

Sociology of opera

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Two lines of inquiry have developed in recent years which might be described as 'sociology of opera', though neither has as yet run to much of the quantitative study characteristic of sociology as a modern academic discipline.

1. Opera as a social statement.

The first is concerned with the inner workings of opera as a genre and of particular operas. It asks what these tell us about social relations in the cultures from which opera (or particular operas) sprang: opera, it assumes, is a revealing witness because, in the elaboration of the artistic means brought to bear on it, the genre lends itself to embodying projections of the fears, desires and conflicts at work within society. Inquiries of this kind have so far been few. Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* has called up several, the best-known being the still controversial essays by Bernard Shaw, Thomas Mann and Theodor Adorno: this is hardly surprising, since the *Ring* itself originated in a conception in part sociological.

More recent studies include one or two by musicologists (Carl Dahlhaus and Francesco DeGrada) but also those of Catherine Clément (from a feminist perspective) and Peter Conrad, as well as a few essays by Luigi Baldacci and by one or two of the American scholars edited by Arthur Groos and Roger Parker. The latter group – literary critics with an interest in opera – are concerned far more

with the libretto than with the music of the works they deal with. A study of the libretto is in itself legitimate and useful. The recent invention of surtitles, besides, makes the words of operas far more present to audiences' minds than they ever were in the past, even when they were sung in the audience's own language; it may end by tilting the balance towards the literary and away from the musical component. It does however seem rash to put forward far-ranging sociological analyses of operas while taking only scant notice of the music. In practice, and until further notice, opera remains an art led by music.

2. Opera in society.

The second line of inquiry, also recent, concerns itself with – to borrow a title from a seminal article by Lorenzo Bianconi and Thomas Walker – the 'production, consumption and political function' of opera, in different countries and at different times. It studies how opera has been financed and managed, and how it has been influenced by (or has influenced) its patrons and audiences. It is historically based, as sociological inquiry can be but (in practice) seldom is, and may be thought of as an interdisciplinary pursuit on the borders of musicology, sociology and economic and social history.

(i) Introduction.

That opera is, among the arts, unusually revealing of pressures within the society that creates it is not a new idea. Early in the 20th century, Edward J. Dent was aware of it as well as knowledgeable about the pressures themselves, but he did not care to deal with the question systematically. What has brought about a new approach is the rapid spread, from the mid-1970s, of an interest in social science and in the social or collective dimension of history, partly under the influence of the group of French historians (Marc Bloch, Fernand Braudel, Emmanuel Le Roy-Ladurie etc.) associated with the journal *Annales*. The change may be seen at work in the short period that elapsed between the appearance of two Italian multi-volume histories, the *Storia dell'opera* edited by Guglielmo Barblan and Alberto Basso (1977), which was organized by countries, genres, schools and periods, and the *Storia dell'opera italiana* edited by Bianconi and Giorgio Pestelli, the first volume of which to appear (in 1987) bore the subtitle 'The System of Production and its Responsibilities'.

Opera has been from its inception a public art drawing on many and diverse

resources and is correspondingly expensive. Requiring as it does singers, musicians, sometimes dancers, scenery and costumes, stagehands, front-of-house personnel, as well as both a literary and a musical creator, it could never be performed in private in the sense that chamber music was for a long time by definition private, if only because the many people involved in its production themselves made up a kind of audience; when, most unusually, a private performance of opera took place (as when Ludwig II of Bavaria arranged to be the only spectator at performances of some of Wagner's operas) it was seen as a contradiction in terms and a sign of the king's eccentricity.

(ii) Early opera.

The new art grew out of diverse kinds of entertainments current in Italy about the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries, all of them patronized by courts or by nobles whose establishments were in effect miniature courts; the cardinals of the Roman Catholic Church, the chief patrons in Rome, were both noble and, some of them, nephews to the pope, that is, members of the ruling family in the Papal States. Even [Commedia dell'arte \(opera\)](#), one of the contributory streams, was at that time patronized by the great, and should not be thought of as an affair of ragged strolling players.

