The Opera House on the London stage

Michael Burden
New College, Oxford

The 18th-century London stage discussed itself repeatedly in performances. Plays, interludes and burlesques of all kinds appear in the repertory from the 17th to the 19th centuries in such quantities that there have there been at least two books devoted to the subject.[1] Here, I'm going to focus on a short interlude called *The Master of the Opera*; the piece, set by Domenico Sarro,[2] was based on Metastasio's only comedy, *The Impresario of the Canaries*, but it is no less relevant to London in the late 1730s.[3]

The opera has only two characters: Dorina, a soprano, and Nibbio, an impresario. The action consists of attempts by Nibbio to book the soprano for his new season, and attempts by Dorina to be booked. The opera contains a lot of self-referential commentary, but I'm going to focus on the four references in which the audience would recognize aspects of opera-going that related to their own experiences, where, if you like, they intersected with world of the stage. And I want to test those points against some known facts.

I: 'An opera book should not be understood'

[1] See, for example, Dane Farnsworth Smith, *Plays about the theatre in England, from The rehearsal in 1671 to the Licensing act in 1737; or, The self-conscious stage and its burlesque and satirical reflections in the age of criticism* (London, 1936) and *Plays about the theatre in England, 1737-1800: or, The self-conscious stage from Foote to Sheridan* (Lewisburg, [1979]).
[2] Domenico Sarro (1679-1744). The libretto: L'IMPRESARIO INTERMEZZO Da Rappresentarsi Dalla Signora ANNA FAINI et Il. Sig. ANTONIO LOTTINI NEL REGIO TEATRO d'HAYMARKET Musica Del Sig. DOMENICO SARRI. GB-Lbl 907.i.11.(3.) [CS: 12885]; [ESTC: T39032].

Dorina: I am quite a stranger to your language

Nibbio: Ah! madam, that, with us, is no objection!

> An opera book should not be understood. We have refin'd our taste to that degree, that sense is the least part of our concern. Sing you but well, the rest will ne'er be minded.[4]

In fact, as it happens foreign opera books *were* understood in London; they ran a parallel English text on the facing page. Opera books (or more properly in relation to Italian opera, libretti) were among the must-have accoutrements for many opera-goers. Unlike books of spoken plays, which were often not available until about a week (and sometimes a month) after the first performance,[5] the book of the opera or musical drama was invariably available for the performance of the piece. Sometimes the songs were available for the first night; for a performance Motteux's bizarre entertainment *The Novelty*, 'some few copies' of part of the sung drama - the masque of *Hercules* - 'were printed for use of the Audience, the first day of '[its] being Acted.'[6]

The parallel translation could be either in verse or in prose, but it was rarely, if ever, a singing translation. In one or two cases, the recitative was translated, and the aria left as prose. In *Zemira e Azore* of 1789 we can see the tortured route through which a London text sometimes went. The opera text was by Jean Marmontel and the

---

[3] Performed at the King's Theatre, 1737: March 26, 29, April 2, 16, May 10; see Michael Burden, 'Metastasio on the London stage, 1728 to 1840: a catalogue', *Royal Musical Association Research Chronicle*, xxxix (2007), whole issue.
[4] *L'impresario Intermezzo*, 6.
[5] See *The London Stage 1660-1800,* ed. Charles Beecher Hogan, V (Carbondale, 1968), cxxxviii, and Shirley Strum Kenny, 'The publication of plays' in Robert D. Hume, *The London theatre world, 1660-1800* (Carbondale, 1980), 309-336.
[6] Pierre Anthony Motteux, *The Novelty* (London, 1697), preface.

setting was by Gretry. But for London, the text was translated into Italian by Signor Verazzi, and into English by Mrs Rigaud; a French text is not, however, included in the libretto.

