Nevertheless, near the opening of *Jacques Offenbach*, Senelick declares that his is 'not a book for musicologists, since Offenbach's music is not subjected to close scrutiny' (xiii). This thrown-down gauntlet is unwarranted; musicologists will find a great deal of value in Senelick's study, not least in the revisionist lens it trains on its subject. Indeed, if *Jacques Offenbach* has a particular angle, it is an argument against the critical tradition that treats Offenbach as the court jester of Second Empire France, whose works reflected the moral emptiness of Napoleon III's court even as their satirical sting worked secretly to undermine the regime.³ Senelick disagrees vehemently with this assessment. His Offenbach is not totally divorced from explicit political commentary, but is more interested in the subversive power of burlesque and in the quintessentially French concept of *blague* – a term untranslatable in its nuance, but which 'suggests raillery, pulling one's leg rather than kicking one's rear' (14). The works of this Offenbach are groundbreaking agents of cultural change, not least because of their frank presentation of sexuality, and female sexuality above all: what could be seen merely as high-kicking smut for bored Second Empire officials is by this account nothing less than the coalface of nineteenth-century sexual liberation. For Senelick it is of the utmost importance that 'the women in his works were not mere objects of lust, but were themselves possessed of erotic agency' (133); thus in the sexual arena, as in many others, Offenbach challenged conventional wisdom. 'Under his baton', writes Senelick, 'sacred cows gamboled their way to the slaughterhouse' (61).

Finally, Micaela Baranello makes a powerful case for studying Viennese operetta in the first three decades of the twentieth century, and not only because so many of the genre's key creative figures made their careers in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Vienna at this time, she argues, had a specific theatrical culture that was distinct from that of other key cities within the Empire's borders (i.e., Prague or Budapest) and certainly distinct from that of foreign metropolises such as Berlin. Vienna also encapsulated many of the

³ The wellspring of this critical tradition is Siegfried Kracauer's classic study *Jacques Offenbach and the Paris of His Time*, trans. Gwenda David and Eric Mosbacher (New York, 2002). For Senelick, Kracauer's Marxist cultural history (and subsequent studies of Offenbach cast in its image) both 'overemphasize Offenbach's interest in politics and ... mistake the nature of *opéra bouffe*'. See Senelick, *Jacques Offenbach*, 5–8.

contradictory political and personal realities of life in the Dual Monarchy, which makes the music theatre written for the Viennese stage especially revealing of the cultural dynamics shaping artistic production. Indeed, this is the central claim of Chapter 1, which takes on the very fountainhead of Silver Age operetta, Léhar's *Die lustige Witwe* (1905). Baranello reads Léhar's work and its calculated mixture of musical styles as a mirror held up to the composite Austro-Hungarian identity. The operetta's opposition of a small European principality ('Pontevetro', a thinly disguised Montenegro) to the ultimate urban metropolis, Paris, is shown to reflect recently industrialised Vienna's ambiguous relationship with its rural hinterlands, as well as the Empire's integration of Western European urban sophistication with Eastern European folkloric authenticity. Indeed, Baranello goes further, arguing that 'this allegorical deployment of stylistic juxtaposition is a defining feature of the Silver Age' (16). Such sensitive musical analysis of individual works, used to augment skilfully handled reception history, is a hallmark of the volume overall, and in this sense Baranello's study is the most conventionally musicological of the three books under discussion.

The remaining chapters use this analytical mode of enquiry to great effect. Chapter 2 takes on the thorny historiography of the 'Silver Age' concept itself, examining operetta's shift in priorities (from satire to sentimentality) and in essence (from high-class diversion to mass-culture phenomenon). Baranello shows the contemporary critiques of operetta as a 'bastardized' art in decline to be inextricable from widespread anti-Semitic prejudices against the Jewish musicians central to Vienna's operetta industry. Chapter 3 explores the role of the 'Gypsy' style and its tight association with the Hungarian half of the Dual Monarchy. While taking care to show that the *style hongrois* was essentially unrelated to the Roma people it allegedly represented, Baranello demonstrates that as a stylistic device, 'Gypsy' musical markers functioned as shorthand for a dramatic interiority that contrasted with the superficial exteriority of the waltz and other 'Western'-coded ingredients of operetta. Chapter 4 explores the ways in which Viennese operettas and their composite identities were inflected by the First World War, while Chapter 5 explores the exotic appeal of external Otherness (as opposed to the internal Otherness of the *style hongrois*). Finally, Chapter 6 explores the end of the operetta tradition, under pressure from newly empowered competitors (especially cinema, which was transitioning from silent film to sound film in the late 1920s) and the tragic political realignments of the 1930s that led to the mass emigration of Jews from continental Europe.

