

**Fluid texts, moving arias, shifting sands;
the London opera libretto in the 18th-century**

Michael Burden
New College, University of Oxford

*...the Tyranny [of Italian opera] is carried yet further for the Songs are so often
turn'd out of their Places, to introduce some Absurd favourite Air of the Singer, that
in a few Days the first Book you have Bought is reduc'd to little more than the Title
Page of what it pretends to...*¹

In a few pungent phrases, the actor Colley Cibber, writing in the preface to his 1716 English masque *Venus and Adonis*, gives us an all-encompassing insight into the world of the London Italian opera libretto. At a stroke, the demanding singers, the irrational plots, and the complicit management are conjured up before us.

The tone Cibber's remarks is anything but approving, and while his comments on Italian opera are often treated with scepticism, evidence to support his remarks on the opera libretto can be found elsewhere. As he claimed, the opera text was manipulated to serve the interests of the singers, sometimes to the extent that an opera as performed in the theatre might have little or nothing in common (beyond the work's title-page) with the text as purchased - at a cost, for most of the century, of one shilling - by members of the audience.²

As these opening remarks suggest, I've taken the opera house as my main focus, and the opera texts as my main subject. I will, however, deviate to playhouse texts, for

the illustration of one or two points. For the purposes of this paper, my use of the term 'text' will at times encompass *both* words *and* music, although my focus will be on the former, the libretto. Indeed, it might be worth noting at the outset, that leaving aside the works of Handel, only about a dozen London Italian operas survive in score. I will be discussing a number types of manipulation: that which we can understand from the librettos as objects; that which we can deduce from the libretto's contents; that where the physical text manipulates the user's response to the opera concerned; and that which, as is clear from Cibber's remarks, took place as they were performed.

The arias to which Cibber refers are one of the two main building blocks of an 18th-century opera; the other was recitative. Recitative shaped the action of the opera, the sentiments of the aria reflected on that action. The reasons for changing the arias were many - these included singers' desires, impresarios' requests, and composers' foibles - but as long as the sentiments of the words fitted the action as outlined in the recitatives, it did not seem to matter in the overall picture what musical setting of those words was employed. The sources of those arias were multifarious; they included house composers, musical directors, and, of course, singers, who travelled with folders of them, giving rise to the term 'suitcase arias'.³

The librettos themselves were designed for use during the performance. Each book prepared for the opera house had facing pages, with parallel English and Italian versions of the text, for even amongst the aristocracy, fluent Italian could not be -

and was not - assumed; they helped the audience to follow the action of both plays and operas. The English word-books at the playhouses of Drury Lane and Covent Garden also served a similar function.

The audience members cared about their books and librettos, even when they did not use them wisely, and there was obviously a hidden and now ill-understood etiquette in their use. In Henry Fielding's novel *Amelia*, we find that a gentleman, wanting to charm the heroine, 'procured her a Book and Wax-Candle, and held the Candle for her himself during the whole Entertainment'.⁴ One can only imagine the indecorous sentiments that might be murmured into a lady's ear, should the book have been procured by an odious bounder.

There is almost no visual evidence of librettos being used in the London theatres, and there are only two images in which books can be seen employed: one is the fourth version of William Hogarth's painting, *The Beggar's Opera*, while the other is James Gillray's print, 'Pacific-Overtures, or A Flight from St. Clouds "over the water to Charley" - a new Dramatic Peace now Rehearsing'.⁵ Hogarth's use is otherwise documented; it is in the hands of Charles Paulet, the Duke of Bolton, the nobleman who was to become the husband of the actress and singer, Lavinia Fenton, who played the role of Polly Peachum.⁶ Paulet is recorded following her every word, night after night, in the book. There can be no doubt, then, of the importance of the text on sale at the performance matching the performance actually given, and the

librettos as objects provide ample evidence of the desperate efforts by the booksellers to keep pace with the changes introduced via the theatres.

