

# Opera and Drama in Eighteenth-Century London

The King's Theatre, Garrick and the Business of Performance

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CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

published by the press syndicate of the university of cambridge  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

cambridge university press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA

100 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, VIC 3166, Australia

Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain

Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2001

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset Monotype Dante 10/5/14pt. System QuarkXPress™ [see

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 521 80012 0 (hbk)

## CONTENTS

List of tables | ix

List of musical examples | x

Acknowledgements | xi

A note on conventions | xiii

Introduction | 1

- 1 The Hobart management | 19
- 2 The new managers take control | 29
- 3 Sacchini and the revival of opera seria | 40
- 4 Recruitment procedures and artistic policy | 52
- 5 The King's Theatre in crisis | 60
- 6 The recruitment of Lovattini | 77
- 7 The English community in Rome | 93
- 8 Lucrezia Agujari at the Pantheon | 105
- 9 Caterina Gabrielli | 121
- 10 Rauzzini's last season | 131
- 11 The King's Theatre flourishes | 153
- 12 The Queen of Quavers satire | 166
- 13 Financial management | 182
- 14 Opera salaries | 198
- 15 The sale of 1778 | 215

### Appendices

- 1a The accounts of Richard Yates and James Brooke at Henry Hoare & Co. (1773-1777) | 234
- 1b The customer account ledgers of Sheridan and Harris (1778-1779) | 251
- 1c Selected entries from the account of Jonathan Garton at Drummonds Bank (1778-1779) | 257
- 1d The account of Gasparo Pacchierotti at Coutts & Co. (1779-1784) | 258

1e	A page of opera payments and receipts in the Salt MSS (1780)	263
2a	Petition to the Lord Chamberlain (c.1770)	265
2b	Petition to the Lord Chamberlain (c.1775)	269
2c	Draft petition to the Lord Chamberlain from Sheridan and Harris (1777)	272
3a	Journal Etranger, No. 1 (June 1777)	276
3b	Opera reviews from Journal Etranger (1777-1778)	283
	Notes	295
	Bibliography	323
	Index	331

## TABLES

- 1 Opera *buffa* and opera seria performances in London 1766†72 78
- 2 Salaries paid to the primo uomo at the King's Theatre | 199
- 3 Salaries paid to the prima donna at the King's Theatre | 207
- 4 Salaries paid to the primo *buffo* at the King's Theatre | 209
- 5 Salaries paid to the prima *buffa* at the King's Theatre | 209
- 6 Salaries paid to the dancers at the King's Theatre | 210
- 7 Salaries paid to the composers at the King's Theatre | 211

## MUSICAL EXAMPLES

- 1 Sacchini, *Il Cid* (London, 1773) excerpt from the chorus 'Tacite ombre' | 44
- 2 Sacchini, *Il Cid* (London, 1773) excerpt from the chorus 'Tacite ombre' | 46
- 3 Sacchini, *Perseo* (London, 1774) excerpt from the chorus 'Qual Vero caso' | 62
- 4 Sacchini, *Motezuma* (London, 1775) the recitative/aria 'Fernando fortunato'/'Manco Fernando addio' | 110
- 5 Sacchini's aria 'Son regina' from the pasticcio *Didone* (London, 1775) | 135
- 6 Sacchini, *Il creso* (London, 1777) excerpt from the aria 'Quest'alma sventurata' | 158
- 7 Sacchini, *Il creso* (London, 1777) excerpt from the aria 'Quest'alma sventurata' | 159

Charles Burney's melancholy account of the state of the King's Theatre in the 1750s leaves the reader in no doubt that Italian opera in London was in a state of very serious disarray, following a sequence of schisms, failures, bankruptcies and imprisoned or absconding managers. So bad had matters become that the spectre of imminent collapse seemed to hang over the opera house at the start of each new regime. Earl Cowper's second wife wrote to him on 24 January 1757: 'I don't like y<sup>e</sup> new Opera so well as y<sup>e</sup> last, but there was a very full House on Satturday, to y<sup>e</sup> great joy of Giardini and Mingotti. I begin to think that y<sup>e</sup> operas will go on.'<sup>1</sup> It was apparently something of a surprise to her that the season was likely to continue at all. Burney thought that these two musicians had set themselves up for 'the chance of speedy ruin' by daring to take on the management of this problematic theatre.<sup>2</sup> Managerial shortcomings were more than matched by the sense of artistic decline. Indifferent performers and an over-reliance on the pasticcio had become perennial problems. Until the arrival of Cocchi, there was not even a resident composer at this period. A good sense of how depressingly low standards had become is conveyed in an account, again by Earl Cowper's wife, of a pasticcio *Solimano* given in 1758:

