Mrs Billington's *embonpoint*;

scandal, hysteria, and Mozart

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> What we have said will suffice to show that Mrs Billington has greatly advantaged herself of her residence in Italy; her talents have been cultivated to the utmost, and she fortunately possesses so musical a soul, that she lets not the smallest of her gifts of nature and acquirements of arts remain useless in her performance. In respect to person, Mrs Billington is rather more *embonpoint* than when she left England, but her features possess infinite symmetry and beauty, and her whole figure and is grand and captivating.[1]

To opera aficionados, it is no surprise that the 'Mrs Billington' who possessed more 'embonpoint' on her return to England, is Elizabeth Billington, *née* Weichsel, one of greatest sopranos of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Intensely musical, she was also renowned as a keyboard player and was a published composer. Her life was lived under a spotlight; she was the central character in events which ranged from the fantastical to the appalling, and which at times outstripped even the wildest fiction. But she grew to be admired and loved, and earned herself the epithet of 'The Billington', an honour which placed her in the category with only two other 18th-century London divas, The Mingotti and The Mara, the latter of which only attained her status in juxtaposition to The Billington.[2]

The Billington's embonpoint was clearly a subject of fascination to the above anonymous writer, and indeed, to others, for the theme had been started by *The London Chronicle*:

> Her en bon point is a little beyond the ton of the day; but her figure is grand; and derives from her deportment, step, and manner, an uncommon interest.[3]

But what, precisely, was it? How can we define 'embonpoint'? The word is, perhaps obviously, derived from the French, but less obviously from three separate words, 'en bonne point', meaning, literally, 'in good condition'. The *OED* gives the whole word the meaning 'plumpness' or 'the well-nourished appearance of the body', a use dated to 1751. It offers a similar meaning from 1662 to its usage as three separate French words used in an English context.

Although the *OED* - and, indeed, other sources - suggests that the term was not necessarily critical or unpleasant, nevertheless its use is certainly always at least ungallant, as in its application by Cooke to Mrs Barry in his life of Macklin; he considers her to be 'just above the middle size, with a fair complexion, well made, and rather inclining to the en bon point.'[4] The term could also be a euphemism for 'fat', but all in all, it implies amplitude and roundness, rather than obesity. Its use can be found today in similar contexts; Anne Widdecombe's embonpoint, for example, has been the subject of much comment, and has been described on the BBC as 'giving a new meaning' to the word.

The Billington's embonpoint had been gained on a six-year continental tour. She had left London for Naples in 1794 in the company of her husband James; she returned without him, he having dropped dead of apoplexy in the arms of the composer Francesco Bianchi at the Naples residence of the Bishop of Winchester. Billington was reputed to have been looking for his hat at the time to accompany his wife to the second night of *Inez di Castro*, the opera written especially for her debut at the Teatro San Carlo in May 1794.[5] And, as Sainsbury's *Dictionary of Musicians* somewhat dryly puts it, this was not 'the only circumstance which impeded her progress'; the Neapolitans, always superstitious, attributed an eruption of Mount Vesuvius to her appearance at the theatre: a 'heretic' had been allowed to perform on the stage of the San Carlo. As might be expected, however, her performance triumphed, and they were won over.

In 1798, she married a diplomat called Felissent (there are various spellings) in the Commissariat department in Bonaparte's service,[6] and who (if Michael Kelly is to be believed) was jealous and violent. He was

> Before marriage, a most insinuating monster of meekness: but from the very first week after their union, the dove assumed the fierceness of a hawk. It was said that he used to treat her unmercifully; and if she dared complain, plates dishes, or any other moveable, was thrown at her.[7]

But as Kelly perspicaciously added: 'Such was *her* story'; but it does appear that her return to England in 1801 was partly to escape his attentions. The Billington came back from the Continental sojourn, then, without either her old or new husbands, but with her voice and taste polished, and with her embonpoint increased and developed.

These brief circumstances give some context to three what we might think of as touchstones or turning points in Billington's career, points which influenced the way she has been viewed by history; the scandal that resulted from the publication by James Ridgway of the so-called *Memoirs of Elizabeth Billington*; her return to London and the staging of Linley's *The Duenna* during which she was taken ill; and her choice of Mozart's *La clemenza di Tito* for her final benefit in 1806.

