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Houses of repute

by [Alexander Coleman](#)

A review of *Molto Agitato: The Mayhem Behind the Music at the Metropolitan Opera*, by Johanna Fiedler, *Covent Garden: The Untold Story*, by Norman Lebrecht, *Valery Gergiev and the Kirov: A Story of Survival*, by John Ardoin.

Decades ago Sir Peter Ustinov was called upon to write an introduction to an amusing anthology about calamities that have occurred in the major opera houses of the West—appropriately entitled *Great Operatic Disasters*. Sir Peter began with a memorable definition: “There is no art form which attempts the sublime while defying the ridiculous with quite the foolhardiness of opera.” The book is full of misbehaving horses, dentures lost in the stage gloom, grotesquely misclad baritones, Rigoletto’s hump gradually slipping down the hapless singer’s back (“One would have thought that they *knew* something about handling hunchbacks in Paris”). And this is not even to begin to consider the quality of the singing, of which Ustinov gives us a few classifications: “Those who can sing but can’t act ... those who can act but who can no longer sing ... those paragons who can both sing and act ... and finally, those who can neither act nor sing, retained in harness by some humanitarian pension scheme.”

It must be said that the proper execution of what Wagner used to call the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the bringing together of drama, song, dance, and instrumental sound, is a high-risk operation at the best of times. Even a ballet evening can go wrong for the most modest of reasons. The Associated Press recently reported that, at London’s elegant Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, about two-thousand ballet fans had to be evacuated after a baked potato exploded in a backstage microwave oven and triggered the fire alarm.

Any major opera house can expect to have its history recounted, and three of the world’s most important have received treatment in recent books: the Metropolitan Opera in New York, the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden (ROH), and the Kirov Opera in St. Petersburg.

Johanna Fiedler certainly knows her way around the world of music. She is the daughter of the Boston Pops conductor Arthur Fiedler, and in her previous book, *Arthur Fiedler: Papa, the Pops, and Me*, she gave us a frank view of her irascible father, who was continually humbled by the BSO’s Serge Koussevitzky. She was also the Metropolitan Opera’s general press representative from 1975–1989 and had the fullest possible cooperation of archivists, critics, singers, agents, board members, and, of course, the general manager Joseph Volpe and the artistic director James Levine.

Ms. Fiedler had no pretensions to writing a serious overview of the history of the Met before her arrival. After all, Irving Kolodin had produced a massive history of the institution, *The Metropolitan Opera 1883–1966: A Candid History*, of well over seven-hundred pages, covering the history of the

house before Lincoln Center. Hers is a personal scrutiny of the Met as she knew it. The present music director, James Levine, first appeared on the Met podium in 1971 as a young twenty-eight-year-old wunderkind. Understandably, given his achievements, he is the central figure in the latter parts of her book.

Molto Agitato is not a book about singing, but rather a story about “operatic” struggles within the Met’s management and about performers facing each other and management down. In their respective battles with exasperated general managers, both Maria Callas and Kathleen Battle were to be summarily fired for behavioral excess—the lesson being that even great singers can only go so far. All sorts of other conflicts are recounted herein—between the board and general manager, between singers, between the orchestra and management, even between the orchestra and their beloved conductor: Levine has been known to wing it. “One mild complaint,” Ms. Fiedler writes, “is that Jimmy sight-reads the scores at first rehearsals for operas he has never done before. After the first rehearsal for one Met premiere, he praised the orchestra. ‘That was very good for a first run-through,’ he said, and one of the musicians replied, under his breath, ‘We could say the same to you.’” Nonetheless, the Volpe/Levine years are much celebrated here, and deservedly so. In her treatment of Maestro Levine, she is frank, but I wonder what kind of biting, untrammelled critical study might have resulted if *Molto Agitato* had not been written by an observer who is so obviously a supremely loyal former member of the Met staff.

