Introduction: opera studies today

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In all art the road to appreciation lies through reflection. (STENDHAL, *LIFE OF ROSSINI*)[1]

In 1860 the French poet Charles Baudelaire heard a concert performance of excerpts from Richard Wagner's opera *Tannhäuser*. Writing about the overwhelming impact that the music had upon him he expressed his desire to understand better its 'mysterious intentions and method, which were all unknown to me. I resolved to make myself master of the why and wherefore, and to transform my pleasure into knowledge.'[2]

We could have no better account of why we might be led to study something, most particularly something that gets under our skin, as Wagner had got under Baudelaire's skin, and as opera gets under many people's skins. We study something firstly because we want to understand 'the why and wherefore' of it: why it is, and why it is as it is. We want to understand its constituents: how they are put together and why they are put together in that way. And, secondly, we want to understand why it has the effect that it has upon us, so as to know better the values that form our own subjectivity; to gain understanding of the basis of our own pleasures or displeasures, as individuals and members of particular groups and communities. And, finally, we study something for the light it casts upon the society and culture within which the object of our study exists (or existed). Even if Baudelaire didn't express this last concern immediately, he was certainly one of the first critics to have understood how works of art tell us about their specific historical moment. These three modes of explanation broadly provide the map by which this book has been put together, indicating what I take to be the three main fields of interest in current opera studies.

Their methods are not mutually exclusive: explanations of the formal 'what?' soon lead (as Baudelaire recognized) to questions about artistic intention ('why and wherefore?'), which in turn inevitably raise questions about performance, institutional, cultural and social contexts; subjectivities themselves are culturally constructed. Nonetheless, time was when opera studies might have considered its remit to be the first of these activities in isolation, examining the formal 'what?' of operatic works as represented by their scores alone. For the British opera historian Robert Donington,

writing as late as 1978, the components of opera are simply 'the words that articulate the drama, and the music that expresses it'.[3] Insofar as opera was studied as an academic subject the focus was on describing the musical and dramatic principles of operatic works, and perhaps supplying some kind of critical judgement of their quality according to probably unexamined criteria (as Joseph Kerman concedes in the passage from *Opera as Drama* on p. 8 below), or offering a historical account of opera's formal or stylistic development through a select handful of canonical composers and works. All that was necessary to know about an opera was assumed to be contained in the closed text and the fictive world it represented; everything else was deemed to be contingent. A statement of method by the German critic Siegmund Levarie, who sought to bring the rigour of formalist analysis to the operas of Mozart, makes this clear: 'Emphasis on the score will banish from the staked limits any primary consideration of Mozart's life and experience. Only rarely and incidentally will the historical devices of the scholarly mode of criticism be admitted.'[4] For Levarie, this method was justified because 'In the case of music, meaning and grammar are identical'.[5] But Levarie cannot avoid discussion of non-musical events since he is analysing opera and is aware that the formal properties of the music must in some way relate to dramatic action, so he issues a caveat that is more than usually revealing: 'The terminology will thus not be able to avoid loans from universal thoughts and aspirations, not necessarily musical, which are shared by all mankind but given particular expression by the composer.'[6]

This is more than usually revealing since it is an explicit statement of what has come to be called 'liberal humanism' – the basing of critical interpretation upon unquestioned assumptions of 'universal' human values. It is explicitly unhistorical (that which is universal by definition excludes historical or cultural particularity), implicitly assumes that the values of one's own culture are universal, and takes no account of the different subject positions that people occupy as the result of culture, gender, class, race, sexuality and so forth. It is exemplified by the kind of criticism that can discuss the theme of sexual jealousy (a 'universal' theme) in Verdi's *Otello* without mentioning the issue of Othello's race and how the issue of race played out in the context of early seventeenth-century English society and late nineteenth-century Italian society. The development of opera studies since the early 1990s may be charted as a move away from these kinds of formalist and liberal humanist approaches towards modes of study that consider the social and historical contexts of a work, and engage not only with dramatic texts but with the materiality of performance practices and events, and with the institutions and cultural discourses that sustain them. To study opera we have to study more than operas.

