1 Introduction

Even before Italian opera was first produced in London in 1705, Italian music and singers had been politicized. In the early years of Queen Anne's reign, issues of national identity, religion, gender, and Tory–Whig politics were implicated in the controversy about Italian and English music and the partisanship over the singers Margarita L'Epine and Catherine Tofts. All-sung, Italian-style opera quickly became the most prestigious theatrical entertainment of London's cultural elite. It was a focus of social life, a recurring topic in literature, and, just as quickly, a lightning rod that sparked responses from all quarters reflecting diverse moral, aesthetic, and political concerns.[1] The objections to opera raised in its first decade became a constant refrain in criticism for the remainder of the century and beyond.

Literary critics claimed opera was an irrational, sensuous art form, sung in a foreign language that violated verisimilitude and decorum. Dramatists and friends of British theater saw opera and highly paid singers as threats to native talent and dramatic traditions. Social reformers and moralists, continuing in the vein of Jeremy Collier, condemned opera as an expensive offspring of luxury that led to vice, sensuality, and effeminacy, and whose castrato singers posed a sexual threat to women and gender norms. Nationalists objected to the presence of a foreign art on the London stage, especially at times when Britain was engaged in Continental wars.

These often irrational and no less xenophobic attacks are frequently (and mistakenly) taken to characterize the British response as a whole to Italian opera, and have often distressed lovers of opera and Handel, who take the outcry as evidence the British were incapable of appreciating either opera or his music. As this book will show, much of the satire of Italian opera had ulterior partisan political motives and targets.

This exploration of Italian opera and politics brings together two fields represented by George Frideric Handel and Sir Robert Walpole. It begins with the founding of the Royal Academy of Music in 1719–20, which coincides with Handel's return to writing operas after a five-year hiatus and with the beginning of Walpole's rise to power as prime minister in 1721–22. Handel was emerging as Britain's pre-eminent musical figure, whose

creative output in 1720–42 was devoted primarily to composing thirty-nine Italian operas (including arranging pasticcios). Politically, the era was dominated by Walpole, who was the target of twenty years' worth of partisan satire and attack. The year 1742 provides a convenient conclusion; in that year Walpole fell from power, by which time Handel had ceased producing full seasons of opera and had turned to presenting shorter seasons of oratorio (see Epilogue).

This study is not an attempt to systematically explore the possible political content of each of Handel's London operas. It principally shows how, at various moments of political crisis, events at the Haymarket Theatre (also known at the time as the King's Theatre) and its star singers were politicized in partisan polemic.

The politics of individual Handel operas are examined because several of them have been given political interpretations by modern scholars. In Chapter 8, though, partly to redress the slighting of non-Handelian operas in modern scholarship, the political content of Italian operas is considered without giving any special mention of their composer.

The phrase "politics of opera" invites the question: What is the relation of the operas being produced in London to contemporary partisan politics? Given there were upwards of ninety new operas produced from 1720 to 1742, this is a daunting question, no less because the question can be approached in many ways. Indeed, many opera historians have taken it for granted that London's Italian operas were politically and topically engaged. The opera historian Reinhard Strohm has confidently claimed:

> We must remember that Handel was writing operas in London, where the opera was of major political importance and inseparable from very concrete social conditions, and that he himself played a part in the development of those conditions. It is no secret, for example, that contemporary political events played a part in determining the choice of an opera's subject.[2]

"One should not ignore the political implications of [*Rinaldo*] and other Handel librettos," cautions the music historian Curtis Price.[3] The historian Paul Monod maintains that Handel's operas "contain veiled hints about politics [and] impart valuable information about the pervasive influence of politics on the arts during the early 1700s."[4] And the historian William Weber states that "the operatic *querelles* in London during the early part of the century were closely related to party politics."[5] Instead of the high level of abstraction of such claims, this study explores the relation of opera to politics with greater precision, with attention focused on the specifics of the partisan politics of the day.[6]

It would in many ways be attractive to find that in an era when partisan politics saturated social life and literature, the operas of Handel and his fellow composers reflected, articulated, or debated the political events and issues of the day; that opera and dramatic music helped shape the political culture and ideology of the day. In considering the relation of opera to politics, much depends on what question is being addressed, for opera, like any cultural product, can be political in many ways.

