Sentimental Opera is a study of the relationship between opera and two major phenomena of eighteenth-century European culture – the cult of sensibility and the emergence of bourgeois drama. A thorough examination of social and cultural contexts helps to explain the success of operas such as Paisiello’s Nina as well as the extreme emotional reactions of their audiences. Like their counterparts in drama, literature and painting, these works brought to the fore serious contemporary problems including the widespread execution of deserters, the treatment of the insane, and anxieties relative to social and familial roles. They also developed a specifically operatic version of the dominant language of sensibility. This wide-ranging study involves such major cultural figures as Goldoni, Diderot and Mozart, while refining our understanding of the theatrical genre system of their time.

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Sentimental Opera
Questions of Genre in the Age of Bourgeois Drama

Stefano Castelvecchi
to Philip Gossett
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PREFACE

‘What are you working on?’
‘A book on sentimental opera.’
‘I thought all opera was sentimental.’

I had this very exchange on two different occasions (separated by a number of years and the Atlantic Ocean). Needless to say, scholars of eighteenth-century opera have used the term ‘sentimental’ to mean something rather more specific than was intended by my interlocutors on these occasions. Yet they often display a somewhat relaxed approach to a constellation of variously interrelated terms and concepts – ‘sentimental opera’, ‘comédie larmoyante’, ‘opera semiseria’, ‘dramma giocoso’, ‘bourgeois drama’, ‘heroi-comedy’, ‘tragocomedy’ – at times treating some of them as largely overlapping or even interchangeable. One still not infrequently sees, for instance, an opera buffa or a sentimental opera of the second half of the eighteenth century characterised either as a comédie larmoyante or as an opera semiseria (if not as both). To be sure, the entire area is something of a labyrinth, and indeed it is my hope that while readers may not agree with all of the interpretations presented in this book, they will nevertheless come to feel better equipped to deal with certain unusual eighteenth-century operas, while refining their understanding of the genre system of Italian opera more generally.

Yet matters of lexicon, or even of genre, have not been my main concern here, except in so far as they relate to broader historical and critical questions. I have primarily been interested in understanding the interaction between opera and certain major (and closely interrelated) developments in eighteenth-century European civilisation – the cult of sensibility in society and the arts, and the quest for forms of bourgeois drama. These developments have attracted a great deal of hostile criticism in the last hundred or so years. Sentimental-bourgeois novels, plays and operas by La Chaussée, Diderot, Rousseau, Mercier, Paisiello and others have been branded as simply ‘unreadable’ today and ‘likely to continue unread forever’, or ‘unplayable’ and ‘unbearable’ – they ‘have stopped speaking to us’, while their associated mentalities and practices of reading and spectating are ‘unthinkable today’, and ‘have become foreign, or even embarrassing’.¹

So why bother? Part of the answer lies in what has almost become a topos in recent historiography: the assumption that a good starting point for historico-cultural investigation – a likely point of access to otherwise unfamiliar systems of values and habits – is often provided by precisely those aspects of the past that most perplex us (such as the presence of apparently indigestible works among the most phenomenal successes of eighteenth-century literature and theatre). If the type of cultural history I have engaged in for the purposes of this book verges at times on what used to be called the history of mentalities – Robert Darnton’s ‘history in the ethnographic grain’ – then my fieldwork has consisted in exposing myself to a large number of eighteenth-century testimonies (more than I ultimately cited), including an amount of ‘trivial’ material (newspapers, letters, anecdotes, proverbs and the like), in an attempt to gain a better acquaintance with a world that is to no small extent foreign to me and my contemporaries.

This is not to claim that I have ventured into anthropological history. After all, many of my procedures could be described as fairly traditional history and criticism relating to high culture (though I would find it hard to draw the line between the ‘high’ and the ‘low’ within my subject-matter); I am, moreover, fully aware of the risk of exoticising the past – sensitive to the warning that we are bound to chance across ‘sentimental savages’ as soon as we start ‘positing a dramatic gulf in mentalité between the eighteenth century and the present’. But I will argue that certain phenomena of the past are likely to ‘speak to us’ with greater intensity (to use the metaphor from one of the above quotations) if we are willing to put in the historical spadework. (I will perhaps somewhat rashly confess that I came to find certain moments in eighteenth-century sentimental literature, drama and opera genuinely moving, which I suspect has something to do with my long-term immersion in that material and its culture.) Of course things have already begun to change in the past few decades: literary historians seem to have felt increasingly able to mention their involvement in eighteenth-century sentimental culture with a straight face, and while I will not be campaigning for revivals of unjustly (lectures of 1937–8), ed. Winton Dean (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 110–24, here 111; Jacques Chouillet, La formation des idées esthétiques de Diderot, 1745–1763 (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1973), p. 497; Robert Darnton, The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History (New York: Basic Books, 1984), pp. 242, 252; Walter E. Rex, The Attraction of the Contrary: Essays on the Literature of the French Enlightenment (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 167; John Mullan, Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 58; Derek F. Connen, Innovation and Renewal: A Study of the Theatrical Works of Diderot (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1989), p. 188; and Alain Ménil, Diderot et le drame: Théâtre et politique (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999), p. 97.