The Opera went off very well last night. I think all the Mattei's songs were very pretty, & I never heard her sing better than she did last night. Signor Potenza was very often horribly out of tune, but very few of y<sup>e</sup> audience were sensible of that. I thought Omfra cara suited his voice very well & y<sup>e</sup> accompaniment kept him in tune, & y<sup>e</sup> little Duetto of Handel's. They sang in tune & it was encored by y<sup>e</sup> English, but y<sup>e</sup> Foreign *Princes* & especially *Midas* seem'd to hold Handel's Musick very cheap, & y<sup>e</sup> ingenious Mr Ward shook his heavy Head at it. It was y<sup>e</sup> best Tuesday, Vaneschi has had.<sup>3</sup>

No one seemed to care, even about poor tuning. Burney was deeply unimpressed by Signor Potenza, 'an uncertain singer, and an affected actor, with more taste than voice'.<sup>4</sup> The incorporation of Handel's music into this pasticcio (in this case a duet from *Amadigi*) made little difference.

Although the London opera house took many years to recover from this low point, a growing number of individual successes began to point the way towards a more viable future. It is clear from Burney's account that there was an increasing audience at least for *opera buffa*, symbolised by the success of Galuppi's *Il filosofo di campagna*, which in 1761 scored a hit with a run of fifteen performances. At a benefit for the *prima buffa* that year, 'not one third of the company that presented themselves at the Opera-house doors were able to obtain admission'.<sup>5</sup> This success was followed in 1763 by another, when audiences flocked to see Anna de Amicis. According to Burney, her figure and gestures had been 'in the highest degree elegant and graceful' and her voice and manner of singing 'exquisitely polished and sweet'.<sup>6</sup> Others were similarly impressed:

16 November 1762

Jones to Lady Spencer

I was at the new Burletta last Saturday, La Signora Amicis a very agreeable voice, with taste, great humour, her person genteel & easy, bien degagée, and tho' her face is very bad, yet she pleases much, the first man is also very well & has a good deal of humour, the other two men & two women have nothing bad in their voices, their persons very well, so that upon the whole I think the Burletta will do very well this winter.<sup>7</sup>

Gray also noted the popularity of De Amicis, and such was her success that Bach requested her as his leading woman in *Orione*.<sup>8</sup> The time was clearly now right for the formal establishment of a regular *opera buffa* troupe, whose performances could alternate with those of the serious company. Such an arrangement did indeed come into force in the summer of 1766, and it rapidly paid dividends, following the recruitment of Lovattini.<sup>9</sup>

Another pointer to where the future prosperity of the King's Theatre might lie was provided by an event of major significance in



the history of Italian opera in London. The recruitment of the castrato Manzuoli for the season 1764–5 has been much discussed, largely as a result of his possible contact with the Mozart family, but his arrival in London signalled an important turning point in the fortunes of the opera house.<sup>10</sup> London had long valued castrato singers, but there was the obvious danger that in response to the problems encountered during the 1750s, King's Theatre managers would start to recruit cheaper, less distinguished singers, and thus be trapped in a downwards spiral of diminishing returns. The reception accorded to Manzuoli put an end to any prospect of that. He demanded and received a massive salary of £1,500, a rate unmatched by any singer until Gabrielli, over a decade later, and his debut caused a major sensation. Burney recalled: 'There was such a crowd assembled at all the avenues, that it was with very great difficulty I obtained a place, after waiting two hours at the door.'<sup>11</sup> No other singer so impressed him: 'the sensations he excited seem to have been more irresistible and universal, than I have ever been witness to in any theatre'. The lesson was obvious; the outlay of a huge salary for a singer of superstar charisma might seem risky, but such a policy was in fact liable to produce a much better financial outcome than a less ambitious recruitment. Time and again, money spent this way, for example on Gabrielli, Pacchierotti and Marchesi, proved money well spent.