Example 1 on the handout is typical of the frequent errata to be found in the librettos of operas. This appears, at first glance, to be a simply correction to the opera's text, a straight substitute of one aria for another. This addition to the libretto must have occurred after the setting of the text; no problem there. But to obtain a license to perform the opera, this text was submitted in manuscript to the Lord Chamberlain less than a week before the premiere, so the addition must have been a substitute very late in the rehearsal process. **Example 2** comes from Thomas Arne's setting in English of Metastasio's *Artaxerxes*, the surprise hit of the 1760s. *Artaxerxes* stayed in the repertory season after season, and was still being performed in the 19th century. So popular was it, that it achieved what I believe to be the only example of its kind in opera history; in 1806, it was performed at rival theatres on alternate nights in the same capital city, with Elizabeth Billington, the greatest soprano of the day, in the lead role in both stagings. This illustration comes from an edition printed about 1780, for the booksellers Thomas Lowndes and James Condell. Like much published with Arne's name on the title page, the printing includes a threat of action, should copyright be infringed:

This Opera is, agreeable to Act of Parliament, entered in the Hall Book of the Company of Stationers, & whoever Presumes to Print it, will be Prosecuted.
The Proprietors will reward any one who will give Information of such Proceedings.

This was somewhat pointless; the new material found in this 'new edition' is entirely insignificant, and by 1780, there were so many editions of the work in circulation, that there was not even a door on the stable, let alone a chance of bolting it.

There are at least ten surviving copies of this edition listed in the ESTC, plus this unique one here at the Barr-Smith Library, which has the only example of what, for better or for worse, we might call 'the manipulative pasteover'.⁷ In this instance, it seems fairly clear that this must have been an adjustment made by the impresario or musical director. By 1780, the form of the opera ended with a chorus with duet interjections, followed by a duet, followed by another duet, followed by a final reprise of the first chorus. This was clearly one duet too many, and so 'Pity from the throne descending' was replaced with the recitative, which opened with 'Revenge and ambition'. But as can be seen clearly in this example, the text on our pasteover is too long to, in fact, be 'pasted', and was inserted on a small, moveable, flap of paper. The contemporary manuscript crosses - a standard device in used in opera librettos to show what was cut - indicate where the text should appear. In fact, this additional sliver of text never made it into a full printed version of the opera; the next edition, that of 1787, advertised as being 'Taken from the manager's book at the Theatre-Royal, Covent-Garden' and sold by Rachel Randall, stuck to the multi-duetted version, as did the 'new edition' printed that same year by Lowndes.

Example 3 shows a note from the 1721 libretto of *Muzio Scevola*, which details how the brackets and inverted commas in the text should be interpreted. The brackets

offer alternatives to the performers and the managers, and may be a desperate effort on the poet's part to manipulate his own text from afar; evidently, he is saying: 'if the performance is too long, please take these lines out, rather than others'. As it happens, this example shows their only such use in an Italian London libretto, for cuts were usually marked with inverted commas. These last were indications frequently also used in play texts. The use of the inverted commas here, however, points to an authoritative source, manipulating the reader to take those sections based on 'true history' more seriously, thereby attempting to lift the opera up from being merely a frivolous entertainment.

Examples 4 to 6 are from another popular opera, *Love in a village* by Isaac Bickerstaffe, the first English opera which exploited the new drama of sentimentality, the third way as outlined by Carlo Goldoni. It sparked off a flurry of activity, and inspired Bickerstaffe to produce the later *Maid of the mill*, an opera based on the most important text of the movement, Richardson's 1740 novel, *Pamela*.⁸ The very popularity of the opera meant that the libretto could, unusually, be decorated with the engraved plate, seen in **example 4**. It also meant that by the time of the 1782 edition by Lowndes, Caslon, Carnan, Baldwin and Bladon, there were at least two different accepted versions, one associated with Covent Garden and the other with Drury Lane.⁹ As seen in **example 5**, the printers of the 1782 edition set out to represent both texts, so that the purchaser could equally well attend the piece at either theatre. But it also meant that Mrs Billingtons' replacement aria had to be accounted for, and at the end of **example 5**, we find the cue for this, a substitution of

both text and music. As **example 6** shows, this proves to be a new setting by Antonio Sacchini, the famous Italian composer who was the director of music at the King's Theatre from 1772 to 1781. The Billington was never connected with the King's, and Sacchini is not recorded otherwise setting texts in English (always assuming that this example was not a contrafact), so the composer must have been persuaded by money, or by Billington's reputation, to produce the aria in question. It is doubtful that Sacchini's music belonged in an English sentimental opera, but the words of text included in the libretto certainly do, and their neutrality illustrates again why aria substitution was successful.

