PART I

The making of opera

1 Opera as process

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Production and re-production

Eighteenth-century opera is experiencing an unprecedented revitalization. New productions are increasingly presented to us in a manner that resonates as much as possible with our modern sensibilities, such as McVicar's recent staging of Handel's *Giulio Cesare*, set in British colonial style with Bollywood-inspired choreography (see cover illustration). Although productions of the same opera in the eighteenth century and in our time result in theatrical events that on the surface seem radically dissimilar, they also share fundamental traits. No matter how distant the story of an opera is set in time or in space, opera was and still is meant to engage with the present audience. To do so, it places the audience at the forefront of the performing event by adopting a system of production that favors re-creation over re-production, or process over work. In this chapter I will examine who and what was involved in this process and how it functions in contemporary practices. The basis of this investigation is Vivaldi's *Motezuma* (Venice, 1733), which exists in two modern and completely different recorded versions. A close reading of this work can reveal the process through which opera was produced and disseminated in the eighteenth century as well as the techniques of creative philology that are practiced in our contemporary production of early opera. As demonstrated in later settings of the Montezuma story beginning with Graun's version (Berlin, 1755), the reform of opera, which was famously exacted by Gluck, attempted to address some of the problems related to a system of production that was perceived as too chaotic and diffuse. The reformers, however, preserved the function of opera in society as a highly engaging and communicative genre, a function that had to maintain the nature of opera as process rather than artifact.

Opera played a central role in eighteenth-century society. The number of active opera houses far exceeded those in today's far more densely populated world. Opera theaters were commonly located in the heart of urban centers and many theaters were active at the same time in capital cities. Small but elegant theaters were also located in provincial towns, in trendy holiday resort locations, as well as in wealthy aristocratic country

residences, like Eszterháza in Hungary, where Joseph Haydn resided and wrote more than twenty original operas, revising and reworking numerous others.[1]

In all of these venues and especially in public theaters a cross-section of contemporary society, including the most influential citizens, gathered for many hours to attend opera performances supplemented with *entr'acte* ballets and/or comic *intermezzi*. Because opera was regarded as the quintessential social event, contemporary critics and commentators, like President De Brosses or Charles Burney, often focus their attention on the live events rather than on operatic texts (libretti and scores) and never forget to record the reaction of the audience. Stefano Arteaga indeed begins his 1783 influential essay on opera with a classification of the opera audience into types of spectators. At the bottom of the hierarchy is the *gente di mondo*, the mundane audience, who attend because "everybody else does," and they are concerned to see and be seen ("adocchiare per essere adocchiati"). Arteaga describes these worldly opera-goers as constantly strolling from box to box, chatting, gossiping, gambling, flirting, and accuses them of confusing affects with lust, and ethics with their own advantage. This casual attitude was facilitated by the architectonic structure of the typical horse-shoe shaped venue tiered with rows of boxes and constant illumination, which certainly allowed one "to see and to be seen." This also permitted the less distracted audience to follow the libretto, which in many cases presented the text in the original language and parallel translation, working as the equivalent of our projected super-titles. The second type of audience, according to Arteaga, is made up of politicians. They exercise their power directly when involved in the production, and at the least they take advantage of opera events, where they go dressed to kill, to confer with other influential people. Next come the well-learned or erudite members of the audience, who are not able to get emotionally involved. Their only concern, according to Arteaga, is to check facts and dates, or the historical and literary accuracy of the plot. Because of their pedantic attitude, they miss what counts most in opera: affects, passions, and artistic imagination. The fourth category is the man of good taste, who appreciates opera for its intrinsic aesthetic value. The fifth is the philosopher, who understands and distinguishes when an opera is a diversion from reality, when it represents human feelings and when it offers a moral lesson. The philosopher is also able to discern how an opera represents national habits, how it reveals the degree of political freedom of a nation and how it exposes current ideas and preconceptions.[2] Arteaga's account shows very little concern for social divisions as we perceive them. As such it differs in critical substance from modern opera scholarship based on a tripartite division of society in

