

BOOK REVIEW

Emily Wilbourne. *Lesbian/Opera: Elena Kats-Chernin's Iphis and Matricide: The Musical*

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Reviewed by Jaslyn Robertson

Queering gives us the possibility to rethink existing structures and definitions in new ways, messing and troubling our view of the world that is shaped by heterosexual understandings. While queer research in music and re-thinkings of opera are both expanding academic fields,¹ Emily Wilbourne takes her own distinctive approach in *Lesbian/Opera: Elena Kats-Chernin's Iphis and Matricide: The Musical*. Wilbourne does not only apply queer theory to an analysis of Australian composer Elena Kats-Chernin's early operas; she queers our very understanding of opera, pushing forward a strong theoretical concept demonstrated through discussion of Kats-Chernin's works. A new publication forged from the author's two-decades-old thesis, *Lesbian/Opera* remains excitingly relevant in current conversations around queerness and opera.

Wilbourne begins by showing us how opera is typically gendered as female in the perception of audiences, musicologists, and critics. Words like extravagant, incredible, and artificial are used to describe opera, and Wilbourne tracks the gendered implications of these adjectives. The opera composer is traditionally seen as male, creating a heteronormative binary between himself and his work. While the opera composer is held up as the male genius taking control over the excessive form, opera itself is objectified as a gendered body of emotion and erotics. How is this binary broken, then, when women compose opera? *Lesbian/Opera* argues that women opera composers queer this structure, threatening the binary relationship. Figuring opera by women as lesbian allows us to grasp a divergent approach to narrative and content, and challenge assumptions made about women's operas under a heteronormative gaze.

¹ Andrew Sutherland, *Queer Opera* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2023); Pamela Karantonis and Dylan Robinson, *Opera Indigene: Re/presenting First Nations and Indigenous Cultures* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).

Wilbourne demonstrates this through examining two of Kats-Chernin's operas: *Iphis* (1997, librettist Richard Toop) and *Matricide: The Musical* (1998, librettist Kathleen Mary Fallon). Kats-Chernin does not identify as lesbian, but *Iphis* and *Matricide* both centre lesbian characters. While queer theory is often engaged to study the work of queer artists, Wilbourne shows how it can equally aid in unpacking issues to do with tradition, subversion, and power relationships. Beyond a feminist interpretation of these two boundary-pushing works, the lesbian lens allows Wilbourne to weave through the tangled threads of these operas towards new understandings.

Lesbian/Opera is rooted firmly in an approach that looks beyond 'the music itself' (p. 5). Although she does analyse the scores, it is equally important for Wilbourne to unpack the societal issues that surround women composing opera. She argues that it is the high patriarchal expectations of opera that multiply structural barriers for composers that do not fit the typical mould of the genius male. While women continue to face difficulties in the masculinised field of composition, Wilbourne identifies that opera presents a specific bias where audiences and critics often collapse the identities of the non-male composer into their work, problematically reading their narratives as semi-autobiographical. This is a prejudice placed only upon women, whereas the male composer is allowed by society to tell a universal story. Uncovering this inconsistency in the reception of operas by different genders supports Wilbourne's thesis that women composing opera forms a new power structure and subjects itself to a different gaze. Non-normative relationships to opera also bring new possibilities of narrative experimentation, just as lesbian relationships have an ability to slip between acceptance and fear in society.

