

**‘Play it again, Sam’;  
the ‘encore’ in 18th-century London opera**

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The great (and well-known) conceit of the phrase ‘Play it again, Sam’, is, of course, that no-one in the film *Casablanca* actually uses it. The nearest we get is ‘Play it, Sam. Play “As time goes by”’. Ilsa Laszlo does not need to use the word ‘again’; it is clearly understood to be a repeat, one representing all the momentousness of a profound relationship that is about to be rekindled. I want to use this well-known incident to make several fundamental points at the outset about the nature of repeats and encores.

The first point, is that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, most operatic music being thus heard was new music. The audience had, on the whole, never heard that particular aria before, and although there were some texts that would have been familiar – primarily those favourites by Metastasio – most of the settings were not. Further, most of arias were *da capo* arias, the *da capo* creating a tri-partite form most easily expressed as A-B-A. The music of middle B section usually contrasted with that of the A section, and when the A section was repeated, it was an ornamented version of the original. Thus the audience had already heard what we might consider as the primary material of the aria *twice*, so the call for an encore had less to do with the desire to hear the music again than had to do with repeating its performance by an individual singer. The second point is that, as the repeat of ‘As time goes by’ in the movie shows, to repeat something is not simply to hear it

again, but by definition, is to hear it differently. When the A repeat section of the aria is performed, the hearer knows its approximate length, dramatic shape, and melodic content. The aural journey is one through familiar territory, so familiar in fact that the singer's ornaments and other performing strategies are immediately identifiable as such by the hearer. The call for an encore provided the singer with the opportunity to perform it differently with a new affect, and for the audience to hear it differently. And when the singer achieved all these things, the audience responded:

the Rondo in the last Act Tu seguì fedele was I believe never so sung before - Often as I have heard it, I never heard Pacchierotti so perfect in it as this night - it was encored wth. fury & he repeated it in a manner which made it wholly new - most divinely indeed.<sup>i</sup>

The third point, that which is essential to a clear understanding of both 18<sup>th</sup> aria structure and the encore is that unlike 'As time goes by', the internal repetitions and encores do not advance the plot. The aria as a whole represents a character's emotional *response* to the action in the previous recitative, not one of *action* in itself. In this context, the differences in performance plus the added ornamentation in the repeated A section represent the emotions of the character which have been heightened by the sentiments of the B section. Further, in the context of the plot, such repeats and encores (usually) have no role as reminiscence, a key aspect in later operas, and indeed, in the use in the movie of 'As time goes by'.

The motivation for encores was an even mixture of calls for repeats from singers making their debuts, well-known singers' performances, tunes that the audience liked, and tunes which were known and given well-studied performances which that audience may have seen before. And, as Susan Burney's account of another evening at the opera with castrato Pacchierotti as *primo umo* suggests, the circumstances of an encore were as varied as they were frequent:

The Opera was recd. wth. great applause, & tho' Pacchierotti was frighten'd, & my Father says almost every part of it has been since much more perfectly perform'd it was exceeding well received. - But the Rondo being encored was hissed to my great chagrin, indeed till I was in a fever - for there were some spiteful wretches who during the whole symphony never gave over - But the violence of the applause & encore encreased in proportion to the resistance they met - Poor Pacchierotti's voice faltered sadly at first however he grew steadier by degrees & ended the rondo divinely - Made. Le Brun's song wth. the hautbois was likewise encored - & to do her justice I never heard her sing so well as in this opera throughout. - many other things were vainly attempted to be repeated.<sup>ii</sup>

Burney here details a number of aspects of the performance of opera in London; the engaged audience reacting with 'great applause', the possible claque whose intention it was to disturb the singer during the ritornello of the rondo, and above all, the encore of Madame Le Brun's song and the 'many other things' that were called for. The reasons for the profound engagement of the audience are multi-farious and go beyond the scope of this paper, but they include a lighted auditorium which encouraged interaction between members of the audience; a forestage which brought the players nearer the audience; and an on-stage audience in close proximity to the players, many of whom were known to them.