The intended function of the translation is recorded in the contemporary English version of one of the earliest opera performances staged in Britain, Pierre Perrin's *Ariane, ou Le mariage de Bacchus*:

> this *Traduction* was thought absolutely necessary for the satisfaction of those, who being unacquainted with the *French* Tongue, and who being Spectators, would find themselves necessitated to see the most pressing of their *Senses* go away from the *Theater* ungratified, by their not understanding the Subject that brought them thither.[7]

Evidence that authors intended the books for use during performances does not, of course, demonstrate that they *were* so used. Visually, there is almost nothing for 18th-century London; indeed, there's only one illustration of a libretto in use. There is, though, some written evidence to show that the libretti and playbooks - sold, printed, or provided gratis - were in fact frequently used by the audience. Von Uffenbach noted in 1710 that if a foreigner took 'a book or a printed copy of the play with him and followed in it', he could learn the English language,[8] while Grossly, recounting how two young English ladies got the giggles at a performance of Metastasio's *Ezio* in 1765, noted that they 'were aquainted with the songs by means of their books.'[9]

---

[7] Pierre Perrin, *Adriane, or the Marriage of Bacchus* (London, 1673/4), 'To the reader'.
[8] *London in 1710 from the travels of Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach*, trans and ed. W. H. Quarrell and Margaret Mare (London, [1934]), 19-20.
[9] M[] Grosley, *A tour to London or new observations on England and its inhabitants* , trans. Thomas Nugent (London, 1772), II, 114.

About the same time, for Tenducci's benefit performance of *Antigono*, it was advertised that 'the House will be doubly illuminated for the Upper Boxes and Upper Gallery to read their books.[10]

When Lichtenberg went to the opera, he was the 'only one of the five on [his] side of [Mrs Abington] who had the whole text of the opera'. This did not work to his advantage, for 'since Mrs Abington was always wanting to know when Gabrielli in *Didone Abandonata* would appear again, my book was passed along to her'; he did not get it back until Gabrielli had gone off the stage for the last time.[11] Among those *not* using a book, was Cesar Saussure, who remarked that 'One cannot understand much about the intrigue of the piece; it is sung is Italian, and the words which suit the music are sung over and over again.'[12] The practice did not escape sarcastic comment; the parodic advertisement in Thomas D'Urfey's *The English Stage Italianiz'd* announces that 'FOR the Benefit of the English Quality, and others who have forgot their Mother-Tongue, This Play is translating into Italian by an able Hand.'[13]

II: A foreign undertaker of the opera

> **Dorina:** At any moment, I expect a foreign undertaker of the opera…
>
> **Nibbio (on arrival):** I differ from all your undertakers.

[10] *The London Stage*, ed. George Winchester Stone, jr., IV/2 (1972), 1106.
[11] *Lichtenberg's visits to England as described in his letters and diaries*, ed. Margaret L. Mare and W. H. Quarrell (Oxford, 1938), 37-38.
[12] [Cesar de Saussure], *A foreign view of England in 1725-1729* (London, 1995), 170.
[13] [Thomas D'Urfey], *The English Stage Italianiz'd* (London, 1727), 23; Advertisement.

Merit, from me, may have money by sack-fulls.[14]

We learn that ‘Nibbio is his name’ and that he is from ‘the Canaries’. The name of the islands, does, of course, also suggest that he is from the land of the songbirds, in operatic language, sopranos. It also parodies the notion of an exotic location, a given aspect of any English opera.

The management of the London opera was not often undertaken by a foreigner; in the early years, it was the business of the aristocracy, in the later years, of theatre managers, some foreign, some local. And impresarios frequently were without money. Two of the most notorious and colourful foreign opera promoters were Francesco Vanneschi and Dr John Francis Crosa.

Vanneschi’s demanding and domineering character is mentioned in the earliest references to him in London. Walpole had this to say:

> I am quite uneasy about the opera, for Mr Conway is one of the directors, and I fear they will lose considerably which he cannot afford. There are eight; Lord Middlesex, Lord Holderness, Mr Frederick, Lord Conway, Mr Damer, Lord Brook, and Mr Brand. The five last are directed by the three first, they by the first, and he by the Abbé Vanneschi, who will make a pretty sum. I will give you some instances; not to mention the improbability of eight young thoughtless men of fashion understanding economy; it is usual to give the poet fifty guineas for composing the books-Vanneschi and Rolli are allowed three hundred. Three hundred more Vanneschi had for his journey to Italy to

[14] *L’impresario Intermezzo*, 2.