A different sort of textual manipulation is found in the translation, and in the extent to which the style and meaning of the text was re-interpreted by the translator. As the author of the note in the 1768 version of *I viaggiatori ridicoli*, seen in **example 7**, makes clear, there were two principal ways in which the translator could work, poetically, and in prose.¹⁰ Both had their merits and de-merits. Prose tended to flatten out the poetic aspects of the text, making the operatic experience rather like reading a bad novel, but the resultant translation was closer to the original in meaning. The poetic translation was better at conveying the story in an operatic mode, but the meaning needed to be twisted in order to construct a rhymed result. The author of **example 7** clearly preferred the latter, while the author of **example 9** clung to the former. The translator of the 1764 *Ezio* chose a middle path; the snippet in **example 8** shows the translation itself is in prose, but the alternating Italic-non-Italic fonts retains the recitative-aria distinction, while the layout of the aria text

keeps the A-B-A verse pattern.¹¹ Here, the eye is manipulated to believe in the operatic nature of a non-poetic translation.

So, the libretto as object can reveal manipulation of the text in numerous ways. But clearly, even more was happening than is revealed by a libretto's physical attributes. The librettos that survive for Metastasio's opera, *Ipermestra*, first set by Hasse for Vienna in 1744, provides us with one example. The discrete numbers of the librettos are shown on **pages 4 and 5** of your handout. Metastasio provided 22 separate numbers for the opera, as well as the expected recitative. When it was performed in London in 1754, however, only six of those texts were retained, and fourteen new texts were added to the opera. When it was staged in a new setting by Sarti in London in 1797, the libretto then retained only four of Metastasio's original texts, with thirteen new texts being added. And as the table shows, there was even a text change between the submission of the licensing manuscript copy to the Lord Chamberlain, which Opera House manager Vincent Federici sent on the 21st of November, and the printed copy which must have been on sale in the auditorium on opening night on the 28th of November. The singer, Giuseppe Viganoni, singing the role of Lineco, perhaps had a change of heart; it is highly unlikely that any request from the Lord Chamberlain was responsible. The tables on **pages 6 and 7** show this process at work on a larger scale, with a much more popular libretto, *Didone abbandonata*. There were ten different versions of Metastasio's opera performed in London, the first in 1737, the last in 1827, set by composers ranging from Vinci to Mercadante. The table shown here is somewhat truncated; there is simply too much

material to show it in any meaningful way, and I have cut each table off at the same point in Act 2. The pattern of substitution is clear, and by the time we reach Paer's 1814 setting, so few Metastasio texts are retained, that it is arguable whether it can really be thought to still be the poet's opera.

And so we reach the matter of performance, the extent to which the opera was altered, in changes made that are not recorded anywhere. Here, of course, we can only speculate, we can only guess, at the results and extent of the alterations made in performance. The extraordinary situation in which the castrato and manager Gaspare Pacchierotti found himself in the 1770s will suffice as an example here. Madam Le Brun, a stylish singer of some experience, agreed with him on the 18th of November that she would sing one aria; imagine his surprise when, at that point in the performance on the following night, she sang a completely different piece.¹² Quite apart from these obvious straightforward substitutions, the case of Regina Mingotti's performances of *Siroe* in the 1754 illustrates the extent of our dilemma. On the preparations, the singer wrote:

THE Musick of *Siroe* was all composed by *Lampugnani*; but when *Vanneschi* heard me privately sing the Songs that were allotted me in this Opera, he found them so little to his Taste, that he begged of me as a Favour, to substitute other Songs of other Masters, knowing that I had better Compositions in my Possession.¹³

In this instance 'songs' meant the music, not the words, so while she substituted the music (probably by Hasse) for that by Lampugnani, the libretto shows no indication that anything was amiss because she sang settings of the same words.¹⁴

In conclusion, I want put forward the beginnings of a theory relating to the sort of textual manipulation I have been considering here, and what it might start to tell us about the larger scene. The notion of the suitcase aria is well understood; its use in European capitals comes as no surprise, and it seems fairly clear that without its existence, the business of staging opera would have been impossible. How, for example, could a singer arrive in London in October, learn six new operas for the season, and then depart at the end of April, unless strategies such as those we have seen with the aria, were in use?