The seeming contrast between opera as given in rulers' courts and public opera as it developed in Venice from 1637 should not be taken too far. True, the differences are obvious. At court, an opera was given a few performances at most, before the ruler, his courtiers and invited guests; it was performed by musicians already in the ruler's regular employ or specially borrowed from fellow-rulers or nobles; it was managed by the ruler's officials, with possibly a good deal of direct interest from the ruler himself; it was lavishly financed from the ruler's purse, with no thought of recouping any of the expenditure; its purpose was to display the ruler's 'magnificence', to enhance his prestige and confirm his supremacy within the court, and to carry the message beyond the confines of the household or the state as well. The opera libretto itself might be designed to glorify the ruler, both explicitly (e.g. by proclaiming the triumph of Austrian arms over the Turks in an opera written for the Vienna court) and implicitly (by an astounding display of monumental scenery and elaborate flying machines). This description applies to the operas composed by Monteverdi for the Mantuan court (*Orfeo*, 1607, and others now lost), to those put on in Rome by cardinals of the Barberini family in the middle decades of the 17th century, and to those commissioned by the courts of Leopold I in Vienna and of Louis XIV in France.

Venetian opera was public in the sense that most of the audience paid to get in, either at the doors or by buying or renting boxes. It was put on for a run of performances (at first only during the carnival season, lasting a couple of months or so, later during the shorter Ascension fair season as well). The opera house belonged not to a ruler but to a noble family, and, by the mid-17th century, a number of competing theatres – generally six or seven – were putting on opera at the same time. The management of the season was as a rule entrusted to an individual or a group of persons known as the **Impresario**, who ostensibly bore the financial risk. The company were hired on contract for the season, and were not in the regular employ of either the theatre owners or the impresario, though a few members might be in the employ of a ruler away from Venice who allowed them to take up a lucrative opportunity. The operas themselves might allude to public events involving Venice, but on the whole were aimed at entertaining the audience: hence, in the 17th century, a strong emphasis on erotic appeal mixed with scenes of low comedy. Though spectacular scenery was not absent, singers were the great draw; the instrumental forces used were, until 1675 or thereabouts, much smaller than in court operas, as for instance in Monteverdi's *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria* (1640), in contrast with his *Orfeo*.

Although this was the 'Venetian model', it was rapidly exported about mid-century to other parts of Italy, in particular to Naples, by the short-lived but influential troupes called *Febiarmonici*. This in turn made possible the growth of what has been identified (by Bianconi and Walker) as a third mode of production, whereby opera was put on under municipal patronage on the occasion of a trade fair, with an impresario or impresarios managing the season but with the ruler (or possibly a group of nobles) meeting the deficit. Here the occasion, as in Venice, was the entertainment of visitors, but the purpose was to enhance the standing as well as the tourist attractions of the city and the state.

Real though the differences are between these various sets of arrangements, they do not mark off straightforward 'court' and 'commercial' modes of production. How far the Venetian nobles who built opera houses pursued profit is unclear. That they had some notion of at least recouping their expenditure follows from the practice of selling or letting boxes, and of entrusting the season to an impresario who (until the late 18th century) was charged rent; payment for admission made the whole thing, in contemporary eyes, a 'mercenary' enterprise. The steward of a family allied to the theatre-owner Grimani rejoiced in 1694 that the Grimani would not, as had been feared, have to stand a loss on the current carnival season. On the other hand it is also clear that ownership of a theatre conferred prestige. Those

involved were leading families who provided doges and high officials; when Cardinal Vincenzo Grimani was Viceroy of Naples in the Austrian interest during the War of the Spanish Succession he used singers and scene designers as counters, both in diplomacy and in forwarding the combined interests of his own Naples opera and of the Grimani theatres in Venice. There were fierce struggles for dominance among Venetian theatre-owning families; in these the primary motive was not commercial. It is thus possible to assert that in 17th-century Italy ‘opera theatre [was] first and foremost an instrument of political authority’ (Bianconi and Walker). If this was true in the leading commercial city in Italy, in Hamburg, another great commercial city, Johann Mattheson could write as late as 1728: ‘Opera is more for kings and princes than for merchants or shopkeepers’.

(iii) The impresario.

