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Larry Wolff. *The Singing Turk. Ottoman Power and Operatic Emotions on the European Stage from the Siege of Vienna to the Age of Napoleon.* Stanford University Press, 2016. 504. ISBN 9780804799652 (electronic).

Larry Wolff, author of one of the seminal books on the "invention" of eastern Europe by the choice spirits of the western European Enlightenment (1994) and a number of other important books and articles on aspects of Europe's symbolic geography and the intricate process of civilizational mapping, has produced a fascinating study of European operas on "Turkish" subjects, composed and performed in the course of the "long" eighteenth century, from the Siege of Vienna (1683) to the 1820s. Bringing together insights from musicology and cultural and political history, Wolff presents us with a wide-ranging survey of significant representations of "singing Turks." Such representations, the author suggests, partially reflected the changing perceptions of the Ottoman Empire in the West but were also linked to current political problems such as the validation of monarchical authority and the limits of royal power.

In his Introduction, Wolff addresses the important issue of *why* the time period specified in the book's title became "the century of Turkish subjects in European opera" (1). As late as the middle of the seventeenth century the Ottoman Empire was still perceived as a threat. The wars of the Holy League, which culminated in the Christian victory in the Battle of Vienna and the conquest of Hungary by Habsburg Austria, changed that, without automatically turning the "Empire of the Turk" into the proverbial "Sick Man of Europe." On the other hand, the modern "Eastern Question" of how to manage the dissolution of that empire without causing a major military clash between the "old" continent's "great powers" gradually rose to international prominence in the 1820s, the decade of the Greek War of Independence. The early nineteenth century also witnessed the beginning of modern Mediterranean colonialism, with the French occupying the Ottoman dependency of Algeria in 1830 (3). According to Wolff, it was within the intervening age of Enlightenment that the Ottoman Empire was perceived as a fit subject for musical theatre as "religious prejudice was somewhat moderated, and intellectual curiosity about other cultures was greatly stimulated" (2). Within this context, the Muslim-dominated Empire evoked mixed feelings in Europeans: Wolff speaks of "a balance of fear, interest, curiosity, titillation, entertainment, and even sympathy" (2). He further maintains that by representing "the Turk" Europeans could explore "what it meant to be European" (2).

In his overview of musical performances, Wolff dwells at some length on Venice and Vienna as principal sites for the production and performance of operas on "Turkish" subjects. As "neighbours and enemies" of the Ottoman Empire, these capitals of the so-called *Triplex Confinium* (the triple border of the Habsburg, Ottoman and Venetian states) were familiar with Ottoman society, culture and politics. Venetians were particularly fascinated by the encounter between Tamerlane (the Mongol ruler Timur or Timurlenk, "Timur the Lame") and Bajazet (the Ottoman Sultan Bayezid). Venetian audiences were deeply moved by the spectacle of the once mighty sultan enslaved by his powerful enemy (Wolff 20-23). However, operas featuring the humiliation of Bajazet were also performed in other European cities. Thus, in 1724, Handel produced his own *Tamerlano* in London, with the Italian tenor Francesco Borosini singing the part of Bajazet (32).

Paris was yet another important operatic capital but its relation to the Ottoman Empire was totally different: France had been an Ottoman ally since the sixteenth century when it even joined forces with the dreaded *Kapudan Pasha* Hayrettin Barbarossa to sack Nice, a vassal city of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. The citizens of Paris had never experienced anything like the Ottoman siege of Vienna or fought against the Turks in battle. As a result Paris "became the site of a more whimsical operatic relation to Turkishness" (4). French representations of "the Turk" ranged from a musical comedy featuring Harlequin disguised as a

sultana in order to enter the harem (was this an artistic precedent for later Western intruders into the Grand Turk's seraglio – such as Byron's Don Juan?) to fantasies of "the generous Turk," whose unexpected magnanimity surprised both Christian captives on the stage and audiences (4).

The 1730s saw the emergence of a new storyline: the drama of the captive European woman, who prefers to remain with her Ottoman pasha or sultan rather than return to Christendom (79). Interestingly, Mary Wortley Montagu recounts a story of a "Christian woman of quality" in Letter XLVIII of her famous epistolary travelogue that bears some resemblance to such dramas. However, the motivation of the new type of operatic heroine markedly differed from that of Montagu's real or imagined acquaintance, who chose to stay and marry an Ottoman pasha in order to avoid being confined to a convent in Spain. The operatic heroine "reconceiv[ed] her own captivity as an opportunity for mastery, for reforming and even civilizing the Ottoman Empire" (79). Based on Jean-François Marmontel's tale "Soliman II," Charles-Simon Favart's 1762 musical comedy *Les trois sultanes* projected a humorous image of the powerful Ottoman Sultan Süleyman I, known in the West as "the Magnificent," while his wife Roxolana (Hürrem) was recast as a Frenchwoman intent upon instructing him in "the pleasures of equality" (89). Wolff argues that Favart's comic opera was instrumental in "redeeming" Roxolana whose earlier image in the West had been mostly negative (94).[1]

Performed in 1782, almost a hundred years after the Ottoman defeat at the gates of Vienna, Mozart's *Abduction from the Seraglio* became the eighteenth century's most famous opera on a "Turkish" subject. Central to it was the figure of a decidedly comic Turk: the pasha's overseer Osmin, raging upon the stage and evoking laughter from the audience (Wolff 148). This was a clear indication that "the Turk" did not inspire fear any more. On the other hand, the speaking role of the magnanimous Pasha Selim, who releases his Christian captives at the end of the *Singspiel*, must have turned him into "a theatrical mirror for the Habsburg emperor Joseph II," thus demonstrating that "Turkish" operas could be used effectively in the Enlightenment debate over the nature and "desirable degrees" of royal power (188–89).

Wolff's survey also includes a number of other works of musical theatre. Special emphasis is laid on Rossini's early work (227–248), his celebrated *L'italiana in Algeri* (272-280), "the libertine adventures of [his] Turkish traveller" (283–304), and, finally, *Le siége de Corinthe*. Performed to great acclamation in Paris in 1826, *Le siége* presented "the last operatic role for a singing Turk" (359). The age of "singing Turks" was passing in Europe as the Ottoman Empire went into a decline, which it attempted to reverse by embarking on a series of modernizing reforms. Those reforms brought it closer to the West and made it appear less "exotic." As a result "Ottoman subjects [grew] less easily conceivable upon the European operatic stage" (375). On the other hand, Orientalism in the Saidean sense was a tangible presence on the nineteenth-century political and cultural scenes, and one of Wolff's closing vignettes presents a picture of the future British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli acting out his "Turkish" fantasies of indolence, luxury and exotic dress during his Oriental tour in the 1830s. At the same time, the Ottoman Sultan himself wore European clothes and to Disraeli's disappointment, "affect[ed] all the affable activity of a European prince" (quoted in Wolff 378).

In closing, it must be pointed out that *The Singing Turk* pushes our knowledge of the "long" eighteenth century and the relationship between art and perceptions of "otherness" a lot further. The book provides a context for additional critical inquiry into European-Ottoman relations and challenges us to revise our interpretative practices by searching for novel perspectives.

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[1] For details of Roxolana's sixteenth- and seventeenth-century representations in Western culture, see my article in the present issue.

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