

¶ Marie-Christine Skuncke and Anna Ivarsdotter (Johnson). *Svenska operans födelse: Studier i gustaviansk musikdramatik*. Stockholm: Atlantis, 1998. ISBN 91-7486-670-2. 428 pp. Mus. Ex., Ill.

The age of cultural greatness in Sweden is arguably the Gustavian period, extending from the ascent of Kung Gustav (or Gustavus) III to the throne in 1772 through to the end of the reign of his brother Carl XIII in 1814. During this time, there existed a vibrant and sometimes peculiar artistic establishment that encouraged the arts, both fine and performing, under the guise of public entertainment, but which in fact

encompassed a broad spectrum of topics and venues. At the core was the Royal Opera, founded by Gustav in 1772 as a means of creating a Swedish national opera, but other opportunities, from debates in the local papers to secondary theatres such as Carl Stenborg's Swedish Comedy, abounded. So much so that Stockholm, for a brief moment in time, became one of the most artistically-advanced countries in the world, achieving a cultural environment that was equal to larger and more politically powerful countries such as the Holy Roman Empire, France, and Britain. In Sweden, the creative juices flowed in abundance, and guided by a King whose own proclivities were theatrical to say the least, the arts flourished, providing an almost endless stream of collaborative events, from social poetic circles to grand opera. Unlike the more traditional court societies, there was a certain egalitarianism, wherein the nobility and commoner alike competed for the public acclaim. It can be said that Gustav guided rather than controlled, and the experiments that resulted bore long-range fruit for several artistic disciplines long into the nineteenth century. From Sweden emanated the modern ballet, conducting, opera as political propaganda, historical nationalism, and a form of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Given such monumental achievements, it is ironic that this Golden Age has been heretofore relegated to an historical backwater in modern scholarship. The centers such as Paris or Vienna are exhaustively researched, their cultures examined in detail by international scholars, while Stockholm has remained somewhat in limbo, its brief cultural renaissance explored only sporadically by local academicians and the occasional conference or symposium. Despite the international acclaim achieved by the revival of the Drottningholm Theatre, an intact relic of that age, the actual repertory written and performed there under the Gustavian period remains even today poorly understood and little performed or recorded. In 1986 an international conference held in Stockholm began what was intended to be the resuscitation of Gustavian scholarship with a plethora of experts from two continents and eight countries meeting to share their work on this seminal period. There the needs were clearly defined; these include a comprehensive history, more individual studies in internationally-recognizable languages, accessible

published works and public revivals. The last was begun in 1989 with Joseph Martin Kraus's *Soliman II*, and since that time numerous discs have presented the music and dramatic portions of the Gustavian opera to an international audience, mostly thanks to projects like Musica Sveciae and the Royal Swedish Opera, series that included works like *Gustaf Wasa* (1786), *Gustaf Adolph och Ebbe Brabe* (1788), and *Ungdom och Dårskap* (1806/1814). Individual articles, too, have appeared in a more or less steady stream, but the long-awaited overview history is still lacking.

It was my hope that *Svenska operans födelse*, a thick tome rich with illustrative material and musical examples, might provide this historical foundation, given that the two authors have contributed much to the understanding of this age through their various individual articles published over the course of many years. The former is well-known for her explorations of the French origins of the bulk of Gustavian operatic literature, while the latter has edited the communal history of the age, *Musiken i Sverige: Frihetstid och gustaviansk tid* (1993). Her work has also included articles on the quintessential Gustavian historical opera, *Gustaf Wasa*, and Carl Stenborg. Given the size of this volume, expectations run high, although to be sure, both state very clearly in the introduction that

vår ambition är inte att ge en heltäckande bild av gustaviansk musikdramatik, utan att genom punktstudier belysa ett antal representativa verk [our ambition is not to give a comprehensive portrait of Gustavian music drama, but rather to illuminate through specific studies a number of representative works].