classes. Reinhard Strohm (to mention one eminent scholar) writes that the "unequal tripartite division of the auditorium approximately reflected the social structures of the audience. The stalls were populated by younger and often fanatical supporters, mostly men, from the privileged classes (and possibly by courtesans). The boxes were used by the court, aristocracy and patrician families, and the upper tier and gallery by the common people."[3] A more recent study by Beth and Jonathan Glixon based on documentary evidence from seventeenth-century opera production, in fact reveals that the social spectrum of the opera audience was much more nuanced; most notably, one cannot speak of nobility as one single block, nor can we assume that the status of *cittadini* or middle class was necessarily below the nobility.[4] After all, Arteaga's account seems to deserve as much attention as later Marxist dialectics of class struggle, at the very least because it qualifies as what in anthropology is called "native theory" i.e., a theory generated from within the system, in this case produced by a European eighteenth-century opera-goer, rather than from an external observer. This does not mean that opera had a less profound political influence on society. On the contrary, the scope of political discourse in eighteenth-century opera included issues of class, but also went far beyond them. For this reason opera needed to be carefully monitored. However, it was a difficult genre to control because of the complexity of its production system.

The libretto was in reality the only part of a production that could be carefully checked by authorities. In contrast to the score, which circulated almost exclusively in manuscript, the libretto was disseminated as a printed text. Official approbation was confirmed in the frontispiece, through formulas like, "con licenza de' Superiori," where the superiors were either or both secular authorities or religious inquisitors. This focus by the censors almost exclusively on the libretto allowed composers and singer-actors a greater freedom of expression. As a consequence, today's interpreters who base their understanding of opera exclusively on libretti are often misled by such partial and reassuring messages offered to censors (Mozart's and Da Ponte's *Le nozze di Figaro* is a case in point). The "licenza" is often counterbalanced and sometimes contradicted by the music and the scenic apparatus (stage setting, costumes, props), and even by the style of acting. In opera of any era the interplay and counterpoint of the various signifying elements call for an active responsibility by audiences to interpret these messages. This process is perhaps more acute in works created during times of restricted freedom of expression because the message is often left intentionally ambiguous. Eighteenth-century opera produced today complicates the picture by superimposing original contextual meanings on new referential associations operating in our society.[5]

The eighteenth century is characterized by continuous debates on the nature of opera, made more acute by the complexity of opera as a knot of diverse signifying elements and the authorial responsibility over the system of production. Fifty years of virtual silence in literature on opera separates the publications of *Il Corago* (a handbook on production in mid-seventeenth-century Venice) and the explosion of critical writings in the eighteenth century, inaugurated by Saint-Évremond denouncing opera for its endemic absurdity engendered by the musical rendition of a dramatic text. At the turn of the century, Raguenet, in his *Parallèle des italiens et des français en ce qui regarde la musique et les opéras* (Paris, 1698, 1702), defended Italian opera for its musicality, while Lecerf de la Vieville denounced Italian opera for its "bad taste" in his *Comparaison de la musique italienne et de la musique française*. The two engaged in a diatribe over the superiority of either Italian or French opera that lasted until the end of the century, articulated through *querelles* and reforms.[6] This debate seems to focus on the superiority of either Italian or French language and music on the basis of two basic aesthetical ideals: naturalness and good taste. Inspired by these ideals typical of the new age of Reason, the followers of the Roman Arcadian Academy were eager to rescue opera from the excess and complexity of Baroque theater by conferring upon works an Aristotelian sense of clarity and coherence based on unity of time, action, and place and on a distinction of comic and serious modes, each to be relegated to a different operatic genre (see chapter 4). Although all the debates focus on issues of aesthetics, what remains at stake are the modes of production and dissemination. The dispute over the superiority of French or Italian opera is implicitly about the clash of two different systems of production. The French model, like the French monarchy, was based on a centralized system, in which the monarchy exerted a strict control on the dramatic subjects and financed lavish productions to display images of power and wealth. This system allowed librettists and composers to exert less ideological control but more artistic responsibility over the final product, with the result that French opera functioned as a model of an integrated art form. For this reason many reformist trends in opera outside France up to Wagner were implicitly inspired by French opera. This system also allowed the establishment and continuation of a repertory of works, preserved in printed editions of both the libretto and the music (see chapter 9). Outside France, and with the exception of a few court theaters, opera existed as a set of production practices, not as a repertory of established and fixed works (even canonic libretti by Metastasio were continuously revised and set to new music). The heterogeneous Italianate system (like its political geography) affected a constellation of European and American centers of production and as such it was

