

Kotnik, Vlado: *Opera, Power, and Ideology. Anthropological Study of a National Art in Slovenia.* Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2010. 210 pp. ISBN 978-3-631-59628-9. Price € 34.80

On one of the days that I wrote this review, there was a demonstration outside La Scala to protest against cuts in funding for the arts in Italy, while inside the theatre, before the performance of Wagner's "Die Walküre," Daniel Barenboim addressed the audience (who included the president of the republic) and read out an article of the Italian constitution, which pledges government support for the country's historical and cultural heritage. The audience broke into applause, including the president. Opera can give rise to passionate feelings of national and civic pride. Even the opera house itself can be the focus of equally strong feelings, whether it be the rebuilding of Venice's La Fenice or Barcelona's Liceu (both victims of fire), the controversial restoration of La Scala, the building of new houses in Valencia or Helsinki, or my own Cardiff's failure to build Hadid's winning opera-house design in its waterfront regeneration.

There are many reasons for anthropologists to take an interest in opera. Opera companies and opera houses have long been the focus for national and local pride. Opera-going is a highly distinctive form of conspicuous cultural consumption. The sacred monsters of the operatic stage and their popular representations also furnish the recurrent themes of opera traverse those of anthropology itself – the circulation of women, transformations, and confusions of identity, orientalising exoticism among them. Opera has provided its own distinctive transforms of classic mythologies, constantly re-working narrative motifs from classical mythology and European folklore. Opera is, moreover, one of the major performing arts in which multiple semiotic codes and cultural techniques come together in the *Gesamtkunstwerk* – music, dramaturgy, and scenic design. Despite this, there have been rather few anthropological analyses of opera and its realisation. As Kotnik points out, anthropologists have certainly been alert to operatic inspirations. Claude Lévi-Strauss, for instance, drew quite explicit parallels between his own work on the great cycles of American myth and the structures of the Wagnerian cycle of European myth-making. But there has been little sustained anthropological interest in opera itself, notwithstanding its excessive and even transgressive nature. Ethnomusicology, of course, occupies the terrain (or at least one terrain) where anthropology and music meet. But, as Kotnik also observes, ethnomusicology has grounded in the assumption that its subject-matter is not Western art-music. Likewise, anthropologists and analysts from cognate disciplines have paid disproportionate attention to popular or vernacular forms of music and performing art. Consequently, art-music and its performance have received disproportionately little attention from anthropologists.

Consequently, Kotnik is one of the few anthropologists to have turned his ethnographic gaze towards the opera. In particular, his is an account of opera in Slovenia, which has a national opera tradition that has historically been positioned as a "regional" one, based on

two opera houses, one in Ljubljana, the other in Maribor. Kotnik examines the invented traditions of opera in Slovenia, reflecting as they do an equally invented national identity. Kotnik interrogates the cultural traditions of this national opera, as enshrined in the "official" discourse of musicologists. This narrative is, of course, intersected by the historical transformation of Slovenia in the postcommunist era. Opera is one of the most "high" and extravagant of the arts, and as such it clearly lends itself to the sort of analysis proposed by Pierre Bourdieu. Kotnik indeed develops the entire monograph on the basis of Bourdieu's inspiration, discussing as he does the *habitus* of opera in Slovenia. He examines the processes of production, reproduction, and representation through which opera is made into consecrated art of national significance. In doing so he demonstrates the multiple definitions and contestations that characterise the cultural field of opera. In a manner characteristic of Bourdieu himself, these are expressed in summary models and diagrams of extreme generality and abstraction. It is not easy for the reader to work back from them towards an intuition of the sort of empirical evidence from which they are derived.

Kotnik has spent a number of years compiling his ethnographic research on Slovenian opera. This particular book is a little disappointing in one respect. The ethnographic detail of everyday life in the opera companies is not visible. This is not an "art worlds" ethnography as found in the work of Howard Becker, nor yet an exploration of performances as advanced by Felicia Hughes-Freeland. Kotnik refers to the ethnography, and writes about it, but he does not introduce us directly to the mundane practicalities of running an opera house, or the everyday work of company managers dealing with national and regional government. Although he has things to say about the repertoire of the Slovenian companies, we do not read about the practical aesthetics and commercial interests that inform the decision-making of *Intendants* and their boards. We certainly learn too little about the singers, musicians, stage crew, and others who make any and every operatic performance a possibility. While anthropologists can and should interest themselves in the discursive work that frames artistic conventions and traditions, this seems but half the story when the grain of the voice remains inaudible, and the techniques of the body remain invisible.

Paul Atkinson

Kronenfeld, David B.: *Fanti Kinship and the Analysis of Kinship Terminologies.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009. 371 pp. ISBN 978-0-252-03370-4. Price: \$ 75.00

The author completed a PhD dissertation on Fanti (southern Ghana) kinship in 1970 and has published regularly on the analysis of kinship and kinship terminologies, including much about the situation amongst Fanti peoples since that time. His 2009 book, reviewed here, brings together the main threads of his many works, most chapters (1, 2, 3, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13) being slightly revised articles from *American Anthropologist*, *American Ethnologist*, *Anthropological Theory*, *Anthropos*, *Current*