Dissolving walls and boundaries

The study of opera has been a late entrant to the academic disciplines, mainly because of opera's own uncertain generic combination of theatre and music, which led to its being marginalized by both musicology and theatre studies. It could, of course, be argued that since music and theatre are inseparable in most of the world's performance traditions this is a false distinction that has only come about due to the separation of theatre and music in European culture, and the resultant separation and reification of their study as disciplines. But the effect of this is that in the development of opera studies as an academic discipline in its own right we can observe two apparently contradictory tendencies at work. The first is the tendency for any new academic discipline to want to demarcate its terrain firmly, and to establish its own rules and procedures. New academic subjects tend to be defensive about their status, with the effect that they often seek to out-rigour older disciplines in an effort to prove that the new subject is indeed worthy of academic attention. This phase of discipline formation is often exclusionary in its determination to draw the line between its own procedures and what is perceived to be the amateurish dilettantism that has gone before. As the historian Michel Foucault argued in *Discipline and Punish*, 'Discipline sometimes requires *enclosure*, the specification of a place heterogenous to all others and closed in upon itself. It is the protected space of disciplinary monotony.'[7] The second tendency, which usually follows as a reaction to the 'disciplinary monotony' of the first, is to throw the subject open to wider disciplinary enquiry. The belatedness of the academic study of opera has had the effect of compacting these two tendencies so that they often seem to occur alongside each other, for at the same time that the claim for disciplinary rigour was being made it was recognized that a form like opera is inherently interdisciplinary, and therefore demands a wide range of critical approaches. At the very least, the critic of opera needs to understand the history, practices and theories of theatre as well as those of music, although these days few theatre scholars or musicologists believe that the study of either theatre or music can be contained within these disciplinary boundaries alone, as I discuss further in Chapter 3. These two tendencies towards methodological rigour and methodological openness can perhaps be seen to crystallize, symbolically at least, in two publications that appeared in 1989 (a year when walls and boundaries were dissolving more widely): Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker's book *Analyzing Opera*, and the launch by Parker and Arthur Groos of the *Cambridge Opera Journal*. If *Analyzing Opera* set out to establish some methods for the rigorous analysis of opera according to its own terms, the *Cambridge Opera Journal* set out quite explicitly to open opera studies to multidisciplinary approaches.

It will not do to oversimplify the story. Much fine work had been undertaken in the field of opera studies before 1989. Most of this work had taken place in relation to individual composers (e.g. Winton Dean on Handel, Julian Budden or David Kimbell on Verdi, John Warrack on Weber, to list only British examples), although such studies often viewed the works in isolation of anything but biographical context, or introduced historical contexts as backgrounds that never seriously impinged on discussion of the composers and their works. One of the first substantial attempts to offer an overarching theory of the dramaturgy of opera was Joseph Kerman's *Opera as Drama*, first published in 1956, a book whose influence remains widespread, and to which I shall return later in this introduction. But Kerman's study is even more resolutely unhistorical than the others mentioned. Newer disciplinary approaches had included the perspectives of sociology (Jane Fulcher's work on French grand opera,[8] or John Rosselli's on the nineteenth-century Italian opera industry,[9] both from earlier in the 1980s) or literary theory (Peter Conrad's *Romantic Opera and Literary Form* from 1977;[10] Herbert Lindenberger's *Opera the Extravagant Art* from 1984).[11] But it was from the 1990s that opera studies really took off as a discipline that was able to recognize both the material and institutional specificity and the broader cultural complexities of the form.