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Historically, the most urgent problem confronting operetta scholars has been one of definition: setting aside the influence of particular theatres, performers or performance styles in codifying genre, what makes an operetta an operetta, rather than a musical comedy, an *opérette*, a *zarzuela*, a *rivista*, or any of the profusion of terms found plastered on playbills? One notable trait of all three books under discussion, though, is the caution with which each author approaches this question. Senelick, in fact, does not even try to deal with the linguistic confusion. Taking his lead from the varied genre labels Offenbach applied to his own works, he declares early on his intent to '[play] fast and loose in [his] narrative, using opera as a shorthand with recourse to operetta, comic opera, or *opéra bouffe* as the context suggests' (xiv). Baranello, on the other hand, relies on the consistency of generic expectations within the tight temporal and geographical bounds of her study (Vienna, c.1900–30) and so avoids confronting definitional problems; we take it as read that Viennese operetta remained intelligible as such throughout the period in question. Scott is also keen to emphasise that 'defining what an operetta is is problematic because its classification is fluid' (7). Yet it is Scott who tries the hardest

to pin down what exactly makes an operetta, in the process demonstrating the difficulty of doing so convincingly.

Perhaps the most puzzling manifestations of this tendency are Scott's sporadic attempts to distinguish operetta clearly from opera. In the Introduction, for instance, he writes that 'unlike "serious" opera, which preferred historical and mythological subject matter, operetta frequently engaged with social modernity' (7); slightly later, the deciding factor is said to rest on the 'presence or absence of musical styles associated with commerce or entertainment' (8). These lines in the sand are for the most part merely perplexing, given they invite the reader to think of numerous exceptions from the various realist schools of opera composition c.1900.⁴ Yet they distract from a more subtle claim about opera and operetta that can be found running throughout the book: over the course of the nineteenth century, Scott argues, a growing polarisation between the spheres of art and entertainment came to affect high-brow and low-brow theatre differently, with operas increasingly treated reverentially as self-contained works whose content was sacrosanct, while operettas remained subject to drastic transformations to suit local taste. The outlines of this narrative are sound; the musical culture that gave rise to grand opera is clearly different to the one that produced the Silver Age of operetta. Yet one wishes that Scott had done more to acknowledge the ways in which the one influenced the other. True, the global dissemination of *opéra comique* in the early 1800s is cited as an influential precursor to operetta, but Scott's conclusion – 'the cultural transfer of *opéra-comique* lacked the global networks of exchange that developed later in the century' (273) – is tautologous. What is missing is a sense that music theatre has *always* been mobile, and that the global networks on which operetta travelled in the 1910s had in a very real sense been built by opera a century earlier – as the growing literature on the global expansion of Italian and French opera in the early 1800s attests.⁵

A similar dynamic is at play in Scott's discussion of operetta's musical style, and he is again unique among the authors in venturing such an account in the first place. Senelick, as mentioned earlier, abjures musical discussion altogether. Baranello discusses music frequently and amply, but usually in readings of individual works; her reference to stylistic norms are therefore often comparative, such as in descriptions of musical phrases that are 'harmonically restless to a degree that is rather unusual in operetta' (67). By contrast, Scott's Chapter 1 is boldly dedicated to 'The Music of Operetta'. Much of this material – drawing explicitly on a comparable account of popular musical style in his previous book, *Sounds of the Metropolis* – is germane, documenting the stylistic heterogeneity of operetta, the importance of dance styles and the influence of jazz from the 1910s onwards.⁶ Musical examples are plentiful: fully twenty of the book's twenty-four musical examples are found in this chapter alone, though the discussion is hampered by their inadequate identification.⁷ Even so, some key features of the Viennese popular style discussed in *Sounds of the Metropolis* are not mentioned in *German Operetta*, such as the

⁴ Some of Scott's distinctions are entirely unfounded, however: the observation 'operas are almost always given in the original language' (56) may hold some validity today, but this was certainly not the norm in the period covered by the book except in a select few institutions, among them the Metropolitan Opera in New York.