Two matters ought to be mentioned in reference to the Met that contrast it to the other two houses under the microscope. The Met has always been funded by private generosity, beginning with the largesse of Otto Kahn, Eleanor Robson Belmont, and Cornelius Bliss, then with the ever more energetic fundraising from the Metropolitan Opera Guild and the popular Saturday afternoon broadcasts, and on to the cultivation of generous individual benefactors, such as Sybil Harrington and Alberto Vilar. Ticket prices have never been cheap, though standing room was and is a bargain. The point is that the government never enters *Molto Agitato* as a subject of concern or preoccupation, whereas, for the other two opera houses under consideration, Whitehall (after the Labour Party victory in July 1945) and Moscow (before and after the Soviet years) are essential topics. The second point is that while ballet is entirely subsidiary to operatic production at the Met, the Royal Ballet at Covent Garden and the Mariinsky/Kirov Ballet are immensely powerful presences in the scheduling and administration of both the British and Russian companies.

Not only is Covent Garden another kind of opera house, but Mr. Norman Lebrecht is quite another kind of critic. He is an outsider, an intruder into the sacred temple of classical music, a wild man, even. As a freewheeling music columnist for London’s *Daily Telegraph* and the author of the much discussed *Maestro Myth* (1991) and *When the Music Stops* (1997; published in the United States under the more appropriate title *Who Killed Classical Music? Maestros, Managers, and Corporate Politics*), he can be fairly described as music criticism’s only cultural guerrilla—there is no one comparable to him in the United States (see his weekly *Telegraph* articles at www.scena.org). What is more, he is the host of a weekly interactive BBC Radio 3 talk show, “Lebrecht Live,” in which unprepared participants, expecting the rattling of teacups, find themselves challenged, scrutinized, and criticized, if not excoriated, in ways that poor little NPR here in the U. S. OF `RA. can only fantasize about. Indeed, after reading anew *Who Killed Classical Music?*, I can only imagine what was left on the cutting room floor after the legal vetting. Mr. Lebrecht took on the titans of classical music management and showed how the concentration of “stars”—the “Three Tenors” being only the worst example—has crowded out even the most distinguished young talent, vocal and instrumental.

The subtitle of Mr. Lebrecht’s history of the ROH—“Dispatches from the English Cultural War, 1945–2000”—is indicative of the social breadth of his inquiry. His grand theme—the role of government in arts dissemination and the ultimate failure of such a program—starts with Churchill’s stunning defeat by Labour in the summer of 1945. With its cities in ruins, a shabbily dressed

populace, and food and fuel rationing that would last ten years more, Britain had won the war and lost the peace. All the more remarkable, therefore, was the intense cultural messianism advocated by the new government. It created the Arts Council, reinforced the dedication of the BBC Third Programme to music, and began the support of the Royal Opera House at Covent Garden. Much of this was due to the superhuman energies and fine political hand of John Maynard Keynes and his ballerina wife, Lydia Lopokova. In a radio address, Keynes intoned: "We look forward to a time when the theatre and the concert hall and the gallery will be a living element in everyone's upbringing." England would rise again alright, but much more enlightened from its economic Dunkirk. "The arts—the creative voice of the nation—were from now on to be a paternal concern of central government." Keynes was the first to occupy the Arts Council chair—he rescued the opera house from the dance hall that it was during the war and married ballet irrevocably to the future Royal Opera House with the help of the imperious Dame Ninette de Valois (née Edris Stannis). Keynes was followed over the years by Ernest Pooley, Sir Kenneth Clark, and most significantly, Garrett Moore, Eleventh Earl of Drogheda, who lasted from 1959–1974.

Mr. Lebrecht's 580-page inquiry asks a simple question: How could an innocent governmental subvention of £25,000 in 1945, which aided in the official re-opening of the ROH on February 20, 1946, end with the two-year closure of the house in the late Nineties for complete renovations costing some £214 million? The story, as one observer put it, is "the longest running arts farce" in the nation's history. One crucial element in all this, not noted by Mr. Lebrecht until page 494, was that donations to the arts in Britain were *not* tax deductible until the Inland Revenue law was changed in 2000. And state subsidies, while new to Britain in 1945, were and are still meager compared to those doled out in Germany. The Munich Opera House is supported by a 70 percent state subsidy, a sum inconceivable to the Exchequer no matter whether Tory or Labour resided at No. 11.

But after all this, one can still understand Mr. Lebrecht's ultimate exasperation when he notes that, because of innumerable delays over the years, the stage technology of the new house is already thirty years out of date, and seat-back subtitles, so pleasing at the Met, "had never been considered at Covent Garden, nor mentioned to the architect." (It was just announced that the indefatigably charitable Alberto Vilar will pick up the tab for the installation of seat-back titles at the new Covent Garden.)

