

I | Sixteenth-century beginnings

For many years, the accepted view of the birth of opera as a distinctive art form was that it arose from the discussions of the so-called Camerata that first met in the house of Count Giovanni de' Bardi in Florence in the 1580s. There is a truth in this, in that a number of ideas were poured into an intellectual crucible and amalgamated in the heat of discussion and experiment into a new condition; and in that with this dramatic interaction of poetry and music, the late Renaissance found a new form of creative expression. The steady development of opera in Italy, impelled by Italian skills in singing and the performance arts, and by Italian delight in show and in the conviviality of the theatre, gave it a primacy which the rest of Europe was compelled to acknowledge. Italian opera long remained, not only Italians have felt, a tradition to which all others related, especially when in various times and countries it was paid the respect of ferocious resistance by those arguing and working for a nationally independent art.

Like all artistic truths, this can be over-simplified. Definitions of opera as an art form, however variously expressed, tend to agree on it as a staged drama sung in costume, with instrumental accompaniment, in which the leading expressive element is music. However, what constitutes the enactment of a drama through music, rather than with music, can never be clear-cut. In Italy itself there has been a variety of dramatic forms dependent to differing degrees on music, both before and after 1600. It is useful to classify some of these as lying outside opera, such as the intermedio (with continuous music but consisting of a series of tableaux with no properly developed plot) and the pastoral play (with a continuous plot but with music confined to a series of interludes); but in practice some lie close enough for classifications to begin to lose their meaning. The situation is still less clear-cut in Germany, where the role of music as

2 | *German opera*

contributing an important element to a play was established at the time when German drama began taking on an individual character in the Renaissance. In many different spellings and formulations, the loose term *Singspiel* soon begins to appear, meaning nothing more than a play with music; but the need for the description indicates that the condition of the drama would be different without the music. It is a term now most familiar when attached to eighteenth-century works (including some of Mozart's) but could still fairly describe operas by Beethoven and Weber in the early nineteenth century, by Lortzing in the mid-nineteenth century, and can even cover the music theatre of Weill (who allusively used the term 'Songspiel') and others in the twentieth. *Singspiel* is a vital part of German opera, and the early elements of moral instruction seldom wholly left it, despite the more familiar comic aspects: indeed, comedy was often found to be the liveliest form of instruction and moral lesson. Together with this went, in thoughtful German minds, an anxiety about the artistic possibilities of so limited a genre; and even in the centuries when German opera could not free itself from Italian example or build upon French models, and had little of real distinction of its own to show, theorists were arguing for a closer identification of its constituent parts into a unified whole greater than their sum. Though this was the ideal condition to which so much in German opera, and in the discussions of operatic theorists, aspired from early days right the way through to Wagner, it is wrong to undervalue the tradition from which it grew and with which, for much of its history, it coexisted.

It was only with the growth of German humanism in court, city and above all university in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that there could also develop a culture deriving from ideas and ideals that were based on a common language and a shared experience, and justified by intellectual enquiry. Though the universities proved the greatest agent for the introduction of humanism into Germany, they were initially conservative and, despite a sense of common purpose, parochial and lacking in wider influence. However, by the latter half of the fifteenth century the balance of importance between the

constituent faculties within them was changing. The liberal arts were becoming less an introductory study to theology, the ‘Queen of the Sciences’, and beginning to assert their own values and hence their own methods of instruction, sometimes prompted by the wandering scholars who assisted the spread of humanism. The arts hence came to acquire a new intellectual standing, especially with the fashionable enthusiasm for classical texts, above all Seneca, Plautus and Terence. A significant event was the acquisition by the University of Heidelberg in 1450 of a collection of manuscripts of Seneca and Terence, which were keenly studied; and all Terence’s plays and several of Plautus’s were translated into German before 1500. The performance of classical plays became more frequent, generally with a German prologue so as to acquaint a wider audience with the plot, and Latin drama was to survive well into the eighteenth century.

When Johannes Reuchlin (whose scholarship led Erasmus to compare him to St Jerome) published his popular farce *Henno* (1497), the first attempt by a German humanist to reproduce the spirit of Roman comedy, it was immediately taken up in Heidelberg. The first four of the five acts end with a choral song, set to a single melodic line with mensural note-shapes by one of the students, Daniel Megel. This is the first use of chorus texts, but they play no part in the action and have no connexion with the plot except as commentary: for instance, at the end of Act I, Elsa laments the loss of some stolen money and the chorus sings of vacillating fortune and the blessings of the poor who can lose nothing. Another of Reuchlin’s comedies, *Sergius* (1496, but not published until 1504), includes choruses with instrumental accompaniment. The final ‘Chorus cum choraule’ consists of seven verses, each of them repeating the opening couplet (which also appears in *Henno*):