Chapter 2 begins questioning how the content of opera can be lesbian, addressing queer treatments of narrative and mythology. This is done carefully, considering how concepts such as lesbian narratives in literature can be applied to opera, encompassing both the libretto and the music into the telling of the story. If Catherine Clément has shown us how opera narratives are rooted in patriarchy,² then Wilbourne shows us how a divergent narrative that breaks this cycle can be seen as a queer approach. Opera narratives are often shaped by more than one person. *Iphis* filters an Ovid myth through librettist Toop's and Kats-Chernin's treatments, telling the story of a woman raised as male and falling into a lesbian relationship. *Matricide* is based on the true story of two New Zealand girls who murdered one of their mothers, and was being developed by librettist Fallon for years before Kats-Chernin's involvement in the Chamber Made production. It is sometimes difficult to assess whether the librettist or the composer is responsible for departures from straightforward narrative. Interviews with Kats-Chernin and Fallon help by revealing Kats-Chernin's heavy involvement with the narrative shaping of *Iphis*, and her collaborative approach with Fallon in *Matricide*. Wilbourne also returns continually to the music as an important part of narrative telling, showing how the score fragments, complicates, exaggerates, and juxtaposes the text. In writing about the operas, she succeeds in the secondary aim of the book: to bring academic attention to Kats-Chernin's 1990s operas and her work in general. Descriptions allow the reader to viscerally experience the theatrical worlds of these operas.

Wilbourne goes deeper into gendered depictions in each opera in Chapters 3 and 4, unpacking gender performativity in *Iphis* and depictions of madness in the women of

² Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, trans. Betsey Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

Matricide. She argues that the character of Iphis embodies Jack Halberstam's concept of female masculinity.³ Without a lesbian composer or librettist, we might wonder how genuine this representation is. Wilbourne finds that Kats-Chernin's identification lies in her experience with otherness as a migrant and her dissatisfaction with gender norms in life and career, showing how female masculinity is not only relevant to those identifying as queer. Additionally, she looks at butch and femme representations in Chamber Made's and subsequent stagings of the work that augment the camp aspect. The discussion of gendered madness in opera draws on Susan McClary's writing on 'mad scenes'.⁴ Of course, *Matricide* displays a more contemporary understanding of mental illness in women than McClary's examples, ranging from Monteverdi to Schoenberg. Wilbourne grapples with how to apply this template that relies on identifying the musical conventions of the time period to frame the mad scenes. While Kats-Chernin's music draws from operatic tradition with both reverence and parody, her musical language also exists in a postmodernist landscape that incorporates numerous genres. In that sense, it is difficult to understand how *Matricide* deviates from operatic norms without considering other late twentieth-century operas. Wilbourne succeeds in going beyond 'the music itself' by considering staging, reception, and the compositional process. To take the analysis a step further, placing them in comparison to other contemporary operas in Australia and overseas would help to show whether Kats-Chernin's works particularly queered representations in opera, or if her depictions are characteristic of the expansion of the form in the late twentieth century.

Wilbourne's preface to the book states, 'This is not the text I would write today, yet there remains much to recommend in it' (p. xi). Perhaps an updated theory would posit the relationships between composers and opera beyond binary hetero or lesbian relationships—the end of Chapter 1 hints at the possibility that the singer could be a third interloper in the relationship, but this is put aside for the rest of the book. Expanding the theory past binaries could give it more strength to decipher a work like *Iphis*, that approaches more complex issues of gender. The focus on the relationship between Kats-Chernin and her operas also leaves little room to expand on collaborative processes. Interviews with Kats-Chernin and Fallon reveal exciting moments of cooperation on the libretto that could be viewed as a feminist method behind the scenes of *Matricide*. Rather than being critiques of *Lesbian/Opera*, these points suggest that there is so much more to be found by embracing queer approaches to music research. Wilbourne demonstrates how queer theory should not be limited to discussion of queer composers, but can help us reconsider structural relationships in music. While gender issues and queer characters in opera are becoming a more common topic, *Lesbian/Opera* takes the conversation forward by questioning how opera can embody queerness in its narrative structure and musical language. This is a wonderfully written and thought-provoking read for those interested in Elena Kats-Chernin's work, but also for all those excited by the prospects of queering musicology and composition.

About the Author

Jaslyn Robertson is a composer and researcher undertaking a PhD in Music at Monash University. Her practice-based research centres on queer censorship and experimental opera.

³ Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

⁴ Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).