Mr. Lebrecht was granted only "partial access" to the ROH archives. Indeed, when he wished to examine the archive file on Arnold Goodman, Harold Wilson's right-hand man and "the most influential fixer England had ever seen," Mr. Lebrecht drily notes that "With his usual skill, Goodman left no fingerprints. His file in the ROH archives is completely empty, cleared as if by order." Secrets must be guarded fanatically, even if they are anodyne and harmless:

Before I could enter the archives, the board demanded that I obtain the approval of all past chairmen, one of whom refused access to the files pertaining to his period. I would later discover that he had little to hide. His response was typically that of an ROH grandee who saw no reason for the public to know what had been going on while he was in charge of a public-funded institution.

The appointment of the first General Administrator of the house, David Webster, 1945–1970, was symptomatic of the way things were to be. Once the manager of the Bon Marché department store in Liverpool and active in local music circles, Webster was drawn to London and told by the powers that be "to organize a national home for opera and ballet." An authoritarian musical amateur, Webster demanded total musical control, and it is appropriate to list the musical directors he would not consider: Beecham, Barbirolli, Malcolm Sargent, Albert Coates, Klemperer, Szell, Reiner, Erich Kleiber, and others. The young Leonard Bernstein conducted once in 1946 and was never invited back. "Any of these masters," Mr. Lebrecht notes, "was capable of raising an opera house from the

foundations up, yet none was considered for Covent Garden.” Webster chose an unknown Austrian exile: one Karl Rankl, unknown to all. Beecham’s reaction was typical: “The appointment of an alien, and especially one bearing a German name, to the post of musical director of the British National Opera is so incredible that I have from time to time to remind myself that it has actually happened and is not some fantastic dream.” The curse of provincialism initially hung over the house. The bracing slogan to “Buy British,” that is, to use British singers over their better French, German, or Austrian counterparts made the first years of the ROH unnecessarily grim.

Yet after the expected demise of Karl Rankl, there have been many extraordinary triumphs. A list should include Erich Kleiber’s *Wozzeck*, many stunning performances by Callas and Sutherland, the eras dominated by George Solti (a complete *Ring*, Schoenberg’s *Moses und Aron*), Rafael Kubelik, Colin Davis, and Bernard Haitink, as well as the rise to stardom of Kiri Te Kanawa and Luciano Pavarotti. As for the Royal Ballet, one only need mention Dame Margot Fonteyn and her collaborations with Rudolf Nureyev and the choreography of Frederick Ashton, John Cranko, and Kenneth MacMillan. But the deficits grew to gargantuan proportions, much to the irritation and censure of the likes of Margaret Thatcher and John Major. Thanks to a generous infusion of funds from the National Lottery, the renovation was brought to a happy end, but the massive endowment needed for its independence has yet to be raised.

The most stunning sentence in Mr. Lebrecht’s entire history is pronounced by Lord Drogheda. George Whyte was a young Hungarian-Jewish department store owner who offered to take charge of desperately needed fundraising for the ROH in exchange for a seat on the board. This was deemed to be too pushy an offer, and Drogheda offered a symptomatic, summary chastisement: “Never forget, George, what is an Englishman’s by privilege, the Jew has to acquire by merit.”

A few words about the late John Ardoin. At his death in March 2001, he had just retired after thirty-two years as the music critic of *The Dallas Morning News*. He was a well-esteemed presence in New York city music circles, as intermission guest on the Saturday afternoon Metropolitan Opera broadcasts, and as New York critic for *The Times* (of London) and *Opera* magazine. He was the author of some six books, two on Callas—*The Callas Legacy* and *Callas at Juilliard*, the latter work inspiring the playwright Terrence McNally to write his *Master Class*—and the definitive examination of the recorded legacy of Wilhelm Furtwängler. Ardoin was an extraordinarily honest critic—he wrote an unfavorable review of a performance by his friend Maria Callas in Dallas in 1974, and she never spoke to him again. He had just finished *Valery Gergiev and the Kirov* when he died suddenly from lymphoma. Had he lived, his next project was to have been an exhaustive examination of the recorded legacy of Leonard Bernstein.