⁵ See, for instance, Benjamin Walton, 'L'italiana in Calcutta', in *Operatic Geographies: The Place of Opera and the Opera House*, ed. Suzanne Aspden (Chicago, 2018), 119–32; and in the same volume, Charlotte Bentley, 'Between the Frontier and the French Quarter: Operatic Travel Writing and Nineteenth-Century New Orleans', 105–18. With a view to operetta specifically, see Tobias Becker, 'Globalizing Operetta before the First World War', *Opera Quarterly* 33/1 (2017), 28–48.

⁶ See Derek Scott, *Sounds of the Metropolis: The Nineteenth-Century Popular Music Revolution in London, New York, Paris, and Vienna* (Oxford, 2008).

⁷ Example 1.7, for instance, is identified only as 'Komm', komm!' both in the caption and in the list of musical examples; the reader must look elsewhere to learn that this is the refrain to the aria 'Komm', komm, Held meiner

disruptive harmonic implications of the tendency to state melodies in parallel thirds and sixths. Instead, Scott's energies are focused largely on one music-theoretical claim, imported more or less unaltered from his earlier work: 'by the turn of the twentieth century, the free-floating sixths, sevenths and ninths that had worked their way into the Viennese popular style were a regular gesture, and could be used confidently without even a hint of resolution' (22).

Coloristic sevenths and ninths are indeed a characteristic feature of operetta harmony. Yet is it accurate to say they do not resolve? Take Scott's discussion of 'Ein Walzer muß es sein', an aria from Leo Fall's *Die Rose von Stambul* (1916). His Example 1.2 reproduces the first seven bars of the melody, and he claims that the phrase ends on the final note – an apparently unresolved major seventh, lending the tune 'erotic frisson'. Yet Example 1.2 as presented is highly misleading. In the full score, the final dotted minim is in fact tied over, the melody flowing on unchecked: this is not a phrase ending at all, but rather the mid-point of a sixteen-bar phrase. When that phrase is considered in its entirety, it is plain that the melody delineates a descent from scale degree $\hat{8}$, through $\hat{7}$, down to $\hat{6}$. In other words, the major seventh *does* resolve downwards to a less dissonant sixth; it is not 'free-floating' at all, but embedded in a melodic-harmonic matrix that governs its usage in relatively predictable ways. For this is plainly a trope – even a cliché – of popular harmony. Melodies that outline a descent through the tetrachord $\hat{8}-\hat{7}-\hat{6}-\hat{5}$ are common enough to constitute a schema of operetta composition (it arguably appears in Scott's Examples 1.1, 1.2, 1.4 and 1.7). The point here is that even 'coloristic' dissonances are not as straightforward as they first appear; in this style as in many others, there is a tension between vertical and horizontal facets of harmony, whose complexities resist being explained away quite so easily. That is, there is ample room within operetta studies for in-depth future work of a specifically music-theoretical nature, in addition to the kinds of cultural-historical studies already prevalent.

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What ends up carrying Scott's book is his encyclopaedic knowledge of the repertoire and its milieu, and the sense that he is writing from a place of great affection. Yet this raises the question: to what extent does lucid writing on operetta require a buy-in of love? Baranello writes perceptively about the increasing professionalisation of operetta discourse and the tendency to move away from the territoriality of previous writing about the genre – often motivated by the desire to legitimise operetta, typically by 'sorting worthy works from dross to prove that the genre as a whole is worthwhile' (10). Leaving such partisanship behind, Baranello implies, is what has fuelled the 'boom' in operetta studies of the last decade, though she too clearly has a fondness for the genre, declaring herself in a short preface to be 'fascinated by operetta's playful self-reflexivity and intertextuality, which are invisible when two or three works stand in for the whole genre' (viii).

