# Introduction

In E. M. Forster's novel *Where angels fear to tread* (1905), members of the Herriton family travel to Italy on a mission to rescue the offspring of a woman gone astray. That is, they search for the infant son of their sister-in-law Lilia, who has died in childbirth, with the intention of ensuring that he will be brought up in civilised, well-bred southern England and not by Gino, his Italian father, son of a provincial dentist. The most important illustration of the chasm of social and cultural difference that separates them from Gino, and that motivates them in their quest, is to be found three-quarters of the way through the book, when they attend a performance of Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* at the opera house in Monteriano, a small Tuscan town Forster modelled on San Gimignano. Philip Herriton, who is enthusiastically Italophile, has cajoled his rather severe sister Harriet into joining him by using the magic words 'Sir Walter Scott – classical, you know.'[1] In the event, she is appalled by the locals' shouting and throwing of bouquets during the performance: '"Call this classical?" she cried, rising from her seat. "It's not even respectable!"'[2]

Like a number of other nineteenth- and early twentieth-century novels, including notable later examples by Forster himself, *Where angels fear to tread* associates receptivity to music with emotional and (at least as far as the class-conscious English are concerned) social liberation.[3] But this is not the only significant aspect of the novel for those interested in the representation of music, especially opera, in literature. Potentially more revealing is that two-thirds of the character of Philip (as Forster himself put it) is based on that of the musicologist Edward Dent, Forster's contemporary at Cambridge.[4] Dent's help in drafting the description of *Lucia*, and, more generally, his influence on Forster's appreciation of Italian opera, point to

connections between ostensibly very different kinds of writing about music, some of which will be explored in what follows. The really striking detail of the scene, though, the one that arguably makes sense of all the others, is the reference to its model, the trip to a provincial opera house to see a French translation of the same opera described in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. For Forster as for Flaubert, the principal object is the distinction between those characters whose consciousness is invaded by the performance and those who, conversely, find it impermeable: 'Harriet, like M. Bovary on a more famous occasion, was trying to follow the plot. Occasionally she nudged her companions, and asked them what had become of Walter Scott.'[5]

In each case the situation is rather more complicated. On the one hand there is no evidence that Philip, despite his affinity for things Italian, is much moved by the music; on the other, as we shall see in Chapter 3, M. Bovary (Charles, husband of the heroine, Emma) becomes increasingly engaged by it; in the end more so than his wife. But more than the narrative triangulation with the musical and scenic events of the opera, variously foregrounded and faded out, through which the respective authors are able to develop these nuances of plot and character, it is the relationship of the episodes to an established generic context that gives them special depth and resonance. Forster makes this relationship explicit, although his point of reference is arguably unique: *Madame Bovary*, a sensation when it was first published in 1856, had by 1905 attained its current status as *the* novelist's novel.[6] Flaubert, too, had plenty of models to choose from; indeed, he was writing in a tradition in which attendance at the opera was such a relatively frequent part of novelistic plotting that no particular literary *hommage* would have seemed necessary.

That tradition is what the present book sets out to examine. Even if one dismisses Dominique Fernandez's arresting assertion that opera and the novel – specifically, the French novel – are inextricably bound together by virtue of having their origins in the same historical moment, there is no doubt that, in the nineteenth century above

all, the latter has a special sort of dependency on the former.[7] This developed from a late eighteenth-century convention in which (in Francis Claudon's summary) the figure of the musician, as well as his arcane props, were used as symbols of the passions, of obscure and unreasoning feeling.[8] In the works of Rousseau and especially Mme de Staël, there gradually emerged an attention to musical detail, and an exploitation of the narrative possibilities of musical reception, that moved beyond those basic associations.[9] Representation of operatic performance, its effect on characters, and the social contexts that shape its meaning, is a still later literary phenomenon, but one that, once established, endured for more than a century: from the early works of Stendhal to *À la recherche du temps perdu* (that is, in the case of the passage examined in Chapter 6, a year or so before Proust's death in 1922) and beyond. The generic breadth of the tradition is also striking: opera was part of the frame of reference of novels ranging from *Madame Bovary* to Dumas père's *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo* and (of course) Leroux's *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra*.