The impresario, too, when examined closely turns out to have been less than a risk-taking capitalist. This figure was to remain central to opera production in Italy until the late 19th century, as public opera spread (from the turn of the 17th and 18th centuries) to more towns and seasons; impresarios, often Italian, also came to operate in the German-speaking lands, the British Isles, the Iberian peninsula and Eastern Europe (in Britain, 18th-century German and Italian impresarios were succeeded by British managers who worked in much the same way). The one important European country that resisted the system, as it resisted Italian opera itself, was France, where serious opera remained for long an entertainment under royal control, and theatres up to recent times were run by permanent managers (*directeurs*); it was the incursion of Italian troupes that helped to bring about the growth of (rapidly Frenchified and less directly controlled) *opéra comique*.

Rather than a venture capitalist, an opera impresario was an intermediary who stood to the controllers of an opera house in a relation somewhere between that of a partner and that of a dependant. The management, if held by a nobleman or a group of nobles (as often happened in the 18th century), was in practice a kind of executive acting on behalf of the ruler (in a royal theatre) or of the noble family or association who owned the theatre or the boxes. A plebeian manager, on the other hand – generally a member of the musical or dancing professions, or a tradesman with theatrical connections, e.g. a costume hirer or printer – depended on the controllers of the opera house for a subsidy, and was sometimes little less than a retainer of theirs in everyday life; as late as the 1810–40 period one of the leading Rome impresarios was a tenant of the Capranica theatre-owning family, whom he supplied with chocolate and candles. The subsidy was not (until the early 19th

century) necessarily regular or laid down in advance, nor was it always paid in cash; it might consist in a number of boxes which the impresario could dispose of (as he could not dispose of boxes in general), or in the sometimes highly profitable gambling concession attached to 18th-century theatres, or in a cash subvention either agreed beforehand by the theatre owner(s) or the boxholders, or granted by them or by the ruler to make up a deficit. This did not mean that the impresario took no risks: some of the various forms of subsidy were uncertain and might prove inadequate, leading to the impresario's failure, signalled by his fleeing the town and leaving the company unpaid; on the other hand, until well into the 19th century, authority could at times be successfully appealed to for further help.

(iv) 18th-century developments.

In Italy, the movement during the 18th century was towards the formation of a market for opera management and especially for the engagement of opera personnel: cash rewards and short-term contracts gradually superseded relations of patronage and dependence. During the 17th century, opera engagements had been too few to provide a regular living; most musicians and singers (themselves, in the first half of the century, not clearly differentiated from instrumental musicians) were employed in church music and sometimes in chamber music as well, which might well mean permanent attachment to a great personage or to an institution. An incidental reason for the growth of a market was the almost uninterrupted series of wars on both Italian and German soil between 1689 and 1714, which drew some rulers' attention elsewhere and often precluded them from paying musicians. More fundamental in accounting for the change was the notable multiplication of theatres and seasons. Already in the period of the wars a kind of circuit had grown up among the courts of Mantua, Modena, Parma and Tuscany, with some allied town theatres, along which musicians circulated. By the 1750s the opera habit was firmly implanted among the upper classes of many north and central Italian towns; many theatres had been built, if only, as yet, semi-permanent wooden ones; and spring and autumn seasons had come to be regularly given as well as the traditional ones held during carnival and summer fairs. This made a dense network where opera personnel could find employment all year round at a wide variety of levels of imputed quality and financial reward. The network also enabled them to concentrate on opera, some of them to the exclusion of all other work.

In the many German-speaking states, opera became divided between court theatres (sometimes maintained by a great nobleman who was a virtual petty sovereign, like

Haydn's employer Prince Esterházy), some ambitious municipal theatres as in the free city of Hamburg, and humbler town theatres used by itinerant troupes who got a princely or municipal subsidy. Save for a few important capitals such as Vienna, Munich and Dresden, the coming of opera was delayed by the ill effects of the Thirty Years War until late in the 17th century, and it remained subject to sudden financial constraints or to the accession of a new sovereign with little interest in music, who might close it down. Arrangements which in Italy were becoming archaic still went on in Germany down to the Napoleonic Wars, such as the engagement of musicians and singers for a term of years (sometimes lifelong) to perform in church and chamber as well as in the opera house. In large cities such as Vienna, Prague and Dresden, however, public opera houses could be run by Italian impresarios and with a mixture of Italian and German musicians. Expensive wars, again, between 1740 and 1763 drew opera away from court and towards a town opera house under less direct imperial or royal supervision; it was for this latter kind of theatre that Mozart's late Italian comic operas were written.