This can be read in several ways; first, as a somewhat disingenuous apology; second, as a distancing from the actual historical record; third, as a simple means of trying to focus in an area that is vast and in places contradictory; or fourth, as a prologue to some as yet unwritten true history. The actual intent is not clear in the preface, although it is clear that both authors divided up the work, with Skuncke writing chapters 1-5, and Anna Ivarsdotter (whose scholarly work has also appeared under the

name Johnson) chapters 6-8 and the epilogue. Since these divisions also tend to focus on their respective specialties—the first five deal in depth with the literary underlay, while 6-8 more with sociological aspects—this dual approach to collaborative writing can be considered appropriate and expected, although Prof. Ivarsdotter does interject into the first five chapters snippets of musical analysis whenever called upon to do so.

Perhaps the most important immediate advantage to the book is the rich amount of illustrative material that covers a wide variety of subjects. The illustration of an oil by Laureus (p. 211) of a market crier demonstrating his wares gives a certain reality to the extended discussion of the pivotal scene in Hallman and Stenborg's parody of *Birger Jarl*, *Skeppar Rolf* (1778), for example. And it is good to have representative illustrations, such as that of the Lapps (p. 235 & 239) which are good visualizations of culturally sensitive and exotic characters that appear in *Birger Jarl* (1774) or *Petis och Telée* (1779). And finally, of course, costume designs from the period (as on p. 285) are always welcome in order to curb our modern fantasy on exactly how such grand figures such as Gustaf Wasa, Frigga, Proserpin, etc. were portrayed. The amount of musical examples is also illustrative, but here proof-reading would have been a distinct advantage, for a great many of these contain considerable problems that make their use difficult and, moreover, sometimes reflect negatively on the author's analysis by revealing elementary mistakes. Modern score form is rarely followed consistently; for example, Example 7:11, a dance of the Lapps from Uttini's music to *Birger Jarl*, arranges it according to the eighteenth century manuscript format with brass on top, while the extended score of the chorus of nymphs from Kraus's *Proserpin* (Examples 4:12-15) has it in modern score order. There are disturbing wrong keys, such as Example 7:5, where the key signature of this A-major work is missing altogether (although oddly enough the accidentals are inserted into the lines individually). And there are other glaring examples that make the reader wonder if the authors actually saw some of the musical examples or could read them. One would, of course, not impute this to such highly qualified scholars, but when there exist statements such as that found in Example 7:13—

“Lapparnas andra dans, där tamburiner får ersätta lapptrumman [The Second Lapp dance, where tambourines should replace the Lapp drums]”—when all the composer has done is to entitle the movement with a generic dance form (“Tambourin”) one begins to wonder.

The methodology for the work does in general fare better, with the chapter divisions exploring some of the more interesting and unusual aspects of Gustavian opera. Of course, this is done at the expense of an historical continuum, and thus one really does not get an idea of which works were produced in what sequence, but the internal discussions nonetheless provide some penetrating analysis. For example, the chapter on the parodies produced by Stenborg’s theatre (“Parodiernas Skrattspegel”) contains an interesting mix of description of the humble venue at Humlegården, the creation of the genre, and the development of a work from written text to stage production. It is amusing to note the authors’ discussion of sets and performance practice, with comic props, such as the various wigs and Bacchanalian barrels (p. 213ff). With respect to the text and music, however, these entice more than they explicate. For instance, in a hilarious scene in *Petis och Télée*, the parody of the Gustavian opera’s seminal work, Petis receives a “prophecy” by an old hag, who throws herself at her after telling her not to be so “persnickety” knowing that all women become like her in the end. The element of surprise, the odd juxtaposition of Lapps (singing in fake Lappish, no less) from another main work, *Birger Jarl* (which was also parodied), the use of authentic folk material to supplement Stenborg’s folk-like score all seems glossed at times, although one does find instructive examples, such as Example 5:7 where the pompous Borgander announces his position with a strangely modulating accompanied recitative. Elsewhere, the chapters on *Amphion* (1777), *Gustaf Eriksson i Dalarna* (1784), and *Gustaf Wasa* are informative, if faced with the equally daunting problem of trying to encompass their enormity within just a few short pages. Sometimes the language descends to the commonplace in a tone one finds odd in a scholarly work. For example, in the second chapter on the “Librettists workshop” (p. 101), the authors state: “Specialister på Gustaf III och Kellgren, på Naumann, på Desprez har alla lämnat bidrag....Återstår då något att säga? Jag tror det. [Specialists on Gustav