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| Musis poetis et sacro | To the Muses of poetry and to divine |
| Phoebo referte gratias. | Apollo give thanks. |
| Vates honor decet suos | Honour also is due to the musicians |
| Quos musica proportio | whose harmony |
| Aequare vult caelestibus | strives to make them equal to the gods |
| Dulcissimo convivio. | in sweetest companionship. |

4 | German opera

Reuchlin's fellow-humanist and wandering scholar Conrad Celtis, Germany's first *poeta laureatus*, who declared that new truths could be revealed through study of the ancient texts, wrote poetry with Ovid and Horace as his models, but also stage pieces to be enhanced by dances with music. His *Ludus Dianae* (1501), in a prologue and five acts (a structure owing much to the Italian intermedio), has many links with the Italian intermedio and is not so much a drama as a series of dramatic tableaux, but one in which music plays a part. Act I ends with the whole troupe singing in four parts the praises of the Emperor Maximilian I and his (Sforza) Empress Bianca Maria, while nymphs dance; Act II with four voices accompanied by lute and zither; Act III with a three-part choral ode; the brief Act IV with drums and horns accompanying revelry; and Act V with Diana thanking the Emperor, echoed by a four-part chorus. The music was published in the Nuremberg edition of 1501. Celtis 'would have considered his odes and dramas incomplete without musical accompaniment' (Spitz, 1957, 80). It is possible that he himself, an expert musician, added polyphony to the melodies by Franciscus Niger, in which metres and quantities are strictly observed, though more probably it was the work of a court musician.

Other examples occur; and though the musical contribution is incidental rather than functional, it was generally regarded as essential support, and it has a significance. Rather than, as in Italy, suggesting a revival of past glories and drawing on music of great sophistication, such plays, written on classical models but German in temper, and lying outside the influence of the Church, stirred curiosity about Germans' own past history, and presented ethical ideas with a vernacular music assisting their performance to a popular audience.

With the growing humanist concern for the education of the young, interest turned to the use of such dramas in schools as a means of instruction; and the practice was sufficiently established by the early sixteenth century for there to be at hand a valuable instrument for the spread of the ideas of the Reformation. Luther himself, a trained musician, set an example with chorales and their

attendant melodies (many of them originating in popular folksongs), and these proved ideally suitable for use in the school dramas to press home a message or celebrate a moral. In such famous hymns as 'Ein feste Burg', Luther put into practice his precept that everything in the melody should grow from the inflections of the German language, and its original form is fluent and irregular. Moreover, a good many of his chorale melodies derive from folksong, so that 'O Welt, ich muß dich lassen' began life as 'Innsbruck, ich muß dich lassen'. In his table talk he once declared that 'Musica est optima ars, qua notae vivere faciunt verba' (Luther, 1883, *Tischreden* 2545) ('Music is the finest art, one by which notes bring words to life'); and his insistence on a vernacular music setting German is recorded in, for instance, a letter to Nikolaus Hausmann, 'mihi prorsus non placet, notas Latinas super verba germanica seruari' (Luther, 1883, *Briefwechsel*, 26 Mar. 1525) ('I am absolutely opposed to the use of Latin melodies setting German words'). The school dramas were an apt medium for attacks on the Roman Catholic Church, with vernacular hymns and choruses providing the musical content (even when some chorales were based on Gregorian chant), and the tradition of farce offered, ready to hand, a means of satire.

Among those who took up the popular theme of the Prodigal Son was the fabulist Burkard Waldis, a Franciscan who converted to Lutheranism in Rome in 1524, and the author of a famous collection of tales based on Aesop. His *Fastnachtspiel*, or Shrovetide play, *De Parabell vam vorlorn Szohn* (or *Der verlorene Sohn*, 1527) has the prodigal robbed in a Papist house of ill repute at the Devil's instigation. While his pious brother at home places all his trust in good works, the chastened prodigal repents and returns to the bosom of his family, his conversion to true religion being saluted in a final hymn celebrating the Lutheran message of justification not by works but by faith. The hymns which mark the act divisions were clearly well known, as only the first lines are cited; but more significantly, there is a *Te Deum* sung during the feast, which is also accompanied by instrumental music for trumpets, shawms and flutes. Before the end 'ward gesungen der cxxix Psalm "Uth deper noeth" etc met v stimmen'

6 | German opera

(‘Psalm 129, “Out of the depths” etc., is sung in five parts’). A more elaborate involvement of music comes with Paul Rebhun’s *Susanna* (*Ein Geystlich spiel von der Gottfürchtigen und Keuschen Frawen Susannen*, 1536). As part of his metrical and structural experiments, music is made to play a more functional role by having lyrics that are connected to the drama: for example, the first chorus consists of four ten-line strophes, the first two telling of the power of Venus, the latter two extolling chaste love.