Although the date of the first encore on the London stage has so far proved elusive, it does appear to have emerged in London as part of the cult around the Italian opera and its performers, probably from the arrival of Niccolini in 1708. By 1712, Addison's commentator in *The Spectator* could mock:

I observe it has become a custom that, whenever any gentlemen are particularly pleased with a song, at their crying out 'Encore' or 'Altro volto' the perform-er is so obliging as to sing it over again.<sup>iii</sup>

Whether new or not – the context is unclear – it was clearly an accepted enough phenomenon for Addison to use it without comment when describing (in a later issue of *The Spectator*) Mr Froth's behaviour at another performance given by Nicolini.<sup>iv</sup> By the mid-1720s, Charles Lillie under guise of 'a footman' wrote:

I my self have become a mighty lover of [operas]; but the grievance I am going to complain of is concerning a French or Dutch word (I cannot well tell which) called *Ancore* or thereabouts, which, when repeated in the front-boxes, the performers immediately returned and sung the same over again [But, the front-boxes] growing weary of it, their servants in general have took it up, so that upon every extraordinary squeak of a fiddle, or any other noise vocal or instrumental that happens not to be in tune, or some other misfortune of not agreeing with the rest, the footmen all in a body cry out *Ancore*, *Ancore*. I at the same time, willing that I should not be laughed at, bawl out as loud as I can 'No more, no more'; but am unfortunately overpowered by the great majority, whilst the strutting performer, whoever it happens to be, returns again with his wonted pride, and repeats his last song [...]. By this frequent imposition we are kept at the playhouse till

eleven, from supper till one, and out of bed till three.<sup>v</sup>

Even in 1725, Lillie's account suggests that evenings were already extended to an inordinate length. And by the time of Pope's *New Dunciad* of 1742, it had become part of the general critical discourse on foreign opera; at the point when an Italian singer has lulled spoken drama into a stupor, Pope's Goddess of Dullness is informed that, at the Opera:

To the same notes thy sons shall hum or snore,

And thy yawning daughters cry *Encore*.<sup>vi</sup>

The date of the first encore in an English opera is also unknown; however, it seems likely that English singers lost no time in imitating their Italian counterparts. By the second half of the century, they were recorded at performances of English and Italian operas alike: in *The Royal Shepherd* in 1764 when 'many of the songs were Encor'd';<sup>vii</sup> in Cimarosa's *Giannina e Berdoni* at the Kings' in 1787 when Anna Benini was forced to repeat the rondo;<sup>viii</sup> in *The Seraskier* in 1816, where Horn notes that he was 'encored in four songs, the duetto and Braham's quartetto';<sup>ix</sup> in *The Magic Flute* in 1819;<sup>x</sup> and in 1821, when Mr Yates was encored in his Mail Coach Song in the title role of *Rob Roy MacGregor*.<sup>xi</sup> As the ensembles got larger, so did the encores; in 1827, the singers were forced to repeat the whole 'sestett' from the third act of Pacini's *La Schiava in Bagdad*.<sup>xii</sup> The early 19<sup>th</sup>-century habit of a repeated encore - known as a 'double encore' - can be attributed to Madame Catalani, who sang one at the King's Theatre on 9 January 1808 in the comic opera of *La Freschetana*; Parke claimed that it 'afterwards became fashionable with regard to the singers, particularly at the English theatres.'<sup>xiii</sup> It soon disappeared, only to resurface at Covent Garden with John Braham.

On occasion, it seems more than likely that the singers themselves organised the encore to

enhance their prestige and to maintain their popularity. In particular, there were nights when it was suspected that a singer was using her orders (that is, her right to free tickets) to support a clique. When Madame Vestris was singing in *The Marriage of Figaro*, a ‘friend’ felt called upon to defend her against a charge that the singer ‘did issue out a number of orders for the express purpose of calling for “I’ve been roaming”’.<sup>xiv</sup> Madame Catalani had to issue similar denials when it was revealed that she was in receipt of fifty orders nightly; who else was she to give fifty orders to, the thinking went, but to her ‘supporters’?<sup>xv</sup> As these declarations suggest, the perceived ‘integrity’ of an encore was important, at least in the context of the journalistic noise and fury that surrounded the staging of opera. Even serious commentators used encores (or lack of them) to support their judgements of singers’ performances, as here, when Mrs Wood (Mary Paton) was in singing Bellini’s *La Sonnambula* at Drury Lane:

Mrs Wood was enthusiastically applauded throughout her performance, and was led on by Mr. Wilson at the conclusion of the opera at the general demand of the auditory, but she was not encored in any one piece of music.<sup>xvi</sup>

It was also part of the narrative of a singer’s career, as can be seen in Thomas Sedgwick’s debut in the role of Artabanus in Arne’s *Artaxerxes*:

...in the last act of the Opera [Artabanus] is ordered to banishment: here Thomas Sedgwick (unfortunately) was left to think for himself, and instead of representing the vindictive exit of the high-spirited Greek, he slunk out the poor insignificant Ironmonger. There was a murmur of disapprobation immediately throughout the Theatre in consequence.