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First, James Ridgway's *Memoirs of Mrs Billington.*[8] The publication of this scurrilous volume was one of the sensations of 1792; indeed, as the composer Joseph Haydn noted on publication day 14 January 'you couldn't get a single copy after 3 o'clock in the afternoon'. [9] While it's difficult to gauge the tone of the rest of Haydn's note - he was an admirer of The Billington[10] - there is no doubt that his interested reaction to the volume was typical of the majority of those who were excited by such prurience; by later that month, the publisher claimed to have put 2000 copies into circulation, and to have sold 1500 of them.[11] The scandal was all the greater because there was an attempt, detailed in the volume, to blackmail The Billington into suppressing publication.

The *Memoirs* consists of a number of distinct sections, with 16 relatively short letters dated between 1783 and 1785 purporting to be between The Billington and her

mother. The volume also contains supporting chapters suggesting multiple affairs, illegitimate children, homosexuality on the part of James Billington, and extensive incest in the Weichsel family. What are we to make of this 'memoir'? Some of those writing biographical sketches such as her contemporary William Parke, ignore the volume entirely; others have taken the few facts contained in the letters to be true. But a careful reading of the texts shows that, scandal aside, they contain mostly facts already in the public domain. They also form only a small part of the publication; most of the surrounding material - such as the essay 'Upon vicious refinement and moderate adultery' - is merely absurd padding.

What is significant about this affair is that it doesn't seem to have resulted in an immediate flurry of satires, either literary or visual. Why this should have been the case isn't clear, but it may well be that the contents in themselves were thought to be so ludicrous that the story died early. It has been proposed that the resulting scandal caused the Billingtons to depart for the Continent; of course, this may have been the case, but as others have argued, it seems dubious;[12] the Billingtons did not depart until 1794, and the gossip, while doubtless vigorously circulating in the early part of 1792, can hardly have lasted into the next season.

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Secondly, we come to the disaster of *The Duenna*. When the Billington reappeared in London at the end of 1801, she had made her triumphant return singing Mandane in Thomas Arne's *Artaxerxes*; [13] she appears to have first performed the role in 1787,[14] and it had been one of her signature pieces ever since. Her first performance at Covent Garden was on 3 October 1801, her first at Drury Lane on 8 October.[15] The embonpoint which so pre-occupied the critics must have been very much in evidence for it made the press immediately; it must also have caught the eye of the brilliant James Gillray, for in December that year, he published the first of his images of The Billington. **[copyright illustration removed].** [16] While there is no doubt that it is a caricature, the image is, uncharacteristically, rather gentle, and one which probably reflected the reality of The Billington's figure.

However, the significance of the dress in this formative caricature cannot be overestimated. The source of the fashion was revolutionary France, where 'women had adopted short-sleeved while muslin gowns, sandals, and cropped curls' in 'imitation of a classical past'.[17] And while English women did not adopt the French semi-naked version of this mode of dress, its origins only emphasised the connection between the style's perceived sexual license and political upheaval.

Recorded complaints involve the corruption of the intended classical effect; the ideal of the style was to imitate a draped statue, but with many dresses cut so low and the fabrics so thin, the result was a graphic outline of the body rather than the intended impression of drapery.[18] Further, her figure was topped off with feathers, which several decades earlier had been the focus of ridicule and condemnation. There can be no question, then, of the link Gillray established via costume either intentionally or unintentionally, between immorality and The Billington. It was one he would use in every one of his many caricatures of the singer.

Gillray's image was promptly taken up and developed by the engraver Williams as a response to an incident which took place during the 1801 performances of Linley's opera, *The Duenna*. The role of Clara was a tried and tested one for her, but during December, disaster struck:

> We were sorry to learn that this bewitching warbler was taken extremely ill at the conclusion of the opera and went into successive fits.[19]

But what further fuelled the flames was the notion that this was part of pattern, that as a woman soprano, such a reaction was inevitable:

> Mrs Billington was always hysterical, she should, therefore, carefully avoid that extreme exertion, which necessarily must induce fits to persons of her habit and constitution. [20]

The writer concludes in an entirely sarcastic manner:

> Though we are in raptures at her singing, great as the pleasure is, we would not purchase it at the price of her health.[21]

The whole incident gave rise to the first of the 'embonpoint' satires, 'Theatrical Doctors, or recovering Clara's notes'. As can be seen from the print **[copyright**

image removed][22], she is being fed guineas as medicine both by Mr Sheridan (of Drury Lane) and Mr Harris (of Covent Garden). Williams has combined illness and hysteria, and presented them as symptoms of avarice; when fed the correct amount of money, her health - represented all too obviously here by her embonpoint - would improve and she would, again, sing.

