# Introduction: opera's orbit

In a book that explores the theoretical possibilities and manifestations of music and drama, it seems appropriate to begin by setting stages. It is also important to underline the plurality of stages that are relevant to this study, since the multiplicity of genres, contexts, and circles of agents involved are central to this book's conceptual premise. Opera and its numerous iterations, forms that ranged from the dramatic to the semi-dramatic, thrived in a world in which the multimedia potential of theater was both powerful and attractive. It is to the cultural presence, the historical legacy, the diversity, elusiveness, and controversy of the musico-dramatic stage that this book turns.

I begin by setting the first stage: Rome. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century this was a locale characterized by the splendor and grandeur of late baroque theater, from the architecture, art, and design that shaped the city, to the rituals of pomp and hierarchy enacted by papal sovereigns throughout the church's calendar year, to the social and political stages erected in public squares and within private walls of Roman *palazzi*, where local and foreign residents performed a range of ceremonies that embodied the practices of early modern sociability among the noble classes.

There are, nevertheless, some particulars to be considered and some choices I have made in conceptualizing the stages that form the objects of study for this book. The second stage is occupied by opera. The opera stage I refer to is not an actual stage of a particular theater or a context in which a given composer's works were performed. Rather, it is a metaphorical and symbolic stage for opera in Rome, a highly problematic space when we consider the history of opera in this locale. My book, in fact, arises from a fundamental contradiction in music and drama of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Rome. This period enjoyed remarkable artistic vitality in the midst of critical and moral surveillance. Secular theater – but most importantly, opera – was a pleasure that regulators threatened to prohibit from time to time. Entertainment sometimes occupied sites of papal jurisdiction, subject to regulation and licensing. And yet, in spite of institutional dicta, evasions of authority persisted, some with apparent impunity. Rome's nobility, foreign dignitaries, and cardinal patrons

continued to attract and enlist poets, dramatists, stage designers, composers, and musicians of the highest repute, from both Rome and afar. Historians who study the reception of opera in this locale and period know well the contradictory truisms that were often played out. Despite the conventional wisdom that conservative papacies withheld the performance of opera and other types of theater, opera continued to survive, perhaps even thrive, in an atmosphere of containment and regulation.[1] In short, Rome was host to major and significant creativity in many artistic spheres, and especially in opera, even during a climate of occasional repression and restriction.

In this setting of contradiction and ambiguity opera was often a focus of concern and controversy. Even if the discourse and debate were not entirely new, opera towards the latter decades of the seventeenth century began to strike an apprehensive chord. Tensions surrounding opera were prominent in the papal edicts of religious conservatives. But beyond the papacy, intellectuals also took issue with opera's impact, registering their concerns with opera's abandonment of cultural inheritances linked to historical notions of poetic and literary aesthetics, and thus raising fundamental questions of the relationship between music and the other expressive arts. These contradictions underline the complexities of opera production in Rome, and reveal that an account of where, when, and who enacted bans or offered sanction for opera is not enough for interrogating that complexity. My focus is to treat the simultaneous censure of and desire for opera as a critical symbolic and symptomatic feature of this context, and more so of this historical moment. This is not a tension that can be adequately grasped simply by focusing on opera as a collection of discrete formal texts. Rather, to understand opera's relations within shifting cultural arenas requires treating opera as a larger phenomenon. The stage upon which I consider opera is therefore not just one of performance and production, and certainly not of a single stage, or even a stage that belonged to opera alone. *Opera's Orbit* explores the importance of opera as a multidimensional site, a site where opera served as a conduit for the interplay of a number of musico-dramatic forms.

As noted, we must recognize that opera became an object of attraction, interest, concern, even condemnation, within a number of influential Roman circles, with its influence felt across several different genres; opera is at the root of a division of aesthetic and political sensibilities that extended to agents and contexts operating with and yet beyond the papal sphere. Chief among them, and a central concern of this book, is opera's treatment by Rome's Academy of Arcadians. Therefore, a third stage for this book is Arcadia, and more specifically, Arcadian Rome as both a real and symbolic location that encompassed a series of figures, a range of debates, sets

of discursive practices, and a collective mentality that were significant for and resonant with the assessment and redirection of history and culture in general, and of opera more specifically.