When in 1769 the King's Theatre came under the management of the Honourable George Hobart, the future Third Earl of Buckinghamshire, the outlines of the strategy most likely to succeed were by now very evident. The new manager's initial appraisal of the state of the opera house would have focused on Lovattini's recent triumph in *La buona figliuola*, which was so great that the previous season there had been only *opera buffa* productions. Hobart, however, would have been in no doubt that *opera seria* with a star castrato still lay at the heart of the English aristocratic audience's interest in Italian opera, and he accordingly laid plans for its re-introduction.<sup>12</sup> His decision to recruit Guadagni was a shrewd one, as the castrato was already known in London, having performed with De Crosa's troupe in the 1748–9 and 1749–50 seasons, and he was by now a *seria* singer of

acknowledged quality.<sup>13</sup> Hobart's first choice as a partner for the castrato, Anna de Amicis, was also a well-conceived selection. After her success in London as *prima buffa*, she had gone to Italy, where her career as a serious singer looked promising.<sup>14</sup> The pairing of Guadagni with De Amicis in *opera seria* had obvious potential, but in the event Hobart was only able to recruit the castrato.

Impressions formed at the start of a new managerial regime could be hard to overturn, and from Hobart's point of view, it was unfortunate that he made a complete hash of the start of his first season. As so often in the world of eighteenth-century opera, personal relationships interfered with musical decisions. While in Italy the previous year, he had taken the singer Zamperini as his mistress, and she now won the position of 'first' woman over Guadagni's sister.<sup>15</sup> The supporters of the latter made their feelings plain on the opening night, and Hobart over-reacted ludicrously:

29 November 1769

George Bussy Villiers to Lady Spencer

I hear from the Crewes, who have more Macaroni intelligence, that there has been a riot at the Operas the Galleries chusing to hiss the Zamperini. Mr Hobart took fire, carried the Guards up, & made a most agreeable fracas: The whole Event of which I suppose is that she is now sure of meeting with the same reception everytime she appears. We shall hear more of it, I dare say; if such is Mr Hobart's method of acquiescing with the Voice of the Public.<sup>16</sup>

The management of cabals, groups of supporters of rival singers, required a good deal of diplomacy on the part of an opera impresario, and it was always made more difficult when there was a personal involvement. Walpole noted gleefully the activities of the two parties supporting the rival singers 'who alternately encore both in every song' so that 'the operas last to almost midnight'.<sup>17</sup> More significantly, the dispute meant that Hobart was from the start at odds with his *primo uomo*, whose sister was widely felt to have been slighted.

To add to Hobart's problems, audiences were at first poor. Walpole, as always ready with a pithy put-down, observed: 'The

operas are commended and deserted. I desert but cannot commend them.’<sup>18</sup> George Bussy Villiers informed Lady Spencer on 23 December that the house was ‘quite thin’.<sup>19</sup> The pessimism was not entirely justified; attendance was often indifferent around Christmas before picking up in the New Year, and Guadagni’s performances were soon attracting praise.<sup>20</sup> It was not long, however, before the castrato began to run into problems. According to Burney, he was a difficult character with ‘strong resentments and high notions of his own importance’, which ‘revolted many of his warmest friends, and augmented the malice of his enemies’. It was not so much these personal shortcomings (if indeed they existed) that got Guadagni into trouble, as his approach to acting. His insistence on preserving the ‘dignity and propriety’ of the dramatic character led him to adopt practices which began to antagonise his audiences. Especially unpopular was his refusal to perform encores, and this gave his enemies the chance to exploit his predicament by calling repeatedly and vociferously for them. As we shall see later, Guadagni’s calculated challenge to the long-established conventions of audience behaviour at the King’s Theatre which underpinned the relationship between the aristocratic audience and the star singers, stemmed ultimately from ideas about the presentation of drama espoused by Garrick.

Although Guadagni enjoyed the support of a fiercely partisan clique, his reputation with the wider opera-going public began to suffer, and he was also unable to reach agreement with Hobart over the size of his fee for the next season. The *London Magazine* stated that he had received £1,150 for his first year, the going rate in London for a castrato of his stature, but he was now demanding £1,600, with £1,000 to be paid in July and £50 a month thereafter. Hobart refused to trust his singer with so large a sum before the season had even begun, but he apparently offered him the choice of receiving the fee in the usual way or at £30 a week.<sup>21</sup>

The outcome of these accumulating disputes was a serious schism; Guadagni abandoned Hobart at the King’s Theatre and agreed to join Giardini in an unlicensed opera sponsored by Mrs

Cornelys.<sup>22</sup> The personal animosity that led to this action is easy to understand, but its rationale is less obvious. It was a near impossibility to make money out of Italian opera in London at this period, and there was never the remotest likelihood of two houses co-existing profitably. The purpose of the rival venture can only have been to damage Hobart sufficiently to cause him to withdraw, in the expectation that a new management, more to the liking of the rebels, would speedily re-incorporate them into the King's Theatre's programme. But this was a risky gamble, because Hobart clearly had the law on his side. The tactic adopted by his opponents was to test the range of the legal prohibition on unlicensed opera. Was it possible to perform one without full staging, or without costume, or in an abbreviated version, and still remain within the law? The title of the new venture 'harmonic' and its location on premises run by Mrs Cornelys suggest that the intention was to present concert versions, with enough acting to satisfy opera lovers.