In London it used to be held that distinctly commercial arrangements prevailed, with opera run by committees of the aristocracy and the upper merchant class on (at least in intention) business lines; but recent studies have suggested that the system by which Handel's operas were put on was not markedly unlike the Italian, since it included an impresario working on behalf of a boxholders' committee, and a subsidy (though a relatively modest one) from the king. True, opera artists in London were never dependants of the ruler or of any individual noble; their engagements were seasonal and contractual and payment was strictly in cash, whereas on the Continent part payment in kind (easier to come by and held to be more honorific) went on, gradually diminishing through the rest of the century. Again, in this matter German courts and noble households remained archaic, so that until 1790 Haydn and the company at Eszterháza were paid partly in beef, cabbages and firewood.

(v) From patronage to the market.

As the production and organization of opera moved from patronage to the market, so the make-up and the visible array of the audience changed over time.

In 17th-century court opera the audience focussed on the ruler or other great person whose bounty had made the performance possible in Venice and occasionally elsewhere the paying audience was more heterogeneous and the glory shed on the noble family or group ultimately responsible for the performance

more diffused. Between about 1700 and 1850 the single great man or family gradually came to play a less active and more decorative role, if indeed such a single focus remained. Instead, the most visible part of the audience – the boxholders – collectively put themselves on display, still with a nicely graduated hierarchy signalled by the architecture of the opera house itself. In this display the aristocracy generally bore a large part, together with the upper stratum of the professional and official classes; at widely varying times, a more clearly defined middleclass element became conspicuous, but where it prevailed it tended ultimately to impose a modified architecture and a new, less obviously hierarchical array.

The earliest Renaissance theatres went back to antiquity for a model and seated most of the audience on stepped stands (for illustration *see* [Intermedio \(opera\)](#) (*opera*); *see also* [Vicenza \(opera\)](#)). The earliest opera houses, as they were first worked out in Italy and then copied all over Europe, instead took up much of the outer skin of the auditorium with vertically arranged tiers of boxes, set out in horseshoe, bell or rectangular shape; the tiers numbered anything from two to six. There were technical reasons for this: voices had less far to travel, even in a very large six-tier house such as the S Carlo, Naples (1737), than in a stepped theatre laid out in depth. But the main reason was the enhanced possibility of displaying an audience of boxholders, in the first place to each other, and of arraying them in hierarchical order (*see* [Seating](#) and [Theatre architecture](#)).

The horseshoe or similar shape ensured that the occupants of every box were visible from every other box. It also made possible the provision, across a corridor running behind the boxes, of a dressing-room corresponding to each box: here servants could prepare meals and drinks; the family occupying the box enjoyed a home from home. The vertical arrangement made possible a clear, graduated hierarchy, taken over from the vertical hierarchy of an Italian palazzo (and not very different from that of a noble palace in Vienna or Prague). The second tier invariably ranked highest; this was where the ruler (if there was one resident in the town) had his or her box, and save in exceptional circumstances the other boxes were occupied almost wholly by the aristocracy, at any rate in the main opera season (exceptions were certain commercial towns with little resident nobility, such as Trieste). The first and third tiers ranked somewhat lower than the second, and any tiers above the third somewhat lower still; the sixth tier in a very large theatre might still harbour the odd impoverished noble, but was generally given over to a shopkeeping, artisan or soldier audience as well as to some of the vast number of servants of the aristocracy attending the opera (who in some places had

free entry). Boxes at the side of each tier ranked a little lower, and cost a little less, than those in the centre, but their inconvenience was less marked than it is now, because the stage and the singers were thrust farther forward into the auditorium. The downstairs area, in Britain called the stalls, in America the orchestra, and in a number of continental countries the parterre, in the 18th century might also be filled with servants, but upper ones: at La Scala, between the opening of the theatre in 1778 and the coming of the revolutionary French army in 1796, the stalls gave admission at a preferential rate to the 'black cloaks' – the majordomos, secretaries and stewards of the nobles occupying the boxes, who were thus enabled to call on their services whenever they chose. But the stalls were also the place for officers, government officials, passing travellers and, in university towns, students.

