better life in early Virginia. They had imagined a New World land that would fulfill Old World dreams, but instead James Fort settlers quickly discovered nature’s stark indifference to human desires, needs, life.


True to the series in which it is published, New Perspectives in Music History and Criticism, Bonnie Gordon’s monograph suggests a new way of hearing and interpreting seventeenth-century music. Not a book about Monteverdi per se, Gordon instead uses selected works by the composer—including such well-known masterpieces as the Lamento d’Arianna, Il Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda, and frequently performed works from the seventh and eighth madrigal books, as well as lesser-known compositions such as Book Eight’s Ballo delle ingrate and pieces from the third and fourth madrigal books—as a frame of reference for making larger observations about seventeenth-century musical culture. In a series of five independent but interconnected essays (plus an introduction and brief “Coda”), Gordon pursues two primary goals: to “re-hear” Monteverdi’s music as it would have been heard in the seicento, informed by seventeenth-century ideologies of anatomy and gender difference, and also to demonstrate how these ideologies were used to “contain” women’s voices while at the same time offering a means for female singers to empower themselves through song. To do so, she draws upon an impressive wealth of source material, including anatomical and other scientific treatises, singing manuals, Monteverdi’s own writings, music theoretical works, conduct books and other prescriptive writings, as well as contemporaneous poetry, literature, and painting (plus a sprinkling of recent pop culture references). Along the way she also touches upon a number of other issues, such as the well-worn subject of love and sex in the madrigal and an ambitious discussion of the change in aesthetics and musical style from Monteverdi’s early to late works.

If this sounds like a lot for a book of just over two hundred pages, it is, and the various strands that Gordon pursues do not always connect as well as
one might hope. For example, in the impressive third chapter, the longest one and (rightfully so) the centerpiece of the book, Gordon offers new insights into the confluence of love and sex in the polyphonic madrigal, convincingly demonstrating that regardless of the high-minded Neoplatonic spiritualism in the poetry, sung performance renders the music explicitly sexual. While this foregrounds Gordon’s assertion that listening to music in the early seicento was an embodied, physical experience, it does not add anything to her argument about the containing or empowering of women’s voices; gender, in fact, is only discussed in a three-page “Excursus” that is extraneous to the chapter and does little more than recall ideas from earlier in the book. In chapter four, Gordon draws upon literary, social, and artistic sources to offer a context for understanding Monteverdi’s Book Eight madrigal “Mentre vagà Angioletta” as a disjointed, fragmentary, eroticized representation of the ideal female voice, but her attempt to connect the processes of the text and music to the processes of anatomical dissection is rather forced, as is her larger conclusion that through analysis and dissection the madrigal serves to contain and control the unruly and dangerous female voice. Even the masterful first chapter runs into similar difficulties: After using singing manuals to gain insight into seventeenth-century notions of anatomy and then using that insight to offer an erotic interpretation of Monteverdi’s Book Seven madrigal “O come sei gentile,” Gordon goes on to discuss the strict discipline under which singers were trained and then pushes the envelope a bit too far with the admittedly “very speculative conclusion” (44) that written-out ornaments, especially those circumscribed by other musical elements, served as a means for male composers to physically control their female singers.

The chapter that most successfully unites Gordon’s two primary goals is the second one, which originally appeared as an independent article in the 1999 issue of the Cambridge Opera Journal. This chapter focuses on the Ballo delle ingrate within its original context of the famous 1608 marriage festivities at the Mantuan court. Gordon contextualizes the ballet by comparing it to contemporary conduct books and tracing its Ovidian, Boccaccian, and Petrarchan themes, and she compellingly discusses how the physicality of live performance and even the scenic effects both emphasized the disciplinary message and also subversively undermined it. By allowing one of the doomed unruly women to sing a lament at the end of the work, Monteverdi presents the female voice as a powerful force in need of male control, but he simulta-
neously presents a woman who resists the confinement imposed upon her: “By bringing to life these punished but not passive female figures, the singers asserted the very agency that the productions attempted thematically to suppress” (81). Gordon then concludes the chapter with a brilliant reading of a well-known contemporaneous description of festivities, stripping our modern sensibilities from the (male) author’s exaggerated prose and demonstrating that his words once again put the women “in their place.”

It is in the fifth chapter that Gordon tackles the ambitious project of accounting for the shift in musical style and aesthetics from Monteverdi’s early to late works, using her embodied understanding of music as a key to better understanding what scholars have discerned as a shift from resemblance to representation in Monteverdi’s music. Focusing on four works sung by angry women, she argues that while the power of the earlier works comes from music that viscerally creates the movement of the passions, the later works merely represent anger by using purely musical materials to create abstract sounds that we passively associate with anger. Through a bravura series of comparisons and associations, she then equates Monteverdi’s musical experiments (especially as described in his own words in the preface to the Eighth Book of Madrigals) with seventeenth-century scientific experiments, ultimately drawing parallels between the way one experiences Monteverdi’s later music and Descartes’s natural philosophy. By mid-century, she argues, new ways of construing the body and new “soundscapes” in music had put a “space” between the singer’s voice and the audience’s ears, thereby “taming the power of song” (200) while also creating more opportunities for the public display of the no longer dangerous female voice. This final chapter sheds light on the previous four, illuminating the large-scale organization of the book and also betraying Gordon’s unspoken premise: that the earlier music, in its embodied physicality, is in many ways more powerful (and therefore better) than the merely representational music of Monteverdi’s later years. In this way, she follows a long line of scholars, most notably her dissertation adviser Gary Tomlinson, who have bemoaned the loss of the “Renaissance” aesthetic of Monteverdi’s early music.

This book is of greatest value to musicologists, though the general reader who knows Monteverdi’s oeuvre well could also find much to appreciate. Gordon devotes little space to detailed musical analysis and offers few musical examples, which would seem to make the book more accessible to a
wider audience; however, the emphasis in her musical discussions on local surface detail, often at the expense of the whole, makes it necessary to read the book with recordings and/or scores at hand (unless one is already intimately familiar with the works). Her broad range of source material and larger cultural discussions would seem to make the book attractive to social and cultural historians of the seventeenth century, but because Gordon’s readings of her sources are drawn almost entirely from secondary sources, the book will most likely not provide any new information for scholars already familiar with the works in her extensive bibliography. For readers familiar only with the standard musicological literature, however, Gordon’s book will definitely shed new light on the music of the seicento. Even if it does not cause a seismic shift in the way one hears and interprets Monteverdi’s music, it nonetheless gives the reader much to ponder and will make anybody think twice before interpreting a piece of early seventeenth-century vocal music according to our modern understandings of the body, the voice, and musical meaning.


Opera is a serious matter, Jean-Noël Laurenti tells us in his introduction, which is why he has decided to focus not on the aesthetic qualities of the tragédie en musique or its political or social functions during the Ancien Regime, but rather on the moral, philosophical, even theological meanings explored on the lyric stage. Moving against the grain of accepted notions of opera as mere fluff, Laurenti bases his arguments on tendencies in the repertory over the first seventy-four years of its history, primarily through comparisons of individual works and references to contemporary writings on the theater, philosophy, and moral or religious matters. Taking into account the shifting philosophical orientations over the years, he reminds his readers that spoken theater was also a form of “spectacle” in order to bring home the point that opera was not only spectacle, even though it was manifestly spectacular. Recognizing the limitations of an approach to opera that leaves out any consideration of the music and dance that were essential to it, Laurenti nonetheless