

8-2013

Eighteenth-century reception of Italian opera in London.

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<https://doi.org/10.18297/etd/753>

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EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY RECEPTION OF ITALIAN OPERA IN LONDON

By

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B.M., Southeast Missouri State University, 2009

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
Division of Music History of the University of Louisville
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Music

Department of Music
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

August 2013

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A Thesis Approved on

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Jack Ashworth, for his guidance and patience over the past two years. I would also like to thank the other members of my committee, Dr. Douglas Shadle and Mr. Dan Weeks, for their advice and hard work in helping me to complete this project. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to my parents and to my sister, Jody, who have loved and supported me in all of my endeavors.

ABSTRACT

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Kaylyn Kinder

August 13, 2013

In his 1776 *General History of Music*, English musician and music historian Dr. Charles Burney (1726–1814) wrote one of the most comprehensive and critically honest reviews of the introduction of Italian opera into England at the beginning of the eighteenth century, as well as its subsequent performances, successes, and struggles as it attempted to maintain a foothold in London. Burney's copious chronological account includes the names of active composers and performers, and detailed information about the types and titles of operas performed in London during this time. He even offered opinions on several topics pertaining to Italian opera, including his adamant defenses of the foreign entertainment in his native England. I have extracted these opinions from the surrounding factual material and have compared them with other contemporary accounts from English subjects during the first half of the eighteenth century in order to ascertain general sentiments or concerns the English public had at this time towards a foreign entertainment becoming such a large part of their theatrical culture. Results illustrated a gradual shift in English opinion of Italian opera as the century progressed, as well as a change in what the English expected from the entertainment, its composers, and its performers.

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INTRODUCTION

“The ancient Romans had the fine arts and eminent artists from Greece; and, in return, the modern Romans supply all the rest of Europe with painting, sculpture, and Music. This last art is a manufacture in Italy, that feeds and enriches a large portion of the people; and it is no more disgraceful to a mercantile country to import it, than wine, tea, or any other production of remote parts of the world.”—Charles Burney, *A General History of Music*, 1776¹

English musician and historian Dr. Charles Burney (1726–1814) was one of the first music historians to compile and publish a history of Western music. He famously traveled across Europe in the 1770s to research music of other European nations, interviewing musicians and composers along the way and keeping a meticulous description of his daily activities. To this day his journals remain one of the best sources for an honest, first-hand account of music and other activities across Europe in the eighteenth century.²

¹ Charles Burney, *A General History of Music: From the Earliest Ages to the Present Period*, ed. Frank Mercer, vol. 2 (New York: Dover Publications, 1957). All quotes hereafter have been transcribed exactly as they appear in their respective sources.

² Burney traveled first through France and Italy in 1770 and then Central Europe and the Netherlands in 1772. For an account of his first trip see: Dr. Charles Burney, *An eighteenth-century musical tour in France and Italy: being Dr. Charles Burney's account of his musical experiences as it appears in his published volume with which are incorporated his travel experiences according to his original intention*, ed. Percy Alfred Scholes (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1959). For the account of his travels through Central Europe and the Netherlands see: Dr. Charles Burney, *An eighteenth-century musical tour in Central Europe and the Netherlands; being Dr. Charles Burney's account of his musical experiences*, ed. Percy Alfred Scholes (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).

In the true fashion of the Enlightenment, the compilation of these adventures resulted in his *General History of Music from the Earliest Ages to the Present Period*, published between 1776 and 1789. In addition to giving one of the most detailed accounts of European musical activity of its time, the book manifests Burney's own biases and prejudices, which in turn reveal a great deal about the opinions and viewpoints of a learned Englishman in the eighteenth century.

Of all the information contained within the four volumes the largest portion was dedicated to opera, particularly to Italian opera in England. Burney's painstaking chronological account of Italian opera's introduction into England revealed that it was not simply imported there, and it certainly did not thrive for many years after its introduction. Rather, it arrived on English shores in a form almost unrecognizable to its Italian originators, and then struggled to gain acceptance for many years.

It is not surprising that Burney, an educated musician who traveled throughout Italy and spent weeks in Naples, the very heart of Italian opera, would fail to understand why Italian opera had not been immediately embraced in his homeland nearly 70 years earlier. Indeed, if an English viewpoint on Italian opera in London is to be sought during the first years of the eighteenth century, and with it answers as to why an art form that was overwhelmingly embraced throughout the rest of Europe had trouble gaining a foothold in England, one cannot expect to find answers in Burney alone. To comprehend any criticisms or opinions of Italian opera in England it is important to seek an understanding of the context in which it was brought into the country and to attempt to determine the current state of the theatre and of English tastes and preferences prior to its introduction.

Italian music, art, and literature were already a major part of English culture well before the turn of the eighteenth century. The taste for Italian madrigals and the *stile recitativo*, along with the pastoral literature of Giovanni Battista Guarini (1538–1612) and others, can be traced back as far as Nicholas Yonge’s *Musica Transalpina* of 1588.³ Further evidence of Italian musical influence can be observed in the music of composers like Nicholas Lanier (1588–1666) and Henry Lawes (1595–1662).⁴ Even English theatre was influenced by Italian culture, as can be seen in the plays of William Shakespeare (1564–1616), especially *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Merchant of Venice*, among others.

An initial step for the English towards an opera was the semi-opera, which, as described by Richard Taruskin, was a comic ballet adapted to the “tastes, and above all to the longstanding prejudices, of the English theatergoing public.”⁵ These “prejudices” included an English favoritism shown toward chorus and dance, and, most fundamentally, the long-standing tradition of the English theatre and the importance of spoken text carrying dramatic weight. Music in the theatre was reserved for entertainments between acts, dances, effects, or on rare occasions for minor characters, yet always remained subservient to the dramatic text. Spoken text was therefore reserved for the lines of important characters in order that the text remain discernible to the audience.

³ *Musica Transalpina*, compiled by Nicholas Yonge (d. 1619), was the first printed collection of Italian madrigals to which English words were set.

⁴ For more information on the Italian influence on English song in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries see: Ian Spink, *English Song: Dowland to Purcell* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1974). Also see Vincent Duckles, *English Song and the Challenge of Italian Monody*, in *Words to Music: Papers on English Seventeenth Century Song Read at a Clark Library Seminar, December 11, 1965* by Vincent Duckles and Franklin B. Zimmerman, introduction by Walter H. Rubsamen (William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California, Los Angeles, 1967), 1-25.

⁵ Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, vol. 2, *Music in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 127.

Additionally, the restoration of Charles II to the English throne in 1660 following his brief exile at the French court of Louis XIV brought the influence of French opera to the English theatre. Under these new influences, composers like John Blow (1648/9–1708) and Henry Purcell (1659–95) composed dramas that were continuously sung throughout—first Blow’s *Venus and Adonis* in 1683 and then Purcell’s famous *Dido and Aeneas* around 1689.⁶ These productions, with their traditional French overtures, lack of spoken text, and elaborate stage decorations (which made them expensive to mount and thus rarely performed), would have been the closest dramas to resemble Italian operas until after the turn of the century.⁷

Although Purcell never composed an Italian-style opera, his ability to set the English language in his works for the stage established a preferred taste and expectation of the English people for other stage works to follow, including operas in the Italian style. Evidence of such partiality for Purcell can be found in numerous sources from around the turn of the eighteenth century. One example is contained in marginal notes written onto a copy of a discourse on Italian opera in England that was published in 1709.⁸ In these notes, the anonymous author (from now on referred to as Author A) expressed nothing

⁶ The first known performance of *Dido and Aeneas* was in 1689. Although they are often referred to as “semi-operas,” *Dido and Aeneas* and *Venus and Adonis* were dramas that were sung entirely throughout, making them different from the other English semi-operas at the time, which maintained spoken text for all dialogues or for the most important characters.

⁷ Curtis 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), 3.

⁸ This discourse was published with, and added to, the English translation of François Ragueneau’s *Parallèle des Italiens et des Français en ce qui regarde la musique et les opèras* (*A Comparison Between the French and Italian Musick and Operas*) by an anonymous author in 1709. One copy of this addendum contains anonymous marginal notes from a separate author commenting on the material and can be found here: François Ragueneau, *A Comparison Between the French and Italian Musick and Opera’s. Translated from the French; With some Remarks. To which is added A Critical Discourse upon Opera’s in England, and a Means proposed for their Improvement*, London: Printed for William Lewis, 1709. Repr. ed. Introduction by Charles Cudworth (Westmead, Farnborough, Hants: Gregg International Publishers Limited, 1968).

but admiration for Purcell, and claimed: “I have seen much Italian musick. And in all that which ever came or cou’d come to Mr Purcell’s sight, I never saw anything but what I cou’d have match’d with something of his as good att least.”⁹ Since this was published in the early eighteenth century, it is apparent that Purcell’s music was still very much in the memory of the English people at the time, and this author, at least, needed more convincing as to the ability of Italian opera ever to surpass his music. Even Burney, writing over half a century later, noted that Purcell “is as much the pride of an Englishman in Music, as Shakespeare in productions for the stage, Milton in epic poetry, Locke in metaphysics, or Sir Isaac Newton in philosophy and mathematics.”¹⁰

In summation, the English had been somewhat previously exposed to opera through French operatic influences that highly emphasized grandiose overtures, dancing, and choruses. They had also been exposed to the Italian *stile recitativo* and to the virtuosic singing of the few traveling Italian performers that toured through London. The English were also partial to dramatic text being primarily reserved for speaking with music used as an interlude or diversion, an addendum to the main performance.

And so this was the environment into which Italian opera was launched in England. It would seem that the English, who had been so welcoming of other cultures’ ideas and music previously, would have welcomed Italian opera into its borders in the same fashion, but as Burney and others reported, such was not the case. It came to London first in an almost unrecognizable form and then struggled to maintain a foothold

⁹ Although this author is not identified and his or her comments cannot be dated with certainty, the writing style is similar to that of the actual author of the discourse (Author B) and was probably written shortly after the addendum’s publication in 1709. Ragueneau, *A Comparison*, 65.

¹⁰ Burney, *A General History*, 380.

until a handful of Italian singers and composers (particularly the German-born George Frideric Handel) solidified its place in the theatres of London.

CHAPTER 1

ITALIAN OPERA “STEALS” INTO ENGLAND

“The Italian Opera began first to steal into England; but in as rude a disguise, and unlike itself, as possible, in a lame, hobbling Translation, into our own Language, with false Quantities, or metre out of Measure, to its original Notes, sung by our own unskillful Voices, with Graces misapply’d to almost every Sentiment, and with Action, lifeless and unmeaning, through every Character.” –Colley Cibber, *An Apology for the Life of Colley Cibber*, 1740.¹¹

The above quote from English actor Colley Cibber’s (1671–1757) autobiography *An Apology for the Life of Colley Cibber*, though cynical of the English attempt to assimilate Italian opera, is still one of the most concise summations of the progressive and sometimes confusing steps by which this happened. Thankfully this account is well documented in two thorough histories published several years after Cibber’s book. The first was Burney’s *General History of Music*, published in four volumes between 1776 and 1789.¹² The second, also from 1776, was *A General History of the Science and Practice of Music*, published by Sir John Hawkins (1719–89).¹³ Although these histories

¹¹Colley Cibber, *An Apology for the Life of Colley Cibber: With an Historical View of the Stage During His Own Time*, ed. B.R.S. Fone (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1968), 175.