To the question whether or how opera contributes to the fundamental political concern of achieving the public good, critics and moralists saw Italian opera as a decisive factor, both as symptom and cause, in their vision of a British society and culture in decline. In high-literary works, such as Alexander Pope's *Dunciad* (1728) and his formal verse satire of the 1730s, to the theatrical farces of Henry Fielding, Italian opera symbolized the false taste in the arts and sciences that was overrunning Britain. To the broad political question "What sort of culture do we want to foster?"[7] some contemporaries replied it was one absent Italian opera, a by-product of luxury with its foreign, effeminizing castrato singers. False taste and the fashion for opera had political implications as well; they were a sign of the perilous state of Britain's arts and sciences and, by implication, a rebuke to the royal family, ministry, and ruling elites. Propagandists in the political opposition of the 1720s and 1730s repeatedly pointed to Italian opera as proof of the corruption and luxury sweeping over London caused by Walpole's ministry.[8]

The content of individual librettos could be political in various ways. Operas have politics as a theme. Librettos on historical subjects represent kings and queens, courtiers, generals, usurpers, tyrants, and Roman consuls and dictators engaged in actions that occur in the political realm: deposing tyrants and usurpers, arranging succession to the throne, discovering the rightful ruler, suppressing rebellion, waging war, dispensing justice, and fending off conquerors. In this sense, as Strohm notes, "Princes and rulers, political and military power, states and nations, were among the most significant themes Italian *opera seria* was expected to address."[9]

Operas produced at seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European absolutist courts for dynastic events are frequently built around allegorical programs populated with symbolic figures, heroes, or mythic characters who represent the virtues, nobility, and heroism of the dynasty or the prince in the audience. These court operas serve to flatter and legitimate the prince and his rule.

Where operas were produced as a communal undertaking, as in the family-owned theaters in seventeenth-century Venice that presented seasonal offerings for the public, the choice of story could speak to a state's

mythology, nationalism, and self-image. Early Venetian operas presented the history (or presumed pre-history) of the republic and its mythical origins with the Fall of Troy.[10] London operas on Roman subjects could flatter aristocratic Britons who idealized and assimilated the ideals and arts of ancient Rome in their quest to create an oligarchy of virtue.[11]

Operas can be political in the didactic sense by holding up examples of tyrants and just rulers, and conveying universal lessons about the exercise of political power. Using episodes drawn from history, plots teach the fate of empires and republics, show honor and glory achieved by those who sacrifice for their country, illustrate the wise exercise of power, show the just punishments befitting tyrants, urge devotion to duty and public virtue, show the dangers of rulers led astray by illicit love and unbridled passions, and represent the lustrous examples of rulers exhibiting self-mastery of passions and granting clemency to malefactors. Here, opera would be at one with the professed purpose of history and dramatic poetry: to show the beauty of Virtue and its rewards, the deformity of Vice and its punishments; to encourage the former and frighten from the latter. The lessons are made all the more compelling and attractive by the embellishments of theatrical spectacle. As the librettist Metastasio lamented to his friend Farinelli, he had "wasted his entire life in order to instruct mankind in a pleasing way."[12]

An opera on a historical subject could be made topical or relevant to politics of the day by the technique of parallel and application. A London opera-goer (or libretto reader) could draw from the episode represented on stage a universal lesson or precept of political wisdom; then the opera-goer could apply the precept to the circumstances of the day to illuminate, advise, or judge a specific person or situation. This approach of parallel and application accords with the classical humanist expectation that history or dramatic poetry teaches best by example, not through inculcation by direct moralizing.

At a more philosophical level, operas can be political in the sense that their action, dispensation of poetic justice, or text can state doctrines of political theory or endorse forms of political organization and activity, such as ideas about the duties and obligations of rulers, citizens, and subjects.[13] In the sense of politics as the struggle for control of government and power, London opera – as an institution or genre – was put to symbolic use in satire by opposition propagandists in their media campaign to oust Walpole from his place as prime minister.