The Gillray print is the obvious model used by Williams and her figure has now come to resemble more closely the abuses complained of by fashion critics; they asserted that the classical style was one that, when taken in hand by an immodest woman, pushed the bust up and out; with the aid of a new corset 'which, by an extraordinary construction and force of material, [could] force the figure of the wearer into whatever form the artist pleases', it made 'a sort of fleshy shelf, disgusting to the beholders'.[23] And it was this image that was used in every caricature of The Billington after this date.

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Mozart's *La clemenza di Tito*

The third, and last touchstone, was The Billington's choice for her benefit on 25 March 1806; this was Mozart's opera seria, *La clemenza di Tito*, the first Mozart opera to be staged in London. Most modern commentators have assumed that it was the attraction of the to us 'great Mozart' that encouraged her to chose it, but such a proposition overlooks a number of significant contemporary facts.

Firstly, the type of opera seria embodied in Mozart's work was by this time out of fashion; indeed, it was *old* fashioned by the time Mozart set the libretto in 1791. The text of the opera was by Metastasio, the great 18th-century Viennese Court opera librettist; settings of his works dominated the European stage for some 50 years of the preceding century. But by the 1780s, only a few of his libretti remained popular, and all of these, such as *Didone abbandonata* or *Artaserse*, preceded his court appointment. No one was interested in his slick complimentary Court texts, a group which includes *La clemenza di Tito*.[24]

This in itself might not have mattered, if, secondly, the subject matter had had some independent currency with the London audience; but it did not. Although the opera had been performed in London in three different settings, the *last* of these had been staged in 1765;[25] and although Metastasio's text was used as a basis for a number of spoken dramas with versions being published in London in 1755, 1796, 1828, and 1836,[26] these plays were not performed.[27]

Thirdly, Mozart was not a fashionable composer. It would have been logical, for example, for The Billington to have chosen a work by someone like Paisiello; there was his *La Didone*, for example, a setting of *Didone Abbandonata* which had been first staged in London 1799.[28] It is true that musically *La clemenza di Tito* offered an audience novelty, and there are examples of singers relying on this to sell their benefit tickets; identifiable strategies include the commissioning of new works especially for benefit performances, although it is interesting to note just how many of these never had another airing.[29] It may also be the case that The Billington was relying on her overwhelming personal popularity to sell the tickets. But the assumption behind a benefit was that crowds would be drawn in, and there could no assumption that a crowd would be drawn in by an old *opera seria* by Mozart. The singers relied on the income from their benefits to top up their salaries, and playing fast and loose with a benefit programme was a dangerous game.

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So what *did La clemenza di Tito* offer Billington? Why *did* she choose it?

What I am going to propose is that this choice was a deliberate attempt to create, at her final benefit, a position of cultural monumentality for herself by establishing her image along side the pantheon of 'classics' of 18th-century musical theatre, Mozart and Metastasio. It is important to emphasise 'classics' in this context. As we have seen above, Mozart was not universally popular; he was, however, beginning to be understood to have been a 'great genius'. It was the case that Mozart's music had, since the 1780s, been under going a classicization reflected in performances and publications of his instrumental music.[30] Further, as Emanuele Senici has outlined, a

London Mozart cult was to grow up around Leigh Hunt which resulted in a number of commentaries like Parke's, which largely critical of the libretto of *La clemenza di Tito*, but all expressing surprise at the composer's neglect at the hands of the London audience.[31]

The rise of the cult of Mozart went hand in hand with the rise of the notion of the single-author 'work' as a stable object; in a group of inter-related developments, the pasticcio became a minor component of the London opera season; a closer, integrated approach to opera composition now reached the point where it became impossible for aria substitution to be practised in the carefree manner of the past century; and the notion of a 'repertory' which had until this point, hardly existed, began to emerge. The time was right, then, for Mozart's operas to be 'classicized'.