¹² Kerry S. Grant, “Burney, Charles,” in *Grove Music Online*, <http://www.grovemusic.com/> (accessed 3 February 2013).

¹³ Percy A. Scholes, “Hawkins, Sir John,” in *Grove Music Online*, <http://www.grovemusic.com/> (accessed 3 February 2013). Hawkins’ *A General History of the Science and Practice of Music* can be found here: John Hawkins, *A General History of the Science and Practice of Music*, introduction by Charles Cudworth, vol.2 (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1963).

differ in minor ways, they primarily corroborate one another and together paint a detailed and mostly consistent account of the history of English music up to that time.

According to Burney's account, Italian singers, including Francesca de l'Epine (c.1680–1746) and Pier Francesco Tosi (1654–1732), began to arrive in London and wow English audience-goers with virtuosic Italian solo literature during the final decade of the seventeenth century.¹⁴ Next, Burney claimed, was *Arsinoe Queen of Cyprus* in 1705, which was the first “musical drama that was wholly performed after the Italian manner, in recitative for the dialogue or narrative parts, and measured melody for the airs.”¹⁵ Here Burney was discussing the opera's form and comparing it to the Italian opera model where the drama is constructed with arias and recitatives to link them. Aside from the form, nothing else about this opera could truly be called “Italian.” The libretto, although taken directly from an older Italian opera of the same name, was translated into English for its London performance and the music was newly-composed by Englishman Thomas Clayton (c.1670–c.1730), who had supposedly gone to Italy and felt himself capable of replicating the Italian style in his homeland.¹⁶ Essentially *Arsinoe* was an Italian text, translated into English, and set to Italianate music.

Clayton himself serves as an excellent witness to the over-arching ideals and expectations of his English public's ears at the time, for his preface to the printed score of

¹⁴ Burney, *A General History*, 652–653.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 654–655.

¹⁶ This opera was originally composed by Petronio Franceschini (1651–80) with libretto by Tommaso Stanzani (c.1647–1717) and premiered in Bologna in 1676. Thomas Walker and Marc Vanscheeuwijck, “Franceschini, Petronio,” in *Grove Music Online*, <http://www.grovemusic.com/> (accessed 5 June 2013).

Arsinoe stated his intentions for the work and addressed his concerns that it might not be immediately accepted:

The design of this entertainment being to introduce the Italian manner of Musick on the English stage, which has not been before attempted, I was obliged to have an Italian Opera translated: in which the words, however mean in several places, suited much better with that manner of Musick, than others more poetical would do. The style of this Musick is to express the passions, which is the soul of Musick; and though the voices are not equal to the Italian, yet I have engaged the best that were to be found in England; and I have not been wanting, to the utmost of my diligence, in the instructing of them. The Musick being recitative, may not, at first, meet with that general acceptance, as is to be hoped for, from the audience's being better acquainted with it: but if this attempt shall be a means of bringing this manner of Musick to be used in my native country, I shall think my study and pains very well employed.¹⁷

Here Clayton was concerned with his audience's lack of understanding of his work, but his statements tell a great deal about English preferences and tastes. For example, the line "The Musick being recitative, may not, at first, meet with that general acceptance..." directly addressed the English favoritism for spoken dialogue in their dramas. Another interesting comment he made was to seemingly apologize that his performers were English. This shows that as early as 1705, an understood superiority of Italian to English singers was prevalent enough to warrant Clayton's justification of his available performers.

The numerous contemporary accounts of *Arsinoe* illustrate that Clayton was justified in feeling the need to defend his work. Particularly scathing criticism can be found in the same discourse onto which Author A scratched his or her commentary of Purcell. The anonymous author of the discourse itself (which is an addendum to the 1709 English translation of François Ragueneau's *A Comparison Between the French and*

¹⁷ Quoted in Burney, *A General History*, 655.

Italian Musick and Opera's) claimed that "there is nothing in [*Arsinoe*] but a few Sketches of antiquated Italian Airs, so mangled and sophisticated, that instead of *Arsinoe*, it ought to be called the Hospital of the old Decrepid Italian Opera's."¹⁸ The author (Author B) also added that it no more deserved the title of "opera" than the dramas of Purcell, because at least those works had "several beautiful Strokes, compos'd by the late Famous Mr. Henry Purcell; whereas it will be as difficult to discover one tolerable thing in [*Arsinoe*]."¹⁹ Burney, though looking retrospectively, was also not impressed:

In the title-page of the Music, printed by Walsh, we are assured that [*Arsinoe*] was wholly composed by Mr. Thomas Clayton; and in justice to the masters of Italy at that time, it may be allowed to be his own, as nothing so mean in melody and incorrect in counterpoint was likely to have been produced by any of the reigning composers of that time. For not only the common rules of musical composition are violated in every song, but the prosody and accents of our language. The translation is wretched; but it is rendered much more absurd by the manner in which it is set to Music. Indeed, the English must have hungered and thirsted extremely after dramatic Music at this time, to be attracted and amused by such trash. It is scarce credible, that in the course of the first year this miserable performance, which neither deserved the name of *drama* by its poetry, nor an *opera* by its Music, should sustain twenty-four representations, and the second year eleven!²⁰

Obviously Burney was just as surprised as Author B at the opera's success. Yet where Author B compared Clayton's work to Purcell and found it wanting, further demonstrating the prevalent English taste for Purcell at the turn of the eighteenth century, Burney compared Clayton's inferiority to that of the "Italian masters." So although both agree that Clayton did not measure up to their ideals of good music, they evaluated him

¹⁸ Ragueneau, *A Comparison*, 65. Hawkins lists the addendum author and translator (Author B) as Johann Ernst Galliard (c.1680–1749) in a footnote. Hawkins, *The Science and Practice of Music*, 810. Burney, however, disagrees with him and says that, although it is often attributed to Galliard, that it could not be him. Burney, 989.

¹⁹ Ragueneau, *A Comparison*, 65.

²⁰ Burney, *A General History*, 656, 658-659

against qualitatively different standards, a fact that illustrates changing preferences of English audience members across the course of the eighteenth century. Although Hawkins agreed with both of them, he dismissed Clayton as being nothing more than an adamant self-promoter with little talent.²¹

The next Italian-style opera to be mounted at Drury Lane was met with unanimous applause: *Camilla* (1706), a work with music by Giovanni Bononcini (1670–1747) that was translated into English and prepared by Nicola Francesco Haym (1678–1729).²² As with *Arsinoe*, the libretto was a simple English translation of the Italian original, but whether the music was composed by an actual Italian composer, or because this opera had already experienced so much notoriety elsewhere in Europe, *Camilla* was immediately successful in London and would be continuously produced by various houses across the city for years afterward. The anonymous Author B had nothing but praise for it, saying: “[*Camilla*] receiv’d so Universal an Applause, that I don’t think it ever met with so good a Reception in any of its first Representations Abroad.”²³ The author continued:

Before this, ev’ry Man that had the least smattering in Musick undertook to Compose an Opera, but upon the appearance of *Camilla*, all their Projects vanish’d into nothing; they who before bragg’d of their Undertakings, were now asham’d to own ‘em, and they who had valu’d themselves upon having almost finish’d their Work, begun now to deny they had so much as set about it; so that at least six or seven Embryo’s of Opera’s, that had no Being but in the airy Conceptions of their pretended Composers, became Abortive, and every one join’d in the admiration of *Camilla*.²⁴

²¹Hawkins gives the year as 1707. Hawkins, *The Science and Practice of Music*, 810.

²² Burney, *A General History*, 656.

²³ Ragueneau, *A Comparison*, 67.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

The marginal writer, Author A (who rarely agreed with Author B), also commended *Camilla*, or rather Author B's praise of *Camilla*, as "fine," "mighty fine," and "perfectly fine."²⁵ Burney himself did not voice a personal opinion of the opera, recounting only the frequent number of times it was performed, but Hawkins felt that the work might have been overrated, partly because Bononcini was so young when he wrote it.²⁶

Since *Camilla* seems to have had the same troupe as *Arsinoe*, and, like the earlier opera, its text was simply the original Italian translated into English, the only variable was the music itself. One was by an Englishman attempting to replicate the style of Italian music he had observed during his travels while the other was an authentic Italian opera composer. Considering that they were only just being introduced to Italianate music, it seems as though English audience-goers were already able to differentiate between the authentic and the inauthentic as early as 1706. No account appears to give any reason as to why *Camilla* was superior; it is as if it was simply understood to be superior, and numerous performances would only solidify this opinion over time.

Additionally, according to Hawkins' account, *Camilla* was the first opera in which another phenomenon occurred that would at first be the object of ridicule but would eventually lead to the adoption of Italian opera performed in Italian in London. Hawkins said that "to accommodate the singers of our own country, many of the recitatives and airs were translated into English," but since the role of Turnus was performed by an Italian singer Valentino "Valentini" Urbani (fl. 1690–1722), his lines

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Hawkins, *The Science and Practice of Music*, 815.

were kept in Italian, thus resulting in a dual-language production.²⁷ He added, “notwithstanding the glaring absurdity of so motley a performance, it is said that the opera of *Camilla* never met with so good a reception abroad as it did here.”²⁸ These dual-language performances would become commonplace in London, especially as more Italian singers began to arrive in England (see Chapter 2).

In 1705, manager Sir John Vanbrugh (1664–1726) opened the Queen’s Theatre at the Haymarket and although this theatre performed more traditional English dramas, it was also the first public house to be opened with the idea of promoting Italian-style opera in London in addition to its other performances.²⁹ Precise details concerning these early performances can be difficult to ascertain due to conflicting contemporary accounts, but it is clear that the first few productions of Italian-style operas at the Queen’s Theatre were relatively unsuccessful, especially when compared to *Camilla*. These, too, were translated Italian libretti set to newly-composed music, and most accounts agree that the music was written by Giacomo Greber (d. 1731) who, like Clayton, had traveled to Italy and studied Italian opera. Ironically, Burney claimed that because Greber was German, these operas could not “with accuracy” be called “Italian” (although he would later have no problem considering Handel’s operas to be “Italian”).³⁰

Despite the overwhelming success of *Camilla*, the next opera to be launched at Drury Lane also met with almost unanimous criticism. This opera was *Rosamond*, which seems to be the first completely “English” opera attempted in England, with both text and

²⁷ Ibid., 810. This account is also verified by Cibber in his autobiography. Cibber, *An Apology*, 175.

²⁸ Hawkins, *The Science and Practice of Music*, 810.

²⁹ Price, Milhous, and Hume, *Italian Opera in Late Eighteenth-Century London*, 3.

³⁰ Burney, *A General History*, 657.

music newly created for this performance. The composer was once again Thomas Clayton, author of *Arsinoe*, but the librettist was Joseph Addison (1672–1719), an established playwright who ironically would later become one of the most outspoken critics of Italian opera in England. It also appears that the same troupe as *Arsinoe* was used for this performance as well.