As an object of musicological study, opera has always been problematic for critical methods derived from the historical hegemony of German instrumental music. As Abbate and Parker suggest, 'Traditionally, [musicology] treated opera in a stepmotherly fashion, preferring older or purely instrumental music for establishing canonical norms, often abandoning the study of nineteenth-century opera to amateurs.'[12] And this applied not just to nineteenth-century opera, of course, despite the valiant efforts of scholars like Winton Dean or Donald J. Grout to restore the reputations of composers such as Handel or Scarlatti, or the work of the German scholar Reinhard Strohm on eighteenth-century Italian opera.[13] Writing in 1949 the Scottish musicologist Donald Francis Tovey notoriously dismissed the whole history of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century opera as an irrelevant bywater of 'the mainstream of music', judging that 'at the beginning of the seventeenth century [the mainstream] enters into regions partly mountainous and partly desert and becomes choked with weeds'. For Tovey the only redemption for opera was to regard it as 'ultimately a pure form of music' with 'a capacity to rise almost as high as absolute music can rise'.[14] Lest we are tempted to dismiss Tovey's discomfort with opera as being a relic of the past, it is worth noting that the twenty-four chapters of Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist's *Rethinking Music* of 1999,[15] a compendium of what were judged to be the main issues in musicology at that date, confine themselves almost exclusively to the discussion of non-operatic music, even

though paradoxically the purpose of the book was to demonstrate the wide range of disciplinary approaches now being taken by musicology. Similarly, Alastair Williams's 2001 survey *Constructing Musicology* dedicates a mere five pages to opera, discussing it in relation to the representation of women and the orient in music, issues over which opera has proved particularly vulnerable to contemporary forms of social and cultural critique, and issues which merit two chapters to themselves in this book.[16]

Yet for much of the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries 'music' meant, for most people, opera. Countering Tovey, William Austin proposes that 'Between Monteverdi and Mozart we may infer . . . that Italian opera constituted the mainstream of music.'[17] For many composers who are remembered today primarily for their instrumental music (or songs), such as Haydn, Schubert or Dvořák, opera constituted a substantial part of their output, whilst, of course, many major composers such as Gluck, Verdi, Wagner, Massenet and Puccini worked almost exclusively in opera. Traditional accounts of the musical development of opera tend to see it in relationship to the 'progress' of canonical forms of instrumental music. A composer like Mozart, one of the few composers to have been an absolute master of operatic and non-operatic genres alike, is therefore supposed to have deployed the inherently dramatic and developmental structures of instrumental sonata form to allow opera to develop a properly dramatic language (although this doesn't explain why Haydn, another master of sonata form, was, by our lights, much less successful in opera). But, as Austin and Abbate have both suggested, this argument may be tautologous. Abbate suggests that our concept of what is 'dramatic' in music is, in the first place, derived from opera, and Austin argues even more broadly that 'Our basic ideas about the orchestra, about keys and chords and modulations, about rhythms and forms and musical expression, were shaped by opera.'[18] It may in fact be the case that sonata form developed from *opera buffa* rather than the other way round. And Abbate has also suggested that the hermeneutic turn in contemporary critical musicology, the tendency to interpret music in relation to its constructions of, say, gender or nation, has its roots in opera aesthetics insofar as it is opera that affirms music's 'signifying capacity'.[19]

Although Wagner claimed that his music dramas were symphonic, perhaps a reflection of his own status anxiety about working in the medium of opera, they deliver no meaningful symphonic method for the analyst; definitions of what might constitute symphonic thinking have to be rendered very vague and abstract to include Wagner. Perhaps the best-known example of this kind of approach was the work of the Wagnerian critic Alfred Lorenz who, in the 1920s and 1930s, rejected the prevalent obsession with labelling and interpreting the thematic leitmotifs of Wagnerian

drama, identifying instead the larger-scale harmonic structures underlying the surface of the music. In doing so he reduced Wagner's operas to a series of purely formal, tonal processes entirely divorced from dramatic meaning.[20] Typically, critics rooted in the tradition of formal analysis often prefer their operas unperformed; Mozart scholar Julian Rushton finds the music of *Don Giovanni* to be so perfect that 'in truth [the opera] needs no staging'.[21] Kierkegaard preferred to listen to performances of *Don Giovanni* with his eyes closed; the advent of recording technologies made that unnecessary, re-enforcing the tendency to listen to opera as a primarily musical experience which has almost certainly contributed to the dominance of the conductor in opera during most of the twentieth century. The arrival of video, notably much more popular for opera than for spoken theatre, has redressed this balance somewhat.