The anti-Hobart account of the dispute in the *London Magazine* is headed 'Musical Dissention', and the author takes the manager to task for the 'present deplorable state of the opera'. It had been the custom to treat performers with 'civility' at least, but now they were being regarded as so many 'miserable menials'. Having rendered himself 'obnoxious' to the public, Hobart had now been rejected by the principal musicians who had declared they would never again 'exhibit' under his direction.<sup>23</sup> The very illegality of the rival opera attracted much interest.<sup>24</sup> It was soon the talk of the town, and there is no doubt that its popularity was beginning to damage the King's Theatre, as noted by Mrs Harris on 12 January.<sup>25</sup> Hobart, recognising how serious a threat this posed to the continued existence of Italian opera at the Haymarket, at first tried to bargain:

27 January 1771

Horace Walpole to Lady Mary Coke

Oh! I had forgotten: there are desperate wars between the opera in the Haymarket and that of Mrs Cornelys's. There was a negotiation yesterday for a union, but I do not know what answer the definitive courier has brought. All I know is that Guadagni is much more haughty than the

King of Castille, Arragon, Leon, Granada etc. In the mean time King Hobart is starving, and if the junction takes place his children must starve, for he must pay the expenses of both theatres.<sup>26</sup>

Society gossip was all of 'the charms of the Harmoniac meeting'; the 'Anti-Harmoniacs' would allow no merit to the new operatic venue, but they were clearly on the defensive.<sup>27</sup> Compromise was obviously out of the question, and Hobart took decisive action by informing the authorities, the effect of which was dramatic. The next Soho performance scheduled for 13 February was unexpectedly cancelled with the illness of the singers given as the reason. This fooled nobody. Mrs Harris was well aware of the situation and correctly predicted the end of the venture: 'The truth is Mr. Hobart has informed against them . . . The Harmoniac is over.'<sup>28</sup> Walpole reported to Sir Horace Mann with ill-concealed glee that Guadagni 'is not only fined, but was threatened to be sent to Bridewell'.<sup>29</sup> The report in the *London Magazine* suggests that Hobart had acted with some cunning. Having been informed that the first of the unlicensed 'operas' had taken place, he covertly sent a servant to purchase a subscription ticket for the remaining eleven, using the name of a friend so as not to cause suspicion. He then turned up and witnessed a complete performance of *Artaserse*, given 'upon a stage, and in the same manner as Operas are usually performed'.<sup>30</sup> The court action was widely reported and was the subject of a caricature in the *Oxford Magazine* (March 1771). Guadagni was fined £50 for taking part, and Mrs Harris even suggested that the singer had been threatened with a whipping.<sup>31</sup> The old cynic Walpole expressed himself 'delighted' at the quarrel and correctly predicted that Guadagni's 'singing as well as loving days are near over'.<sup>32</sup> There appears to have been a brief reconciliation when the singer returned to the King's Theatre to appear in the title role of *Orfeo* again, the first of these performances being given 'by command of their Majesties' on 30 April 1771. In his preface to the programme book, Guadagni expressed conciliatory sentiments: 'in performing the part of Orpheus, I require no other bribe, or reward, than the pleasure of shewing you a ready obedience'.<sup>33</sup> Although it failed, this

abortive attempt to set up a private opera did achieve significant support from both patrons and musicians. It is indicative that all was not well at the King's Theatre.

The debacle with Guadagni proved to be the central failure of Hobart's period of management. The singer's return came far too late in the season to prevent losses which were probably considerable. Worse still, *opera seria* did not quickly recover. For the next two seasons it remained at a low ebb, despite the rising reputation of Tenducci, the new *primo uomo*: 'Grass grows in the pit at the opera' was Walpole's tart comment.<sup>34</sup>

The financial consequences of Hobart's failure to make the best use of Guadagni (compounded by the losses incurred during the Cornelys venture) were serious, but success with comic opera might still have enabled him to save the situation. By the summer of 1770, Lovattini had completed four successful seasons in *La buona figliuola*, and the time was obviously right for a new work, even though a sequel, *La buona figliuola maritata*, had not lived up to expectations. Hobart thus attempted to recruit Piccinni. Burney, who agreed to act as his emissary, arrived in Naples in October 1770 and immediately presented the composer with a detailed proposal and a contract.<sup>35</sup> Piccinni firmly rejected the offer, despite Burney's warm advocacy of the financial benefits of a year in London. This was an imaginative move which might well have had the outcome desired by Hobart, since the composer's operas already in the repertoire, notably *La buona figliuola* and *La schiava*, continued to be popular with London audiences.