Critics of this opera were brutal, but, unlike the case with the first productions at the Queen’s Theatre, these accounts also included explanations of its shortcomings. Author B of the anonymous addendum claimed that it was “no better than a confus’d Chaos of Musick, where there is ev’ry thing, and nothing...” and that its only merit was that it was short.³¹ Hawkins later agreed, claiming that “A criticism on this most wretched performance is more than it deserves,” and noted that one of the reasons it failed was because of the music “preponderating against the elegance and humor of the poetry, and the reputation of [Clayton].”³² Burney likewise blamed its lack of success almost entirely on Clayton’s music, but said that Addison, who was supposed to be a great critic of music, should have known better:

...but this admirable writer and respectable critic in topics within his competence, never manifested a greater want of taste and intelligence in Music than when he employed Clayton to set his opera of *Rosamond*. Indeed, it seems as if nothing but the grossest ignorance, or defect of ear, could be imposed upon by the pretensions of so shallow and contemptible a composer.³³

All accounts blamed the opera’s failure on Clayton. Author B restricted commentary to the overture, saying it had novelty “without Sense, Reason, or Harmony”

³¹ Ragueneau, *A Comparison*, 69.

³² Hawkins, *The Science and Practice of Music*, 811.

³³ Burney, *A General History*, 658.

and that the rest of the opera was nothing but a “continuation of the *Bassi arpeggiati* without any other design than to Promise much, and Perform nothing.”³⁴ He continued to claim that the rest of the opera matched the overture in disappointment. Hawkins, too, focused his criticism on the overture saying that the first movement “pretends to a great deal of spirit, but is mere noise.”³⁵ He also said that “as to the songs, they have neither air nor expression. There is one that sings thus: O the pleasing, pleasing, pleasing, pleasing, pleasing anguish.”³⁶ Hawkins thus criticized both Clayton and Addison for essentially accomplishing nothing and giving the audience nothing, both in terms of music and of text. Therefore, as Burney recounted, “[*Rosamond*], in spite of its poetical merit ... was laid aside and never again performed to the same Music.”³⁷

Though on the whole struggling to gain a foothold, Italian opera was large enough to make adamant supporters of the traditional English stage feel somewhat threatened. Cibber recounted in his biography, for example, that some actors even sought legal action to require that theatres be dedicated specifically to the traditional English plays and other theatres to the new Italian operas.³⁸ An outspoken contemporary account that clearly articulated some of these opinions comes from the English playwright John Dennis (1658–1734). One needs only to read the full title of his 1706 piece, *An Essay on the Opera's After the Italian Manner, Which are About to be Establish'd on the English Stage: With Some Reflections on the Damage Which They May Bring to the Publick*, to

³⁴ Ragueneau, *A Comparison*, 68.

³⁵ Hawkins, *The Science and Practice of Music*, 811.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Burney, *A General History*, 658.

³⁸ See Cibber, *An Apology*, 182-210.

understand his feelings toward Italian opera in England.³⁹ Dennis here called operas “Diversions without Reason” and further asserted that “the Italian Opera, another Entertainment, which is about to be establish’d in the room of Plays, is a Diversion of more pernicious Consequence, than the most licentious Play that ever has appear’d upon the Stage.”⁴⁰ His arguments revolved around the legacy of the Ancients and how drama was a continuation of their great heritage, saying that the greatest kings and philosophers all wrote dramas. He also evoked the Commonwealth, a time when English theatres were closed, with bitterness and warning:

...that here in England indeed two or three formal affected Bigots...upon a pretence of making all Men good Christians...have actually made Thousands ten times worse than they would have been without them: That the Consequence of their Writings has been, that Plays have been for some Years discourag’d, and Diversions establish’d in the room of them, that have been, and are like to be ten times more prejudicial to the Publick than ever Plays were pretended to be.⁴¹

Because Dennis felt that the response to the Commonwealth’s crackdown on English theatres only made the morals of the English people worse, he warned that the introduction and acceptance of Italian opera would likewise overrun the English theatre and contribute to the overall ignorance of the English people, asserting that it is “undeniable, that in whatever Countries Operas have been establish’d after the manner of Italy, they have driven out Poetry from among that People.”⁴² Finally, in addition to

³⁹This essay can be found here: John Dennis, “An Essay on the Opera’s After the Italian Manner, Which are about to be Establish’d on the English Stage: With Some Reflections on the Damage Which They May Bring to the Publick” in *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, ed. by Edward Niles Hooker, vol. 1 (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1939), 382.

⁴⁰ Dennis, “An Essay on the Opera’s,” 382-383.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, 386.

claims that these operas made innocent women lose their “original Innocence” to “those Heroes with luxurious Voices,” Dennis considered it an issue of national autonomy:

...when I presume to oppose a popular and prevailing Caprice, and to defend the English Stage, which together with our English Liberties has descended to us from our Ancestors; to defend it against that Deluge of mortal Foes, which have come pouring in from the Continent, to drive out the Muses, its old Inhabitants, and seat themselves in their stead; that while the English Arms are every where Victorious abroad, the English Arts may not be vanquish'd and oppress'd at home by the Invasion of Foreign Luxury.⁴³

Cibber also shared Dennis' concerns about the replacement of English plays with Italian opera because, he claimed, there are “many more People...that can see and hear, than think and judge.”⁴⁴ Other contemporary accounts and criticisms deepened this split and seemed to pin English theater-goers to one side or the other. On one side was the continuation of the English tradition and the maintenance of English theatre as the dominant form of entertainment in the land, and on the other was the new “invasion” of Italian operas that, as Cibber puts it, “hobbled” into England in a “rude disguise,” or a mere shadow of their successful selves in Italy.

The most prevalent objection to these early translated operas was that the English texts simply did not make sense. The majority of these early opera libretti were Italian texts translated from the original opera and sometimes words were changed, added, or removed as the English composer or arranger saw fit. This led to occasions where the translated text either did not make sense in English, or where the English text did not go hand-in-hand with the music, disturbing or sometimes missing the Affect entirely.

⁴³ Ibid., 384-385.

⁴⁴ Cibber, *An Apology*, 57.

This was famously pointed out by Joseph Addison, one of the most out-spoken critics of Italian opera in the early eighteenth century, in 1711 and 1712 in his London-based newspaper, *The Spectator*. Although Addison himself had attempted (and failed) with his own go at Italian opera with *Rosamond*, he later spared the genre no ridicule, particularly when he discussed the nonsensical texts of Italian operas when rendered in his native tongue:

Our authors would often make words of their own, which were entirely foreign to the meaning of the passages they pretended to translate...thus the famous song in Camilla, 'Barbara si t'intendo,' 'Barbarous woman, yes, I know your meaning,' which expresses the resentments of an angry lover, was translated into that English lamentation, 'Frail are a lover's hopes,' etc. And it was pleasant enough to see the most refined persons of the British nation dying away and languishing to notes that were filled with a spirit of rage and indignation.⁴⁵

He also added, "I have known the word *and* pursued through the whole gamut, have been entertained with many a melodious *the*, and have heard the most beautiful graces, quavers, and divisions bestowed upon *then*, *for*, and *from*, to the eternal honor of our English particles."⁴⁶ So, as Addison humorously pointed out, the music usually either did not compliment the text being sung, or the text was not always set well to the music, resulting in the music accentuating smaller or unimportant words over words that would otherwise normally be stressed.

Of course the alternative to these inscrutable English translations would be to perform an entire opera in its original Italian for an audience that largely did not understand the language, which is precisely what happened. As Addison recalled:

⁴⁵ Joseph Addison, "History of the Italian Opera," in *The Works of Joseph Addison*, edited with critical and explanatory notes by George Washington Greene, vol. 5, *The Spectator* (New York: G.P. Putnam and Company, 1854), 62-63.

⁴⁶ Addison, "History of Italian Opera," 62-63

At length the audience grew tired of understanding half the opera; and therefore to ease themselves entirely of the fatigue of thinking, have so ordered it at present, that the whole opera is performed in an unknown tongue. We no longer understand the language of our own stage. I cannot forbear thinking how naturally an historian who writes two or three hundred years hence...will make the following reflection: ‘In the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Italian tongue was so well understood in England, that operas were acted on the public stage in that language.’⁴⁷

Despite what Addison postulated, “three hundred years hence” it is clear that the majority of eighteenth-century English opera patrons did not speak Italian, which can make it difficult to reconcile how a people could embrace a foreign drama in a foreign tongue when they were already complaining that the English productions were indiscernible. However, Addison himself gave perhaps the most important reason for this occurrence as he continued his criticisms:

The next step in our refinement, was the introduction of the Italian actors into our opera, who sung their parts in their own language, at the same time that our countrymen performed theirs in our native tongue. The king or hero of the play generally spoke in Italian, and his slaves answered him in English: the lover frequently made his court, and gained the heart of his princess, in a language which she did not understand.⁴⁸

Here Addison was poking fun at operas like *Camilla* that featured singers “conversing” in two different languages, but his statement also reveals something else. The roles of kings or heroes in Italian operas of the seventeenth and most of the eighteenth centuries were almost always performed by castrati, a commodity that the English did not possess. If a country does not have a commodity then it must be imported, and if these castrati would only sing in their native Italian, then the English would have to settle for these mixed-language productions that most felt were ridiculous. The alternative was to listen to an

⁴⁷ Ibid., 64

⁴⁸ Ibid., 63.

opera wholly in Italian, and if the majority of the nation already felt that Italian was the most superb language for singing anyway, this step was inevitable.

CHAPTER 2

THE INEVITABLE ITALIAN “INVASION”

“For there is no question but our great grand-children will be very curious to know the reason why their fore-fathers used to sit together like an audience of foreigners in their own country, and to hear whole plays acted before them in a tongue which they did not understand.” –Addison, *The Spectator*, 1711.⁴⁹

In 1702, a French physician named François Ragueneau (c.1660–1722) published his *Parallèle des Italiens et des Français en ce qui regarde la musique et les opéras* (*A Comparison Between the French and Italian Musick and Opera's*), a book that was widely distributed throughout Europe, including England, particularly after an English translation was published in 1709. Here Ragueneau compared French and Italian opera and gave his perceived advantages and disadvantages of each. One of his most prominent points, in addition to saying that the Italian language was more apt for singing than his native French, was that Italian singers were simply the best in Europe, claiming they “sing from their Cradles.”⁵⁰ His strongest praise, however, was reserved for the Italian castrati, whose manufactured voices, according to Ragueneau, were unequalled in power, grace, and beauty in all of music:

No Man or Woman in the World can boast of a Voice like Theirs, they are clear, they are moving, and affect the Soul it self [*sic*]. . . a Voice the most clear, and at the same time equally soft, pierces the Symphony, and tops all the instruments with an agreeableness which they that hear it may

⁴⁹ Addison, “History of the Italian Opera,” 61-62.