By far the most openly partisan of the three authors, however, is Senelick. Senelick, let us recall, declares his book 'not for musicologists': and yet, from the perspective of a discipline that has gone to great pains in recent years to undermine canons of great works by great men, what is most jarring about *Jacques Offenbach* is not the lack of scores or of music-focused discussion. Rather, it is the author's unhesitating willingness to call Offenbach a genius – even a 'virtuosic and original musical genius' (285), as Senelick puts it at the beginning of his conclusion. Such tributes to Offenbach Hero are a

Träume' in Oscar Straus's *Der tapfere Soldat* (1908). Similar lacunae affect the identification of several other examples.

distinctive, if occasionally distracting, feature of the book, with mixed results. On the one hand, Senelick's enthusiasm is infectious; one gets the sense that of the three authors he is having the most fun, in part because of his sympathy for his subject. His prose rollicks energetically along, leavened with winking, punning chapter titles and seasoned with a fragrant mix of *recherché* vocabulary (a chocolate box assortment of personal favourites might include *titivation*, *lucubration*, *gallimaufry* and *pulchritude*). It is hard not to root for Offenbach when Senelick writes of the composer that 'his cynical reappraisal of accepted values, his penchant for alogical nonsense and buffoonery, his paeans to the life-force, executed with the most exquisite musicianship, liberated spirits wherever his work was performed' (61).

Yet the other side of the coin is that Senelick's thumb is nearly always on the scale. He is smitten with one version of Offenbach: the bold satirist, the unashamed entertainer, the puncturer of pomposity. Any Offenbach production throughout the long history Senelick relates that fails to live up to this image is generally dismissed. Thus Gilbert and Sullivan – positioned as the English answer to Offenbach – are praised for grasping Offenbach's satirical purpose, but marked down for their prudish avoidance of sex. Moreover, Senelick is so firmly against romantic re-imaginings of Offenbach's works that his interpretations begin to feel predetermined: invariably such revisions are read as distortions. Sticking with Gilbert and Sullivan, for instance, we find statements such as the following: 'Sullivan rarely if ever attains Dionysian ebullience: when he attempts deep emotion in his more serious pieces, it is tainted by sentimentality and religiosity' (113). Yet Senelick's unexamined distrust of sentimentality is interesting precisely because it feeds into the historiography of operetta itself, with the sentimental romanticism of Silver Age works read as a degradation of Golden Age satirical norms. When Senelick writes of 'the insipid dullness of the Viennese school' (274), he (perhaps inadvertently) reproduces a long-standing trope of operetta critique.

The slanted nature of this history is partly a result of Senelick's decision to narrate it through the lens of Offenbach, the singular composer. To be clear, what is not in doubt is the global reach and popularity of Offenbach's works; Senelick's documentation is thoroughly convincing on this point. Yet given the mutations these works underwent in their travels to different locales – which Scott would claim are fundamental to their identity as operettas but which Senelick, as we have seen, often deplures – how much of their reception was truly determined by Offenbach's authorship? Senelick is convinced that Offenbach-mania was a crucial force driving the creation of an increasingly global popular culture; one wonders whether it was actually the other way around.

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This tension between individual creativity and mass popularity – or better, between operetta's local and global dimensions – gets to the very heart of why operetta is surprisingly tricky as an object of scholarly inquiry. Senelick and Baranello, in particular, make for a matched pair in this respect, so it is worth drawing out how the local and the global manifest themselves in their studies.

