Introduction

In the 1750s, the King's Theatre in London was in a state of near collapse. A shifting series of alliances between performer-impresarios, aristocratic amateurs and bankers kept it afloat, but the venture was plagued by financial instability and managerial incompetence. Its artistic decline was even more spectacular. The days when Handel was the resident opera impresario were by now little more than a memory. Since that august era, no other composer of stature had stayed long enough in London to make an impact, and repertoire was of depressingly low quality. Perhaps only one factor ensured the survival of the theatre at all: the unchallenged place of Italian opera at the heart of the social and musical world of the English aristocracy. In the 1760s, there were some signs that the worst period was over. High-quality singers, always central to the success of Italian opera in London, began to appear more regularly, with the castrati Manzuoli and Elisi enjoying popular successes. More significant in the long term was the establishment of *opera buffa* as a regular part of the London season. Comic opera was cheaper to stage, gave variety to the season, and in due course produced its own lineage of stars with the charisma to attract audiences. Mixed seasons of *opera seria* and *opera buffa* afforded some protection against failure in either genre, and a further spreading of the risk was provided by ballet. To judge by the salaries paid to leading dancers from Paris, their contribution to the financial stability of the opera house became ever more essential as time went on. After four seasons in London, feted by society, Pacchierotti, one of the leading castrato singers of the late eighteenth century, retained a sense of realism on this issue. He was well aware that people frequented the King's Theatre because of the dancing, and he expressed the view that if this taste were to cease, the 'melancholy consequence' would be the 'indispensible ruin' of the place.[1]

The contrast between the fortunes of the King's Theatre in the mid century and in the 1780s could hardly be greater. The authors of a recent study of this later period, the managements of Sheridan, Taylor and Gallini, have presented an exciting portrait of the London opera house during some exceptionally turbulent years. Competing teams of managers fought fiercely for control of what was now seen as a highly prestigious cultural asset. Audiences were increasing in size, and the auditorium was periodically enlarged to cope with the rising demand. Seasons with top castrati like Pacchierotti and Marchesi were becoming the norm rather than the exception, and during Gallini's management the quality of the Italian repertoire in Vienna was finally recognised. A potent symbol of this renaissance is the fact that in late 1790, London came close to recruiting both Haydn and Mozart as rival opera composers.[2]

The decade before this 'Golden Age', perhaps the least studied period in the history of the King's Theatre, is the subject of this book. It coincides broadly with Sacchini's tenure of the position of house composer in the 1770s. Rightly judged by posterity to be several classes below Handel as an opera composer, Sacchini was nonetheless an important and influential figure in his day, and he was to play a central role in the revival of the fortunes of the King's Theatre. He was recruited by George Hobart, an aristocratic amateur, who, through a combination of poor management and bad luck, was unable to translate imaginative ideas into a successful programme. Even though for his last season he hired not only Sacchini but also the famous castrato Millico, his management ended in failure, perhaps because he simply ran out of resources. In the event, he left a valuable legacy for his successors, the team who took over the opera house in 1773, and who were to bring both stability and prosperity. The new managers came from a very different background – the London literary and theatrical world. There were five partners, but only three active managers: Frances Brooke, the novelist, translator, critic and would-be dramatist; and two actors of considerable renown, Mary Ann Yates and her husband Richard. Brooke was undoubtedly the driving force behind the partnership, quickly

proving herself an exceptionally capable manager. Having from the start assumed overall responsibility for policy, she demonstrated so sound a grasp of artistic planning and financial control that the King's Theatre began to prosper to a hitherto unprecedented degree. A much more influential figure in the history of Italian opera in London than has hitherto been recognised, her role in the revitalisation of the King's Theatre lies at the heart of this study. Sacchini remained in London during Sheridan's management. It is not my intention to go over ground covered in the recent study of this later period, but in the light of newly discovered documentation a revised interpretation will be proposed in three significant areas: the theatrical politics underlying the seminal 1778 sale of the opera house; the finances of the King's Theatre during Sheridan's management; and the salary paid to Pacchierotti.