Parker and Abbate's *Analyzing Opera* addresses the problem of formalism directly, staking a claim for the importance of analytical methods, but proposing new approaches: 'All too often the practitioners of musical analysis labor doggedly to discover the hallmarks of autonomous structure, or coherence, or organic unity in a work. By doing so, they may ignore a hundred rich contexts for their object, including those we might regard as historical: the conditions of its invention, its intertextuality.'[22] But although Parker and Abbate suggest that their mode of analysis opens opera to social and historical forces, and they reference poststructuralist views that the text is not self-contained – that meanings arise in relation to other texts and contexts (see Chapter 10 of this volume) – the essays in the collection in fact offer few examples of such historically informed analysis. Abbate's highly original (and influential) work on opera has demonstrated that poststructuralist methods of analysis often dispense with the historical contextualization that she refers to above, although more recently she has sought to consider the effect of performance more carefully, leading her to question the methods of close textual interpretation.[23] Historically informed analysis is, in fact, much more evident in the articles found in the *Cambridge Opera Journal*. In an editorial to the first 1989 issue that is admirable for its restraint from polemic Parker and Arthur Groos claim a simple purpose for the journal: to open opera studies to interdisciplinary approaches from scholars outside the discipline of musicology. 'We hope, in short, to broaden the scope of discourse about opera', pointing out with evident satisfaction that contributors to the very first volume of the journal include an economic historian, a musicologist, a literary critic, a philosopher and an opera scholar 'unfettered by academic ties'[24] (even if, under other circumstances, such writers might have been labelled by Parker himself, wearing his analyst hat, as 'amateurs'). In earlier editions of the journal contributors still feel obliged to do a little pre-emptive throat-clearing to

justify their disciplinary solecism; by the millennium it had become evident that opera scholars were revelling in their disciplinary promiscuity.

Disciplinary restraint and disciplinary promiscuity side by side. We could not have a more apt critical paradigm for opera itself, which has always been confined and constrained by the institutional structures and discourses that hold it in place, and yet still manages to be messy, elusive and sometimes even surprisingly subversive.

Opera as drama

Although the study of opera has historically been led by musicology, it is also to some extent informed by whatever is the current state of drama and theatre studies – itself a belated presence in the academy. Drama studies emerged from within literary studies with the study of dramatic texts as literature. Given the predominant formalism of literary studies at the time that drama was becoming accepted as an academic discipline in post-war Europe and America, it is not surprising that the formal aspects of dramatic texts were often exaggerated. And to some extent this might have given legitimation to approaches to opera that similarly focused on the formal properties of the music of opera: the kind of organic textual unity sought by musical analysis is paralleled by the way in which Cleanth Brooks, one of the best-known members of the school of formalist literary criticism known as New Criticism, sought to reduce the meaning of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* to a single metaphor in the play, as if it were no more than an extended poem.[25] Moreover, the formalism of both musicological analysis and New Criticism was in accord with the reductive approach of a critical modernism committed to the pursuit of what is essential to an art form. The aesthetic philosopher Suzanne Langer, for instance, insisted that 'Each of the great orders of art has its own primary apparition which is the essential feature of all its works . . . there can be no hybrid works, belonging as much to one art as to another.'[26] This left opera in a sticky spot, and the modernist theatre critic Eric Bentley duly dismissed forms such as opera in his book *The Playwright as Thinker*, stating that 'every dramaturgic practice that subordinates the words to any other medium has trivialized the drama without giving full rein to the medium that has become dominant'.[27] Indeed, if opera has proved a troublesome stepchild for conventional musicology, which sidesteps the problem by pretending that opera is not theatre, it has proved no less delinquent to conventional theatre studies, which has consistently ignored opera as a theatrical form. My Thames and Hudson *Illustrated Encyclopedia of World Theatre*, still on my shelves from when I was a student in 1977, has no entry for opera, whilst its entry under 'Chorus' says simply