Reasons for this dependency are not hard to identify. In the first place, attendance at opera figured prominently in the social calendars of characters in nineteenth-century French novels primarily because it very often did so in those of their authors. With the majority of works set in Paris, and with the Opéra occupying such a central place (cultural and, after Haussmann's reorganisation of the city and the construction of the Palais Garnier 1861–75, physical too) in the experience of its bourgeois and aristocratic inhabitants, opera-going could hardly fail to be integrated into the plots of urban Parisian (and occasionally, as in the case of *Madame Bovary*, provincial) novels. In the works of Balzac, in particular, it is *the* microcosm of life in the capital, with the hierarchy of boxes and galleries, and the movements within and between them, representing those within society at large. The eighty-plus constituent novels of *La Comédie humaine* at times seem mainly populated by characters who like nothing better than discussing productions at the Opéra and its back-stage ins and outs. They also frequently behave in ways Balzac sees as intrinsically operatic, and even speak the language of opera,

constantly quoting (or deliberately *mis*quoting) from famous moments in Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* or Cimarosa's *Il matrimonio segreto*, among other personal favourites of the author.

Thus one aim of this book is to examine, through the broad lens of fiction, how opera was experienced, and how it implanted itself in the general consciousness, in a reception environment almost unapproachably different from our own. For although there are still opera *habitués*, and indeed fans in the mould of Stendhal, the idea of weekly or twice-weekly attendance (even if partial) at the same institution, giving the same works, is forever lost, even for the idle rich. Judging by the performance statistics and audience information available, even the most diligent critics, musicologists, diva-worshippers and other opera-obsessives of today probably see far less of individual productions than the average nineteenth-century Parisian *abonné* with no particular feeling for music.[10] And yet, alongside the frequently seamless integration of opera-going into the fiction of regular attendees such as Balzac and Dumas, there are a number of significant examples, by authors no less familiar with operatic institutions, of opera-going as a profoundly special occasion, one that in turn occasions significant plot events. Apart from *Madame Bovary*, in which the heroine's never having been to the opera is essential to the scene's effect, this is notably the case with the novels of Verne, who was at one time employed as a secretary at the Théâtre-Lyrique but in whose fiction representations of operatic performance tend always to bring on bizarre crises. Paradoxically, the same is even true of Leroux's *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra*, in which it is literally an everyday occurrence – but always in some way a shock. The tradition may be grounded in repetitive, week-after-week viewing, but many of the scenes described here are one-night stands with dramatic consequences. They are visitations from another, more extravagantly eventful, world.

And whether these operatic outings represent special occasions or not, this eventfulness is one of the principal reasons for building scenes, chapters and (as we shall see) the structural turning points of entire novels around them. They are a reliable source of plot-energy:

interweaving, at various levels, their stories with those of the works on stage; foregrounding the agency of characters who are themselves master-plotters, like the Count of Monte-Cristo; or merely juxtaposing different velocities and trajectories through different kinds of time, measured and unmeasured. They signal narrative potential. They are, for these reasons as much as for more straightforward purposes of realistic social representation, so common in the nineteenth-century French novel as to constitute something approaching a sub-genre all their own, that of the *soirée à l'Opéra*.

Notwithstanding how widespread the tradition became, it has received relatively little attention, at least in anglophone scholarship. The enthusiasm for music of particular authors, above all Balzac and Proust, has of course frequently been discussed, as has the closeness of music and literature generally during the period; but the significance of this generic phenomenon, both for narrative technique and as a source of information on the place of opera in the wider creative imagination, is properly recognised only in a handful of essays by French literary scholars, mainly very short and mainly written in the 1980s.[11] And yet, by virtue of its longevity if nothing else, the *soirée à l'Opéra* tradition would seem uniquely important in the exploration of the developing interaction between various critical languages, forms of representation and aesthetic premises across the long operatic nineteenth century. The cultural sea changes it spans are, after all, profound: the establishment of *grand opéra* and the repertory system; the rise and fall of the *roman-feuilleton*, an entirely new model for the production and consumption of literature; the change from active (and even radical) audience engagement with works in the theatre to the hushed reverence associated with the later nineteenth century. And this is to say nothing of the political upheavals it encompasses, and occasionally refers to, whether satirically or as part of the *couleur locale*: the fall of Napoleon, the July Revolution and that of 1848, the Franco-Prussian War and the Commune, the First World War and so on. As well as changing the complexion of the institutions on which the tradition depends, in some cases – notably the Dreyfus Affair – these events changed society's perception of itself,

exposing new fault lines, and inflecting the interpretation of artistic objects and social practices alike. The Opéra, which was the gallery in which society most conspicuously exhibited, and then studied, pictures of itself, and the literary practice by which that self- and mutual admiration are most compellingly recorded, together constitute an indispensable cultural history.