Scholars of opera and music have long recognized the importance of the Arcadians' criticisms of opera, and yet several of these scholars admit that these criticisms were generally inconsequential to the actual practice of opera.[2] In this case, the aspirations of the Arcadians and their critical proscriptions for opera are more telling than their influence over the practice of opera. The concerns of the Arcadians and the polemics they issued should be given some context, for theirs was not a debate held in isolation. In many ways, this circle of Roman literati echoed contemporary French aesthetic debates. The French criticisms of Italy's declining cultural standards were aimed, in large part, at a perceived downturn in Italian literature, a development in which opera was thought to have played a major role. Certain Arcadian members simultaneously adopted, transmuted, or rejected this foreign criticism. Yet, dating back to at least the mid-part of the seventeenth century, we can identify a growing concern over the direction of Italian artistic and literary practices. These practices were what critics identified as the products of *secentismo* or, more specifically, *marinismo* – the literary style characteristic of Giambattista Marino (1569–1625), marked by extravagant imagery and wordplay. This style came to be associated with artifice, triviality, and decadence in literature, but more importantly, by the end of the seventeenth century it was also seen as an indicator of culture's moral decline and its departure from the elevated models of past practice, of the truths and simplicities embodied in classical models of poetry, drama, and other arts.

In the literature on Arcadia, much has been made of the society's *neoclassical* stance. I agree with those who admit that a definition of Arcadia in neoclassical terms is, at best, problematic.[3] We might see the Academy of Arcadians as a whole, and their rise and development throughout the eighteenth century, as a reflection of and association with neoclassical movements and aesthetics, but when did that association find its roots? Can we call the first Arcadians – the original founders who birthed the academy – "neoclassicists" in the sense that this term would come to have in the mid-eighteenth century? I will leave these questions for other historians of literature, art, and the period in general; my own interest is to adapt "neoclassical" as one of several tendencies at work in Arcadian Rome around the turn from the seventeenth into the eighteenth century. We might better regard the Arcadians both as potential neoclassicists and as practitioners of a latent form of humanism repackaged within the newer terms of early

modernity and the emergent strands of Enlightenment thought. As others have argued with more specificity than is argued here, the Arcadians are best understood within the emerging republic of letters whose origins date to the late seventeenth century. Groups like the Arcadians, its members, and even dissidents from within its ranks, as well as its detractors, believed on some level that a cultural institution might perfect the arts and sciences, correct past abuses, and thereby halt moral decline. In his recent study on Arcadia, Vernon Hyde Minor grounds the academy within this phenomenon – as an impulse to launch a new sense of taste, of *buon gusto.* He regards the Arcadians as more than an intellectual society of the era – rather as a vector for a new cultural stance embodied by reform movements of the first half of the eighteenth century.[4]

My own interest has been to approach Arcadia as a critical cultural nexus through which we might interrogate the broader application of "reform" aimed at opera and musico-dramatic culture. Within this faction of the Italian intelligentsia we are offered an opportunity to observe the most important tensions and reflections on opera at a critical historical turning point. In more specific terms, several Arcadian leaders and critics of the early movement regarded the theatrical practices of their day as falling short of the celebrated dramatic models of the ancients. They implicated opera as the central culprit in the abandonment of truth and verisimilitude in modern drama, above all imputing aesthetic erosion to opera's multimedia dimensions, especially to the element of music.[5] By 1700 the attack on music had become familiar. Music's ascendancy – a development that could be seen emerging much earlier in the seventeenth century – was evidenced by a musical semantic that had the power to reduce or even contradict the signifying role of words, and likewise to transform the dramaturgical role that composers (and singers) increasingly played in the signification of meaning. Most Arcadians equivocated when confronted with the subject of opera and its musical settings, perhaps an admission of opera's musical allure and a recognition of the impossibility of exorcising the genre outright. What seemed more rarely acknowledged or openly confronted was the blending of operatic forms with other distinct artistic forms of expression. Opera's problem was not predominantly that it challenged the primacy of word over music, but that the combinatorial power of word *merged* with music unleashed a new, modern mode for expression where the multiple and stratified "authoring" intrinsic to its creation complicated and thus made less stable (even if more evocative) the articulation of "text." This complexity of authorship adopted by opera entwined discrete strands of expressive practices and their cultural meanings. Ultimately, it would be

difficult, if not impossible, to govern such strand-assemblages under any conditions of presumed equality.