that from the Renaissance onward the collective chorus 'was taken over by one character who acted as commentator and observer of the main action', as if four hundred years of the operatic chorus had never happened.[28] Such solecisms are replicated in standard histories of theatre to this day.

It was the laudable intention of Joseph Kerman in *Opera as Drama* to challenge both Bentley's dismissal of opera from the perspective of drama, making a claim for opera to be taken seriously as a dramatic genre, and the kinds of musical formalism demonstrated by Lorenz and Levarie, insisting that any analysis of the music of an opera should do so in the light of its dramatic function. *Opera as Drama* is feisty and opinionated, but limited by its liberal humanist premises. In the revised edition of the book, issued in 1988, Kerman reflected on the lack of an explicit methodological or theoretical framework in the original book:

> The 'theory' is exceedingly slight and is presented in a conspicuously roundabout fashion. After a not so hidden reference to Aristotle and a rejection of naturalistic criteria, the argument proceeds immediately by analogy . . . Only afterwards . . . is theory set forth or adumbrated. Drama is or entails the revelation of the quality of human response to actions and events, in the direct context of those actions and events. Opera is drama when it furthers such revelations.[29]

The premises of Kerman's humanist psychologism continue to inform everyday operatic criticism. The pages of a magazine such as *Opera* are littered with critical judgements that assume that dramatic characters have an essential being, with statements such as: 'like many Americans, X failed to capture the aristocratic quality of the Count'; 'Y successfully brings out the essential passivity of Melisande's character'. As a callow young opera director keen to make a mark I once proposed to the director I was assisting on Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* that the opera was 'all about money'. 'No', said the director, it's 'all about people'.

Where for Kerman the presumption that drama entailed humanist psychology meant that baroque opera was disqualified as drama, Winton Dean attempted a defence of baroque opera based on precisely the same premises of humanist psychology, presenting a case for interpreting Handel as a great dramatic psychologist. Handel's Cleopatra is 'the equal of Shakespeare's',[30] and, writing of Handel's portrayal of sorceresses such as Armida and Alcina, Dean states that 'Handel's music transcends the libretti; the magic element, designed perhaps as an excuse for diversion and the titillation of the senses, becomes a vehicle for profound truths about human nature.'[31] Dean here makes a number of familiar assumptions. Firstly, he assumes that there is such a thing as human nature, and by implication that it is timeless and universal in that it transcends the specific context of the opera in question.

Secondly, he assumes that it is the music that reveals 'profound truths about human nature', and that these truths are, again, transcendent. This belief in the power of operatic music to convey truths beyond those given in the text is very evident in mainstream operatic criticism; as Carolyn Abbate notes, 'We generally assume that the message conveyed by that music – whatever form it takes – possesses absolute moral authority.'[32] But Abbate also questions this assumption when she insists that the possibility of musical meaning arises from context; there is no essential realm of 'truth' to which music has privileged access. 'When the Countess pardons the Count in act 4 of *The Marriage of Figaro*, it is not that Mozart's music simultaneously gives voice to some more profound statement of or about forgiveness. Rather, it is the fact that there is a Countess, a Count, a specific dramatic situation, and ordinary words like "Contessa, perdono" sung out loud that has in quite precise ways predetermined the meaning to attach to Mozart's musical moment.'[33] And Abbate goes on to insist that 'Such phenomena undermine romantic notions about music's overriding force, seen as the power to do more than the verbal and the visible, to convey something beyond them, to transcend and survive their limits.'[34]