And then all was forgiven:

However, to do him justice, he went thro' the character of Artabanus much better than I ever expected that he would: he played it tolerably well: his Voice was much admired; and he was encored in three different Songs during the Performance.<sup>xvii</sup>

Stevens deemed the encores of the three different songs to have rescued Sedgwick's otherwise shaky debut from complete mediocrity.

The singers did not always acquiesce; the process must have been exhausting, and in a long run of performances, tedious in the extreme. But the downside for the singer of our 'engaged' audience was that an ill-judged failure to respond to such a demand would be held against that performer, sometimes for years. The castrato Guadagni was a case in point. He was already out of favour with some members of the audience, but when his sister was replaced with Lavinia Zamperini in *Orfeo*, he then refused to:

...bow an acknowledgement when applauded, or destroying all theatrical illusion by returning to repeat an air, if encored at the termination of an interesting scene...<sup>xviii</sup>

By doing this 'he so much offended individuals, and the opera audience, that, at length, he could never appear without being hissed.'<sup>xix</sup> Burney claimed that his enemies 'frequently began an encore with which they knew he would not comply on purpose to enrage the audience'.<sup>xx</sup> It is no surprise, then, to find even the grandest singers responding to audience pressure; as Johanna Schopenhauer commented '*even* [my italics] the Billington had to agree to sing a *bravura* aria and a duet twice.'<sup>xxi</sup>

In Guadagni's case, there seems to have been 'form' on both sides, but even when the singers were unable to comply for legitimate reasons explanations had to be offered to calm a

demonstrative audience; at the King's Theatre in 1828, even the fact that Madame Pasta was unable to give an encore in the first act of Meyerbeer's *Il Crociato in Egitto* because she had to change costume had to be explained away.<sup>xxii</sup> Apologies too, were offered, when Madame Vestris felt that the applause had been 'too partial' for a response:

The Opera of Artaxerxes was the first piece, and, on the whole, we never saw it so wretchedly performed. Vestris herself was extremely ineffective, and her air 'In infancy' so feebly applauded, and encore so partial, that she would not sing it again, and Wallace was obliged to come forward say she was indisposed, &c.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Vestris, unusually sound of judgment, seems to have agreed with the critics' assessment of her performance, but it still required an apology to ensure that this decision was not held against her.

Such encores had two obvious downsides. The first was that they exhausted the singer, sometimes fatally. Miss Paton, for example, was encored so many times at the Haymarket Theatre in the opera *Morning, Noon, and Night* during the summer season, that when she moved to Covent Garden at the beginning of the ordinary season, she sang only one performance (with yet more encores) as Polly in *The Beggar's Opera*, before her voice gave out, and she had to rest it until December.<sup>xxiv</sup> The second problem was that it made the long evenings longer; and the longer the bills became as the century wore on, the more encores there appear to have been, until the managers were forced to advertise on the bills:

Whereas by the frequent calling for the songs again, the operas have become too tedious; therefore, the singers are forbidden to sing any song above once; and it is hoped nobody will call for 'em, or take it ill, when not obeyed.<sup>xxv</sup>

There was another problem too; an opera's harmonic design, which became more extended as the 18<sup>th</sup> century progressed, produced arias that were in themselves much longer than the earlier straightforward *da capo* arias. 3 encores from the 1750s would have taken much less time than those from the 1780s, while Horn's four encores in the 1816 *The Seraskier* mentioned above would have taken that much longer again. Further, new styles of operatic writing had introduced an increasing number of ensembles of all shapes and sizes, and it is clear that it became impossible to respond to every call made in an evening. An account of the first evening of Vincenzo Federici's 1790 *L'Usurpator Innocente* – a version of Metastasio's *Demofonte* - gives some insight into the difficulties.

The patience of the Subscribers, put so exceedingly to the test during the preceding part of the season, was yesterday warmly rewarded by the appearance of *Marchesi* and *Mara* in the new serious Opera of *L'Usor Pator Innocet*. [sic.] The wonderful powers of these inimitable performers have not suffered any diminution, we never heard either to more advantage , and the applause very properly kept pace with their exertions. Among the encores complied with, were the first air of *Mara's*, the duet in the first act, and *Marchesi's Prudente Machede*, though not to the same melody that formerly gained so much merited fame to the famous Mansoli. The audience, by no means scanty, considering the unfavourable aspect of an Easter Tuesday, would have had a repetition of *Mara's BRAVURA*, and the *TERZETTO* in which *MUSSINI* shews off so well. But the *OPERA* is at present much too long to bear even the encores it had.<sup>xxvi</sup>

The singers refused to repeat both the bravura aria and the terzetto; and just as well, the critic implies, given that both pieces would have been long in an already over-long opera. But it is

Charles Horn's account of the encore that encapsulated all the jealousies and rivalries to be expected in a theatre:

The tenors were jealous of me, for I had 3 songs and two duetto, one with a bass voice called 'The Tiger Hunt. And they were sulky and jealous and almost mad, till they heard their songs which were all liked by then and- what was still more strange - all encored.