⁵⁰ Ragueneau, *A Comparison*, 19.

conceive, but will never be able to describe. What can be more affecting than the Expressions of their Sufferings in such tender passionate Notes.⁵¹

Although castrati were not well received in France, the rest of Europe embraced them, which lead to a cultural bias in which Italian singers, especially castrati, were considered superior to any other. Author B, who translated Raguenet's work into English in 1709, used Raguenet's points to argue that Italian opera in England had to be sung in Italian instead of English because Italian was a "Language the most proper for Musick of any other in Europe: Musick seems to have been born with it."⁵² Author A agreed saying, "You must have foreign operas. They must bee sung all in Italian," and "wee must have an Italian opera (which wee knew before)."⁵³ Since he dismissed this as common knowledge, it can be assumed that he felt this was the general English opinion and not worthy of a lengthy discussion.

This idea of the supremacy of Italian singers, and of the Italian language for singing, held even to Burney, who echoed Raguenet's claims to argue that the transition to Italian was inevitable:

It is universally allowed that the Italian tongue is more sonorous, more sweet, and of more easy utterance, than any other modern language; and that the Music of Italy, particularly the vocal, perhaps for that reason, has been more successfully cultivated than any other in Europe. Now the vocal Music of Italy can only be heard in perfection when sung to its own language and by its own natives, who give both the language and Music their true accents and expression. There is as much reason for wishing to hear Italian Music performed in this genuine manner, as for the lovers of painting to prefer an original picture of Raphael to a copy.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Ibid., 37-38.

⁵² Ibid., 84.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Burney, *A General History*, 672.

Likewise, Burney spent a great deal of time in his *General History of Music* defending Italian opera and answering Addison's criticisms that the audience suffered because the operas were Italian. He claimed that Addison's issue with the audience's inability to understand the language was moot because "things to be heard or seen, as exhibitions, must be extraordinary: people will never be at the trouble and expense of going to a public place for what they can hear or see at home."⁵⁵ In short, Burney said that the "confusion of tongues" to which Addison spoke "seems to have been tolerated with great good nature by the public; who, in Music, as well as words, seemed to care much less about what was sung, than how it was sung."⁵⁶ He even went so far as to suggest that Addison's attacks were fueled primarily by jealousy at the failure of his own production (*Rosamond*), saying that "complaints of neglect are generally the croakings of inferiority" and that "disputable talents frequently remain in obscurity, but supreme excellence will burst through all prejudice, indifference, and opposition, and always shine with due luster in the eyes of the grateful public."⁵⁷

The cornerstone of Burney's defense, however, rested with the fact that audience members, in his opinion, came to operas to hear the singers, not necessarily for the drama or the text: "The poetry of an Italian opera in England is wholly out of the question; nor has the Music much to do with its success; it is generally upon the *singing* that its favour entirely depends. Great and favourite singers only can save an Italian musical drama of any kind in this country."⁵⁸ When considering Burney's point that it is "generally upon

⁵⁵ Ibid., 677.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 663.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 677.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 680-681.

the singing that [an opera's] favour entirely depends," along with the fact that the bulk of Burney's account of Italian opera in England (as well as similar accounts found in his journals from his European travels) was devoted not to the composers or librettists but rather to the actual vocalists themselves, it is clear that Burney felt that the foundation of an opera's success was a remarkable talent. Addison's "failure" to understand this suggests a shift in opinion from one point in time to the next; that sometime between the introduction of Italian opera in 1705 and Burney's historical account in 1789 the English people lost their overall concern for an understanding of the text in favor of a fantastic leading (and Italian) singer.

Both Burney and Hawkins documented the "invasion" (to use John Dennis' language) of these Italian singers into England and the gradual acceptance of completely Italian operas.⁵⁹ At the turn of the eighteenth century, Italian singers were special foreign spectacles who traveled to England for a season or so to perform primarily solo works at occasional performances. The first mention of Italian singers in English operas comes with *Camilla* in 1706, where some roles were given to native Italians who sang their parts in Italian while the remaining cast performed in English. Both Burney and Hawkins revealed that, after this period, a continuous flood of Italian performers appeared between *Camilla* and the arrival of Handel in 1710, including the emergence of the castrato Nicolo "Nicolini" Grimaldi (1673–1732) around 1707.⁶⁰ Grimaldi's arrival was highly documented, which says a great deal about his fame and of England's reaction and

⁵⁹ Dennis claimed that Italian opera's introduction into England was an "Invasion of Foreign Luxury." Dennis, *An Essay on the Opera's*, 385.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 661.

acceptance of him. Cibber, for example, wrote that “no Singer, since his Time, has so justly, and gracefully acquitted himself, in whatever Character he appear’d, as Nicolini.”⁶¹ Nearly all accounts praised him both in voice and in acting, including Addison, who wrote that he “sets off the Character he bears in an Opera, by his Action, as much as he does the Words of it, by his Voice; every Limb, and Finger, contributes to the Part he acts, insomuch that a deaf Man might go along with him in the Sense of it—He performs the most ordinary Action, in a manner suitable to the Greatness of his Character.”⁶² Burney also noted that with the arrival of Nicolini and the subsequent fame he acquired, opera prices began to rise for the productions in which he was appearing, which is perhaps the first link between talent and special pricing observed in England.⁶³

The part-Italian, part-English operas continued to be performed sporadically as more and more Italian singers (and composers) traveled to England until 1710, when the first completely Italian opera (that is, performed in Italian by Italian singers) was executed.⁶⁴ This opera was *Almahide*, which Burney attributed to Bononcini (the composer’s name was not given). Although the intermezzi performed between the acts was in English (and by English musicians), Burney claimed the opera itself was “wholly Italian in poetry, Music, and performance.”⁶⁵

In addition to this switch from English being the primary language of operas performed in London to the subservient place of the intermezzo, the nation’s

⁶¹ Cibber, *An Apology*, 210.

⁶² Addison, *The Tatler* 115. Quoted in Cibber, *An Apology*, 211.

⁶³ Burney, *A General History*, 662.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 664.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

overwhelming embrace of Italian singers seems to have given English singers a kind of inferiority complex that led to even the “great” ones feeling pressured to adopt the Italian style over their own in order to maintain a place in the theatres. Hawkins, in his account of the history of Italian opera in his country, stated: “Between any other of our countrywomen and the Italian we hear of no competition; the reason whereof may perhaps be, that, in respect of their performance, the Italian women had so much the advantage over the English, that the latter could not but consider themselves as their scholars.”⁶⁶

Theatre managers took advantage of the public’s fascination with these talented singers and, for a time, the most popular type of Italian opera in England was the pasticcio, a “new” opera that was constructed by simply cutting and pasting parts of other operas together (libretti, arias, or both). These pasticcios were incredibly popular for multiple reasons. First, they could be assembled quickly because the theatre didn’t have to wait for a composer to complete a score or a librettist to write a story. Second, in the majority of cases the performers themselves were involved in the process and each selected arias they performed or knew well. This also cut down on rehearsal time, allowing the show to be mounted very quickly. It also better ensured that the singers would give great performances, since their arias had been hand-selected for or by them to showcase their unique abilities or greatest vocal assets. Often singers were assembled first and only after each had picked certain arias to perform would the libretti be gathered or written in order to segue between them.

⁶⁶ Hawkins, *The Science and Practice of Music*, 815.

Although these pasticcios were favored by theatre owners, producers, and performers, the appeal of fantastic singers only performing their best arias was not enough to let all English citizens forgive them for their lack of creativity and artistic merit. Anonymous Author B, for example, unflatteringly satired how to prepare a pasticcio as early as 1709:

Pick out about an hundred Italian Airs from several Authors, good, or bad, it signifies nothing. Among these, make use of fifty five, or fifty six, of such as please your Fancy best, and Marshall 'em in the manner you think most convenient. When it is done, you must employ a Poet to write some English Words, the Airs of which are to be adapted to the Italian Musick. In the next place you must agree with some Composer to provide the Recitative, and promise to give him, in case the Opera is perform'd, as littla as possible; by this means you'll run no Risque, being at little or no Expencc. When this is done, you must make a Bargain with some Mungril Italian Poet to Translate that Part of the English that is to be Perform'd in Italian; and then deliver it into the Hands of some Amanuensis, that understands Musick better than yourself to Transcribe the Score, and the Parts.⁶⁷

Regardless of criticism from Author B and others, the pasticcio remained the most popular type of opera in London for the majority of the eighteenth century.

The increase in Italian opera's popularity in England due to the fame of its singers was further exacerbated by the arrival of German-born composer George Frideric Handel (1685–1759), who appeared in London first on a visit in 1710 and then permanently in 1712.⁶⁸ Hawkins said that his coming “announced the production of operas, such as were performed at the theatres in Italy; that is to say, the drama being in the Italian language, and the music in the modern Italian style.”⁶⁹ Further, he added that a new (and better, in

⁶⁷ Ragueneau, *A Comparison*, 70.

⁶⁸ Anthony Hicks, “Handel, George Frideric,” in *Grove Music Online*, <http://www.grovemusiconline/> (accessed 5 June 2013).

⁶⁹ Hawkins, *The Science and Practice of Music*, 814.

his opinion) standard of opera was introduced with Handel that made it above all ridicule from that moment on, implying that with Handel, Italian opera had finally achieved success and its undisputed final point of arrival in England. Finally, he noted that because Handel's operas were so well-loved, the only criticisms that could be found were those of Addison and the like, whose critiques were restricted to the elaborate sets and staging, which were part of the reasons audiences came in the first place.⁷⁰

But this isn't quite true. Indeed the arrival of Handel and the premiere of his first London opera, *Rinaldo*, in 1711 produced reviews and opinions that were overwhelmingly complimentary. Burney was completely enraptured by it and wrote voluminously and admiringly on his opinions of its composition, claiming that it was "so superior in composition to any opera of that period which had ever been performed in England, that its great success does honour to our nation."⁷¹ Hawkins, in his account of *Rinaldo*, said that "the applause it met with was greater than had been given to any musical performance in this kingdom: in a word, it established Mr. Handel's character on a firm and solid basis."⁷²

Although Handel is often given credit for saving Italian opera in England, much like Palestrina is frequently given credit for saving polyphonic sacred music, and although it makes for a great story, the evidence speaks otherwise. The truth is that Italian opera fared no better immediately following the arrival of Handel than it had done following its 1705 debut. There were a lot of hits and an equal amount of misses, and

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Burney, *A General History*, 675. See Burney's complete description of *Rinaldo* on pages 673-675.

⁷² Hawkins, *The Science and Practice of Music*, 814.

both Hawkins and Burney placed the blame not on Handel but rather on the shortage of talented singers. Burney rationalized Handel's lack of success during this time because he had "no real great singer to write for. Nothing but miraculous powers in the performers can long support an opera, be the composition ever so excellent."⁷³ Burney noted a general decline in interest in Italian opera by the public beginning with the departure of Nicolini in 1712: "Nicolini having left the kingdom, it seems as if the passion for musical dramas in England had a little abated."⁷⁴ Things were apparently so bad that between 1717 and 1720 no Italian operas were performed in London at all.