Similarly, Metastasio's librettos, both in structure and content, were regarded as out of date, if not antediluvian. But like the understanding of Mozart's 'genius', Metastasio's genius was - in London at least - appreciated. As late as 1791, the new Pantheon Theatre painted its drop curtain with his picture, and published a pamphlet explaining the allergory thus demonstrated:

> 'Tis the pride of Englishmen to unite the most zealous Patriotism with that impartial Philosophy which teaches to generalize the Sentiments. With us, Stranger and Barbarian are not synonymous. The distinction of Foreigner is lost in the blaze of extraordinary abilities; warmed by this pervading principle, we consecrate our Labour to the *Manes* of a Roman Bard, and name the Curtain THE APOTHEOSIS OF METASTASIO. His portrait is in the centre of the Picture, looking up, and listening with admiration to the MUSIC of the SPHERES: he bears with him that LYRE to which he so pathetically has sung, and whose power he so justly describes.[32]

Not only was Metastasio's standing as a poet high, however; the circumstances of the writing of *La clemenza di Tito* ensured that the libretto had a high-toned moral angle which could be exploited for propaganda purposes; its original function was to mark the name-day of Emperor Charles VI in 1734.[33] Those sentiments clearly governed its choice in 1791 to celebrate the coronation of Emperor Leopold II in Prague; even

after Metastasio's text had been adapted by Caterino Mazzolà, those sentiments remained. And they could not have been more useful to The Billington. In her performance, the scene in which her character Vitellia confesses publicly to potential dastardly deeds, she is forgiven everything by Tito, and in The Billington's hands, it became a personal, public statement.

For while the scandal of the Billington *Memoirs* was years behind her, it still must have been a cause for comment and speculation. Further, her years on the Continent, the loss of her husband, the difficulties associated with her disastrous and ultimately fatal second marriage, and possible affairs with the Prince Regent and others, must have all taken their toll on her reputation at large. Metastasio was regarded in London not just as a poet of genius, but as a moral force. Towards the end of the century, his opera texts were plundered for passages that, on their own, could be used as sentiments for improvement. And in this, the moralising passages in *La clemenza di Tito* came high on the list of preferred passages used by those compiling such volumes.

Conclusion

The Billington's choice of *La clemenza di Tito* for her last benefit showed her customary shrewdness, reading of the audience, and above all, her musical perspicacity. As Parke was to comment only 30 years later, when the Mozart cult was well underway:

> It is a curious fact that no opera by Mozart was performed on the Italian stage in London till that year, when Mrs Billington produced his 'Clemenza di Tito' for her benefit at the King's Theatre. Thus the high distinction of making known the greatest musical genius of this age to the British public was reserved for an English female.[34]

If 'monumentality' was, as I have argued, her aim, she succeeded; in terms of her reputation both then and now, the choice of Mozart's opera the reason she is remembered today in musical circles. The 1806 performances had associated the woman thought to be one of Europe's greatest sopranos with one of its greatest composers and its greatest poet and librettist. The Billington's *embonpoint* has now

taken on a new complexion; its caricature may well have been responsible for the staging of the first Mozart opera in London.

One last point. While retrieving her own image, she was did not manage to banish the general one of the 'fat soprano', the ungallant way of describing a singer's embonpoint. The images of The Billington, are, obviously, not the first to ridicule singers, but they are the first to capture consistently the image of the fat soprano, which almost incredibly, has entered current sporting terminology as 'the opera's not over until the fat lady sings'.[35]