The present study is far from an exhaustive survey of that history; rather, it is a collection of examples chosen on the one hand for their diverse interpretations of the *soirée à l'Opéra* as a literary inheritance and, on the other, for the range of styles, registers, and narrative and cultural contexts in which the device is put to work. Neither is it systematic in its historical approach, although the chapters are arranged chronologically by novel – and, with the exception of Verne's accounts of Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* (1836) and Arconati's *Orlando* (which is a fictional work by a fictional composer, but sounds very much as if it is modelled on one of the many late eighteenth-century Neapolitan settings of Metastasio), more or less chronologically by opera too. It cannot even claim to cover all the major writers represented in the tradition: George Sand, author of some of the most extended meditations on individual receptivity to music, is hardly mentioned, for the simple reason that her characters are frequently musicians themselves and therefore do not elicit the same kind of subjective response in the reader, or raise the same broad socio-cultural questions.[12] Instead of an examination of literature's assumption of the operatic (or, vice-versa, of that extremely narrow subset of empirical opera reception data found only in the fiction of major novelists), what follows is an attempt to place both operas and novels in a larger interplay of cultural forces. It does not seek the musical in prose (whether texture, sonority or form), or construct a taxonomy of music–literature relations, or try to bind opera and novel together according to any other technical rationale, but instead moves relatively freely between works, criticism, and the social structures in which both existed, tracing the development of a uniquely rich (and uniquely accessible) border region between the two areas of cultural production.[13]

Although each chapter is largely constructed around a particular author, and often a single opera or composer, longitudinal themes quickly emerge. The first of these is a strategy common to all the novelists discussed here: when called upon to translate musical effect into evocative prose, to find a language that will render sound, they tend not to rely on their own experience but rather reach for, and try to assimilate, external resources. The means of this assimilation are as distinctive as any other aspect of their respective styles, ranging from personal contact with the composers concerned (in the case of Dumas père with Rossini) to a largely documentary approach (Leroux and Gounod). Others enlist assistants, just as Forster did with Dent. Balzac made no secret of his use of a musical amanuensis, and it has been suggested that Flaubert consulted his sister's piano teacher, a Polish émigré named Orlowski.[14] Proust had his own expert advisor in Reynaldo Hahn: composer, singer and ex-lover. In their correspondence, Proust often makes a great show of his own lack of musical discernment; while this is clearly a role, part of the vocabulary of their relationship, it also brings to the fore some of the aesthetic implications of borrowing a language. The opacity of music – the difficulty of judging it, the fascinating aura of its terminology – is a distinctive element of the literary *soirée à l'Opéra* tradition.

From this general question of competence, as much an expression of authorial attitude as of character experience, derives an inevitable attitude of reading. If the musical detail co-opted into descriptive passages often draws attention to itself because it is used so tentatively, so self-consciously, to the initiated reader it may also appear – at least at first glance – straightforwardly wrong. Mistake-spotting in nineteenth-century fiction has recently become popular with readers of criticism, and whether the errors are real or apparent, the questions they raise are, as John Sutherland has insisted, always worth asking.[15] In this context, the interest lies not so much in their presence within the work of novelists who were in some cases so prolific that they could hardly have had the leisure (let alone the education) to procure, and check details in, musical scores, but more in what their nature reveals: about the work the novelist wants

opera to do in his book, and about shared perceptions of opera at the time. On one level, opera is just another subject that everyone, writer or reader, knows something about, but that the former often needs to research in order to sound really convincing to the latter. It is surprising how few do so successfully.

Apart from potentially providing a kind of secret passage into the text, musical mistakes impinge, if indirectly, on these accounts of operatic performance in at least one other significant sense. Many were written against the background of a professional critical discourse that was itself becoming increasingly concerned with technical competence. It was an aesthetic feature of the new *grands opéras* in its own right; an element of critical judgement just then beginning to be as important as more traditional qualifications (principally, a feeling for dramatic literature); and a quality French reviewers by turns demanded and regretted in the Italian tradition (which prized singing at the expense of everything else). Novelistic and critical reports on performance overlapped during the period: not only were the writers sometimes the same, but the distinction between the genres was not always clear. Evocations of real visits to the Opéra appeared alongside those of more fantastical encounters, a juxtaposition regularly exploited by publishers.[16] Clichés about repertory works were borrowed from reviews for use in the representation of, and characters' conversations about, operatic performance. And, at least in the case of Flaubert, familiar critical standpoints may even have shaped, to a certain extent, some more fundamental aspects of narrative technique.

