

Bellow on Gutsche-Miller (2015)

Gutsche-Miller, Sarah. *Parisian Music-Hall Ballet, 1871–1913*. U of Rochester P, Eastman Studies in Music, 2015, pp. 384 + 37 b&w, 39 line illustrations, ISBN 9781580464420

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If asked to conjure a mental image of ballet in late-nineteenth-century Paris, most readers would imagine a scene at the Opéra. However, as Sarah Gutsche-Miller's groundbreaking book shows, Parisians of that era would likely have visualized a music-hall stage. Her book traces the period between the end of the Paris Commune and the beginning of the First World War, when the Folies-Bergère, Casino de Paris, and Olympia produced increasingly dazzling, ambitious ballets that rivaled the opulent offerings of the Opéra. Gutsche-Miller's meticulous research provides a glimpse of these now-lost ballets, created at the impressive rate of four to six new works per year. Enabled by the repeal of Napoleonic laws that restricted the genres that theaters could offer, and driven by the desire of music-hall proprietors to appeal to a bourgeois clientele, what Gutsche-Miller describes is nothing less than a ballet boom on an unprecedented scale. As striking as the phenomenon itself is the near-total absence of these music-hall productions from accounts of dance in the period, hitherto viewed as the "dark age" of French ballet. In her introduction, Gutsche-Miller notes that "nearly all histories of ballet focus on dance in state-funded 'high art' institutions, which in France has meant a nearly exclusive concentration on the Paris Opéra" (2). The 1870s marked the beginning of a long decline in the quality and quantity of the Opéra's ballet offerings. Previous scholarship held that, as a result of its changing fortunes at the Opéra, ballet withered away until the arrival of Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes troupe in 1909. In fact, ballet "simply changed venue" (2). Ballet's apparent disappearance, in other words, stemmed from later scholars' refusal to acknowledge that popular music-hall performance constituted a form of ballet.

Gutsche-Miller's revisionist account begins with a detailed overview of the music-halls that, in emulation of English venues such as the Alhambra, began to feature ballet alongside circus acts and other attractions. Central to her story is the Folies-Bergère which, under the directorships of Léon Sari and Édouard Marchand, programmed ballet and symphonic concerts in an effort to elevate the hall's prestige. At first, these ballets were largely short, plotless divertissements, but when Marchand arrived at the Folies-Bergère in the late 1880s, he began to feature single large-scale narrative ballets as an evening's main event. Marchand's model was emulated to varying degrees by the Folies-Bergère's competitors, the Casino de Paris and the Olympia. Gutsche-Miller provides a nuanced analysis of the three theaters, with particular attention to the subtly different audiences each venue attracted. This she deduces not only by comparing entrance fees, but also tabulating other associated costs of attendance (including coat check, programs, libations, and even a prostitute's ministrations).

In subsequent sections, Gutsche-Miller delves into the ballets and the librettists, composers, and choreographers who made them. Intriguingly, many of these people crossed over from elite institutions including the Opéra, particularly during the 1890s as music-halls began to trade on the fame of dancers and musicians to promote their ballets. At the same time, music-halls provided opportunities for figures outside established circles—such as "Mme. Mariquita," a former dancer who became one of the period's few female choreographers. The extant records for many of these figures, and for the ballets themselves, are frustratingly incomplete. Gutsche-Miller builds her analysis from the extant evidence, primarily titles, synopses, and musical scores. A musicologist by training, she infers a great deal from the latter. As she notes, ballet accompaniment was necessarily formulaic: "It needed to have a steady pulse with rhythms that propelled a dancer forward, an even number of measures, and balanced phrases" (115). However, she refuses to equate such constraints with inconsequentiality, pointing to canny ways that composers used music to evoke place, atmosphere, and character.

Admittedly, the author pays less sustained attention to the more ephemeral components of these pieces—choreography and design. Some readers also may wish for more robust analyses of individual ballets, as well as a more substantive grounding of her account in the political, social, and economic context of turn-of-the-century Paris. For example, the author suggests in passing that music-hall ballets may have served as vehicles for political or social critique, an idea that would have benefited from deeper, more specific elaboration. But we must refrain from asking too much of the first book to grapple in depth with this group of ballets. Arguably, Gutsche-Miller's greatest contribution lies in her insistence that this popular genre is worthy of serious scholarly inquiry.

Volume: 45.1-2

Year:

- 2016