III, Kellgren, Naumann, and Desprez have all delivered contributions/essays....Is there anything left to say? I believe so]". This is an odd use of the vernacular in the tone, one which jars and seems to detract from the scholarly focus of the book. It is also is patently disingenuous; there is *always* something to be said about as multi-faceted and complex a work as *Gustaf Wasa*, which the two authors subsequently prove with an often skillful and illustrative essay about the creation, text, and music of the piece.

In addition to the lack of historical continuity, there is some concern on this reader's part that certain important works are missing, even from the oblique commentary, while the authors' insert others whose relevance to the period in Sweden are awkward. For example, one may be convinced by their argument that Kraus and Kellgren's *Proserpin* (1781) really is a special work, despite it having been performed only once on a private stage at Ulriksdal Palace. But to spend the considerable time on Lully's seventeenth-century opera music, which has no relevance in the slightest to Kraus's dramatic score, is unfathomable. Too, there is a well written essay that appears in the Epilogue on the Russian satire (or perhaps slanderous parody) on Gustav, *Gorebogatyř Kosometovitj* (1789), with text by Catherine II and music by the international composer Vicente Martín y Soler. One misses some indication of the music to this piece, but the description of its inception and the satirical examples are well-demonstrated. One does not see the relevance to the topic of the book, however; such an essay would best have been published in a journal like the *Tidskrift för Musikforskning*, for example. The second part of the Epilogue, a brief gloss on Ivarsdotter's previous work on the Funeral Cantata for Gustav III is likewise out of place, although here one can at least admit that the "operatic" quality of the ceremony that is not unequal to anything the King put on stage. Finally, there is the entire section on Grétry's *Zemire et Azor*, which was produced in 1778 in a translation by Anna Maria Lenngren (née Malmstedt). There is no denying that Malmstedt's translation was a significant event in Gustavian theatre history, not least for its literary qualities. But I am not convinced of the need for no less than five examples of Grétry's music, none of which was extensively altered (the

text was done mainly to fit the extant score without much change). Such space would have been better suited to the inclusion of some real missing works. These include the largest and most complex Gustavian opera, *Aeneas i Cartago* by Kellgren and Kraus, which began its tortured career in 1782 and was finally performed in 1799, Haeffner's *Elektra* (1787), and the multitude of ballets and plays with music that the Royal Dramatic Theatre produced following its inception. Bournonville's *Les Meuniers Provençaux* (1785, music by Grenser) and *Fiskarena* (1789, music by Kraus) were pivotal works in the later development of the modern ballet, an outcome of the Gustavian opera that seems sadly omitted. While some Singspiels, mainly from Carl Stenborg's repertory, are mentioned, no word appears about Oxenstierna's exotic sensation *Soliman II* (1789), or Lannerstierna's *Äfventyraren* (1792) or even of Kotzebue's *Eremiten* of 1798. All have extensive and advanced scores, and were popular as well as significant to the growth of nineteenth century opera.

The aforementioned may perhaps seem to be particularly picky, especially in a work that only purports to be a series of studies. There is of course a great deal of extremely useful information and analysis in this book, and the insights and commentary is on the whole useful. One can be particularly impressed by the illustrative material, though the musical examples are, as noted earlier, of mixed quality and usefulness. If one regards the layout and structure as a flaw in the overall purpose of the work, then it is surely because the authors themselves ran up against one of the more difficult realities of Gustavian opera research, the need to have a thorough historical overview. Again, the authors make it clear that this work merely seeks to answer some general historical questions (p. 11), but it is equally clear that they aspire to a loftier goal, that of an overall historical perspective. If one accepts the work in the light of the former, then it has achieved its goal. If one goes by the aspirations, however, then the lacunae and lack of historical continuity argues for the old adage: There is never enough time to do it right, but always enough to do it over. This book is but a step in the direction of a true history of this creative and brilliant period in Swedish cultural history.