When my own songs fell to the ground they would positively try and push me onto the stage to any slight indication of an encore, which singers think so much of in general.<sup>xxvii</sup>

## Conclusion

Of course, encores were things that the singers thought ‘so much of in general’, but would be easy to dismiss them merely as the vanity of singers. For while vanity was clearly a motivating force, the important (and perhaps obvious factor) is that it was *customary*, and once a custom was established, it was then absolutely essential for each singer’s credibility and, indeed, professional survival, that the encore was taken, even when the singer objected; when there was risk to the health of the performer; or when the evening was being substantially extended.

Whether or not a performer could command encores was, then, a standard assessment of that singer as a performer, as much as it was of an individual performance. As it happens, it was also a measure of a composer’s success or failure; to cite but one example, Charles Burney thought Cocchi a repetitious composer, and commented that although ‘he had two admirable singers to write for, Elisi and Mattei, their performance could not procure any of his airs an encore in the Opera-house, or popularity out of it’.<sup>xxviii</sup> Burney, like others less seriously engaged with music history was using the encore as a retrospective measure of success, and by doing so, such commentators ensured that it became part of the biographical and historical narrative of musicians working in London in the long 18<sup>th</sup> century.

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- <sup>i</sup> Susan Burney, Ms Diary, GB-Lbl Egerton MS 3691, f.75, 9 March 1780.
- <sup>ii</sup> *ibid.*, f.67v, 22 January 1780; the performance in question was Apostolo Zeno's *Quinto Fabio*, with alterations by A Andrei, and music by Ferdinando Bertoni.
- <sup>iii</sup> Joseph Addison, *Spectator*, No 314, 29 February 1712.
- <sup>iv</sup> Joseph Addison, *Spectator*, No 323, 11 March 1712.
- <sup>v</sup> Charles Lillie, *Original and genuine letters sent to the Spectator and Tatler* (1725), II, 204-5. I am indebted to Roger Savage for drawing my attention to this one, and for many helpful suggestions.
- <sup>vi</sup> Alexander Pope, *The New Dunciad* (London, 1742), 9, IV: 57-8.
- <sup>vii</sup> Hopkins Diary--MacMillan. *The Royal Shepherd* was an English version by Richard Rush of Metastasio's *Il re pastore*, with a score by George Rush; the first performance took place at Drury Lane on 24 February 1764.
- <sup>viii</sup> William Parke, *Musical Memoirs* (London, 1830), I, 67; Anna Benini made what appears to have been her London debut in this role on 9 January 1787.
- <sup>ix</sup> Michael Kassler, ed., *Charles Edward Horn's memoirs of his father and himself* (Aldershot, 2003), 61.
- <sup>x</sup> [Leigh Hunt], *Leigh Hunt's dramatic criticism, 1808-1831*, ed. Lawrence Huston Houtchens and Carolyn Washburn Houtchens (New York 1949), 30 May 1819.
- <sup>xi</sup> *The Theatrical Observer*, No 12, 19 November 1821.
- <sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 1601, 25 January 1827.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Parke, *op. cit.*, 11.
- <sup>xiv</sup> *The Theatrical Observer*, No. 1893, 4 January 1828.
- <sup>xv</sup> Parke, *op.cit.*, 13.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Charles Rice, *The London Theatres in the eighteenth-thirties*, ed Arthur Colby Sprague and Bertram Shuttleworth (London, 1950), 42, Drury Lane, 2 May 1837.
- <sup>xvii</sup> For the year 1779; Mark Argent, ed., *Recollections of R. J. S Stevens, an organist in Georgian London* (London, 1992), 131.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Charles Burney, *A General History of Music*, IV (1789), 497.
- <sup>xix</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xx</sup> *Ibid.*, note (n).
- <sup>xxi</sup> Russell Jackson, 'Johanna Schopenhauer's journal: a german view of the London theatre scene, 1803-5,' *Theatre Notebook*, lii/3 (1998), 146.
- <sup>xxii</sup> *The Theatrical Observer*, No. 1953, 14 March 1828.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 2523, 13 January 1830, 1.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 333, 9 December 1822; she was further delayed by an unrelated ankle sprain, see No. 339.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Charles Burney, *op. cit.*, 250.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> *The Times*, 7 April 1790, 2.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Kassler, *op.cit.*, 65.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Charles Burney, *op. cit.*, 476.