But what the figures relating to London performances of Metastasio have begun to suggest, is that it is only the existence of his operas that make this system possible. He produced 27 opera seria texts, which were set on some 300 different occasions by composers as varied as Cimarosa, Gluck, Handel, Haydn, Mozart, and Scarlatti. Some composers set almost nothing other than Metastasio's texts, and others produced different settings and versions of the same text: in the case of Niccolò Jommelli, four each of *Ezio* and *Demofonte*, three of *Temistocle*, and two each of *La clemenza di Tito* and *Achille in Sciro*.¹⁵ By the 1740s, an opera house was more likely to be staging a Metastasian opera than one with a libretto by anybody else; singers arriving with a setting of an aria from *Artaserse* were likely to find that a setting of

Artaserse was included in the season, and could easily sing the arias they already knew and which may have been written for them. In other words, it is only the presence and popularity of Metastasio's works that makes the suitcase aria both possible and popular.

His works were collected, published, re-published, and translated. The first collected edition was supervised by himself, and it seems clear that this was an attempt to establish, or at least, to stabilise his own texts in the uncertain world of the opera house.¹⁶ By 1821, the Nardini edition, show in **example 10** of your handout, was in its third edition, and the image of Metastasio, engraved by Wright in this edition, had been reproduced again and again in various collections.¹⁷

In method and result, of course, the operatic processes I've discussed in this paper suggest a performance routine utterly alien to anything a modern audience might expect or desire, and stand diametrically opposed to our notions of the work, of a repertory, and of a canon of pieces on which such a repertory might draw. And it is clear that the opera received by the 18th-century London public may have been a very different work in performance to that which we study so enthusiastically on the page in the history of opera reception.

Bibliographical note

This paper comes towards the end of a project which has been running since 2007, 'The Italian Opera Aria on the London Stage 1705-1801'. Its aim has been to list incipits of all the arias that appear in the Italian opera librettos that were prepared for the London in the 18th century. It takes as its starting point the assumption that if an opera was performed, a libretto must have been printed, and that each season an opera was revived (a rare occurrence), a new libretto was produced. We have so far identified 908 different librettos for the London Italian opera, a count that includes around 110 copies in the Larpent collection of the Lord Chamberlain's licensing copies at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California.

The catalogue will appear as Michael Burden and Christopher Chowrimootoo, 'The Italian Opera Aria on the London Stage 1705-1801', 3 vols; it is discussed in Michael Burden and Christopher Chowrimootoo, 'A movable feast: the aria in the Italian libretto in London before 1800', *Eighteenth-Century Music*, iv/2 (2007), 285-289.

The sources for the material and statistics consulted in the writing of this paper include: *The London Stage 1660-1800* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press): Part 1: 1660-1700 (1965), ed. William Bird Van Lennep; Part 2 (1961): 1700-1729, ed. Emmett Langdon Avery; Part 3 (1961) 1729-1747), ed. Arthur H. Scouten; Part 4 (1960) 1747-1776, ed. George Winchester Stone, jr; Part 5 (1968): 1776-1800, ed. Charles Hogan; Curtis A. Price, Judith Milhous, and Robert D. Hume, *Italian Opera in late eighteenth-century London. Vol. 1, The King's Theatre, Haymarket 1778-1791* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995); Michael Burden, 'Metastasio's "London pasties": curate's egg or pudding's proof?', in Hg. von Elisabeth Th. Hilscher und Andrea Sommer-Mathis eds., *Pietro Metastasio (1698-1782), 'uomo universal'*, (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2000), 293-309; Judith Milhous, Gabriella Dideriksen, and Robert D. Hume, *Italian opera in late eighteenth-century London. Vol. 2, The Pantheon Opera and its aftermath, 1789-1795* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001); and Michael Burden, 'Metastasio in London: a Catalogue and Critical Reader', *Royal Musical Association Research Chronicle*, xxxix (2007), whole issue.