The effect of music in the Reformation drama on audiences is now of course difficult to gauge. However, the hymns, familiar from their use in Lutheran church services, clearly played a vital part in concentrating the religious message into a moment of meditation on doctrinal truth; and they would have acquired something more than the affective power of music on an audience, serving as they did to draw idea as well as emotion into a common experience, when they were associated with the architect of the Reformation himself. The chorales – hymns sung *choraliter* by Luther’s ‘priesthood of all believers’ – struck a resonance which never faded from the German consciousness, which was given new power by successive composers and especially by the genius of J. S. Bach, and which was still awakening strong echoes in the time of Mendelssohn and above all with Wagner’s invocation of the length and strength of German history in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*.

Tribute to the effectiveness of the Reformation drama, spreading rapidly as it did through Northern Europe and especially into Bohemia and Switzerland, was not long delayed. Founded in Paris in 1534 by Ignatius Loyola with six companions, the ‘Clerks Regular of the Society of Jesus’ had their status approved by the Pope with the Bull ‘Regimini Militantis Ecclesiae’ of 27 September 1540. From the start, the Jesuits formed the spearhead of the Counter-Reformation. As early as 1556 there were over a hundred Colleges in Europe, organized in twelve Provinces, by 1600 over four hundred in twenty-seven Provinces. By 1626 there were over a hundred Colleges in German-speaking lands, and later in the seventeenth century 38 in the Austrian Province (embracing what is now Moravia, Hungary

and Slovenia), 29 in Bohemia, and altogether in the so-called German Assistancy no fewer than 167. With the establishment of Jesuit Colleges throughout the Empire came a response to the success of the Protestant school drama, conducted with all the intelligence, shrewdness and forcefulness that were to characterize the Order. From 1550 until the Order's suppression in 1773, thousands of plays were produced in hundreds of towns, and in some cities the Jesuit performances even took on the character of a minor court theatre. Though the Jesuits claimed that artistry in their school dramas was secondary to the instruction of schoolchildren in religion and the preparation for leading a Christian life, they drew upon music, dance, spectacle (including equestrian displays and flying machines), costumes, décor, ghosts, vanishing acts and much else in their appeal not only to schools but to the population of the surrounding area.

The Jesuit drama evolved originally from instructional rhetorical dialogues. Loyola himself, though he confessed to enjoying music, did not believe that God had willed it as part of the liturgy and refused to admit it to the first Colleges. Only later was this proscription relaxed when, observing the effectiveness of the Reformation drama in its use of Terence and Plautus, the Jesuits found ways of turning a popular idiom to their own ends. This quickly led to dramatic presentation of Bible stories, such as a Counter-Reformation version of the Prodigal Son, who now returns from wasting his substance and imperilling his soul to be received into the forgiving bosom of the Roman Catholic Church. Other dramas, generally written by a Jesuit father appointed *choragus*, drew on comedy, or on the personification of virtues and vices. They could be blunt in their onslaught, as with one of 1565 that ends by consigning Luther and Calvin to Hellfire. Forms might divide into *Revuestücke* (principally instructional) that could also be *Heiligenviten* (portraying the lives of Biblical figures or saints and martyrs), *Marienspiele*, *Bischofsspiele*, *Mirakelspiele*, *Totentanzspiele*, didactic and confrontational pieces, and pieces with an exemplary hero such as Belisarius, Cyrus, Themistocles, Constantine the Great, Joseph, David, even Thomas à Becket and Mary Stuart, and with villains including Herod and Julian the

Apostate. Generally, such plays were not given in church but in College halls or other theatres, publicly at Shrovetide, in part so as to restrain pre-Lenten excesses; other occasions would be school prize days or visits by prominent persons. They might last from two to seven hours, sometimes more, and would culminate in a scene using all their resources to make the greatest impact on the audience.