Unsurprisingly, Senelick's book is wholly committed to operetta's global dimensions, tracking as it does the reception of Offenbach's works around the world. Such an approach has great merits, in that it foregrounds the striking similarity of Offenbach discourse even in very divergent cultural environments. (Repeatedly, we find that opposition to Offenbach's works typically fell along either snobbish or prudish lines, and sometimes both.) Yet after a while, the barrage of production details, opinions, reviews, recollections and the like begins to wear on the reader – and one gets the sense they began to wear on the author as well. Chapter 7, for example, has the tongue-in-cheek title 'Doing the

Continental'; it has the job of documenting Offenbach's triumph across nineteenth-century Continental Europe, and accordingly covers the composer's reception in Belgium, Scandinavia (Sweden and Norway), Bohemia, Spain, and Portugal. No amount of winking subheadings can disguise the repetitive nature of the material here, and the impression that Senelick's inspiration ran dry in this world tour is only strengthened in Chapter 8, baldly titled 'South of the Equator, East of Suez'. The chapter dutifully tracks Offenbach's reception according to these coordinates, first in Latin America (i.e., Brazil), then Egypt, Australia and Japan. This final Japanese excursus is barely four pages long, a far cry from the meaty twenty-page chapter on Victorian England. It undeniably offers proof of Offenbach's success across the globe. Paradoxically, it tells us little about Offenbach (or, indeed, about Japan).

There is one exception to Senelick's general procedure, however, which indicates a different direction the book could have taken overall. Curiously enough this comes as early as Chapter 2, which is a study of Wagner's obsession with Offenbach's works and their triumphant success, and the mixture of professional sour grapes and rank anti-Semitism that fuelled it. Wagner's propaganda campaign against the Jewish composer reinforced the standard cocktail of anti-Semitic tropes: Offenbach as a faithless 'international', an artistic con-man, a purveyor of inauthenticity – all ideas whose reach extended far beyond Wagner and his (generally ineffectual) missives. Yet Senelick deftly ties the polarity drawn between Offenbach and Wagner into the anti-Semitism shaping the wider reception of Offenbach's work and persona, and the sensitive political realities (i.e., the Franco-Prussian War) that affected the latter. (He also has some fun at Wagner's expense, juxtaposing the sparkling Gallic sexuality of Offenbach's works with the ponderous Teutonic sensualism of Wagner's.) Framed around an issue rather than a location, this material works extremely well. In the face of the sprawling mass of sources, works, texts and productions – the vortex of popular cultural production that sometimes threatens to overwhelm Senelick's narrative – this is the chapter that feels the most in control.

By contrast, control – of narrative, of sources – is the key characteristic of Baranello's study. Every parameter of *The Operetta Empire* is tightly defined: the book explores one city (Vienna) over three decades (1900–30) through the work of four composers (Franz Léhar, Oscar Straus, Leo Fall and Emmerich Kálmán). Though the book advances roughly chronologically, each chapter is anchored by a particular theme that directs the choice of case studies, one or two specific works mined for the precise, locally defined meanings they acquired in their Viennese orbit. There is much virtue in Baranello's approach, not least insofar as it proves that this repertoire is more than capable of yielding rich insights into cultural history via the kind of musical analysis by now standard in studies of opera. Despite (or perhaps because of) the book's strictly delimited purview, it is in Baranello's study that operetta comes into sharpest focus as a coherent genre, along with the mechanics that animate it – irony, satire and self-reflexivity on the one hand, sentimentality, romanticism and pleasure on the other. If operetta scholarship is to progress in the direction Baranello desires, away from defensive fandom and towards sober musicological objectivity, then it seems likely that future studies will be cast in this volume's image: localized, specific, granular, even micro-historical. They will probably try to do something with the music itself, too.

Read in conjunction with Scott and Senelick, however, this localism raises questions. If these operettas that clearly meant such nuanced and complex things in Vienna were subsequently exported to Berlin, London, New York and beyond – where numbers were replaced wholesale, dialogue and language altered, and so on – do we lose sight of something important by focusing on such an unabashedly local reception history? Of course, Baranello's study tells us much about Vienna, and indeed this is one of her explicit aims: to destabilize cosy narratives of the city as incubator of the intellectualized

avant-garde. Yet what are we learning about operetta, both in the abstract and in the form of specific Viennese works, if we disregard the fundamental malleability of the genre, its ability to cross borders and reinvent itself with ease? How important are the specifics of musical works which were, in some important sense, meant to be non-specific? Baranello is clearly aware of this tension: in Chapter 1, for instance, she writes that ‘outside its home territory, of course, *Die lustige Witwe* itself became a phenomenon rather than a product of a particular time and place in operetta history’ (42). Yet it is precisely this process of becoming a ‘phenomenon’, arguably the focus of both Scott’s and Senelick’s volumes, which Baranello essentially avoids confronting head on. Perhaps something fundamental about operetta as a genre is lost as a result.

