The Politics of Opera in Handel's Britain

The Politics of Opera in Handel's Britain examines the involvement of Italian opera in British partisan politics in the first half of the eighteenth century, which saw Sir Robert Walpole's rise to power and George Frideric Handel's greatest period of opera production. McGeary argues that the conventional way of applying Italian opera to contemporary political events and persons by means of allegory and allusion in individual operas is mistaken; nor did partisan politics intrude into the management of the Royal Academy of Music and the Opera of the Nobility. This book shows instead how Senesino, Faustina, Cuzzoni, Farinelli, and events at the Haymarket Theatre were used in political allegories in satirical essays directed against the Walpole ministry. Since most operas were based on ancient historical events, the librettos – like traditional histories – could be sources of examples of vice, virtue, and political precepts and wisdom that could be applied to contemporary politics.

THOMAS MCGEARY has written extensively about the reception of Italian opera in eighteenth-century Britain and his editions and translations of Arnold Schoenberg and Harry Partch received ASCAP-Deems Taylor awards. His research has been supported by fellowships from institutions including the Newberry Library/British Academy, Paul Mellon Centre for British Art, and the American Handel Society, and his articles on art, music, and literature in eighteenth-century Britain have appeared in, among others, *Music and Letters*, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, *Journal of Eighteenth-Century Studies*, *Early Music*, *Burlington Magazine*, and *Philological Quarterly*.

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THOMAS MCGEARY

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Preface

This book began developing more than fifteen years ago. My initial work on the reception and introduction of Italian opera in Britain dealt with the aesthetic and critical issues raised when justifying and criticizing the new art form. I had remaining unused many squibs and satires on opera found in sources diverse as lead essays in newspapers and high-literary verse satire. Although these sources did not deal with critical or aesthetic issues, they did seem to be important and characteristic British responses to opera and its star singers, the castratos.

The realization that satiric allegories on Italian opera were being used for partisan political purposes led to the present study. The *Deborah*–Excise allegory in the *Craftsman* has often been recognized as a satire linking Handel and Walpole. Other *Craftsman* essays discussed in the following pages have been previously reprinted without comment as if they were bona fide journalism, not satiric allegories.

A general awareness of the high pitch of Tory–Whig party strife in the early decades of the century and of the politicization of the stage throughout the period has predisposed modern scholars to find partisan or topical politics in the management of the opera companies and the opera librettos themselves. My years of immersion in the topical political journalism and pamphleteering of the day, the ninety or so opera librettos, the unquestionable partisan politics of other literature of the period, and the biographical profiles of the opera sponsors led to a reconsideration of the topical political involvement of the world of Italian opera.

The question of the politics of opera can be explored at many levels. From a modern historical vantage point, Italian operas in London might be studied as an expression of the values of its sponsors and audience, as a site expressing class values at a time of the rising middle classes, for their potential as social–political critique of the court or monarchy, as showing how operatic themes reflect transformations in political thought from absolutism to republicanism and democracy, how opera replicates the structures of power and values that organize social life, or as a force in nationalism and forging national identity.

From experience that such inquiries – carried out at high levels of abstraction and generalization about British politics, society, and culture – are usually unsatisfactory, this study quite deliberately takes a more radical historical focus: attempting to discover by recourse to the rich contemporary print culture the political meaning Italian opera – as a genre, institution, or individual operas – would have had for the audiences or libretto readers of Handel's day; how opera was invoked or enlisted for "political work" in the rough-and-tumble of partisan politics of the day; how audiences might have related the opera librettos to current political life.

Not fitting with this brief of partisan, topical politics are numerous poems, plays, political essays, and high-literary satires that engage Italian opera in contesting issues of cultural politics, answering the questions What sort of nation do we want Britain to be? What forms of art contribute to our ideal of Britain? These issues will be explored in a companion study, *Opera and Cultural Politics in Britain, 1700–1742*.

For assistance in providing the time and access to the primary materials necessary for this work (especially in the years before ECCO), I am grateful to the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, the Newberry Library, and the NEH Summer Fellowship program for residence fellowships, and for travel awards, to the Newberry Library/British Academy, The Handel Institute, and the Paul Mellon Centre for British Art, London.