The coming of an audience more middle-class in composition and tone was not sudden or uniform. It happened first in economically advanced places where a growing middle class was willing or eager to take an interest in opera. France in the last years of the *ancien régime* – a good deal more economically advanced, in relative terms, than popular cliché has it – was such a place: as soon as the shackles of official monopoly were removed from opera at the Revolution there occurred an explosion both of new works and of opera performances, not only in Paris but along a dense network of provincial towns; between October 1793 and August 1795 there were 1643 performances of operas by Dalayrac in 36 provincial towns and, in nine months of 1795–6, 1552 performances of operas by Grétry. This was one among many changes that could be only partly reversed, whether by Napoleon or by the restored monarchy: at Lille, a middle-sized town, the theatre in 1815–16 gave more than 250 performances of all genres, of which 134 were of opera and ballet. In the period immediately after Waterloo an attempt was made to put the Paris Opéra back under royal and aristocratic control, but the 1830 revolution brought in a selfconsciously bourgeois regime both in the state and in the opera house. Provincial opera houses continued to provide a largely bourgeois audience with abundant fare; as France was also unusual at this time in having an effective system of copyright for both the text and the music of French-language operas, Italian composers such as Donizetti and Verdi were keen to see French versions of their works going round this circuit, quite apart from the works they wrote specifically for Paris.

A similar change took place under French influence in parts of Italy and Germany, but piecemeal and more slowly. Milan, chosen by Napoleon as his Italian capital, developed a considerable middle class which by the 1820s was occupying much of the space formerly taken up by 'black cloaks'; it was also the first place in Italy to

get rid of hierarchical pricing by class and genre (i.e. higher prices for nobles, lowest for servants; higher for serious opera, lower for comic). Whether and how fast such changes came about depended on the general social and economic make-up of the town and the pattern of control over particular theatres. The main opera house in the capital of a small German or Italian State was likely still to be dominated by the court; in Venice, the leading theatre, the aristocratically controlled La Fenice, resisted making the top tier into an undivided gallery (seen as relatively 'popular') until 1878, but other Venice theatres were less fussy.

A special case was Britain, economically the most advanced country in the first two-thirds of the 19th century, but with a middle class of whom many avoided opera, some through religious scruples about all theatre-going, others out of a longstanding preference for native mixed genres (ballad opera, pantomime etc.). George Eliot, representative of the Victorian middle class at its finest, associated opera with the appurtenances of 'good society' – 'claret', 'velvet carpets', 'dinner engagements six weeks deep', 'faery ballrooms' – an association it has never wholly shaken off. True, there was, alongside the taste for opera as an imported luxury, a middle-class following for the modest line of native operas (by Balfe, Wallace etc.) and for the Pyne-Harrison company which gave opera in English. In the USA opera remained an exotic import (first Italian or French, then German). Religious objections had some force with the overwhelmingly middle-class audience here as well, though they did not prevent a stream of young women singers from going to Europe for training and a *début*; Emma Abbott (1850–91) did interpolate 'Nearer, my God, to Thee' in a performance of *La sonnambula* in Milan (it was hissed) and later declined to sing *La traviata* on moral grounds, though she relented in her American days as touring singer-manageress (she stressed the sentiment and the Worth gowns).

The Latin-American countries shared the North American propensity to consume opera as a luxury import from Italy or France, along with zarzuela from Spain; German opera did not arrive in strength until the 20th century. The audience here was heavily dominated by the Iberian-descended 'oligarchy'; from the 1860s it provided rich pickings for European troupes that took advantage of the South American winter, corresponding to the slack season in the northern hemisphere, and were prepared to face the attendant risks of yellow fever and coups d'état. In the last third of the 19th century, large Italian immigrant populations built up in Argentina, Uruguay and Chile: these supported an Italian popular opera, based on a few ultra-familiar repertory works.