> pick up dancers and performers, which was always as well transacted by bankers there. He has additionally bought over an Italian tailor- because there are none here! They have already given this *Taylorini* four hundred pounds and he has already taken a house of £30 a year…[15]

Vanneschi was, of course, in no sense a clergyman, and the title 'Abbe' reflected Walpole's view of his apparently prelate-like style; in any case, this tale of general skulduggery did not surprise Mann, who remarked 'I am sorry to hear such an account of the opera and that it so little answers the expense your dear Harry [Conway] is put to, but I should not have it otherwise if Vanneschi was governor'.[16]

Vanneschi's 'foreigness' kept him in trouble; he expressed various political views - it is not clear what these were - and was arrested on a treason charge in relation to the New Gunpowder plot in 1755, in which he (supposedly) planned to blow up the subscribers at the Opera House. He was ultimately thrown into the Fleet prison for non-payment of debts, probably at the behest of the wily soprano Regina Mingotti, who then took over the King's Theatre. Like good impresarios, he survived all this, to make a come back to run two further seasons before dying some time after April 1760.

Vanneschi was also responsible for bringing Dr Crosa to the King's, on a misleading contract that sent Crosa bankrupt. Crosa was a North Italian impresario whose

[15] HW to Horace Mann, 6 November 1741; *Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. W. S. Lewis, Warren Hunting Smith, and George L. Lam, XXVII (London, 1954), 190-191.
[16] Horace Mann to HW, 10 December 1741; ibid., 216.

company specialised in the performance of the then new and potentially exciting genre, comic opera. He was described as:

> A thin man, about five feet high five inches high of a swarthy complexion, with dark brown eye-brows, pitted with the small pox, stoops a little in the shoulders, is about 50 years of age, and takes a remarkable deal of snuff talks Italian and French, but speaks very little English.[17]

This description came at the end of the bailiff's notice when Crosa's company collapsed in May 1750 and Crosa, on bail, had absconded to Amsterdam. It was probably accurate, given that it was intended to assist with his apprehension.

Unlike Nibbio of the Canaries, neither of these impresarios had money by the sackful, and the financial embarrassment of both of them caused huge upheavals and much gossip in London opera circles.

III: I writ fifteen operas in less than a month

> **Dorina:** What! A poet, Sir!
>
> **Nibbio:** That Madam is my sort!
>
> And so rapid is my view, that in my own country,
>
> I writ fifteen operas in less than a month.[18]

To a certain extent, Nibbio's claim parodied Handel, who was supposed to have finished one opera in a fortnight. This rate of production was, however, possible. Many of the operas performed in London were pasticcios, that is, they were

[17] *The General Advertiser*, 8 May 1750.
[18] *L'impresario Intermezzo*, 10.

constructed using pre-composed vocal numbers linked together with often newly composed recitative.

The practise (which is of infinite variety) was both despised and accepted by the audience, and an absolute necessity for the impresario wanting to advertise new works. At its most sophisticated, the product was of high quality; its worst is summed up by Nibbio's '15 works in a fortnight' claim. The form of a pasticcio - or even of a new opera - was often (indeed, usually reworked) in rehearsal. The attitude for rehearsal of new works was 'how can I make this new music and story work'; that for revivals and pasticci on the other hand was 'how can I fit these tunes and incidents into this text.' For these 'old works', rehearsals appear to be often much less well prepared, and alterations of more significance appear to have been made much later on.

At the first general rehearsal of a pasticcio of Metastasio's *Alessandro nell'Indie* on 19 November 1779, for example, the opera lacked its second act finale, and other numbers in the opera had yet to be agreed. The preparations for this staging can only be described as a shambles, all the more serious since the opera was to open the 1779-1780 season. But that the opera was ready to open on 27 November eight days later is not so much a miracle, but a commonplace triumph of technique over circumstance. Whether such a process always produced a coherent result is open to doubt; Anfossi's muddled 1784 adaptation of Sarti's *Fra i due litiganti* ends with the stage instruction 'They all go off confusedly, at different parts', an instruction that

probably describes the London audience's reaction to the worst opera house products.