See, for example, Darnton, The Great Cat Massacre, pp. 4–5. 4 Ibid., p. 3.

A resolutely anthropological approach to eighteenth-century Italian opera – in this case opera seria – has recently been taken by Martha Feldman in Opera and Sovereignty: Transforming Myths in Eighteenth-Century Italy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

forgotten masterpieces, I have been pleased to learn of a number of recent productions – at times very high-profile productions – of sentimental operas.6

In the chapters that follow, I alternate between focusing closely on a number of representative operas and setting up broad contexts for them – webs of social and cultural references with which their early audiences would have been more or less familiar. This should afford a sharper sense of the generic status of the works in question (the statement some of them might be seen to make if viewed as a family), while allowing the individual character of each to shine through. I do not quite provide a linear account, and certainly try to avoid the type of goal-oriented narrative by which certain eighteenth-century operas are interpreted in light of their supposed nineteenth-century offshoots. I offer less a theoretical definition of a genre than a gradual build-up of images and themes, in the hope that readers may develop an understanding of that genre in much the same way as we all come to understand ‘lived’ genres. After all, ‘It is a trite but true Observation’, as Henry Fielding wrote in 1742, ‘that Examples work more forcibly on the Mind than Precepts’.7

In this book, ‘opera’ often means ‘Italian opera’ – which of course means not opera in Italy but opera in Italian, by far the most prevalent form of opera in eighteenth-century Europe. Other phenomena are given prominence in proportion to their influence on the specific aspects of Italian opera under consideration (which is why, for instance, forms of French drama and opera play an important part, whereas such a major figure in the history of bourgeois drama as Lessing is mentioned only in passing). Even so, my net has necessarily been cast very wide, and I have had to take account of the vast and ever growing literature on the various fields concerned (among them the theory of genre in general, theories and practices of sentimental literature and bourgeois drama in various European languages and across several decades, eighteenth-century sensibility, the ‘moral cure’ – and of course ‘sentimental opera’, however intended). There was inevitably a point at which I had to discontinue reading, and there will be items of literature that I have not covered; there are also items that I saw but have not mentioned, in most cases because they do not add to, or change, my line of argument.8

6 In the case of Nina (see Chapters 5–6), there have been recent productions not only of the celebrated version by Paisiello – in some cases involving such stars as Cecilia Bartoli (Zürich, Opernhaus, 1998) or Riccardo Muti and Juan Diego Flórez (Milan, Teatro alla Scala at Teatro Strehler, 1999) – but also of the earlier opéra comique setting by Nicolas Dalayrac (Cattolica, Festival Notti Malatestiane, 2002, in Italian).


8 Items that discuss at some length the works or issues at the centre of this study, but that are not cited in it, include (though are by no means limited to) William C. Holmes, ‘Pamela Transformed’, Musical Quarterly, 38 (1952), 581–94; John A. Rice, ‘Sense, Sensibility and Opera Seria: An Epistolary Debate’,
A brief word about the structure of the book. What was originally intended as a few introductory pages on the general theory of genre evolved into a self-contained prologue. There, I give my own account of developments in the field in the last century, one that is naturally inflected by the particular concerns of this book. Less theoretically inclined readers may prefer to skip this prologue and begin directly with the historical narrative. They will miss the significance of a few later allusions to it, and perhaps more importantly their reading of that narrative will not be informed by the flexible model of genre that I have found to be best suited to my complex subject-matter. (Both drawbacks are likely to be felt most keenly in the final chapter.) Chapters 2 and 3 were first written as a single chapter, as were Chapters 5 and 6. In each case it ultimately seemed advisable to split what had grown to be a chapter of inordinate length into two more manageable halves, which should nevertheless be seen as presenting a unified narrative (one about bourgeois drama in Chapters 2–3 and one about Paisiello’s Nina and its background in Chapters 5–6).

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Earlier versions of portions of Chapters 5 and 6 were published as ‘From Nina to Nina: Psychodrama, Absorption and Sentiment in the 1780s’, Cambridge Opera Journal, 8, no. 2 (July 1996). The material is reused here with the permission of Cambridge University Press. An earlier version of Chapter 7 was published as ‘Sentimental and Anti-Sentimental in Le nozze di Figaro’, Journal of the American Musicological Society, 53, no. 1 (2000). The material is reused here with the permission of the American Musicological Society.

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NOTE ON EDITORIAL METHOD

The vast majority of quotations from foreign-language sources are presented in translation (the translations being mine unless otherwise indicated). Where a quotation is from a dramatic text (play or libretto), where the point being made is one specifically about language, or where some aspect of the translation is less than straightforward, I also provide the foreign-language original. In these cases, where aspects of language or poetic form are particularly important (virtually always the case for extracts from librettos), the original passage is presented in the main text followed by the translation; otherwise the original is given in a footnote.

I have generally preserved the spelling found in my sources, silently correcting what are patently mistakes (rather than merely archaisms), and have modified the punctuation only when I felt this would significantly aid comprehension of the text. Ellipsis dots representing an omission are enclosed in square brackets (as, of course, are other kinds of editorial insertion); this makes it possible to distinguish such editorial ellipses from ellipses originating in the source (which are frequent and crucial, as will be seen).