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[1] *The Theatrical Review; or the Weekly Rosciad*, Saturday 3 October 1801.
[2] 'The Billington is indeed second to none but the Mara'; *The Times*, 21 March 1786, p.2, on Billington's performance in *The Peruvian.*
[3] *The London Chronicle*, 1801.
[4] William Cooke, *Memoirs of Charles Macklin* (London, 1804), p.193.
[5] *A Dictionary of Musicians from the earliest ages to the present time* (London, 1824), p.89.
[6] The date of 1798 is given by William Parke, *Musical Memoirs* (London, 1830), II, p.145. He also refers to Billington's husband as 'M. Felisenti', whom he described as 'good-looking and gentlemanly young man, of a lively disposition and tolerable good sense'.
[7] Michael Kelly, *Reminiscences of Michael Kelly of the King's theatre, and Theatre royal, Drury lane*, ed. by T.E. Hook (London, 2/1826), p.266; Parke, ibid., II, p.145, also mentions that 'it was said that when he and his wife differed in an argument, he had a *striking* mode of convincing her of her error'.
[8] [James Ridgway], *Memoirs of Mrs Billington* (London, 1792).
[9] The First London Notebook (1791-92), A-Wn Cod. 15391, quoted in H. C. Robbins Landon, *The Collected Correspondence and London Notebooks of Joseph Haydn* (London, 1959), p. 255.
[10] The British Library possesses a score of Haydn's which came via the composer William Shield, annotated 'on purpose to be sung by Mrs Billington - at the time Haydn visited England' [GB-Lbl Add. 34037, f.8]; see Arthur Searle, 'Haydn autographs and 'authentic' manuscript copies in the British Library', *Early Music* 10 (1982), p. 495-504.
[11] [Anon], *An answer to the memoirs of Mrs Billington, with the life and adventures of Richard Daly. Esq. and an account of the Irish Theatre* (London, 1792), p.15.
[12] 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*, II (Carbondale, 1973), p.125.
[13] It is also the case that while she was gone, only Gertrud Mara was suitable to sing the part, and the opera went briefly out the repertory; the last performance was on 25 May 1796, and it was not stage again until 3 October 1801.
[14] See ARTAXERXES. AN ENGLISH OPERA. As it is Performed at the THEATRES ROYAL IN *DRURY LANE,* AND *COVENT-GARDEN*. The Musick Composed by THO. AUG. ARNE, Mus. Doc. A NEW EDITION (London, 1787), GB-Lbl 1342.k.37.
[15] The recorded performances are as follows: **1801: CG:** October 3, 7. **DL:** October 8, 10. **CG:** October 13, 15. **DL:** October 17. **CG:** October 20. **DL:** October 22, November 5. **CG:** November 6. **DL:** November 9, 11. **CG:** December 5. **DL:** December 8. **1802: DL:** January 7, March 13, 23, April 1. **CG:** April 3. **DL:** April 10, 26. **CG:** April 27, May 6. **DL:** May 26, June 3. After that date, both Billington's performances and staging so the opera tail off, but it was nearly always done once a season, most frequently being used as a launch pad for the singers who were clearly using the role of Mandane as a test piece; see Burden, Metastasio.
[16] 'A bravura air, Mandane'. Coloured engraving. Drawn and engraved by James Gillray. Published by Hannah Humphrey, 22.xii.1801. Image consulted: New College, Oxford.
[17] Aileen Ribiero, *Dress and Morality* (London, 1986), p.117-18.

[18] Ibid., p.118.
[19] *The Theatrical Repertory or the weekly rosciad* 15 December 1801 .
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid .
[22] 'Theatrical doctors, recovering Clara's notes'. Coloured engraving. C. Williams. Published by S. W. Forres, 16.i.1802. Image consulted: US-SM 109498.
[23] [Anon.], *The Mirror of the Graces; or, the English Lady's costume* (1811), p.96-97.
[24] Michael Burden, 'Metastasio and myth', forthcoming.
[25] *La clemenza di Tito* (1737) in a setting by Veracini, *La clemenza di Tito* (1760) in a setting Gioacchino Cocchi, and *La clemenza di Tito* (1765) in a pasticcio arranged by Cocchi with music by Abos, Bach, Cocchi, Galuppi, Giardini, Guglielmi, De Maio, Sacchini, Sarti, Scarlatti, and Traetta.
[26] *Titus Vespasian*(1755), *The conspiracy* (1796), *The clemency of Titus* (1828), *Titus Vespasian*(1836) and *La clemenza di Tito* (1839); it was also published in Edinburgh in 1839 as a libretto which appears to be unrelated to any setting.
[27] See Michael Burden, 'Metastasio on the British Stage 1728-1840', *Royal Musical Association Research Chronicle*, 40 (2007), p.109-123.
[28] Paisiello's original version had been premiered in Naples at Teatro San Carlo on 4 November 1794; the London version had additions by Antonio Benelli, Vincenzo Federici, and Pietro Guglielmi.
[29] See, among many examples, The masque *The Choice of Apollo*.
[30] See Cliff Eisen, 'Dissemination of Mozart's Music, England', in *The Mozart Compendium: a guide to Mozart's life and music*, ed. H. C. Robbins Landon (London, 1990), 190, 201-2.
[31] Emanule Senici, '"Adapted to the Modern Stage"; *La clemenza di Tito* in London', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 7 (1995), p.14-19.
[32] [Anon.], *Description of the Allegory Painted for the Curtain of the King's Theatre, Pantheon* (London, 1791), p.8.
[33] The text was first set by Antonio Caldara for the Teatro Grande of the Hoftheater in Vienna.
[34] William Parke, *Musical Memoirs* (London, 1830), II, p.144.
[35] It does seem possible that it did not spring fully formed in 1978 from the lips of Dan Cook, the baseball commentator who gave the phrase its currency; Fred Shapiro dates it to 1976 in the *Yale Book of Quotations* (New Haven, 2006), and a documented earlier saying from the South 'church is not over until the fat lady sings' is recorded in Fabia Rue Smith and Charles Rayford Smith, *Southern Words and Sayings* (Jackson, 1976).