Throughout the research and writing of this study, I have benefited from the advice, assistance, and encouragement of Lorenzo Bianconi, Donald Burrows, Xavier Cervantes, John Dussinger, Robert Hume, David Hunter, Harry Johnstone, Paulina Kewes, the late N. Frederick Nash, Suzana Ograjenšek, John Roberts, Ruth Smith, Carole Taylor, Stephen Taylor, David Vickers, Carlo Vitali, and Howard Weinbrot.

I am grateful to the staff at the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, the Newberry Library, the Henry E. Huntington Library, the Houghton Library, and numerous public record offices, but especially at Bury St. Edmunds. The library at the University of Illinois, Urbana–Champaign provided unparalleled access to rare and modern materials; Kathryn Danner and her interlibrary loan staff cheerfully and unfailingly fulfilled my requests for material.

Notes on sources

Fuller information on the operas, singers, musicians, and the opera companies mentioned in this book can be found in the entries in the *Cambridge Handel Encyclopedia* (2009) and the *New Grove Dictionary of Opera* (1992). The sources, plot summaries, and textual histories of Handel's operas are given in thorough detail in Winton Dean and John Merrill Knapp, *Handel's Operas, 1704–1726* (1995), and Winton Dean, *Handel's Operas, 1726–1741* (2006). The operas of the Royal Academy of Music from 1726 to 1728 have been studied by Suzana Ograjenšek, and David Vickers has studied those of Handel's Second Academy period. The political background of the period can be conveniently surveyed in greater depth in the biographies of Walpole, Bolingbroke, George I and II, and Stanhope by J. H. Plumb, William Coxe, Isaac Kramnick, Ragnhild Hatton, Jeremy Black, Andrew Thompson, and Basil Williams. Further background for the period can be found in the surveys by Geoffrey Holmes and Daniel Szechi, *The Age of Oligarchy: Pre-Industrial Britain, 1722–1783* (1993), Geoffrey Holmes, *The Making of a Great Power, Late Stuart and Early Georgian Britain, 1660–1722* (1993), Jeremy Gregory and John Stevenson, *Britain in the Eighteenth Century, 1688–1820* (2000), and Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727–1783* (1989).

Since quotations are taken wherever possible from original sources and to reduce the bulk of the notes, modern reprints of documentary sources are not cited unless they are a full reprint of an important source. Modern reprints of much of the documentary material about Handel and Italian opera are found in O. E. Deutsch, *Handel: A Documentary Biography* (1955), soon to be superseded by the forthcoming *George Frideric Handel: Collected Documents*, the *Händel-Handbuch* (1985), Elizabeth Gibson's study of the Royal Academy of Music (1989), and the online Handel Reference Database ichriss.ccarh.org/HRD. Many of the documents are calendared in Milhous and Hume, *A Register of English Theatrical Documents, 1660–1737* (1991).

Wherever possible, I have made fresh transcriptions from manuscript sources, even when readily accessible in printed sources such as the Historical Manuscripts Commission reports. Consulting the original manuscript sources frequently provides more accurate readings or passages

fuller than those in the published transcripts. Manuscript transcriptions reproduce original spelling, abbreviations, and punctuation. Only in rare cases, where meaning requires it, have I provided editorial punctuation in square brackets.

Likewise, I have been able to consult in almost all cases the original issues, usually in folio half-sheet format, of newspapers and periodicals, instead of the later collected reprint editions or the paraphrased and excerpted texts in the *Gentleman's Magazine* or the *London Magazine*. This approach has yielded numerous and important remarks and satires on opera in news columns or advertisements that are omitted in the collected editions and, hence, have hitherto gone unnoticed. Dates and issue numbers are those given in the original issues (those in the *Craftsman*, it must be noted, are occasionally changed in the collected edition). Texts are frequently more complete in the original issues than the collected editions. I indicate quotations from the original texts of periodicals by including the issue number with the date.

In quotations from printed sources, italic and roman are occasionally reversed when an original passage is set in all italics. For dates, the old style calendar years are used, unless noted, except that the New Year is assumed to begin on January 1.

Frontispiece: George Frideric Handel; mezzotint engraving by John Faber the Younger (1749), after painting by Thomas Hudson. Photo: courtesy of the Gerald Coke Foundation, The Foundling Museum, London.