The new sets of choices prompted by operatic production further intensified as competing expressive modalities responded to the changing contexts of performance. And these choices agitated against a culture in search of simplification, of pursuing more stable definitions and fixed enclosures. As several instances in this book will attest, the reform of opera rarely encompassed a conception of radical change, but rather turned towards the recuperation of something lost, and so was an act of retrieval, a way to draw clearer boundaries and hierarchies in the face of instability and ambiguity. Opera works for us as a critical lens for complicating reform since opera powerfully juxtaposed those elements of modern departure against a culture entrenched in stasis, retrospection, and nostalgia. Musical drama, as perceived through the polemics of the Arcadians, was at odds with the multifold practices of combining music, poetry, and semi-dramatic narratives. This very contradiction within the musical culture of Arcadian Rome is a central conundrum that arises throughout this book.

Opera's orbit – the effect of that pull opera exerted as locus both of artistic expression and of cultural reform – reflected and intensified Rome's instability in these decades. This instability had been instigated by shifting cultural and social ideologies, by reconfigurations of political authority, through crisis within the church and over the rise of secular culture, and by new economies and social classes.[6] If opera did not actualize any of these changes, at very least it had the powers to magnify them on stage, in performance, and through the effects of reception on its listeners and spectators. For the purposes of my analysis, opera thus helps to reflect the larger stage of Arcadian Rome where musical drama serves to highlight the complicated boundaries between what was private and public, sacred and secular, new class and old aristocracy, local and foreign – elements all struggling to find purchase and all up for negotiation during this momentous historical transition. The numerous stages through which I explore musical drama in Arcadian Rome are a refraction of this larger worldview.

Rome during the transition from the late seventeenth into the early eighteenth century remains a locale for which opera, music, and culture are understudied. In part, this is due to peculiar conditions of the locale – the on-again, off-again production of theater in this period and the need to account for *both* public and private opera cultures make evaluation of Roman opera difficult. Historical documentation and music manuscripts are often fragmented, scant, or missing altogether. The difficulties posed

by opera's lacunae during this period are what forced me to reassess the local conditions, and to move beyond the confines of opera in order to examine a wider range of musical drama. What seemed to be missing from the scholarship was a deeper, analytical treatment of opera's relations, influence, and reception within the so-called "non-operatic" confines of vocal music in Rome. In fact, what has been sorely ignored in a context as particular and unique as Rome is an examination of how opera was frequently projected beyond itself and on to other musico-dramatic genres.[7] Opera's more expansive power of diffusion has been underestimated. In modern scholarship, the concept of diffusion is largely understood to indicate the spread and establishment of mid-century Venetian-style public opera in other cities within and beyond the Italian peninsula.[8] Less attention has been paid to how such diffusion affected parallel vocal-dramatic music making in various contexts.

Critical for the scope of this study was thus to recognize that as a historical force, opera established a sphere of influence the reach of which extended to genres whose histories never intended them to have deep association with opera; nevertheless, they were inevitably drawn into opera's orbit because that sphere corresponded with the aesthetic directions, cultural aspirations, and socio-political dimensions of this period. This, I believe, was opera's impact, and I choose to illustrate this through a greater range of musical drama. I have selected a specific constellation of genres based on their importance not merely as genres but also as cultural forms – for how they shaped individual performances and events in the Roman context, but mainly for the ways in which they mirrored opera culture and polemics during this period. I focus on the oratorio, the serenata, and the cantata not because these three genres were the only forms of vocal music marked by opera in the period. Far from it. This book does not aim to undertake a more comprehensive study of period-based musico-dramatic forms with the kind of detail, rigor, and interdisciplinary perspective that a larger study of urban musical practice in Rome deserves. Rather, I have chosen the three genres that are central to this study because arguably their institutionalization as seasonal ritual, political propaganda, or intellectual entertainment makes them ideal cases for further investigation. These genres form the other musico-dramatic stages considered in this book and they will become crucial for reading opera outside opera and across several matrices of music and culture.