Finally, in 1719, a group of nobles, with partial funding from King George I, founded the Royal Academy of Music with the exclusive purpose of promoting Italian opera in London. This group sought lyric poets, singers, and composers they deemed to be the best Italian opera had to offer, starting with Handel, whom they immediately sent to Europe to recruit the best performers. Composers Bononcini (whose music was already familiar to English opera patrons with works like his *Camilla*) and later Attilio Ariosti (1666–1729) were also recruited and the Academy's first funded performance, Giovanni Porta's *Numitor*, opened in April of 1720.⁷⁵ The remarkable success of the next opera, Handel's *Radamisto*, was very encouraging for the new Royal Academy. The praises of Hawkins and Burney specifically were overwhelmingly favorable. Burney wrote: "The composition of this opera is more solid, ingenious, and full of fire than any drama which Handel had yet produced in this country."⁷⁶ And, according to Hawkins, "Whoever

⁷³ Burney, *A General History*, 684.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 689.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 700.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 701.

peruses the opera of *Radamisto* will find abundant reason to acquiesce in the high opinion that was entertained of it.”⁷⁷

Indeed it was successful, running ten nights and then being immediately revived the following season for the arrival of Handel’s singers Francesco Bernardi Senesino (d.1759) and Margherita Durastani (fl.1700–34).⁷⁸ One anonymous account of a performance of *Radamisto* attested to its enormous popularity:

The applause it received was almost as extravagant as his *Agrippina* had excited; the crowds and tumults of the house at Venice were hardly equal to those at London. In so splendid and fashionable an assembly of ladies, to the excellence of their taste we must impute it, there was no shadow of form or ceremony, scarce indeed any appearance of order or regularity, politeness or decency: many, who had forced their way into the house with an impetuosity but ill suited to their rank and sex, actually fainted through the excessive heat and closeness of it; several gentlemen were turned back who had offered forty shillings for a seat in the gallery, after having despaired of getting any in the pit of boxes.⁷⁹

Hawkins added that the “performance of the opera of *Radamisto* had impressed upon the friends of Handel, and indeed upon the public in general, a deep sense of his abilities.”⁸⁰

In addition to promoting and re-familiarizing the English with Italian opera, the Royal Academy managed to make a visit to the opera house a truly opulent experience. Hawkins famously referred to opera as “an entertainment calculated for the better sort of people in this country,” and with truly elaborate sets and the best performers and composers Europe could offer, the Royal Academy spared no expense.⁸¹ The opera house

⁷⁷ Hawkins, *The Science and Practice of Music*, 868.

⁷⁸ Burney, *A General History*, 701.

⁷⁹ Quoted in Hawkins, *The Science and Practice of Music*, 868.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 818.

quickly became the place to see and be seen amongst the London elite. Hawkins also detailed an increase among the nobility in the interest of music education, so they could further immerse themselves into the privileged world of the English opera house:

The establishment of the opera gave a new turn to the sentiments and manners of the young nobility and gentry of this kingdom: most of these were great frequenters of the opera; they professed to admire the music, and next to that the language in which they were written; many of them became the scholars of the instrumental performers, and by them were taught the practice of the violin, the violoncello, and the harpsichord. Others, who were ambitious of being able to converse with the singers, especially with the females; to utter with a grace the exclamations used to testify applause, and to be expert in the use of all the cant phrases which musical connoisseurs affect, set themselves to learn the Italian language; and in proportion to their progress in it were more or less busy behind the scenes, and in other respects troublesome and impertinent.⁸²

Indeed it was through working with the Royal Academy that Handel achieved the greatest height of his London fame, but it was not always because of his music alone.

One reason was a supposed competition between Handel and Bononcini, which seems to have been between their supporters rather than between the two themselves. These competitive tiffs seem to have sprung from the production of *Muzio Scevola*, which was premiered shortly after Handel's successful *Radamisto*. The opera was a showpiece for the Royal Academy in which Filippo Amadei (fl.1690–1730) composed the first act, Bononcini the second, and Handel the third.⁸³ Each composer wrote an overture and a chorus for each act as well, so that each was a complete piece and all three had equal opportunity to demonstrate his talent.⁸⁴ Although this was probably not the intention, to

⁸² Ibid., 869.

⁸³ Anthony Hicks, "Muzio Scevola," in *Grove Music Online* <http://www.grovemusic.com/> (accessed 20 June 2013). Both Burney and Hawkins list Attilio Ariosti as the third composer of *Muzio Scevola*, along with Bononcini and Handel, however Attilio did not arrive in London until after this opera premiered.

⁸⁴ Burney, *A General History*, 712.

some it appeared to have been set up between Bononcini's supporters and Handel's to pit the two against each other. Burney pointed out that similar joint-composer operas were frequent in Italy, downplaying the supposedly nefarious intentions of the project, but he did admit that it was the spark from which "great feuds arose."⁸⁵ Hawkins confirmed this by saying, "It was hardly possible that men possessed of talents so different as were those of Handel and Bononcini, should be equally admired and patronized by the same persons" and therefore "two parties were formed among the nobility, the one profession to patronize Handel, and the other Bononcini."⁸⁶ Hawkins also claimed that the public, because of this opera, judged in favor of Handel, which led to Bononcini's subsequent retirement in 1727.⁸⁷

Although Burney downplayed any such competition, he tacitly did choose sides by only discussing Handel's contributions to *Muzio Scevola*. He stated that this one act of Handel's "must have evinced the enlightened public, of Handel's great powers of invention and knowledge of harmony as effectually as a hundred entire operas could have done."⁸⁸ He also addressed the feud directly and confirmed his favoritism of Handel:

The partisans for Bononcini seem to have had little foundation for their praise of his plaintive and pathetic songs; as there are generally more airs of that kind in a single act of an opera set by Handel, than in any one of Bononcini's whole dramas. The spirit, invention, and science of Handel, has never been disputed; but by a recent examination of his early works, I am convinced, that his slow airs are as much superior to those of his contemporaries, as the others in spirit and science.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Hawkins, *The Science and Practice of Music*, 861.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Burney, *A General History*, 715.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 719.

Bononcini's first opera with the Royal Academy, *Astarto*, premiered in November of 1720. Although Burney pointed out that it "afforded great pleasure to our ancestors," he was harsh in his criticism of it:

I am unable to discover the cause of its favour from the excellence of the composition. The spirit of party, ignorance of good Music, and an unformed and trivial taste, must have enhanced its value with the public; but, for my own part, I am not only unable to point out a single air in which there is dignity, originality of design, or a fanciful melody, but to discover that tenderness and pathos, for which Bononcini has been so celebrated, even by those who denied his invention and science. And this sentence is not passed in consequence of the extreme difference this Music and that of modern times; but by mounting up to the period of its production; and comparing it with contemporary compositions, lately perused, in which there are infinitely more of what were thought the necessary requisites of good Music sixty years ago, than can be found in the opera of *Arstarto*.⁹⁰

Additionally Johann Joachim Quantz (1697–1773), the famed eighteenth-century flautist and writer on music, observed both Bononcini's and Handel's works on a trip to London in 1727 and wrote in his autobiography that "Handel's workmanship (Grundstümme) was better than Bononcini's melodic line (Oberstimme)."⁹¹

In addition to the fabricated feuds between Bononcini and Handel that caused tension at various opera performances, there were also very real feuds between the singers and their supporters that caused documented incidents of chaos. Perhaps the most famous rivalry during the 1720s was between Faustina Bordoni (1697–1781) and Francesca Cuzzoni (1696–1778), known by their stage names as Faustini and Cuzzoni respectively. Accounts of their bad behavior abound and Hawkins spoke to the frenzy and divisions they sparked amongst opera-goers:

⁹⁰ Burney, 711-712.

⁹¹ Johann Joachim Quantz, *The Life of Herr Johann Joachim Quantz, as Sketched by Himself*, in *Forgotten Musicians*, ed. Paul Nettl (New York: Philosophical Library, Inc, 1951), 313.

...but the town no sooner became sensible of the perfections which each was possessed of, than they began to compare them in their own minds, and endeavour to determine to whom of the two the greatest tribute of theatrical applause was due. Some ladies of the first quality entered very deeply into the merits of this competition; a numerous party engaged to support Cuzzoni, and another not less formidable associated on the side of Faustina. Thus encouraged, the behaviour of the rivals to each other was attended with all the circumstances of malevolence that jealousy, hatred, and malice could suggest; private slander and public abuse were deemed weapons too innoxious in this warfare, blows were made use of in the prosecution of it, and, shame to tell! the two Signoras fought.⁹²

The “blows” to which Hawkins is referring probably never occurred but rather entered into the collective English memory through a famous parody that hyped up the feud between the two singers (see *Beggar’s Opera* in Chapter 3). Nevertheless, this feud did cause actual distractions in performances because of the shouts and hisses of supporters. Quantz himself observed this behavior during a performance of a Bononcini opera (he does not identify which) in London: “In this opera, two factions were heard from, one in favor of Faustina, and the other in favor of Cuzzoni. The factions were so incensed that one whistled when the other applauded, and vice versa, so that finally the opera had to be suspended for the time being.”⁹³ These disturbances eventually proved bad enough to prompt the Royal Academy directors to take actions that eventually lead to Cuzzoni departing from England.⁹⁴

Whether these feuds between supporters of different composers and singers fueled the public’s interest in attending Italian opera performances at the Haymarket or soured them against attending is unclear, but what is certain is that the Royal Academy was in

⁹² Hawkins, *The Science and Practice of Music*, 873.

⁹³ Quantz, *The Life of Herr Johann Joachim Quantz*, 313-314.

⁹⁴ Hawkins, *The Science and Practice of Music*, 874.

significant financial trouble as early as 1721. The Academy had issues collecting subscriber payments and numerous advertisements and attempts to collect on those debts added to the fatigue of opera-goers.⁹⁵ Additionally, the Royal Academy had effectively limited its audience to a select group of upper-class patrons at the expense of isolating the rest of London. Since more traditional English dramas and musical productions remained at theatres like Covent Garden and Lincoln's Inn Fields, a sort of division sprang up between a "better sort of people" (as Hawkins put it) who attended Italian operas, and everyone else. With so expensive a budget and so narrow a targeted audience, what happened next should have surprised no one. It was in the midst of this financial turmoil in 1728 that a unique ballad opera that poked fun at the grander Italian-style productions was mounted to an unprecedented and successful reception, revealing a prevalent taste for traditional English-style theatre and what appeared to be a final blow to Italian opera in London.

⁹⁵ Burney describes the Royal Academy's numerous attempts to collect payments and raise ticket prices in an effort to stay afloat. Burney, *A General History*, 717.

CHAPTER 3

THE BEGGAR'S OPERA AND THE FALL OF THE ROYAL ACADEMY

“[The *Beggar's Opera*] likewise exposeth with great justice, that unnatural taste for Italian music among us, which is wholly unsuitable to our northern climate, and the genius of the people, whereby we are overrun with Italian effeminacy, and Italian nonsense.” –Jonathan Swift, *The Intelligencer*, 1728.⁹⁶

By the end of the 1720s, London was split between theatres like Covent Garden and Lincoln's Inn Fields that were committed to domestic dramatic productions, and the King's Theatre at the Haymarket, which was devoted to Italian opera.⁹⁷ The Royal Academy, with composers like Bononcini and Handel and great talents like Cuzzoni and Senesino, had ushered in the most successful years of Italian opera in England since its introduction there. But like many phenomena of popular culture it was subject to parody, and a foreign genre that usurped traditional music while simultaneously isolating itself at the expense of the common people (in addition to the rumors of singers fighting onstage and composers being pitted against each other), was an easy target.