It will be useful to outline the main themes of this study, which are as follows:

(1) Theatre politics

In the 1770s, the affairs of the Italian opera house became deeply entangled with the world of the London theatres and in particular with the interests of two major figures of the English stage, David Garrick and Richard Brinsley Sheridan. Theatre in London was regulated by the Licensing Act of 1737, which restricted performances to the two 'patent' theatres at Drury Lane and Covent Garden. Despite a small breach of the act in 1766 when a limited patent for summer performances was granted to Samuel Foote at the Little Theatre, it was still very much in force in the 1770s. Permission to stage Italian opera performances at the King's Theatre was not subject to the 1737 Act, but was granted through an annual licence, issued by the Lord Chamberlain's office once the financial viability of the proposed season had been secured.[3]

The effective monopoly on spoken dramatic performances enjoyed by the proprietors of Drury Lane and Covent Garden greatly enhanced the commercial profitability of their theatres, and it also

conferred considerable artistic power on the managements, both in the hiring and firing of actors and in the selection of plays to be performed. Garrick, manager at Drury Lane, was inundated with offers of plays, meritorious and otherwise. His necessary rejection of most of these scripts not infrequently led to the breakdown of hitherto cordial relationships. A significant factor in the entanglement of the Italian opera house in London theatrical politics of the 1770s was one such rejection. The author Frances Brooke had submitted a play to Garrick entitled *Virginia*, which had been rejected because he had already accepted another play on the same subject by Samuel Crisp. This rebuff rankled deeply, and, rightly or wrongly, she believed that her play had not been given a fair hearing by the actor simply because she was a woman. Modern critics do not see in Brooke's plays unjustly neglected works, nor does her personal charge against Garrick seem particularly well founded. He presented a range of new plays by women authors, sometimes taking great pains to ensure their success. When Brooke's views became public, he received strong support from other women writers. Nonetheless, that the famous actor had behaved in what in the modern era would be termed a 'sexist' fashion was Brooke's unshakeable conviction. After a period in Canada, she returned to London where she conceived a remarkably bold plan: this was to attempt to mount a direct challenge to Garrick by staging her own plays. In the light of the restrictions imposed by the 1737 Act, it would have been difficult to raise capital for a new building with no guarantee that a new patent would be issued by the authorities. Her attention thus turned to the King's Theatre, already a focus of some opposition to the existing monopoly. The opera house had many advantages, occupying an attractive site close to the fashionable areas of West London, with a loyal, wealthy and aristocratic audience, and a licence, albeit granted only for public performances of Italian opera. Moreover, the King's Theatre was manifestly under-used, lying vacant for four to five months each year, and even during the season staging only two operatic performances a week. The idea began to gain currency that an application to stage theatrical performances out of the opera season

or on intervening nights during it, might win favour with the authorities as a controlled further breach of the 1737 Act.

With this as her avowed aim, Brooke put together a small consortium to take over the opera house when it came up for sale in 1773. Had she succeeded in gaining the desired permission, she would not only have been in a position to attempt to demonstrate to the world at large the fallibility of Garrick's artistic judgement by staging successful productions of her own rejected works, much more significantly she would have further undermined some of the monopolistic influence enjoyed by the established theatre managers. At that point, the public ramifications of what had started as a private dispute began to cause alarm in wider theatrical circles, Brooke's bold move in effect claiming for the King's Theatre the much desired but elusive status as London's third winter theatre. The adverse consequences of such a change were well understood by the proprietors of the two established theatres, and they resisted it with all the means at their disposal. Brooke, however, a woman of extraordinary tenacity in the pursuit of her ambitions, was a formidable adversary, and the issue dominated London theatre politics for much of the decade, during which repeated applications for a licence were rejected by the Lord Chamberlain, who appeared anxious at all costs to preserve the *status quo*, even though some of the arguments in favour of a relaxation, notably the increase in London's population since 1737, were beginning to seem compelling. On a personal level, the old quarrel between Garrick and Brooke simmered on, flaring up in 1778, when satirical attacks were published by both sides.