A factor in this situation was the singer, in *The Master of the Opera* encapsulated by Dorina. Sopranos, after all, had their views. Regina Mingotti, who had more views than most, commented on one impresario's pasticcio:

> Amongst other stupid Mutilations, he had not only cut out the Duetto, which is, without doubt, the pleasing Part of the Opera; but taken the Air *Tu sai ch'io sono Amante* from the Character of *Ipermestra*, and given it (against all Theatrical Rules, and yet more against common Sense) to that of *Lineco*; that is, he took from me my capital Air to give it to Signor Ricciarelli. [19]

As Dorina illustrates, the soprano is King, and this was reflected in the speed and construction of many 18th-century operas.

IV: The audience love, too, to talk in their turn

> **Nibbio:** [The opera] may be sung in what language you please; for then you know,
>
> The audience love, too, to talk in their turn.
>
> **Dorina:** Nay sir, if that's the way, it's well enough.[20]

The general picture given of an 18th-century London playhouse audience is that it was always violent, always rioting, and always in need of the guards who patrolled the theatres and their environs. Conversely, it has been argued that, by virtue of the cost of the subscription, the opera audience was more genteel. And like all such

dichotomies, they present exaggerated opposites. There is no doubt that the audience *was* boisterous and had a great deal more interaction with the performers on the stage that a later audience would expect or desire. Whatever issue engaged them as an audience, they were vocal and partisan; during one row over the Italian opera, the insults hurled during a performance of *Love in a Village* included 'Dickons forever, no Catalani' and 'No annual boxes or Italian singers.'[21]

When the audience was noisy, it was very noisy; the audience at a performance of Shield's opera *The Woodman* made so much noise that the experience of watching it was liken to a 'dumb shew.'[22] The noise began when the doors opened usually at least half an hour beforehand, and sometimes longer. As early as 1669, Magalotti mentions 'that many go early' to the theatre to enjoy the tunes that 'render the waiting less annoying and inconvenient'.[23] The audience would also call for repertoire. In the middle of a performance of *The Barber of Seville*, the audience clamoured for a repetition of the play, *The Stranger*. The noise was such that in the end Mr Fawcett, the manager, had to stop the opera and ask what was 'the pleasure of the audience'.[24]

As well as the audience's own natural exuberance, there is also evidence of organisation in the frequent presence of a claque, often created with a singer's ticket

---

[19] Regina Mingotti, *An appeal to the public* (London, [1755]), 2-3.
[20] *L'impresario Intermezzo*, 6.
[21] *The Covent Garden Journal* (London, 1810), I, 160.
[22] Ibid., 181.
[23] Lorenzo Magalotti quoted in 'Filippo Corsini and the Restoration theatre', *Theatre Notebook*, xxxiv/1 (1980), 6.
[24] *The Theatrical Observer*, No 12, Friday 16 November 1821.

orders. It was as often denied: a ‘friend’ of Madame Vestris felt called upon to defend her against a charge that, when singing in *The Marriage of Figaro*, the singer ‘did issue out a number of orders for the express purpose of calling for “I’ve been roaming”’,[25] while Madame Catalani had to issue similar denials when it was revealed that she was in receipt of fifty orders nightly.[26] Such staged applause was parodied in the invention of the ‘Applauder’ by Zephyr in the satire *The Dramatic Puffers*. This was a machine ‘by which one man, with the simple winch of a barrel-organ, shall give a more mark’d and judicious applause, than can possibly be derived from any stationary band of hireling clappers!’.[27]