inherently less centralized, more often than not based on capitalistic, economically liberalist modes of production. This model favored the creation of works that needed to appeal to audiences with different political and ideological views and to both men and women. Gender in this era represented and was perceived as a huge cultural and social divide; women became, nevertheless, an extremely influential part of the audience, as testified by the many dedications of libretti to the local *dame* or ladies.

Production practices and consumption outside France appear reckless given their basis on the principle of a constant demand for new works and the unscrupulous usage of compositional procedures that often reveal little concern for single-authorial responsibility or for the integrity of the work. Opera was the collective result of the work of artists, artisans, and administrators. The complexity of the production process is best described in Benedetto Marcello's *Il teatro alla moda* (1720), subtitled as "an effective and fast method to compose and produce operas," which targeted the production system of Vivaldi's Venice.[7] Marcello's book lists over twenty professional figures involved in the making of opera, including poets (librettists), composers, singers in various roles, orchestral musicians, dancers, but also impresarios, managers and clerks renting theater boxes, selling tickets, sending invitations, lottery organizers, lawyers writing contracts, architects, engineers and painters in charge of the stage sets, tailors, supernumeraries, prompters, copyists, ushers, bodyguards of the star singers, vocal coaches and even singers' mothers who acted in the double role of managers and bodyguards.

This system fostered compositional procedures that in many cases can be described as modular, allowing works to regenerate themselves in different forms, by dissembling and reassembling their parts. Substituting arias for later productions of the same opera was the norm. An extreme but far from uncommon case was the *pasticcio*, an opera made up of pieces from previous dramatic works by the same composer or even from operas or newly composed pieces by different composers. In the first half of the century, this practice was facilitated by the dramaturgical syntax of opera, structured as a chain of recitatives alternating with self-contained or "closed" pieces, mostly arias; duets were rare and short, and so were the ensembles, mostly choruses, relegated to a function of generic commentary. This kind of syntax is normally described as "number opera" since every closed piece that excluded the presence of recitative (such as an aria, duet, a trio, or a whole finale) was numbered, as can be seen in any musical score, in order to facilitate rehearsing, copying, but also replacing pieces.

Printed operatic music was disseminated mostly as anthologies of favorite pieces often marketed as souvenirs from famous performances

(not so much for domestic reproduction by amateurs, considering the technical difficulty of these arias). The function of the score in these cases is descriptive rather than prescriptive. This important distinction between the two functions of music notation was first made by ethnomusicologist Charles Seeger, but his idea that Western culture has always used music notation prescriptively for its own tradition and descriptively for non-Western repertories ought to be reconsidered.[8] *The Favourite Songs in the Opera call'd Artaxerses by Sign^r. Hasse*, as many other favorite-songs collections, seem to use notation descriptively, as can be inferred by the use of the past tense ("sung by Farinelli in *Artaxerses*"), showing that the printed score functioned as a recording of a specific performance. This is a continuation of a seventeenth-century practice exemplified by the 1609 Venetian printed edition of Monteverdi's *Orfeo*. This score has performance indications (including the instrumentation used in one piece or another) narrated in the past tense, and the ornamented version of Orfeo's "possente spirto" is superimposed on Monteverdi's original unornamented melody, as a recording of the performance by the first interpreter.[9] A slightly different case is presented by *Artaserse*, originally created by Hasse with a libretto by Metastasio for the Grimani theater in Venice in 1730. The London *pasticcio* of 1734 presents a new aria, "Son qual nave agitata," for Arbace, composed by Riccardo Broschi and of course interpreted by his brother Farinelli. It is one of the most astounding bravura arias. In his account of Hasse's *Artaserse*, Daniel Heartz observed that this opera "contains the most successful arias [Hasse] ever composed." For this reason in his discussion of the aforementioned London anthology he disregards Broschi's substitute piece, which would have spotlighted Farinelli to the detriment of Hasse's art.[10] In a recent work on opera seria, instead, Martha Feldman spends several pages analyzing "Son qual nave agitata" looking at a London manuscript that (like Monteverdi's "possente spirto") superimposes two vocal lines, one for the melody composed by Riccardo Broschi, the other recording the seemingly improvised ornamentations. Her analysis stresses how certain conventional aspects of arias in this period (the alternation of instrumental ritornelli and solo vocal episodes) and their typical form (the ABA′ or da capo form) enhanced the ritualized exchange between singer and audience (by the same token jazz and blues music is based on typical and redundant forms filled with ever-changing musical content). Feldman emphasizes the nature of opera as event, as a form of "ritualized action" (borrowing the term and theory behind it from anthropological studies), during which the active participation of the audience, whether euphoric or distracted, should not be seen as an intrusion, but as part of a collective ritual.[11]