The most successful parody was the *Beggar's Opera*, a ballad opera arranged by Johann Christoph Pepusch (1667–1752) with libretto by John Gay (1685–1732) that opened in the Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre in January of 1728. Ballad operas, productions

⁹⁶ Jonathan Swift, *The Intelligencer* no. 3, <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/13169/pg13169.html/> (accessed 10 June 2013), 12-13.

⁹⁷ The Queen's Theatre became known as the King's Theatre in 1714 with the ascension of George I.

consisting of assembled popular English tunes stitched together with spoken dialogue, were very popular in London theatres and although the *Beggar's Opera* was not the first one to satirize Italian opera, it was by far the most successful.⁹⁸ Gay's opera served as both a satire of Italian-style opera and as an alternative or a competition for it by elevating traditional English ballads and theatrical elements at the expense of Italian opera.

The *Beggar's Opera* was very blunt and out-spoken with its objective of mocking the popular genre. Those intentions were made clear with the opening dialogue of The Beggar, who served as the narrator:

I have introduced the similes that are in your celebrated Operas: the Swallow, the Moth, the Bee, the Ship, the Flower, etc. Besides, I have a prison-scene which the ladies always reckon charmingly pathetic. As to the parts, I have observed such a nice impartiality to our ladies, that it is impossible for either of them to take offence. I hope I may be forgiven, that I have not made my Opera throughout unnatural, like those in vogue; for I have no recitative.

There were several swipes at Italian opera in this opening statement. The first directly addressed the Italian pastoral images of birds, bees, and flowers, with the list of “similes that are in your celebrated Operas.” The second, in which the Beggar referred to a prison scene that the ladies will find “charmingly pathetic,” may have specifically referred to a similar scene in the opera *Coriolanus* that had been popular a few years prior to the *Beggar's Opera*.⁹⁹ The third comment was the most hard-hitting. When the Beggar explained that there would be two roles of equal value to avoid “offence” (referring to Polly Peachum and Lucy Lockit, two women who fight for the love of the leading man,

⁹⁸ Other popular examples of contemporary dramas that satirize Italian opera are Richard Estcourt's *Prunella* of 1708 and *The English Stage Italianiz'd* in 1727. William Eben Schultz, *Gay's Beggar's Opera: Its Content, History and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1923), 135-138.

⁹⁹ Although Hawkins adamantly denied that the *Beggar's Opera* was a satire of Italian opera, he did concede this one similarity. Hawkins, *The Science and Practice of Music*, 874-875. Burney, however, directly admits that it is a burlesque of Italian opera. Burney, *A General History*, 677.

Macheath), Gay was referring to the recent and infamous argument between Faustina and Cuzzoni.¹⁰⁰ The final statement from the Beggar playfully apologized that the production would contain spoken dialogue rather than “unnatural” Italian recitative that was “in vogue” in London.

The concluding remarks of the Beggar and his fellow narrator, the Player, also linked the *Beggar’s Opera* to Italian-style operas, particularly when the Player objected to the story’s potential unhappy ending by saying “the catastrophe is manifestly wrong, for an opera must end happily.” The Beggar agreed with him and concluded that “in this kind of drama, ‘tis no matter how absurdly things are brought about – let the prisoner be brought back to his wives in triumph,” to which the Player replied, “all this we must do, to comply with the taste of the town.” This “taste of the town” could be seen as Gay’s reference to the taste for Italian opera in which, as the Player points out, a happy ending was expected regardless of the absurdity of the circumstances.

Gay also spoofed Italian opera by showing that it and all of its facets were replaceable. He replaced the showy arias and recitatives with traditional and familiar English songs and spoken dialogue, and he also substituted simple scenery for the expected lavish and expensive Italian opera sets. All of these things were commonplace amongst ballad operas but Gay’s *Beggar’s Opera* was unique because he went further and replaced the traditional Italian opera characters of mythological heroes, kings, and god-like figures with very common and very un-heroic beggars, thieves, and prostitutes. Taking it one step further, Gay gave his satire a happy ending in spite of the main character’s crimes, justifying his actions with the last lines of the Beggar who says, “the

¹⁰⁰ The argument between Faustin, Cuzzoni, and their supporters was discussed in Chapter 2. For more information on these two singers and the events surrounding their performances see Hawkins’ account on pages 873 and 874 of *The Science and Practice of Music*.

lower sort of people have their vices in a degree as well as the rich; and that they are punished for them.” Gay insinuated that the wealthier people in society were always entitled to their “happy” endings because they were not as frequently punished for their “vices” as the poor.

Since *Beggar’s Opera* served as a satire of both Italian opera and the injustices of English society, it is difficult to place the credit for its success on one aspect or the other. Introduced in the midst of a society that was more and more influenced by the anti-Establishment ideas of John Locke and other writers identified with Europe’s Age of Enlightenment, it is not surprising that this production was embraced by a good majority of the English public who sympathized with its message. However it also directly appealed to those in favor of traditional English theatrical performances because it revived the popularity of English songs and drama while simultaneously belittling the foreign Italian opera that was not wholly embraced by all of London’s inhabitants. Whatever the reason, *Beggar’s Opera* remains one of the most successful English theatrical productions of all time. Although it struggled at first to find a theatre-owner willing to let it be staged, it was immediately popular and ran for at least 62 performances on its first run.¹⁰¹ Colley Cibber, one of the people to initially dismiss the potential of this production, later claimed that it was the “best-written Play that ever our English Theatre could boast of” and that Gay had “more skilfully gratify’d the Publick Taste, than all the brightest Authors that ever writ before him.”¹⁰² Political satirist and essayist Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) similarly wrote:

¹⁰¹ Schultz, *Gay’s Beggar’s Opera*, xxi.

¹⁰² Cibber, *An Apology*, 135, 171.

[The *Beggar's Opera*] likewise exposeth with great justice, that unnatural taste for Italian music among us, which is wholly unsuitable to our northern climate, and the genius of the people, whereby we are over-run with Italian effeminacy, and Italian nonsense. An old gentleman said to me, that many years ago, when the practice of an unnatural vice grew so frequent in London, that many were prosecuted for it, he was sure it would be a forerunner of Italian operas, and singers; and then we should want nothing but stabbing or poisoning, to make us perfect Italians.¹⁰³

Burney himself barely mentioned the production, but did succinctly sum up its importance by calling it “a memorable epoch in our national Music: for though not a single new air was composed for this pasticcio in our vulgar tongue, it has proved the best opera to the patentees of our playhouses that ever was brought on the stage.”¹⁰⁴

Burney also quoted an unnamed source from the *London Journal* in 1728 who said that the *Beggar's Opera* was a “touch-stone to try British taste on; and it has accordingly proved effectual in discovering our true inclinations; which, how artfully soever they may have been disguised for a while, will one time or other start up and disclose themselves.”¹⁰⁵ English poet and critic Alexander Pope (1688–1744) also noted that the *Beggar's Opera* “hit all tastes and degrees of men, from those of the highest Quality to the very Rabble.”¹⁰⁶ He continued in the notes for his famous *Dunciad* with praises of its exceptional fame:

The vast success of it was unprecedented, and almost incredible: What is related of the wonderful effects of the ancient Music or Tragedy hardly came up to it: *Sophocles* and *Euripides* were less follow'd and famous. It was acted in London sixty-three days, uninterrupted; and renew'd the next

¹⁰³ Swift, *The Intelligencer*, 12-14.

¹⁰⁴ Burney, *A General History*, 997-998.

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in Burney, *A General History*, 756.

¹⁰⁶ Alexander Pope, *Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. James Sutherland, 2nd ed, vol.5, *The Dunciad* (London: Methuen & Co., 1953), 327. Although it should be pointed out that Alexander Pope was a personal friend of John Gay.

season with equal applauses. It spread into all the great towns of England, was play'd in many places to the 30th, and 40th time, at Bath and Bristol 50.¹⁰⁷

These praises of the *Beggar's Opera* all centered around the production's elevation of more traditional English drama (and English song) and seem to identify Gay's ballad opera as sort of a turning point where English people, swayed temporarily by the siren songs of these foreign Italian operas, would henceforth return to their native theatre since Gay had succeeded in making it popular, profitable, and relevant once again. The critics of Italian opera, who had previously spoken out against its perceived causal link to the decline of their native theatres, now had a successful native production with which they could support that equaled (if not overshadowed) the popularity of any Italian opera performed in London.

Not all English subjects were pleased with the ballad opera, however. Critics seemed to either completely miss or deny that the *Beggar's Opera* was even a satire of Italian opera, and focused instead on Gay's elevation of lowly figures like prostitutes and beggars to the status of relatable and sympathetic characters who were deserving of equal treatment to wealthier folk. This was a message that the upper classes in London understandably found to be threatening. Hawkins was perhaps the harshest critic of the *Beggar's Opera*, who still viewed it as a threat more than forty years after its premiere. He wrote:

The malevolence of the people, and the resentment which they had been taught to entertain against that conduct of administration, which they were equally unqualified to approve or condemn, were amply gratified by the representation of it; but the public were little aware of the injury they were doing to society, by giving countenance to an entertainment, which has been productive of more mischief to this country than any would believe at the time; for, not to mention that the tendency of it, by inculcating that

¹⁰⁷ Pope, notes to *The Dunciad*, 327.

persons in authority are uniformly actuated by the same motives as thieves and robbers, is to destroy all confidence in ministers, and respect for magistrates, and to lessen that reverence, which, even in the worst state of government, is due to the laws and to public authority, a character is exhibited to view, of a libertine endowed with bravery, generosity, and the qualities of a gentleman, subsisting by the profession of highway robbery, which he defends by examples drawn from the practice of men of all professions.¹⁰⁸

Hawkins even went so far as to suggest that the *Beggar's Opera* inspired a rise in the incidence of robberies and violence because the characters who sinned in the play were not held accountable for their actions: "The effects of the Beggar's Opera on the minds of the people have fulfilled the prognostications of many that it would prove injurious to society. Rapine and violence have been gradually increasing ever since its first representation...."¹⁰⁹

Hawkins' statements on the moral degradation of the English public following the ballad opera's introduction are certainly exaggerated, but Gay's production did openly acknowledge the financial gap between the wealthier patrons of Italian opera productions and the rest of the nation. It also gave English subjects who felt previously excluded from Italian opera a work they could adopt as their own to which they could relate. Finally, it served as a vessel for traditional English music that rose to a level of popularity not achieved by any Italian opera production in London.

