

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Claudio E. Benzecry, *The Opera Fanatic: Ethnography of an Obsession*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011, 256 pp. \$US 29.00 paper (978-0-226-04342-5), \$US 85.00 hardcover (978-0-226-04340-1)

The sociological study of musical taste, particularly of high-culture consumption, has been dominated by a focus on the relative significance of cultural capital and social hierarchy (e.g., Bourdieu's *Distinction* and Peterson's omnivorous thesis). In *The Opera Fanatic* Claudio Benzecry builds on cultural sociology to rescue the sensuality — or the musicality — involved in the passionate, meaningful experiences of opera fans. The author temporarily brackets issues of social distinction and takes seriously the claims of fans that they consume opera out of love. Benzecry builds on music sociology (e.g., Tia DeNora and Antoine Hennion) and a diverse literature on fandom to consider the powerful, affective element of opera consumption, thereby providing a model of long-term attachment and cultural membership.

The book draws on data collected from 18 months of ethnographic research by the author throughout the 2002–2005 opera seasons in Buenos Aires. He focuses primarily on the people who populated the upper-floor standing rooms of the eminent Colón Opera House. These are not meant to represent all opera fans; they are arguably a particularly passionate and engaged part of the opera audience. Benzecry conducted 44 in-depth interviews, primarily with these audience members though also with key music critics, producers, and organizers of the Buenos Aires opera world. The son of a maestro and already intimately familiar with Buenos Aires, Benzecry provides the reader with considerable information on this historically significant opera site.

Who are these passionate opera fans and where do they come from? The class and social distinction literature on high culture led Benzecry to expect to find members of the upper middle class who had grown up in the well-off neighborhoods of Buenos Aires and were groomed by their parents to such distinguished tastes from a young age. Instead, the life stories he collected suggest a more heterogeneous group of opera fans raised in diverse parts of the city and country. These opera fans recount being initiated to opera via a “random act” during some part of adulthood, by family (though usually not a parent), a friend, or a public

institution (e.g., radio). Benzecry collected complete background information on 39 people and acknowledges his sample is too small to make large claims about demographics. While he finds no trends in terms of social class and education, it is striking that most of these opera fans live alone. Of the minority of interviewees (less than a third) with a live-in partner, many report difficulties in maintaining opera fandom and family life; married fans often report needing to compromise with their families and limit opera attendance to somewhere between once a week and once a month. Benzecry notes how becoming single leads to a direct increase in a fan's investment in opera, but it could have proved instructive to flesh out this relationship in the opposite direction, i.e., the idea that the obsessive-compulsive behaviour of the opera fanatics studied might be related to becoming or remaining single.

The core findings of the book are arguably found in its middle chapters on "how" and "why" individuals become opera fans. The career of fans starts with an intense visual and corporal attraction to opera (akin to love at first sight) followed by attempts to "socially learn how to control and maximize" this effect. Opera must be learned in order to be properly enjoyed, or so fans believe. Fans make intensive and extensive investments to learn about opera through formal (e.g., classes, lectures, and conferences) and informal methods (e.g., interactions at or around performances). Especially insightful here is Benzecry's concept of "collective connoisseurship" whereby older fans silence or prompt newer ones through implicit coercion or persuasion. Fans become exasperated when opera novices applaud at inappropriate moments or for undeserving performances, and thus "etiquette, appreciation, and emotion go hand in hand as part of the same complex system whereby rules of civility both constrain and enable emotion and allow for its proper public display" (p. 77). The informal apprenticeship of opera fans, and its civilizing process, leads to the concept of "Moral Listening" whereby passionate fans emphasize how their relationship with opera enables a heightened form of affective engagement, making them (in their opinion) better persons. Benzecry builds on the symbolic boundaries literature to show how opera fans craft worthy, superior selves who come to believe opera is "theirs." Fans discredit new audience members as uncommitted and unknowledgeable, audience members seated in lower (and more expensive) seats as attending simply for entertainment or due to social obligations, and point out how these people do not practise opera correctly. Fans perhaps maintain the most adversarial relationship with opera critics. Critics are deemed to be overly benevolent or simply dishonest; besides, to become an opera fan one must craft one's own tastes.

Benzecry describes *how* fans deeply and passionately invest in opera, but it is in explaining *why* fans behave as they do (albeit tentatively) that the “love for” metaphor becomes most persuasive. Opera fans differentiate themselves from other people, but the honour they receive in the upper floors of the Colón Opera House does not translate to symbolic capital elsewhere. Fans say they come off as “crazy” when sharing tales of their love for opera; they hide facts about attending opera many times a week or driving hundreds of miles to see a performance. Benzecry quotes a new audience member (p. 189): “They have to be insane. Otherwise, why would they pay to come and boo something?” Instead of a status payoff, the author stresses a typology of four styles of engagement, which could conceivably be applied to other practices of intense attachment (e.g., soccer): the heroes, the addicts, the nostalgics, and the pilgrims. Essentially, all four types seek transcendence more than personal honour.

This ethnography is unusually rich in data, insight, and theory. Nonetheless, the book suffers from a few shortcomings. The first chapter offers a deeper history of the Colón Opera House than the rest of the book warrants; the details contained here help establish the local history of opera, but are rarely built upon later on. Paired with the second chapter, on biographies of opera fans, it takes 63 pages before getting to this 194-page book’s core chapters. *The Opera Fanatic* would have been stronger if the early parts were tightened to the benefit of more detail in the middle chapters. Also, the evidence Benzecry gives to support his statements is often in the form of quotes. In itself that is no issue, however the author frequently ends paragraphs and sections with other people’s words. While these quotes support his arguments nicely, they sometimes come off as abrupt endings without the author’s unpacking.

The Opera Fanatic ends with the words of José Luis, one of the book’s most quoted opera fans, who asks the author (p. 194):

Why is it that you sociologists always ask about if I go to the opera to be seen, to meet people, to see my friends, to achieve a better professional status, but always fail to ask me if I go because I like it or, better, because I love it?

Taking the question and its sociological implications seriously, Benzecry’s book provides an important contribution to the understanding of music consumption notably by going beyond studies focusing solely on social distinction and class identity. *The Opera Fanatic* crucially helps bring further complexity to the understanding of high-culture consumption and, more generally, to the sociological study of culture.

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