However, when opera historians approach the politics of individual Italian operas in London, they usually proceed on the "generic expectation" that

operas are allegorical or allusive of contemporary politics and the monarch, statesmen, or the royal family.[14] This approach short-circuits the process of extracting precepts, making parallels, and applying the precepts and instead draws direct identifications between characters or events in the operas and eighteenth-century persons or circumstances.[15] For example, Lucius Cornelius Sulla has been seen as representing the Duke of Marlborough or the Hanoverian Elector Georg Ludwig; Floridant, as George II while Prince of Wales; or Richard the Lionheart, as George I or II.[16]

This book develops two complementary arguments. It argues there is no basis for the generic expectation that the librettos of individual Italian operas on historical subjects are, or were intended and received as, allegorical or allusive of contemporary topical politics; nor is the title-hero to be identified with the reigning monarch or a statesman. When modern allegorical political interpretations are examined, we find that the allegories are incomplete and lack coherence and the relationship claimed to current politics is inconsistent and unconvincing. The operas proposed as allegories are quite unlike what Handel's contemporaries would have known and recognized as allegories. Rather than interpretations that need improving, the premise upon which they are based is faulty.

Yet we need not remain suspended in indecision about assessing the politics of opera librettos. The other undertaking of this book is to examine unmistakable partisan stage works and journalistic essays of the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries to identify those features that mark them as having been intended, written, and received as political and allegorical. The relevant context for assessing the politics of opera is not just the contemporary political world, but the whole range of political and polemical works with which political operas might share methods and aims. My goal is to find what Robert Hume calls the "extrinsic evidence with which to validate" political interpretations.[17] In this way, we can attempt to recover the political meanings London operas had for Handel's audiences.

Once we remove the blinders worn as a consequence of the generic expectation, we find that Italian opera – the events at the Haymarket Theatre and those involving its star singers – was engaged in far more varied and significant ways in the daily partisan politics of Hanoverian Britain. A principal way opera is politicized exploits the age-old all-the-world's-a-stage topos. In partisan periodicals and newspapers, propagandists occasionally wrote what appear on the surface to be straightforward journalistic accounts of disputes and squabbles at the opera house – the rivalry between partisans of Faustina and Cuzzoni, Handel's raising of ticket prices for *Deborah*, his

dismissal of Senesino, and the supposed capture of Farinelli by the Spanish court in 1737. Upon close examination and with an eye on current politics, these journalists' accounts turn out to be extended parallels between occurrences at the opera house and domestic or foreign political events. They function as part of the sustained opposition propaganda campaign to discredit the policies of Walpole's ministry and force his removal. Opera as a form of dramatic poetry and history could also function as a source for universal precepts and exempla about political experience that could be applied by audience members or libretto readers to the political situation of their day.

An examination of the Royal Academy of Music and the Opera of the Nobility shows that the claims about the influence of politics upon their founding and management are not borne out. Granted, there was partisanship within the Royal Academy about singers and composers, and London recognized the rivalry between Handel's company and that of the Nobility opera; but careful consideration of the full array of evidence reveals the companies operated above the fray of partisan politics. If there was an eighteenth-century generic expectation about Italian opera, I suggest it was that the opera stage was not where one expected to find topical, partisan allusion and allegory.

These complementary arguments are developed in the following chapters. Chapter 2 sets the stage for understanding the relation of opera and politics by examining the generic expectation that operas were allegorical or allusive of contemporary topical politics and that the title-hero is to be identified with contemporary statesmen or members of the royal family. The circumstances of the Continental courts where allegorical operas did celebrate the royal dynasty and monarch are contrasted to the opera system in London to suggest that operas on historical subjects in London cannot generically be expected to have plausible political allegorical applications.

Since political interpretations for Handel operas have been proposed as allegories, this chapter also examines critical writing on allegory and allegorical works of the period to recover what the early eighteenth century thought about allegory and would have recognized as allegory. From a broad range of Restoration and early eighteenth-century plays and satires that were undoubtedly intended and received as political, I develop criteria to suggest whether a work was written or received as political. These criteria point to the type of extrinsic evidence that could validate allegorical or political readings of individual operas.

The political scene beginning with the rise of Robert Walpole as prime minister, which roughly coincides with the founding of the Royal Academy of Music in 1719–20, is surveyed in Chapter 3. Claims that external politics

affected the founding and governance of the Royal Academy are examined; in general the Academy's founding, membership, and direction occurred without the intervention of partisan politics. The political interpretations that have been proposed for several of Handel's operas from these years are examined; here and elsewhere, such interpretations are shown as incomplete and inconsistent readings that do not correspond adequately with the political circumstances of the day. No extrinsic evidence supports these readings.