The belief that music has access to realms of truth beyond the dramatic situation is invariably also supported by the common view that truth is reached through the abandonment of received schemata and conventions. This presumption clearly underpins the entry on 'Mozart' in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Opera* (1987 edition), which describes Mozart's operatic career as a progressive liberation from conventional forms to represent his characters with increasing lifelikeness and truthfulness. The incomplete opera *Zaide* is 'a clear step forward'; *Idomeneo* 'has the power to transcend old forms'; *Le nozze di Figaro* is 'an enormous advance on its predecessors'; *Don Giovanni* 'severs almost the last connections, still present in *Figaro*, with set types'; finally, *Die Zauberflöte* shows Mozart's 'lifelong care for the truthful observation of human character'.[35] Yet this routine narrative is patently absurd in the case of Mozart. If Mozart blurs the stereotypes of *opera seria* and *opera buffa* to challenge class distinctions in *Figaro*, the characters in *Don Giovanni* clearly revert to earlier types from *opera seria* (Anna and Ottavio) and *opera buffa* (Leporello and Zerlina), for reasons that I tried to suggest in my *Mozart and the Enlightenment*.[36] It is nonsense to imply that the obviously generic characters of *Die Zauberflöte* represent the consummation of Mozart's movement towards 'truthful observation of human character'. If they appear truthful it is because Mozart knows how to deploy particular musical and dramatic conventions that have become naturalized in such a way that they *seem* truthful. As Ronald J. Rabin puts it, 'Rather than assume that Mozart's genius invariably led him to transform genre conventions, we might enquire instead how Mozart *exploits* them

to suit his dramatic aims.'[37] There is no simple opposition between convention and truth. As late as *Aida* in 1871 Verdi knew that conventions of Italian opera that went back to Rossini could still be relied upon since, as Harold Powers put it, conventions create 'a framework of expectations' for an audience.[38] Alessandra Campana's chapter on operatic genres addresses this issue of genre and convention across the history of opera.

The problem with Kerman's reliance on such a narrow definition of drama is that it excluded huge areas of the operatic repertory on the grounds that these works failed to meet his stringent criteria: most seventeenth-century opera, all eighteenth-century Italian *opera seria* and French opera, most early Romantic opera. The exclusionary tightness of Kerman's category of drama led Peter Conrad in *Romantic Opera and Literary Form* to offer a provocative rebuff when he suggested that opera might more usefully be associated with genres such as the epic, romance, Shakespearean lyric poem, allegory, novel, dance and even painting – anything but drama! Kerman's method is also typical in that it ignores the theatrical experience of opera in performance; his analytical method is rooted in the notion of the text as something self-sufficient. Remedying this is not just a matter of considering 'staging' as an additional component of opera (a position that Donington conceded in a later book);[39] it involves an understanding that musical and theatrical works are, to a significant extent, conceived and shaped according to the musical, theatrical and social systems for which they are created.

Nietzsche to the rescue

Kerman's claims for opera as drama had already perhaps been pre-empted in the nineteenth century by Friedrich Nietzsche, who so often anticipates later twentieth-century modes of thought. Nietzsche's first major work *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* of 1872, written under the influence of Schopenhauer and Wagner, places the problem of opera at the centre of a philosophical enquiry into the nature of being. In this book Nietzsche suggests that those elements that Kerman rejects as inessential to opera as drama ('the lyrical, spectacular or ritual elements'[40]), or that Winton Dean considered to be 'an excuse for diversion and the titillation of the senses', might actually be what make the form valuable. For Nietzsche, in his famous distinction between the Apollonian and the Dionysian aspects of art and life, the main characteristic of the Dionysian is that whereas the Apollonian spirit attempts to impose order and meaning on the world through idealized representation, the Dionysian accepts the underlying flux and meaninglessness of life, sometimes celebrating it, at other times