Already there were signs of the division between the musical and dramatic styles of Northern and Southern Germany which were to be strongly marked until virtually the end of the eighteenth century. The most important centre for the Jesuit drama outside Vienna became the Collegium Gregorianum in Munich, which by 1631 could claim no fewer than 1,464 pupils. At least in part, its significance rested upon the strong Roman Catholic connexions of the court; and the Wittelsbachs' love of music assisted the import of Italian composers and Italian stage expertise. *Samson*, staged for the marriage of Duke William to Renata of Lorraine in 1569, had choruses by Lassus, who had accepted the invitation to join Duke Albrecht's court in 1556. One of the most celebrated of all presentations was that of *Hester* in 1577, when some 1,700 costumed performers took part in procession through the streets on foot, on horseback, on elephants and in triumphal cars, accompanied by giants, devils, men with lions' heads, dolphins, tigers, wolves, executioners, lictors, magicians and Janissaries. The epilogue to this stupefying entertainment points the moral. Whereas, in the Old Testament, Esther had used her influence with King Ahasuerus to save the Jews from extirpation at the hands of the Grand Vizier Haman, we are now taught by Ecclesia that Hester is the Virgin Mary, Assuerus is God the Father and Aman the 'immanis Daemon', that is to say the Turks. Ecclesia asks Mary to support her against the Turks and against a much more dangerous enemy, Heresy. In this way, the analogy runs, she can soften the wrath of God and liberate the Austrian and Bavarian ruling houses and hence all dependent Christians from such threats to the soul.

These dramas often follow classical example and early Italian models by including choruses at the ends of the acts, showing the importance of music to confirm the religious message; and there

was also an important use of dance in a symbolic role. With later dramas, music moved closer to the centre of the expression. In *Philothea*, given seven times in Munich in 1643, the heroine at first refuses to obey and casts herself into worldly pleasures, before bowing submissively to divine mercy. Set out in recitative with ariosos and short arias, finally choruses, this has violins to accompany the songs of Christ and the angels, violas to accompany Misericordia, Clementia, Amor and the sorrowing Philothea, cornetts to sound when Mundus and Philothea rejoice, and solemn trombones when Justitia steps forward and Christ appears as Judge; there are also theorbos and lutes for the joyful chorus of the Daughters of Sion. One version records the use of fifteen instruments. A contemporary male equivalent, *Theophilus*, describes Man's journey to Christ in a sequence of Biblical quotations, and uses thirty-two musicians. The text is sung SATB, with recitatives, arias, duets and choruses. The high point is the Sanctus, and the work concludes with the damnation of unbelievers.

Such lavish dramas naturally made a more sensational impact, leaving the humbler Protestant versions far behind. The Jesuit drama's greatest German writer was a Swabian, Jakob Bidermann, whose most famous play was *Cenodoxus, sive Doctor Parisiensis* (1602). *Cenodoxus* is honoured as a model of Christian virtue, an apparently pious scholar; but he is ruled by pride in his heart. As he is being buried with great pomp, the Heavenly Court on high pronounces damnation. In a famous performance in Munich in 1609, before an influential audience, the effect proved overwhelming:

The hall was packed with an audience which included important nobles of the Bavarian court and the foremost citizens of Munich. At first the audience rocked with laughter at the opening comic scenes; but as the play progressed the mood changed to one of shock and horror as the spectators realized the enormity of the sins portrayed and became aware of the power of hell; and by the end of the play the members of the audience, trembling at the sight of a soul eternally damned, were reflecting in stunned silence on the punishment their own sins merited. The impact of the play was immediate. Fourteen members of the

audience went into retreat to perform the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius, just as in the play Bruno retreated into the wilderness to found his monastery and lead a life of spiritual contemplation; and the actor who played the part of Cenodoxus shortly afterwards entered the Society of Jesus and after a life of piety and holiness died in the odour of sanctity . . . In a few hours the play had accomplished what a hundred sermons could hardly have done. (Dyer, 1975, 1–2)

Much in the staging of these dramas was clearly left to the resources and talents of the time and the place. The so-called *periochae*, or *Periochen*, essentially synopses and guides to help German speakers follow the Latin action, generally consist of no more than title page, argument, résumé of individual scenes and list of performers, occasionally summaries or selected lines of the actual text; they leave a great deal to the modern imagination, though they are often the only source of information for lost dramas (see Szarota, 1987). Often the music is also lost: a rare surviving example is Johann Caspar Kerll's five-act *Pia et fortis mulier* (1677), the first extant Viennese Jesuit drama, which draws close to the condition of Italian Baroque opera in its use of recitative, da capo aria, ensemble and chorus.

There is disagreement as to whether the Jesuit tradition at its peak should be denied the status of musical drama (Valentin, 1978) or is the true ancestor of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (Szarota, 1978–87). By the second half of the seventeenth century, the title *Drama musicum* is found attached to some of them, though this should not be taken as indicative of what was meant by later use of such a term. Study of *periochae* and of accounts of performances does not really indicate a condition among the earlier examples in which music takes a functional lead in what may have approximated more closely, at best, to the dramatic nature of the English masque or the French *ballet de cour* (which both involved a degree of audience participation). Nevertheless, the essential role of music in the enactment of drama was confirmed at the earliest stage of the genre, and taken to a degree of high sophistication as the techniques of Florentine, Roman and Venetian opera began to infiltrate the Jesuit dramas in the