It is important to recognize that the cantata, oratorio, and serenata each had its own singular tradition and history distinct from opera in Rome in the seventeenth century. In several cases, we could imagine the flourishing and

perpetuation of each of these genres *without* opera. But genres do not choose history; they respond to it. Opera's influence was real and it intensified as the century came to a close, throwing each of the aforementioned genre trajectories into flux, even if their contact, interaction, and response to opera was more situational than programmatically intentional. Neither oratorio, cantata, nor serenata was a simple extension of opera, even if we might identify works from each genre that lean heavily towards operatic modeling. True, the socio-political predicaments and cultural parameters in Rome cast several of these non-operatic genres into what appear to be seasonal substitutions for opera. The well-known fluidity between public and private, sacred and secular, staged and non-staged, and thus opera and non-opera, makes any kind of scholarly categorization of the musico-dramatic genre continuum nearly impossible. My inquiry is not directed towards formal definitions of genre difference or similarity. Though such fundamental comparisons have their initial use, the situation of genre relationships in this locale is much more complicated. What I strive to reveal for the genres treated in this book are the dialogical connections as determined through genre collisions, and what they reveal about opera's orbit, and about the cultural tensions surrounding opera. But with each genre, I also consider how contact and interaction work in the opposite direction, noting how each genre influenced – in ways both real and perceived – opera's continued historical trajectory.

My approach to viewing opera across a select genre spectrum requires the concept of appropriation.[9] The appropriation of opera is evident in each of the three genres I consider, though it is not restricted to the employment of opera's formal traits and conventions but extends to the configurations of taste in dramatic music and to the intense rhetoric of aesthetic politics that opera inspired. We must therefore recognize how appropriation accentuates plural uses and diverse readings. In the selected examples this book explores, I relate how specific contexts, authors, and patrons found opera "useful" in diverse ways – as a form to model, as a source of aesthetic innovation, or even as a counterexample. What we learn in each instance is how opera pulled upon and was pulled within a culture of diverse musico-dramatic expression. Opera in this context appears as a phenomenon to be measured and equally as a measure of other genre rituals. When considered from these angles, opera no longer appears a simple predetermined and reified form. When we consider multi-genre relations, opera is more easily discernible and knowable in its complex relationships to the larger musico-dramatic field, in its ties to local realities, and as a site that hosted ensuing discrepancies and tensions that marked opera's career towards the century's end.

My aim is therefore to resituate opera within this broader landscape of genre relations in ways that place greater emphasis on something we might call an *operatic field*. How does the orbit of opera (a phenomenon) produce a pull (its effect) across a specific constellation of vocal genres? How does opera come to be displaced to, and perhaps remapped on and even within, these other genre sites? In what ways do opera's echoes resonate uniquely or differently beyond the actual boundaries of opera? These questions are crucial as they focus attention on how opera may have created conditions of cultural gravity to affect surrounding genres. Through difference and distance, the oratorio, serenata, and cantata uniquely reverberate opera. Each accentuates opera's musical, aesthetic, cultural, and social dimensions, and allows for critical assessment through rereading and recontextualizing opera's influence in diverse and contrasting arenas. It also allows us to reveal a deeper relationship of opera to other genres, not only one of mutual exchange, but also of contestation – in which some of opera's most critical elements and cultural implications are boldly registered. Using this trans-genre analysis, I aim to create a unique perspective on the history of opera culture by examining it from external vantage points rather than solely relying on opera as an explanation in and of itself. In doing so, I seek to broaden the conventional boundaries of musical drama to encompass these genres, and I argue that it is only by illuminating other genres as reactionary sites of music and drama that we can reconstruct a more complete understanding and retrospective of opera as embedded relationally in this historical context.

The approach this book embraces is meant to restore attention not just to a larger spectrum of music culture, but to one that operated within a specific historical period, and where a circumscribed locale works as a source for uncovering the broader cultural assumptions and ideological orderings of that era. Historical evidence, above all, has elicited the questions and issues I discuss, and as I will demonstrate in the chapters that follow, genre in this period (within and beyond musical culture) was an important epistemological and cultural construct. Genre's canonic use, as well as its manipulation and potential for sprawl, resonated deeply in a place and time where musical genres appeared distinct yet were caught in paradoxical juxtapositions of rigidity and pliability. In such cases, genres were deeply consonant with other socio-political conditions and incongruities, for the very period under study was wrought by pressures that mark culture and politics in moments of consolidation and entrenchment on the one hand, and unraveling crisis on the other.