Chapter 4 traces the rise of the political opposition to Walpole in the mid 1720s and examines one way the opera company at the Haymarket Theatre was enlisted in partisan politics. The opposition newspaper the *Craftsman* carried a number of accounts of events at the opera house involving the singers Faustina, Cuzzoni, and Senesino. These pieces of counterfeit journalism are actually allegories of the disputes between Britain and Spain over Gibraltar and the impending conference at Soissons intended to prevent war between the two countries; their partisan purpose was to indict the foreign diplomacy of the Walpole ministry.

The establishment of the opera company run jointly by Handel and Heidegger is described in Chapter 5. As with the Royal Academy of Music, events at the Haymarket Theatre were allegorized by the political opposition in partisan political satires directed against the king and the Walpole ministry.

The Opera of the Nobility, founded in 1733 to rival Handel, has conventionally been taken as an episode where opera became involved with partisan politics. Chapter 6 examines the claims that Prince Frederick, as leader of the political opposition, set himself at the head of this company in opposition to Handel to spite his sister or father. Using a variety of evidence, the chapter shows that much of this oft-told story is a fiction, deriving from John, Lord Hervey's spiteful and unreliable memoirs. If the Opera of the Nobility itself was not a tool of partisan politics, the political opposition took up the occasion of its star singer Farinelli's departure to the Spanish court in 1737 – breaking his contract with the opera directors and remaining "detained" in Madrid – as a means of indicting the Walpole ministry's claimed failure to defend British merchant shipping from Spanish depredations and captures.

A number of allegorical theater and operatic works that celebrated weddings and birthdays of the Hanoverian family were produced in that decade. Similar, in their use of emblematic allegory, to the operas produced at Continental absolutist courts, these musical dramatic works show by contrast how politically unengaged were the realist-mode Italian operas based on historical subjects.

Chapter 7 charts the rise in the mid 1730s of a renewed opposition to the Walpole ministry, often called the Patriot opposition. Topical and politically

allusive dramas produced by playwrights in the Patriot circle provide the broader background of politically engaged dramatic works against which the political engagement of Italian operas can be assessed. The full context of these undoubtedly partisan plays – the biography of the author, context, political content, and contemporary response and government reaction – is presented in depth to show how these plays fulfill the criteria presented in Chapter 2 for recognizing partisan political works.

Chapter 8 turns to politics in the librettos of individual operas. Most Italian operas are based on events and persons from (real or fictive) ancient history. If, as some contemporaries wrote, we consider opera librettos as histories and dramatic poetry, we can apply to opera the same technique that contemporaries used for reading history, the *ars historica*, to suggest one way Handel's contemporaries could have related operas to current politics. Operas on historical subjects could be the source of exempla and precepts that the opera-goer could derive and apply to current politics. Plot events, statements by characters, or dispensation of justice in operas also present ideas about political theory and the role and duties of citizens, subjects, and rulers. Although operas present absolute monarchs as legitimate rulers and plots often feature their overthrow, the operas do embody principles of natural law such that they would not be subversive of Britain's monarchy.

Setting opera in its political context must start with an adequate understanding of British political history. Many political interpretations of operas and accounts of politics in the opera companies and of opera's role in British politics are unsatisfactory because they are faulty or simplistic accounts of the politics of Britain, or they do not accord well with the pertinent and contested partisan issues of the day. British political history of the eighteenth century has been a lively and contentious field, and understanding of it has changed substantially.

The traditional view is that eighteenth-century British politics was a conflict between Whig and Tory marked by the ascent of progressive, liberal Whiggism over conservative Toryism. In 1929, however, Lewis Namier proposed a startling revision of this view,[18] showing that the conventional conflict of Whig and Tory ideology could not adequately interpret the events and motivations of politicians in the 1760s. Instead of party ideology, what existed was an administration party and an opposition; politicians were motivated by family and regional connections, self-interest, and the hopes of achieving political power. Subsequently, Robert Walcott transported the "Namier Revolution" to British politics before 1760 and denied that two unified parties existed.[19] Rather, in the period of Queen Anne, the Commons had seven major segments or connections, composed of shifting

alliances based on family, professional, or regional connections or dependency on a territorial magnate.