Many arias of this time can be classified according to a typological nomenclature, first invoked in John Brown's 1789 opera guidebook for informed English audiences, *Letters Upon the Poetry and Music of the Italian Opera* (see chapter 2). Brown does not make entirely clear, however, that this nomenclature is composed of terms that refer to different and often independent aspects of an aria: the text, its music, dramatic purpose, and economic or practical function. An aria like "Son qual nave agitata" can be classified in different ways: as an "aria di paragone" ("comparison aria") because its *text* compares the character's emotions to a ship in the tempest; as an "aria di bravura" (agility aria) because its *performance* required extremely difficult coloratura passages. It can also be explained as a da capo aria, describing its musical *form*, and finally as an "aria di baule" (literally a "suitcase aria"), describing its *function* within the singer's profession – a piece that suited a particular singer's abilities and became a showpiece to be inserted in any opera whenever the psychological state of the interpreted character is "like a ship in the tempest," which happens at least once in every opera.

The mere existence of this complex system of nomenclature reflects a fluid process of production well suited to fulfill a continuous demand for new operas. Venice's feverish operatic life was described in 1741 by the traveler Luigi Riccoboni in these words: "they [the Venetian opera producers] sometimes act the same opera two nights successively: a practice which disgusts the spectators, and not a little blemishes the glory of the Italian theater, so fertile is novelty."[12] It is precisely to satisfy the demand for new operas that composers and impresarios were forced to resort to a practice of recycling, reassembling, and adapting previously composed pieces. Even Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* (premiered in Vienna in May 1786) was immediately subjected to the usual process of modification and substitution between the Prague production in August 1786 and the Viennese revival of 1789.[13] Roger Parker has recently readdressed this issue, reminding us that "Mozart's (and everyone else's) operas were routinely adapted during his lifetime and long after to suit local conditions and tastes, that Mozart himself was at times a willing helper in this process, adding freely to his own words and those of others." Without denying that these revisions create a "surplus of signature," Parker still holds that "the operatic 'work' can survive startling transformations and still remain coherent." Consequently, he takes into consideration two contentious replacement arias for *Le nozze di Figaro* that Mozart wrote to fit the acting and vocal ability of the new Susanna, Adriana Ferrarese.[14] On February 28, 1778, Mozart wrote to his father Leopold from Mannheim, "I love it when an aria is so accurately measured for a singer's voice that it fits like a well-tailored dress."[15] This well-known

passage should not fuel the notion that composers were subservient to singers, but should rather be taken as evidence that great dramatists, like Shakespeare and Goldoni, worked *with*, not only *for* performers, in order to create a kind of drama that was conceived not as a monument for posterity but as a living experience for the present, indeed for any present as history has proven.