Ardoin was nothing if not intrepid. Taking leave from the Dallas paper in 1995–96, he moved to St. Petersburg for the long winter in order to bear witness to the fortunes of the Mariinsky/Kirov theater. He enjoyed the complete cooperation of Valery Gergiev, the principal conductor and artistic director, and brought with him a friend who spoke fluent Russian. The archives of the house were open to Ardoin, should he be able to locate them. “The Mariinsky’s historical papers and the designs of past productions have been scattered about town in at least a half a dozen buildings, and some had even wound up in Moscow.” Indefatigable, Ardoin has given us four books in one—a portrait of the mercurial Gergiev, now a whirlwind presence in New York though his myriad activities at the Metropolitan Opera and performances with his own Kirov orchestra; a history of the theater since 1860; the personal journey of a Westerner learning a balletic and operatic repertory not often seen or heard in the West; and, finally, the story of an opera and ballet company desperately struggling in post-Communist Russia, bereft of the state support that had been dependable through the czars and Communists.

Ardoin sat through every performance possible—twenty-six different operas and twenty-eight ballets (all repeated, of course), four tours of Europe, and trips to Israel, Japan, and Denmark. Often,

the stars were sent on tour and the vocal “Plan B” stayed home to perform, at times desultorily. There are three discrete orchestras—a ballet orchestra, an opera orchestra, and a tour orchestra, with personnel rotating among the three. For Ardoin, as for the reader, it is all dizzying in the extreme.

Ardoin’s gifts as a musical critic—able to describe in words the peculiar power, majesty, or delicacy of each singer—make this a real treat for the inquiring musician and critic. Ardoin’s ear for orchestral sonority and the ensemble in general is evident in his portrayals of the sound of an individual orchestra, and he roundly condemns some performances. For instance, after hearing nightly the vibrancy, oomph, and general dedication of the Kirov orchestra on their home grounds in St. Petersburg, Ardoin takes a flying trip to New York, accompanying Gergiev to the Met, where he will conduct Tchaikovsky’s *Queen of Spades*. The much-vaunted Metropolitan Orchestra does not fare well:

While the playing of the Met’s orchestra was beautiful, precise, and professional, it lacked that hot-to-the-touch character of the Kirov’s brass, tympani, and strings. Nor did The Met’s musicians play with the sense of propulsion, the 100 percent plus the Kirov orchestra gives Gergiev night after night. The production was a grave disappointment.

An additional bonus to this extraordinary book is Ardoin’s capacities, previously unknown to me, as a critic, appreciator, and describer of ballet performance. One has only to read his descriptions of particular performances of new (to Russia) works of Balanchine, and such old dependables as *La Bayadère*, *Le Corsaire*, *Romeo and Juliet*, or *The Sleeping Beauty*, to know how far-ranging were Ardoin’s interests and talents, and what a loss his unexpected death is to the art of criticism.

In September 1997, Valery Gergiev was appointed principal guest conductor of the Metropolitan Opera. The final pages of both volumes by Johanna Fiedler and John Ardoin dedicate a good amount of ink as to the motives, hidden or obvious, behind such an appointment, and spend even more time contrasting the temperaments and conductorial and rehearsal techniques of Messrs. Gergiev and Levine—the latter tending toward the energetically Apollonian, the former much wilder, unpredictable, and very Dionysian. Ardoin, clearly the more discerning student of orchestral performance, tended to prefer Gergiev in spite of his helter-skelter habits, while Ms. Fiedler is, naturally, a Levine friend and advocate. There is, however, a moment in her book in which she crosses the line into something close to scurrilous hearsay. She quotes a “Met insider” alleging that “With his icy shrewdness in assessing other conductors, Jimmy knows that the orchestra has little use for Gergiev. Jimmy knows Gergiev is a fraud, and either everyone else will catch on or they won’t.” Who is this “Met insider?” I am sorry that John Ardoin is not around to confront the wretch.

Such is the nature of writing about the opera world: gossip, ego, power struggles, etc. It disappears into the gloom when the curtain rises and the music begins.

Alexander Coleman was a long-time contributor to *The New Criterion* and a close friend of the editors. He died on June 17th, 2002.

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