The other consequence of Baranello’s restraint is that her book is surprisingly compact. *The Operetta Empire* never overstays its welcome: it rarely provides the extraneous details that occasionally encumber Scott’s study, and one never feels that the sources are threatening to overwhelm the narrative, as in Senelick’s. Still, the reader is sometimes left wishing Baranello had not left her writing quite so lean, for many historical trends and events are alluded to without ever being fully explained. I was tantalised by the repeated hints throughout the book about the role cinema played in bringing about operetta’s demise: in the Introduction, for instance, Baranello writes that ‘operetta’s decline in the face of economic depression and competition from sound film rendered it increasingly irrelevant’ (12), while in Chapter 5 we find the supremely economical parenthetical statement, ‘(Silent cinema was a serious threat to operetta; sound film proved an existential one.)’ (124). Yet these hints never amount to a sustained examination of how this existential confrontation between media played out in Vienna or anywhere else. Even in Chapter 6, explicitly concerned with the end of the operetta tradition in the Austrian capital, film remains a shadowy threat in the background. This is a shame, because it is clear that sound film inherited a great deal from operetta, from its mass audience to its fondness for sentimental romance to the mixed stylistic signature of most early film scores. This story, among others, could have been told more fully without any loss of the focus and precision that define Baranello’s book.

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For all three authors the Second World War acts a caesura. Senelick is the only one to continue his narrative into the post-war era, and as he writes in his concluding chapter, ‘Taking Offenbach Seriously’, most of Offenbach’s operettas were by this point forgotten; those few still in the repertory (*Orphée, Hoffmann*) were increasingly apt to be seen as ‘classics’ to be revived. Baranello, meanwhile, ends her study with a concise elegy to ‘Operetta in the Past Tense’, looking at some contemporary re-imaginings of a genre widely perceived in the present day – for better or worse – as a type of cultural heritage: safe, kitsch, suitable for a nice day out with the kids. Yet as Baranello points out, this conservative vision of operetta is an invented tradition. Her sympathies clearly lie with modern-day opera directors, such as Barrie Kosky, who recognise operetta’s original fondness for licentious subversion and stage it in new, inventive ways – even if, as she notes, directorial critiques of operetta as stale and conservative echo criticisms that have dogged the genre ever since its Silver Age reinvention. Nevertheless, it is clear from this postlude that Baranello too considers operetta to be a historical phenomenon. Perhaps this outlook is inevitable from the two authors who focus on individual authorial figures (Senelick) and on singular creative milieux (Baranello); after all, both Offenbach and late imperial Vienna are long gone.

By contrast, Scott’s brief postlude on ‘The Demise of Operetta’ is entirely concerned with the persecution of Jewish musicians under the Third Reich. A sobering read, it

feels curiously out of place, like the end-point of a different, more strictly diachronic history of operetta than the one the book has actually provided. It also sidesteps the tantalising provocation thrown down at the end of the Introduction, where Scott claims that ‘if one considers how easily *Phantom of the Opera* or *Les Misérables* might have slotted into the category of operetta as it was understood in the first half of the twentieth century, it might be argued that it is the term that has become old fashioned, rather than the form’ (15). Much like Baranello’s engagement with cinema and its inheritance from operetta, this genealogical thread cast into the future is left mostly unexamined. However, it gives us a glimpse of a different way of seeing operetta, as a particular, historical manifestation of a tendency in popular entertainment that continued beyond 1945 – whether in the form of blockbuster cinema or in the contemporary Broadway musical. The difference between these historiographical outlooks would certainly be worth examining further, because it suggests that there are important questions about operetta that have yet to be broached in any significant way. Clearly, much remains to be written in the history of operetta. In that sense, the genre’s future is looking surprisingly – and seriously – bright.