During Brooke's five years as manager, the commercial and artistic prospects of the King's Theatre as an opera house were transformed. Even though permission to stage plays on alternate nights had not yet been granted, the prospect of a successful application to the Lord Chamberlain was now a serious concern for the managers of the two established theatres. When, late in 1777, it became apparent that Brooke was considering her next career move, Sheridan, who had taken over Drury Lane after Garrick's retirement, felt he had to put in a pre-emptive bid with the support of Thomas Harris at

Covent Garden. The 1778 sale amounted to a remarkable coup on the part of the theatre establishment. The previous defensive strategy, which was to fight off Brooke's applications for permission to stage plays at the King's Theatre, had become dangerously exposed, and, in what might perhaps be termed a hostile take-over, that is, one in which the interests of the acquired organisation were not the chief concern of the purchasers, Sheridan and Harris achieved their immediate aim, but it was a hugely rash gamble, given that they could put up hardly any of the £22,000 selling price from cash in hand. As a result of this coup, the orderly system of finance established by Brooke at the Italian opera house was utterly shattered, and the mess was still being sorted out a decade later.

(2) Opera management

The failure to achieve her primary objective, the public demonstration of the injustice of Garrick's rejection of her works, left Brooke with an opera house to run, and this she did with notable success. Throughout her period at the King's Theatre, she displayed strength of purpose and clarity of vision, both useful attributes for an eighteenth-century opera manager, but it was her ability to cope with an unforseen crisis that was to prove decisive. In her second year as artistic director, she was confronted with a very serious problem. A rival place of entertainment, the Pantheon, began to develop an alternative strategy for presenting major opera stars in London. Situated in a more fashionable locality and free from the crush of coaches that so irked opera patrons, the Pantheon could offer almost all the ancillary elements of a night at the opera: elegant surroundings; a tea room; tables for cards; and facilities for staging dances and masques. When its proprietors took the decision to hire Agujari, a major star of Italian opera, there was consternation at the King's Theatre. It seemed likely that the traditional loyalty of the English aristocracy to Italian opera was about to be put to a severe test. With considerable verve, Brooke elected to meet the threat head on. Her choice of Gabrielli to counter Agujari was an inspired one, and the singer's

debut at the King's Theatre was an operatic event of high drama, which provoked intense debate.

A detailed account of the administration of the King's Theatre at this period will be given, and new information on a range of topics concerning the business of opera performance will be discussed: banking arrangements; finances; salary levels; recruitment policy; and the use of agents. Particular attention will be paid to the links between London and Rome and Naples, and the role of the English artistic community in Italy in sending up-to-date information about singers, composers and scores back to London. There were several well-established sources of repertoire. Music for the season could be provided by a 'house' composer, as was the case with Sacchini, and it could be commissioned directly from an independent composer, but it was just as important to keep in touch with what was going on in Italy. Through her contacts with Ozias Humphry and other English artists, Brooke remained very well informed about which operas were proving most successful in Florence, Rome and Naples, and popular scores were regularly purchased and sent back to London for use in new productions. The connection with Rome was especially important in the supply of recent *opere buffe*, and works by Piccinni, Paisiello and Anfossi were sent to Brooke to be adapted for the King's Theatre.

(3) Opera criticism

The fierce debates that raged in Paris over opera, between advocates of tradition and reform, found only a muted echo in London. The most substantial critique to be published in London was an English translation of Algarotti, *An Essay on the Opera* (1767), but there was hardly any original commentary from indigenous writers. One important source, however, has been overlooked. Le Texier, a reciter, theatrical impresario and would-be opera director, spent several decades of his life in London, attempting to establish for himself an influential position in the King's Theatre management. For two seasons in the late 1770s, he published a periodical entitled *Journal*

Etranger, which included substantial reviews of King's Theatre productions. Signed opera criticism is rare in late eighteenth-century London, and it is useful to be able to evaluate the Frenchman's critique against the background of his career and known views. Given the warmth of his relationship with Garrick, it is quite likely that the *Journal Etranger* reviews reflect ideas on acting in opera espoused by the great actor, whose indirect influence on eighteenth-century reform movements on the Continent was profound, and who now perhaps had a more personal interest in supporting an attack upon Italian opera at the King's Theatre.[4] Although much of what Le Texier had to say was the common currency of opera criticism, his priorities, as an actor, were different from those of the poet Algarotti. He is especially severe on acting deficiencies in the King's Theatre casts, their routine use of stereotyped gestures and exaggerated caricature. He deplores the lax attitude to production management, the use of inappropriate costumes and scenery, and ludicrous gaffes, such as the refusal to ensure the inaudibility of the prompter. Following Algarotti, he even criticises audience behaviour, which he deems excessively indulgent of all these vices. His ideals certainly seem close to those associated with Garrick, notably the insistence on preserving the dramatic illusion, and the natural portrayal of character. Musical issues are of less concern, but, as might be expected, Le Texier approves the use of the chorus in *opera seria* and the action finale in *opera buffa*, and he condemns the excessive reliance on *da capo* arias. A bizarre character, he was thoroughly despised by the opera fraternity, and in consequence he failed to influence the conduct of Italian opera at the King's Theatre in any lasting way, yet his critique of London's failures is interesting in itself, and his journal amounts to a rare manifesto for opera reform in an English context.