Other themes drawn out over these case studies concern the form, rather than the content, of the novelistic opera scene. In keeping with the contradiction outlined above, by which a tradition predicated on a regular part of social intercourse often makes excursions into performance re-imagined as an extraordinary event, some later *soirées à l'Opéra* are in fact transposed outside the Opéra, indeed far away from the urban milieu on which they ostensibly depend for their meaning. And this interest in form also finds expression in a more far-reaching development in the tradition: as the nineteenth

century drew to a close and the twentieth opened, the capturing of performance turned inwards, with the emphasis shifting from the performance recorded to the means of recording. In each of the last three chapters, based on works by Verne, Leroux and Proust respectively, different kinds of technology for storing and retrieving the traces of live performance figure prominently in the plot – and exert a commensurate influence on its form. It is as if the ever-present problem of competence, posed as the more general question of how music and stage action together make their way into the receiving intelligence, finds expression in a fascination with new methods of delivering them to the ear. Metaphor for music cognition or not, these doubly non-live performances of opera are always juxtaposed suggestively with its traditional, theatrical representation: Verne's wax cylinder phonograph and the San Carlo performance it preserves in *Le Château des Carpathes*; Leroux's buried gramophone records at the beginning of *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* and the stage action and singing he describes as if from among the Palais Garnier audience; and, at one remove again, Proust's théâtrophone and the works it relays to him from the Opéra-Comique.

Finally (and arguably most important for the history of the novel), each of the passages examined here is in one way or another a study of *time*: the relative regularity or, by contrast, awkwardly concertina-like motion of its passing, measured against a flow of musical and dramatic information that is itself by turns frozen, diverted or occasionally even reversed. The very principle of the rendition of musical contemplation in prose is conflicted, in that even the most neutral running commentary is already distorted, not only by the conventional metaphors of musical terminology and aesthetic prejudice, which tend automatically to parse the work, but also by the halting and stumbling-forward caused by the non-proportionate time it takes to tell the story of different musical events. Combine that with the private musings such contemplation will inevitably provoke in different characters, and also the progress of the public plot (i.e. what happens around them in the theatre), and it is clear a priori that the literary *soirée à l'Opéra* is a complex temporal entity. As will

emerge at various points, that complexity frequently seems to be the main attraction for the novelist, who enthusiastically exploits it, more and more self-consciously as narrative style approaches Modernist interiority, whether in the service of irony, humour or heightened character-subjectivity.

From a more narrowly musical perspective, as well as providing a sometimes unexpected counterpoint to the standard reception histories of major operatic works, the gala selection of performances presented here also hints at possible inflections of the history of opera as an entire genre, at least as it is normally told about nineteenth-century France. Whereas we tend to think of opera as more and more heterogeneous – generically and therefore (because of the enduring system of theatrical privilege overseen by successive governments) institutionally – from the Second Empire onwards and particularly around the *fin de siècle*, its reflection in literature shows, by contrast, a kind of homogenisation. Opera-going is portrayed in the novel as relatively undifferentiated, whatever the house and indeed whatever the language used for performances. Comic opera is almost entirely absent, mentioned only as a foil to more self-important works. But even accounting for conscious reprises (like Forster's reference to Flaubert) and a limited stock of favourite pieces (like Balzac's fondness for *Guillaume Tell*) the repertory is extremely limited, which mirrors the actual situation in Paris almost throughout the period, where there was a comparatively restricted roster of works at each of the main theatres, and where a greater number of works remained in the repertory, for much longer, than elsewhere.

It is perhaps this very repetitiveness, though, that brings into focus what *does* develop, and exponentially so, across the various kinds of novel represented here: ways of hearing. From the aurally – but especially visually – overwhelming experiences noted down by spectators trying to make sense of the first performances of *grand opéra* in the late 1820s and early 1830s to the accounts of disembodied opera left by those listening to early recordings in the 1890s and 1900s, criticism and fiction alike reflected new attitudes to consuming