Walcott's revisionary attempt stimulated a burst of new archival and documentary research, leading to a general agreement by historians that (with certain subtle qualifications) the principal element in British politics from 1689 to 1715 was indeed the party strife between Whig and Tory that did reflect well-defined positions on important issues of church, state, and foreign policy.[20] But after the accession of George I in 1714, the Tories were so discredited in the eyes of the king for their role in negotiating what the king and Whigs saw as the shameful Treaty of Utrecht that betrayed Britain and her allies by a separate peace with France, and the Whigs had established such an effective political oligarchy, that Tories were virtually barred from government and, except for those who accommodated themselves with the Whigs, spent the following half-century "in the wilderness."[21] The Tory and Whig labels and distinctions survived but mattered little for the reality of daily politics, although the ruling Whig oligarchy was riven by internal conflict.

With the rise to power of Robert Walpole in 1721–22, as J. H. Plumb argued, the rage of party, the instability of brief and mixed ministries, and the confusion of political life was replaced by a period of political stability.[22] Plumb found three principal causes for the emergence of stability: the development of a Whig oligarchy of great wealthy landowners who wielded social and economic power and by these means dominated politics; the rapid expansion of the executive and bureaucracy with its attendant places, offices, pensions, and honors that built up a large court party that could control Parliament; and the emergence of single-party government such that the Tories ceased to pose any challenge to Whig power.

The election of 1722 was the watershed that consolidated rule by the Whig oligarchy. Unlike Anne, George I was willing to govern with single-party ministries and endorse measures supporting the Whigs; consequently, day-to-day politics became a struggle between various Whig factions (with occasional Tory support) for control of government. For the period covered by this study, the dominant political reality was Walpole's control of government and the attempts by dissident Whigs and Tories to drive him from office.

With time, though, questions arose about the degree of political stability achieved.[23] In 1970 Romney Sedgwick and Eveline Cruickshanks showed the Tory party was effective in many constituencies and maintained considerable solidarity in Parliament; not until 1727 did Tory strength in the Commons sink as low as that of the Whigs in the waning years of Anne's

reign.[24] They also showed Jacobite activity was far from extinct. Giving a fuller account of the survival of the Tory party, in 1982 Linda Colley argued the Tories retained an ideological identity, were capable of concerted political action, and nurtured ambitions for political success.[25] Historians, though, have generally considered that Colley has overstated the strength and effectiveness of the Tory party.[26]

The recovery of Jacobitism as a political force was the most sustained challenge to the Plumb stability thesis. Sedgwick and Cruickshanks asserted that "up to 1745 the Tories were a predominantly Jacobite party, engaged in attempts to restore the Stuarts by a rising with foreign assistance."[27] A wide range of poetry, popular culture, imagery, and dissent was uncovered to show Jacobitism was a cultural, social, and religious movement supported by popular or "plebian" activity.[28]

But the significance of Jacobitism as a threat to the Hanoverian succession has likewise been held to be overstated, despite the fears of it aroused by Walpole's ministry.[29] The number of Jacobites in the Tory party was much smaller than claimed by Sedgwick and Cruickshanks.[30] The Jacobite invasion of 1715, the Swedish Plot (1717), the Ormonde invasion (1719), and the '45 demonstrate by their very failure to mobilize the populace the political stability achieved. Arguments exposing the Earl of Burlington, Jonathan Swift, and Alexander Pope as Jacobites or crypto-Jacobites have been strongly challenged.[31] The large amount of scholarship about Jacobitism and Walpole's incessant fanning of fears about Jacobites should not be mistaken for Jacobitism's actual political importance.

Stuart loyalism figures prominently in the revisionist account by J. C. D. Clark, who argues that a long eighteenth-century Britain can properly be called an *ancien régime*: a stable conservative society where culture, politics, and ideology were dominated by the three pillars of aristocracy, crown, and church. It was a period marked by ideological polarity between Stuarts and Hanoverians.[32] Clark's revisionist history provoked heated response.[33] Critics routinely complained that he minimized the forces of modernization or transformation, including commercialization, capitalism, new patterns of consumer consumption, urbanization, secular enlightenment, and science. Social historians argued there was socio-economic change, and indeed some was momentous.[34]

Many historians, though, found aspects of Clark's account salutary and had already come to many of his conclusions: the basis of society was hierarchical, society was generally conservative in its adherence to traditional institutions and values, aristocratic authority remained dominant, and the political nation was successful in maintaining stability and cohesion.[35]