The constant demand for novelty required rapid production. Vivaldi once proudly told Charles De Brosses that he could compose a concerto faster than a copyist could copy it.[16] In 1734 Goldoni surprised even the "red priest" by writing on the spot the text of a replacement aria in Vivaldi's adaptation of Zeno's *Griselda*. Goldoni's job was to make the libretto shorter and current; as he recounts, "to change the order and character of the arias as the composer and the singers wished." The title-role was destined for the composer's protégée, the singer Anna Girò, who requested an aria with more action and expression than languid singing ("canto languido"), with "broken words, vibrant sighing, and some agitation and movement." While Vivaldi kept himself busy reciting a few psalms and hymns, Goldoni (so he recounts) wrote the new aria text "in less than fifteen minutes." Happily surprised by this quickness the red priest embraced the librettist, whom he previously mistrusted, asking him forgiveness, and hugging him. Vivaldi promised that he would not have another librettist. Then summoning Anna Girò and her sister (who were living with him) joyously exclaimed, "he wrote it right here! right here! right here!"[17]

Vivaldi's operas have too often been dismissed as exemplary of a corrupted system that mid-century reforms would attempt to cure. The practice of borrowing or recycling preexistent material, parodying and assembling works out of different parts, nevertheless, affected eighteenth-century music of virtually every genre. The works of Johann Sebastian Bach (who never wrote an opera) offer as many examples as Vivaldi's. One should not assume that this process led necessarily to loss of coherence. Bach scholar John Butt has posited that it is by understanding the logic of assemblage and recomposition that "we may gain some insights into the extraordinary processes by which this composer structured music of diverse origins into a coherent whole." Moreover, "what is remarkable is Bach's manipulation, rather than creation, of musical language."[18] Understanding music of Bach's and Vivaldi's time (and opera in particular), requires us to make a special effort to go beyond the admiration of what Lydia Goehr has called "the imaginary museum of musical works," and start imagining the process of production and reproduction of opera as a continuous and still ongoing phenomenon.[19]

***Motezuma* (1733–2006)**

Let us take a closer look at the process of making and remaking opera from its original context to modern productions and re-creations, by taking into account Vivaldi's operatic output. Vivaldi, like Mozart, is one of the few eighteenth-century composers who not only outlived their time, but even gained popularity long after their death, becoming exquisitely modern cultural icons. Despite their present high renown, both Mozart and Vivaldi ended, 50 years apart, in a similarly inglorious way, in a mass grave in Vienna. If the fame of Mozart was resumed and started growing shortly after his death, Vivaldi, on the other hand, was left in a state of oblivion until the late 1930s when his concertos became a staple in twentieth-century musical culture. Subsequently he became known mostly as a composer of instrumental music, even though his activity as an opera composer was frenetic. In 1739 he claimed in a letter to Marquise Bentivoglio that he had composed 94 operas (probably without distinguishing between his responsibilities as a composer, impresario and editor, since music for "only" half of this number survives).[20] Vivaldi's operas are less studied due also to the condition and history of the sources themselves. Immediately after Vivaldi's death (1741), Count Giacomo Durazzo, a promoter of opera reforms at the time of Gluck, purchased a large collection of Vivaldi's operatic manuscripts that remained in the count's library until his death in 1794. The location of the collection changed several times and in 1922 the manuscripts even spent one night in the open air, mixed up and half immersed in the mud, after the small two-wheel cart used to transport them flipped over. A decade later the library of Turin acquired the dismembered collection from two private owners (Giordano and Foà), but the manuscripts are still waiting to be made accessible through printed editions because scholars have been missing editorial criteria compatible with the nature of Vivaldi's operas, which fiercely resists modernistic critical editing based on the establishment of the most authorial text. Nevertheless (or maybe because of that), a plethora of recent recordings have become available during the last decade, produced in a way that may scandalize scholars trained in modern critical editing.[21] These recordings pose an interesting question: if a modern audio or video recording of an eighteenth-century opera presents remarkably different music from the opera as it was first experienced, shall we dismiss it as a forgery, or consider it as a natural (and authentic) continuation of the original production practices?

An excellent example to reflect on this question is *Motezuma* (*sic*), an opera about the crucial episodes of the defeat of the Aztec emperor Montezuma II at the hands of Hernán Cortés resulting in the Spanish conquest of Mexico in 1531. Vivaldi composed it in 1733, two years before