(4) Careers of singers

The King's Theatre maintained and indeed enhanced its reputation as a leader in the market place for the leading stars of Italian opera.

During the period of this study, the major figures to appear in London were Guadagni, Millico, Agujari (at the Pantheon), Gabrielli and Pacchierotti. Much new information will be presented concerning the London years of these performers, in some cases hitherto unknown financial details of their salaries, in others unpublished accounts of their reception. In general, the 1770s saw the position of castrati as the top earners being challenged by women superstars, while at a rather lower level the position of the *basso buffo* began to develop its own distinctive star status.

(5) Music

The early months of 1773 seem in retrospect a critical turning point for Italian opera in London. In the preface to the libretto of his first London opera *Il Cid*, Sacchini is clearly identified with some of the central ideals of Parisian reform opera, notably as a lover of 'bella semplicità'. In the opera itself, prominent use is made of chorus and dance. A few weeks after the première of *Il Cid*, London had its first taste of Parisian reform opera itself, when Millico starred in two performances of *Orfeo*. Only two months later, however, this production was abandoned in favour of the pasticcio version originally given in London in 1770, and the brief flirtation with authentic Gluck appeared to be over. Although elements of reform opera remained in Sacchini's subsequent London operas (and those of Traetta) with their emphasis on spectacle, prominent use of chorus and orchestrally accompanied recitative, and occasional attempts to integrate ballet, there was no decisive shift in the nature of Italian opera in London.

Throughout this period in London, Sacchini was the dominant figure. His work was the unquestioned touchstone by which other composers, at least in *opera seria*, were judged. In describing him as a musical 'deity', the author of *ABC Dario Musico* was reflecting a view widely held in England. Although in retrospect these were not especially distinguished years for Italian opera in London, there was a growing recognition, evident in the recruitment policy of both

Hobart and Brooke, of the value of employing a good composer to provide original work of quality. The scale of Sacchini's success in 1773 demonstrated that a composer, in support of a leading castrato, could contribute much to the artistic and financial success of the opera house. The culture of the pasticcio, dominant in the 1750s and 1760s, for a time suffered a decline, as Brooke, a writer herself, began to seek out original works from the best available opera composers on the Continent. The list of composers who wrote, or were approached to write for London during her management, is impressive: Sacchini, Piccinni, Paisiello, Traetta, and J. C. Bach. In support of this policy, salary levels for composers rose, although not to the level enjoyed by leading singers. The agreed fee of £150 paid to Sacchini for each opera he composed in the mid 1770s far exceeded the payment that Mozart could expect from the Burgtheater for an opera in the 1780s. It might fairly be said that artistic policy was well conceived, but that it promised rather more than was actually achieved. A particular disappointment was the failure of negotiations that might have attracted the two leading Neapolitan opera composers to London. Piccinni refused an offer from Hobart, and his only original commission from Brooke, *Vittorina*, was a flop; Paisiello was on the verge of coming to London, when he received a better offer from St Petersburg. Despite these setbacks, the quality of repertoire was certainly improving. The recent evaluation of Brooke's last season as 'one of the most successful artistically in the later history of the King's Theatre' seems well merited, ending, as it did, with the most important opera to receive a London première during this period, J. C. Bach's *La clemenza di Scipione*.[5] No attempt will be made in this study to add to the recently published commentaries on operas from Sacchini's last years in London between 1777 and 1782, nor to assess the most popular *opera buffa* to be given during this period, a revival of Piccinni's well-known classic *La buona figliuola*, but there will be brief discussions of musical issues raised by Sacchini's *Il Cid*, *Perseo*, *Motezuma* and *Creso*, and by *Didone abandonata*, the pasticcio in which Gabrielli made such an impression. All that survives of Sacchini's