By that time, repertory opera had become the norm in Italy itself, as well as in

France, Germany, Austria and Bohemia – the homelands of opera. Much the same group of works (headed by *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Lohengrin*, *Rigoletto*, *Il trovatore*, *La traviata*, *Faust*, *Mignon*, *Roméo et Juliette*, *Aida*, *Carmen*) were diffused year after year through many theatres of varying prestige, some of them frankly appealing to a middle- and lower-middle-class public. These theatres were often recently built; by 1880, when an ambitious new opera house (the Teatro Costanzi, now the Teatro dell'Opera) opened in Rome, it had only three tiers of boxes but two large undivided upper balconies, an arrangement which to begin with struck some people as insufficiently hierarchical, though it was soon accepted. From then on, boxes were on the retreat and balconies increasingly the norm. The many opera houses of the second or third rank were no longer dominated either by an aristocratic audience or by a demand for a steady diet of new works; opera and the new, highly popular genre of operetta often alternated, though the two (outside the German-speaking countries) remained distinct in their personnel and their management structures, operetta being more often put on by touring companies headed by a singer-manager. In these countries, the period between about 1860 and 1914 probably saw more and larger audiences for opera than at any time before or since, but far fewer new creations than in the 18th century or the early 19th. It was also a period of some economic strain, particularly for the more traditional aristocratic opera houses. The so-called 'great depression' of 1873–96, really a period of falling prices and lower profits (but on the whole of rising incomes for much of the urban population), damaged some aristocratic fortunes, and the coming of even limited suffrage and representative government brought subsidies for opera under attack. In Italy from 1860 (but in Germany not till 1918) the old state capitals lost their courts and with them much of the money and patronage that had made for notable opera seasons. Formerly important opera houses – at Naples, Venice, Florence, Parma, Modena – lost much of their quality though not (as Verdi grumbled apropos of Naples) their complacency.

(vi) The 20th century.

Strains of this kind were exacerbated in the 20th century by the coming of new technology in popular entertainment with which opera could not compete, and by a long-term rise in labour costs which an expensive art such as opera could not absorb.

The cinema from the 1910s, radio from the 1930s and television from the 1950s have diverted the great public from the opera house, though all three in their different ways (followed now by video) have made opera available to a wide

audience in conditions radically unlike those experienced in the theatre. (In Britain, this outcome is masked by the growth since World War II of regional opera companies and of long, regular London opera seasons; the devastating effects of the new media on the opera-going habit can best be perceived in France and Italy, where the habit was most rooted, though there has been some recovery since the 1960s.) Gramophone records, already important in the 1900s, have had a complex effect on both the production and the consumption of opera. In the early part of the century, they reinforced the cult of the aria and the solo voice, hence the cult of singers such as Caruso. More recently, long-playing records have made part of the audience familiar with entire works and with more works than ever before, but at the cost of further distancing it from what actually goes on in the opera house; on occasion, too, a new opera production is in effect a tryout of a recording. For singers and conductors, opera engagements may become incidents in a career focussed on the recording industry.

The rise in costs is essentially the result of paying decent wages to the rank and file of an opera company (chorus, orchestra etc.) in a country with a steadily rising standard of living. It has debarred impresarios from any longer attempting to manage opera. Even in the USA, the last impresario to run a popular opera company giving regular seasons, [Fortune T. Gallo](#), gave up soon after World War II. Opera in the USA nevertheless can still be run on a mixture of private and civic patronage, with corporate patronage playing an important role, as for example in the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts, sponsored by Texaco. The British government has wished opera companies in Britain to move in the same direction, but so far American levels of private patronage have been unattainable; opera in postwar Britain (as in continental countries since the 1920s at least) has depended on state subsidy and been run by non-profit-making institutions responsible to an intermediary body, the Arts Council (on the Continent, to an appropriate ministry). In Britain the perennial drawback of this system is inadequate funding and the threat of insidiously falling standards; on the Continent it is more often political interference, as in Italy, where the superintendence of an opera house is 'allotted' to a nominee of this or that political party. But that may confirm that where opera is thought important it remains, as a public art, inextricably bound up with political power.

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Opera in society

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