The *Beggar's Opera* is consistently blamed for the dip in English favor towards Italian opera and the subsequent collapse of the Royal Academy. Alexander Pope contended that it "drove out of England the Italian Opera, which had carry'd all before it for ten years: That Idol of the Nobility and the people, which the great Critick Mr. Dennis

¹⁰⁸ Hawkins, *The Science and Practice of Music*, 875.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

by the labours and outcries of a whole life could not overthrow, was demolish'd in one winter by a single stroke of this gentleman's pen."¹¹⁰ However the correlation between the *Beggar's Opera* and the collapse of the Royal Academy seemed to be an issue of bad timing more than causal effect. The Royal Academy had been struggling financially since its introduction and open feuds between supporters of different composers and singers did more than just provide fodder for parody. Temporary slights became open wounds that led to deep divisions between members of the Royal Academy, and in 1728 the endeavor was abandoned. Burney placed the blame for its demise to several different factors:

The governor and directors of the Royal Academy of Music, after the sum originally subscribed for its support was expended, relinquished the idea of entering into new engagements for amusing the public at their own expence. Indeed, either from the difficulty of finding a sufficient number of subscribers that were willing to involve themselves in so costly and hazardous an enterprise, or from an opinion that the opera being no longer in an infant state, was now robust enough to go alone, it appears by the bills and advertisements, that there were no annual subscribers in 1727, but its whole maintenance and support depended on the original subscribers and public favour. Whether the feuds which so long agitated the critics and patrons of Music, concerning the abilities of Handel and Bononcini, and of Faustina and Cuzzoni, precipitated the dissolution of the Royal Academy, or the disagreement between Handel and Senesino, cannot now be easily determined. Perhaps all these causes conspired to relax discipline and to tire the public; for though zeal and attention were at first stimulated by these debates, yet they seem to have been succeeded by disgust and indifference.¹¹¹

The financial issues and the arguments between supporters of Handel and Bononcini and Faustina and Cuzzoni, have already been discussed, and these disagreements certainly led to disruptions within opera productions themselves, but this last disagreement to which Burney refers—that between Handel and Senesino—seems to have been the one that sank

¹¹⁰ Pope, notes to *The Dunciad*, 327.

¹¹¹ Burney, *A General History*, 759.

the entire undertaking of the Royal Academy. Handel appeared to have had trouble with this castrato since he brought him from Dresden in 1721, and the arguments between the two eventually led to Handel pleading with the Royal Academy to replace the singer.¹¹² When they refused, due to Senesino's popularity with the English crowd, Handel likewise refused to compose for Senesino (or have anything to do with any other productions he was in), which is the actual thing that caused the Royal Academy's demise, according to Hawkins.¹¹³

All of these issues eventually led to the collapse of the Royal Academy in 1728, and most likely did so in spite of the *Beggar's Opera*. If anything, the struggles of the Royal Academy fueled the enormous success of Gay's ballad opera and not the opposite, like many writers of the time claimed. When Burney spoke of a public tired of feuds between composers and singers leading to "disgust and indifference," this same crowd would certainly have embraced with open arms a production that satires and speaks to their very exhaustion. The English were getting tired of this foreign entertainment, and after the fall of the Royal Academy its future looked bleak indeed.

¹¹² Hawkins, *The Science and Practice of Music*, 872.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER 4

OPERA IN LONDON AFTER HANDEL

“It has been thought a Taste for Italian Musick was not general enough in our Country to support the Expencc of an Opera; and this Entertainment, after many struggles, seems now sinking into absolute Decay from the Prevalence of that Opinion. This Entertainment stands now upon the Verge of a Precipice and it must be a tender, as well as resolute Hand, that is stretch’d out to save it.” –Anonymous, *A Fair Enquiry Into the State of Operas in England*, 1750s.¹¹⁴

After the collapse of the Royal Academy in 1728, Handel entered into an agreement with opera manager John Jacob Heidegger (1666–1749) for a second Academy, but this venture (much like the first) soon began to struggle, which led to Handel reengaging Senesino in 1730 in an attempt to stay afloat.¹¹⁵ Then a rival opera company called the “Opera of the Nobility” sprang up in 1733, which employed composer Nicola Porpora (1686–1768) and his student—arguably the most famous castrato of all time—Farinelli (born Carlo Broschi, 1705–82). But a city that barely supported one opera company could never support two and so the second Academy collapsed in 1734, with the Opera of the Nobility following in 1737.¹¹⁶ After years of

¹¹⁴ *A Fair Enquiry Into the State of Operas in England* (London: Printed for M. Cooper, at the Globe, in Pater-Noster-Row), 3-4.

¹¹⁵ Winton Dean, “Heidegger, John Jacob,” in *Grove Music Online*, <http://www.grovemusic.com/> (accessed 5 June 2013).

¹¹⁶ For a more in-depth discussion of Handel’s opera engagements following the initial Royal Academy, see: Robert D. Hume, “Handel and Opera Management in London in the 1730s,” *Music & Letters*, 67 (1986), 347-362.

discouraging opera ventures, Handel gave up composing operas in favor of English oratorios. Burney wrote: “[*Deidamia*] was the last opera which Handel composed, we must now take a melancholy leave of his regency; for after this period, having no concern in the composition or conduct of Italian operas, he never set any other words than English, and those wholly confined to sacred subjects.”¹¹⁷

The dismal state of Italian opera in England, in which even a famous composer like Handel could not seem to gain a foothold, continued well after his withdrawal in 1741. Historical accounts tell of a virtual revolving door of opera managers and subsequent financial scandals and failures as Italian opera desperately tried to maintain a place in a town that seemed rather bored with it by the middle of the eighteenth century. Even Burney, the outspoken and enthusiastic defender of Italian opera, seemed relatively uninterested in the genre at this point in history and limited his comments to a simple chronological account of singers, operas, and composers that failed to get much attention. His somewhat tedious report, however, does shed light on one thing—it is clear that the majority of operas performed in London after Handel were pasticcios, and most of the material in them was taken from Handel’s operas.

There are several reasons writers of the mid-eighteenth century gave for their general lack of interest in the genre. Burney placed most of the blame for this lull in opera enthusiasm on the lack of impressive singers available, saying that the operas during this time were done “in vain; for no Music can support an opera, without great and favourite singers.”¹¹⁸ He even claimed that Johann Christian Bach (1735–82), upon

¹¹⁷ Burney, *A General History*, 831.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 847.

arriving in London in 1763, was so “mortified” to see the limited talent available to him that he refused to write for the stage at first, “being unwilling, as a stranger, to trust his reputation to such performers.”¹¹⁹

Other writers did not limit their opposition to Italian opera to just one factor alone. Oliver Goldsmith (c.1730–74), playwright, poet, and colleague of John Hawkins, claimed in his 1759 essay *Of the Opera in England* that English operas simply did not compare to operas elsewhere in Europe:

To say the truth, the opera, as it is conducted among us, is but a very humdrum amusement; in other countries the decorations are entirely magnificent, the singers all excellent, and the burlettas or interludes quite entertaining—the best poets compose the words and the best masters the music; but with us it is otherwise: the decorations are but trifling and cheap; the singers, Mattei only excepted, but indifferent. Instead of interlude, we have those sorts of skipping dances which are calculated for the galleries of the theatre. Every performer sings his favorite song, and the music is only a medley of old Italian airs, or some meager modern capriccio.¹²⁰

In addition to his complaint that opera in England did not measure up to opera in other European countries, Goldsmith revealed that he was tired of pasticcios that only recycled the same “old Italian airs” when operas in other countries had “the best masters” to compose new music. Another writer who echoed Goldsmith’s claims was the anonymous author of a 1753 pamphlet entitled *A Scheme for Having an Italian Opera in London, Of a New Taste*. Here the anonymous author (Author C) described an opera that was to be mounted the following season and added his or her reasons as to why this said opera would not succeed. After first criticizing the singers who would be appearing in the opera

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 865.

¹²⁰ Oliver Goldsmith, “Of the Opera in England,” in *The Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, ed. Peter Cunningham, vol. 3 (New York: Harper & Brothers, Franklin Square, 1881), 142.

and explaining why they were of little merit (which confirms Burney and Goldsmith's descriptions), as well as criticizing the director, librettist, and the decorations because "they intend only to patch up old Scenes in the best Manner they are able," Author C was upset because there would be no dancing in the opera, saying that "we shall have three Hours tedious Music without any Entertainment intermingled to relieve the Audience."¹²¹ In giving these explanations, the writer not only explained why this particular opera would not be triumphant but also disclosed why most operas in the middle of the eighteenth century were likewise unsuccessful:

Add to all this, the Indignation of two hundred Subscribers when they begin to reflect that for such an Opera as I have described, they have paid the same Sum they formerly did for hearing Farinelli, Senesino, Faustini, Cuzzoni, and other Singers of the same Standard, who were supported by superb Decorations and magnificent Dances. These Reflexions convince me that such an Opera cannot support itself...I cannot suppose the English will be such Dupes.¹²²

Much like the lingering taste for Purcell at the time when Italian opera was introduced into England, Author C revealed that the legacy of the Royal Academy and performers like those of Farinelli and Senesino created a standard to which operas were compared over twenty years later. Since Burney explained that most of the operas performed during this time were essentially pasticcios stitched together from previous Handel operas, it can be assumed that opera managers were aware of this preference and were trying to capitalize on this English taste. Additionally, Author C's comments spoke to the increasing role of dance in the popularity of Italian opera, which Burney also alluded to

¹²¹ *A Scheme for Having an Italian Opera in London, Of a New Taste* (London: Printed for W. Owen near Temple-Bar, and T. Snelling opposite White-Fryers in Fleet-street, 1753), 6-8.

¹²² *A Scheme for Having an Italian Opera in London*, 8-10.

by saying that dancing “seems to have encroached upon Music, and instead of being a dependant or auxiliary, is aiming not only at independency, but tyranny.”¹²³

Both Author C and Burney claimed that talented singers were few in London in the middle of the eighteenth century (although if these singers were having to compete with the legacies of Farinelli, Senesino, Faustini, and Cuzzoni, it is no wonder this opinion of a lack of available talent was prevalent), and another anonymous pamphleteer gave several reasons as to why. In *A Fair Enquiry Into the State of Operas in England*, published in the 1750s, the author (Author D) claimed that the financial misdeeds and mistakes of opera managers leading up to the middle of the century, in addition to causing the bankruptcy of many opera groups, failed to provide the incentive needed to attract the best performers to the country: “the Money received for Operas would have supported them elegantly at all Times; but that a great Part of it has fallen into the Hands of Persons who contributed nothing to the Entertainment; and that a Number of unnecessary Officers of the House, have been enrich’d, while the Performers starved.”¹²⁴ Subsequently, Author D said, “the Name of our Country has been thus brought into Disgrace; and good Singers will not come over, unless to serve a different Sort of Masters; worse and worse will therefore be employed, and the Entertainment itself must in the End certainly cease.”¹²⁵ The author is saying that Italian opera in the middle of the eighteenth century could never sustain itself because, since they initially did not pay the

¹²³ Burney, *A General History*, 891-892.