There was no doubt that some members went planning trouble, taking ‘pipes’ or ‘cat-calls’ with which to taunt the players; among the things that audiences carried with them at different times are watchmen’s rattles,[28] French horns,[29] whistles,[30] trumpets,[31] bugle horns,[32] an octave fife,[33] kettle-drums, trombones, and a dustman’s bell.[34] Such a battery of implements made the players feel uneasy, as well it might; one dancer in the farce *The Sham Fight* claimed that when he went on the stage in English, ‘dey beat me black-and-blue - O ma soy, I did tun and jump, for they would prat out my brains with their sticks, stones and other warlike

[25] Ibid., No. 1893, 4 January 1828.
[26] William Parke, *Musical Memoirs* (London, 1830), II, 13.
[27] Henry Bate, *The Dramatic Puffers* (London, 1782), 9.
[28] *The Covent Garden Journal* (London, 1810), I, 160.
[29] Ibid., 162.
[30] Ibid., 160.
[31] Ibid., 156.
[32] Ibid., 156.
[33] [Anon.], *The Rebellion, or all in the wrong* (London, 1808), 18.
[34] Ibid., 21.

implements.'[35] Even for audience members it was not always a good idea to carry such objects. On one reported occasion, a spark, having been asked to shut up and put his trumpet away and had not obliged, was punched in the face by a sailor wanting his money's worth of the play; the 'child's trumpet' went through his cheek and required the services of a surgeon to remove it.[36]

The oranges supplied by the Orange woman, were another source of audience engagement. So ubiquitous was the orange seller that she appears in many a farce and comedy; indeed, *Pigeon-Pye*, the set of satiric instructions on how to write an opera, requires 'The Music to play here in such a manner, as to give the audience an Appetite - (This incident is for the Benefit of the Orange-wenches.)' [37] The oranges were, of course, the cause of litter and had the potential to be missiles. On a visit to *Artaserse* at the Opera House in 1772, Piggot notes that 'the common people throw peals of Oranges on the stage before the play begins,'[38] while one German visitor noted that a man had to come before the curtain and sweep the stage before the entertainment could begin. Oranges were joined by 'Apples, Eggs, two-penny Loaves with many other Kinds of small Shop' that flew about the stage so furiously, that the Reverend John Brown 'expected nothing so much as that Eyes if not Brains must have been knocked out.'[39]

---

[35] [Anon.], *The Sham Fight; or political humbug: a state farce* (London, 1756), 20.
[36] William Chetwood, *A General History of the Stage* (London, 1749), 42-3.
[37] [Anon.], *The Pigeon-Pye or, a King's Coronation proper materials for forming an oratorio, opera, or play according to modern taste* (London, 1738), 30.
[38] Edward Piggott, ms dairy in the Beinecke Library, Yale University. Quoted in Elizabeth Gibson, 'Edward Pigott: eighteenth-century theatre chronicler', *Theatre Notebook*, xlii/2 (1988), 65.
[39] William Roberts, *"A Dawn of Imaginative Feeling": The Contribution of John Brown (1715-66) to Eighteenth Century Thought and Literature* (Carlisle, 1996).

All told, what with running the performance without an interval, the lack of reserved seats, and the activity of 'going behind the scenes', there was a great deal of movement by the audience in and out of the house during the performance. Visiting friends, calling in at the boxes, using the loos outside, or as Robinson recorded at the Opera House, when bored with *The Marriage of Figaro* which had 'no prominent singer', he 'lounged all over the house and in the gallery, etc.'[40]

Talked? That wasn't the half of it.

Conclusion

The illustrating of these four examples of operatic practise and performance suggest that authors were more than accurate in their use of it as a comedic device on the London stage. This is neither a surprising nor original observation; as this paper shows, the genre's comedy relies on the audience's recognition of such references.

However, it is noteworthy that an opera audience was prepared to find such material on the opera interesting. It is even more noteworthy that they knew enough about operatic processes to understand the often-obscure musical details the text contains. What I would argue is that the genre of operas about operas, represented here by *The Master of Opera*, illustrates a higher level of literacy in operatic matters than the London audience is normally given credit for.

[40] 29 June 1816, Henry Crabb Robinson, Diary, MS GB-L Dr Williams' Library.