Towards the end of the 1770–1 season, audiences declined to an alarming extent. With no new castrato to offer to the public, Hobart took the only course of action open to him; he hired a star dancer from Paris – Heinel.<sup>36</sup> Mrs Harris reported that her fee was to be 1,200 guineas, but half of this sum was apparently to be raised by the 'Macaronis', a group of aristocratic supporters.<sup>37</sup> Burney confirms the unusual financial arrangements and hints that the very survival of the King's Theatre depended on the reception accorded to the dancer: 'At this time crowds assembled at the Opera-house more for

the gratification of the eye than the ear; for neither the invention of a new composer, nor the talents of new singers, attracted the public to the theatre, which was almost abandoned till the arrival of Mademoiselle Heinel.<sup>38</sup>

Some time during the last weeks of the season, Edward Pigott went to a performance of *Artaserse*. His brief account of a lively evening confirms the importance of dance:

June 1772

Went to the Opera, is a large and fine house, three Galleries one over an other, besides a number of boxes; the Opera was Artaxerxes, the Musick by To<sup>s</sup> Giordani a Neapolitan; the Actors are Savoi, Ristorini, Millico, Morigi, and Actresses where [*sic*] Grassi, Giordani; I dont like the last; Millico, and Savoi charming Voices especially the first; the decorations extreemly fine; I saw Mad<sup>lle</sup> Heinel & Slingsby dance, la premiere a beaucoup de graces; le second dance avec Beaucoup gaitée et de legertée, il est estimé; the Orquester excellent lead by . . . two harpsichords no organs, delightfull musick, very well executed; they begin at seven and finish at half an hour after ten; people where [*sic*] not dresst so richly nor so well as at Paris; the common people throw peals of oranges on the stage before the play begins.<sup>39</sup>

Heinel was an unqualified success, and she inspired extraordinary emotions in some of her followers:

12 January 1773

George Bussy Villiers to Lady Spencer

The operas go on as usual, & Mad<sup>lle</sup> Heinel continues to captivate from the highest to the lowest, but among all the conquests she has made, I do not know any that is more ridiculous than that of my former Friend James Bru[denel]: he can think or talk of nothing else, with all his uprightness and precise deportment, he is forever with her, & I suppose to ingratiate himself the more, is acquiring all the singular Gestures of the thinnest Macaroni.<sup>40</sup>

Burney noted that, following her arrival, dancing became a more important element in King's Theatre seasons generally.

By now, Hobart was in serious financial trouble. Failure to pay salaries was usually the first sign of a management in crisis, and hardly

two months after the dancer's debut, there was gossip.<sup>41</sup> Despite his difficulties, Hobart held on for one more season, but once again, ill-fortune dogged his efforts. Millico had a moderately successful debut,<sup>42</sup> but both he and Sacchini fell victim to particularly nasty cabals, which used 'violent and virulent means' to poison their reception.<sup>43</sup> For a time, Millico seems to have been systematically hissed, for which Burney blamed admirers of Tenducci and Guadagni in particular. Sacchini's music was decried by the supporters of Cocchi, Guglielmi, Giardini, Vento and Bach. The 'manifest injustice and absurdity' of the campaign did not, unfortunately for Hobart, become evident until the triumphant première of *Il Cid*.<sup>44</sup> The final irony of his period as manager is that the financial and legal transactions necessary to transfer his share in the King's Theatre to new owners were underway within days of the opening of the opera that was to transform the theatre's prospects. It is hard to find fault with Hobart's artistic vision: Piccinni and Sacchini were his preferred composers, Guadagni and Millico his castrati, but success eluded him. When the new managers advertised their plans for the next season, they observed that receipts had 'generally been inadequate to the expenses' and pleaded for 'generous support and encouragement' for the future.<sup>45</sup> John Williams later noted: 'The Hon. Mr Hobart, now Earl of Buckinghamshire, then became sole Manager. He, after many years trial, and a tolerable taste for Italian music, it is generally supposed went out *minus* some thousand pounds.'<sup>46</sup>