¹²⁴ *A Fair Enquiry into the State of Operas in England*, 4-5. The recent financial scandals to which this author was probably referring to include Giovanni Francesca Crosa (c.1700–1771), impresario of a comic opera troupe at the King’s Theatre in the 1740s imprisoned for debt, and Francesco Vanneschi (d.c.1759), impresario of the King’s Theatre in the 1750s who was also imprisoned for debt. Burney says that the Crosa’s scandal “put an end to operas of all kinds, for some time.” Burney, *A General History*, 850.

¹²⁵ *A Fair Enquiry Into the State of Operas in England*, 5-6.

best singers well they now couldn't afford the vocalists that would bring the audience back to the theatres, resulting in a never-ending cycle of failed ventures. In addition to the lack of talent and the tedious stream of recycled pasticcios, English writers in the middle of the eighteenth century seemed also to have been getting tired of the constant vocal acrobatics of the virtuosic singers, which is ironically one of the essential elements of the Italian opera that established its fame at the beginning of the century. English writer John Brown (1715–66) in *A Dissertation on the Rise, Union, and Power, the Progressions, Separations, and Corruptions, of Poetry and Music*, published in 1763, called the *da capo aria* “A Practice which tends only to tire and disgust the Hearer,” and “gaudy, flaunting, and unnatural.”¹²⁶ Goldsmith, too, was also tired of all the ornamentation for the sole purpose of showing off, saying “those unnatural startings, those unmusical closings, and shakes lengthened out to a painful continuance. Such, indeed, may show a voice, but it must give a truly delicate ear the utmost uneasiness. Such tricks are not music.”¹²⁷ It seemed also that the English were tired of the vocalists themselves, and, in particular, the infamous reputation for discourteous and narcissistic behavior they had acquired. Hawkins commented that “the profession of an opera singer was become of great importance; and that the caresses of princes and other great personages, who were slaves to their pleasures, had contributed to make them insolent.”¹²⁸ Colley Cibber was particularly frank in his autobiography when discussing opera singers:

¹²⁶ John Brown, *A Dissertation on the Rise, Union, and Power, the Progressions, Separations, and Corruptions, of Poetry and Music. To which is prefixed, The Curse of Saul, a Sacred Ode* (London: Printed for L. Davis and C. Reymers against Gray's-Inn, Holbourn, 1763), 205.

¹²⁷ Goldsmith, “Of the Opera in England,” 143.

¹²⁸ Hawkins, *The Science and Practice of Music*, 867.

There is too, in the very Species of an Italian Singer, such an innate, fantastical Pride, and Caprice, that the Government of them (here at least) is almost impracticable. This Distemper, as we were not sufficiently warn'd, or appriz'd of, threw our musical Affairs into Perplexities, we knew not easily how to get out of. ..But what is still more ridiculous, these costly Canary-Birds have sometimes infested the whole Body of our dignified Lovers of Musick, with the same childish Animosities: Ladies have been known to decline their Visits, upon account of their being of a different Party.¹²⁹

Cibber and Hawkins clearly had grown tired of the insolence of opera singers and of the fights that rival singers caused among their supporters.

As all of these comments are considered, the future of Italian opera in the middle of the eighteenth century appeared bleak. Author D claimed that it was on “the Verge of a Precipice” and Goldsmith lamented that the castrati “sing to empty benches.”¹³⁰ The genre found itself stuck in several paradoxes. Opera-goers weren't attending the operas because of the lack of vocal talent to entice them to a performance, but opera managers couldn't afford to bring in the best talent because of the lack of subscriptions. The English still preferred Handel and his operas yet were simultaneously tired of the constant pasticcios that opera managers produced featuring Handel's arias. Finally, the English that were previously drawn to the opera theatres by the “costly Canary-Birds” were now disenchanted with them and of the excessive ornamentation and da capo arias with which the great singers displayed their talents.

Despite all of these negative reviews, there are some occurrences in the middle of the eighteenth century that helped to keep Italian opera alive. The first was a wave of impressive singers including Regina Mingotti (1722–1808) in 1754, soprano Colomba

¹²⁹ Cibber, *An Apology*, 227.

¹³⁰ Goldsmith, “Of the Opera in England,” 141-142.

Mattei (fl.1743–78) in 1757, and soprano castrato Giovanni Manzuoli (c.1720–82) in 1764.¹³¹ Burney said that Mingotti “revived the favour of our lyric theatre, with considerable splendor” and that Mattei was “a great favourite,” but his utmost praise was of Manzuoli, who he claimed ushered in a “splendid period in the annals of the musical drama.”¹³² Burney recalled waiting two hours at the door in order to see him in his London premiere of the pasticcio *Ezio*, and that his voice “was the most powerful and voluminous soprano that had been heard on our stage since the time of Farinelli.”¹³³ He added that “the lovers of Music in London were more unanimous in approving his voice and talents than those of any other singer within my memory,” and that with Manzuoli “the serious opera acquired a degree of favour to which it had seldom mounted, since its first establishment in this country.”¹³⁴

In addition to these fresh talents, the introduction of Italian comic opera into England allowed the English subjects something new to be excited about, although, much like its serious counterpart, it had a slow start in London. The first Italian comic opera troupe, under the direction of Giovanni Francesca Crosa (c.1700–71), arrived in London in 1748, which Burney said “pleased the public, and filled the theatre, very successfully,

¹³¹ Both Mingotti and Mattei also managed the King’s Theatre for a time, Mingotti for the 1763 and 1764 seasons and Mattei for the 1757-1763 seasons. For more information, see: Dennis Libby, “Mattei, Colomba,” in *Grove Music Online*, <http://www.grovemusic.com/> (accessed 8 June 2013). Also see: John Rosselli, “Mingotti, Regina,” in *Grove Music Online*, <http://www.grovemusic.com/> (accessed 8 June 2013).

¹³² Burney, *A General History*, 867-868.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

during the whole season.”¹³⁵ In spite of this warm introduction, comic operas in the years immediately following did not fare so well, as Burney recalled:

this disappointment has frequently happened in transplanting favourite operas of the comic kind; for, except the *Buona Figlioula*, the productions which had obtained the greatest applause and celebrity in their own country, have had the least favour shewn them here. This may be partly ascribed to a difference of taste in things of humour; but more, I believe, to our natural aversion to the being told what we should admire.¹³⁶

Then, in 1760, Mattei, now manager of the King’s Theatre, engaged a comic-opera troupe. Their first performance was Baldassare Galuppi’s (1706–85) *Il Filosofo di campagna* in 1761, and it was so successful that it made the soprano Maria Angiola Paganini (fl.1742–73) an instant sensation in London.¹³⁷ Burney spoke admirably of her new-found fame:

This performer...increased in reputation so much during the run of [*Il Filosofo di campagna*], that when it was her turn to have a benefit, such a crowd assembled as I never remember to have seen on the like occasion, before, or since; indeed, not one third of the company that presented themselves at the Opera-house doors were able to obtain admission. Caps were lost, and gowns torn to pieces, without number or mercy, in the struggle to get in. Ladies in full dress, who had sent away their servants and carriages, were obliged to appear in the streets and walk home in great numbers without caps or attendants. Luckily the weather was fine, and did not add to their distress by rain or wind; though their confusion was greatly augmented by its being broad day light, and the streets full of spectators, who could neither refrain from looking or laughing at such splendid and uncommon street-walkers.¹³⁸

This enthusiastic account discloses how some comic operas in the middle of the eighteenth century were able to attract just as many audience members as had serious

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 849.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 860.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

Italian opera. In fact they became so popular that in 1766, a new plan was formed at King's Theatre to produce serious operas on Saturday nights and comic operas on the less-crowded Tuesday nights in order to fill seats.¹³⁹

Another significant event of note was the arrival of J.C. Bach and the successful premiere of his first opera in London in 1763 entitled *Orione*. According to Burney it was attended by King George III and was the first opera to use clarinets in an English opera orchestra.¹⁴⁰ The following year, Dr. Thomas Arne (1710-1778), an Englishman and one of Burney's teachers, was given the chance to compose an Italian opera *L'olimpiade*.¹⁴¹ Although it failed after two performances, it was the first attempt by an Englishman to compose an Italian opera since the genre's initial introduction at the beginning of the century.¹⁴²

Hawkins and Burney wrote their respective histories of music nearly seventy-five years after Italian operas arrived in their native land, and during that time English tastes had slowly changed to accommodate it. What was initially viewed by some as a foreign novelty and potential threat to traditional English theatre had transformed into an

¹³⁹ Ibid.,871.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 865.

¹⁴¹ Peter Holman and Todd Gilman, "Arne, Thomas Augustine," in *Grove Music Online*, <http://www.grovemusic.com/> (accessed 5 June 2013).

¹⁴² Burney attributed its failure to the fact that Arne was simply out of his element, since he was used to writing for more traditional English theatres, saying that the doctor "had kept bad company: that is, had written for vulgar singers and hearers too long to be able to comport himself properly at the Opera house...the common play-house and ballad passages, which occurred in almost every air in this opera, made the audience wonder how they got there." Burney, 868-869. Thomas Busby (1754-1838), another music historian who wrote *A General History of Music, from the Earliest Times to the Present* in 1819, suggests Arne's failure was more of an issue of nationalism, saying "something, perhaps, might justly be allowed to Italian jealousy, and Italian trick, as well as to English prejudice. What! an English composer presume to profane the Italian drama! Insufferable." Thomas Busby, *A General History of Music, from the Earliest Times to the Present; Comprising the Lives of Eminent Composers and Musical Writers. The Whole Accompanied with Notes and Observations, Critical and Illustrative*, vol. 2 (London: Printed for G. and W.B. Whittaker and Simpkin and Marshall, 1819), 450.

exclusive and expensive entertainment for the nobility, as accepted as any other entertainment in London. It hit a high point in the 1720s with Handel, the Royal Academy, and the legendary talents of Senesino, Faustina, Cuzzoni, and others, only to collapse into a dark age of financial troubles, bad management, and little talent.

By the time of Burney and Hawkins the opera theatre was changing even more. The introduction of comic opera provided a separate entertainment and an alternative to serious operas, while still employing and attracting the best Italian-style singers. Composers like J.C. Bach, Stephen Storace (1762-96) and others were beginning to arrive in London and compose new works as the *pasticcio* slowly waned in favor. It was also the declining age of the *castrati* as more people began to embrace the simpler, less-ornamented vocal styles found in the operas of Christoph Gluck (1714-87) and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-91), for example.

In hindsight, it may be difficult to understand how such a colossal and important genre could ever have been in jeopardy, or, at the very least, in need of defense or justification for its existence. But contemporary accounts of its introduction and subsequent struggle to remain in England disclose numerous objections that it had to overcome. Although Burney's most adamant defenses were found in his discussion of Addison's critical comments of the late 1720s, it is understandable why Burney still felt the need to advocate so strongly for the genre nearly fifty years later rather than simply dismissing Addison's opinions as being of little consequence, as Hawkins did. Writers and critics like Goldsmith and anonymous Authors C and D were still questioning its relevance and survival well into the middle of the century, and it would take powerful supporters like Burney, an educated musician who himself had traveled to the very heart

of Italian opera—Naples—to properly contextualize it. Through Burney we can understand the place of Italian opera in eighteenth-century London, and its peculiar relationship with the English public.

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