Sources also consulted include: articles in Stanley Sadie, ed., *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London: Macmillan, 2001), Philip H. Highfill, Kalman A. Burnim, and Edward A. Langhans, *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers and other stage personnel in London, 1660-1800* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press 1973-1993); Colin Matthew, ed. *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003); Frederick C. Petty, *Italian opera in London 1760-1800* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1980); W. C. Smith, *The Italian Opera and Contemporary Ballet in London, 1789-1820; a record of performances and players with reports from the journals of the time* (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1955); William Weber, *The rise of musical classics in eighteenth-century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); and the British Library databases, the ESTC and Burney Newspapers Online.

Forthcoming spin-off publications relating to the larger project include: 'Stage and Costume designers working at the Italian opera in London: the evidence of the librettos 1710-1801', and 'Dancers at London's Italian Opera House as recorded in the libretti'.

Publication of this paper: This paper will be published online in the Oxford Research Archive at the Bodleian Library, Oxford; any one wishing to quote it in this form, should use the version found at <http://ora.ox.ac.uk/>

- ¹ Colley Cibber, *Venus and Adonis* (London: Bernard Lintot, 1715), Preface.
- ² See Michael Burden, 'Stage and Costume designers working at the Italian opera in London: the evidence of the librettos 1710-1801', *Theatre Notebook*, forthcoming, for a discussion of libretto prices.
- ³ See Curtis A. Price, Judith Milhous, and Robert D. Hume, *Italian Opera in Late Eighteenth-Century London. Vol. 1. The King's Theatre, Haymarket 1778-1791* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); and Michael Burden, 'Metastasio's 'London pasties': curate's egg or pudding's proof?' in Hg. von Elisabeth Th. Hilscher und Andrea Sommer-Mathis eds., *Pietro Metastasio (1698-1782), 'uomo universal'*, (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2000), 293-309, for some discussion of these issues.
- ⁴ Henry Fielding, *Amelia* (London: for A. Millar, 1752), II, 81; this was during a visit to an oratorio, but there is no evidence to suggest that this was not also the practise at the operas in the same building.
- ⁵ Published by Hannah Humphrey in 1806.
- ⁶ Charles Paulet (1685-1754), from 1722 3rd Duke of Bolton, and Lavinia Fenton (1708-1760), from 1751, wife of the 3rd Duke.
- ⁷ Pietro Metastasio, altered and translated Thomas Arne?, *Artaxerxes* (London: for Thomas Lowndes and James Condell, 1780); Barr-Smith Library, University of Adelaide.
- ⁸ See Michael Burden, 'The 18th-century Novel as Opera: Sentimentality, Pamela and *The Maid of the Mill*', *La Revue LISA/LISA e-journal*, 9/2 (2011), <http://lisa.revues.org/>.
- ⁹ Isaac Bickerstaffe, *The Maid of the mill* (London: Lowndes, Caslon, Carnan, Baldwin and Bladon, 1782); Barr-Smith Library, University of Adelaide.
- ¹⁰ Carlo Goldoni, altered Giovan Bottarelli, *I viaggiatori ridicoli* (London: W. Griffin, 1768).
- ¹¹ Pietro Metastasio, *Ezio* (London: G. Woodfall, 1764).
- ¹² Curtis A. Price, Judith Milhous, and Robert D. Hume, *Italian Opera in Late Eighteenth-Century London. Vol. 1. The King's Theatre, Haymarket 1778-1791* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 223-4.
- ¹³ Regina Mingotti, *An appeal to the public* (London: for the Author, 1755), 3-4.
- ¹⁴ Pietro Metastasio, *Siroe, re di Persia* (London: G. Woodfall, 1755).
- ¹⁵ See Don Neville's comprehensive list in Stanley Sadie, ed., *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera* (London: Macmillan, 1995), III, 355-7; for a listing of the London versions that includes one or two more, see Michael Burden, 'Metastasio in London: a Catalogue and Critical Reader', *Royal Musical Association Research Chronicle*, xxxix (2007), whole issue.
- ¹⁶ Michael Burden, 'Establishing a text, securing a reputation: Metastasio's use of Aristotle', in Peter Brown and Suzanne Ograjensek, eds, *Ancient drama in music for the modern stage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 177-191.
- ¹⁷ Pietro Metastasio, *Opere dell' Abbate Metastasio*, ed. Leonardo Nardini (London: Lackington, Hughes, Hardy, Navor, and Lepard, 1821); Barr-Smith Library, University of Adelaide.