Historical contexts are rarely conducive to the kinds of enclosure that a single-genre approach may require. Individual genre-centered scholarship

has an immense history with deep and inherited epistemologies that have come to coincide with our modern understanding of genre. For musicology, such an approach has been unquestionably central to its pedagogy, if not its more traditional and general research methods. In many respects, there are good reasons to treat genre this way. Focus directed on a single genre undoubtedly sharpens our understanding of how to group and organize the multiplicity of characteristics and musico-stylistic conventions evident in specific modes of musical practices that belong to a historical era. My own research has been greatly informed by individual studies of opera, the oratorio, the serenata, and the cantata. I thus draw upon this rich and important scholarship in the field, but I do not replicate all of its specific procedures. As useful as such approaches can be, the singularity of focus, and the order and convenience they provide, should be treated carefully. Genres point to what is consistent, repeated, and definitive. Along with utility comes a tendency to emphasize abstract schematic relations whose essential and permanent qualities become ideal forms at the expense of recalling a genre's historical and social embeddedness – those aspects of a genre least amenable to isolation.[10]

Rather, it seems that history often embraces a wide range of constitutive practices where emergent *multiple* forms of music and their social conventions take shape. In the case of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Rome, I discovered that a major drawback of reading individual musico-dramatic works as bound to a single category, effectively isolating a genre, was to miss that genre's expanded dimensional resonance with and among other genres. In most opera studies, the relationship between other genres and opera is ignored; in studies of non-operatic vocal music, opera's influence is more typically reduced to formalist comparisons, or to brief and generalized statements of cultural reciprocity. This genre-isolating tendency has also been the dominant mode of study in many of the musico-dramatic forms of the period. As a consequence, genre – regardless of its centrality to musical culture – is embraced but has not been adequately problematized.[11] My analysis demonstrates that there is seldom a hard and fast boundary between one genre and another, and yet, as categorical entities, all genres imply a sense of and a need for enclosure, even if the maintenance of that enclosure remains difficult in practice. My shift towards understanding genre relationships does not supplant the analytical importance of a genre's autonomy, but it does ask that we recognize and identify important things to be learned by placing emphasis on a genre's intertextual potential. This approach moves the analytic focus away from the confines of the single-genre study to a framework that restores the processes

by which trans-genre developments unfold aesthetically and culturally. In essence, I explore how assumptions of the period can be brought into visibility not merely in terms of the meaning of the distinctiveness of a genre, but in and through the cultural forces and processes that bring genres into their vibrant interrelationships. Inasmuch as genres enter into particular relations, certain historical junctures can also condition this phenomenon. From this vantage point I consider how genres not only constitute a cultural form that makes music conventions visible, but also point to conditions of inclusion or exclusion contingent on the historical landscape in which they are formed and applied.

In attending, then, to the historical views and perspectives, I walk a fine line when interrogating the terms of genre. Genre distinctions are certainly central to period practitioners, whose writings and definitions of genre exemplify how normative categories are on their lips and central to their aesthetic conceptions. These same genre distinctions also become intellectual carryovers that will later emerge in the evolution of our own scholarly lexicon, where the boundaries between individual genres are carefully distinguished and less often complicated. This very condition and development is something this study hopes to unravel. As I work towards the recognition of genres as constitutive formations within a larger contextual field, my concern is to draw out the modes in which musico-dramatic genres intersect *and* are intersected by a host of cultural influences. With one foot firmly anchored in the canonical forms that take hold in the period, I strive to resituate genre as a component that derives meaning and value from a larger arena of aesthetic options that are also profoundly scripted by social and historical contexts. What I argue is that even with a categorical construct like genre, certain choices are made, leaving a number of uncertainties that lie beyond those choices, what Mikhail Bakhtin called *surplus* – "after all the rules are applied and all the generalizations have been exhausted."[12] In this study I probe the encounter between the pre-given patterns of a genre and the messier and less given outcomes of how individual works and events associated with that genre behave and, at times, misbehave, and what that behavior might reveal.

My treatment of genre is insistently, indeed necessarily, heterochronic. No one work, event, or performance is governed by a single "present" only, no matter how pervasive the weight of that present may be. The very categorization of a work as representative of a particular genre entails constraint by the past on the present. Thus, genre helps to show how the molding of musical culture occurs over different measures of time, over a continuous span as well as in the moment of creation or performance. Each genre study