

SENTIMENTAL OPERA

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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UNIVERSITY PRESS



Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom
 One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
 314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India
 103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

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Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521632140

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First published 2013

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data

Castelvocchi, Stefano, 1960–

Sentimental opera : questions of genre in the age of bourgeois drama / Stefano Castelvocchi.

pages cm. – (Cambridge studies in opera)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-521-63214-0

1. Opera – 18th century. 2. Domestic drama – History and criticism. I. Title.

ML1704.C38 2013

782.109'033–dc23 2013007952

ISBN 978-0-521-63214-0 Hardback

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Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-0-521-63214-0 — Sentimental Opera
Stefano Castelvechi
Frontmatter
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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’, ‘tragicomedy’ – 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

¹ These particular quotations are from Gustave Lanson, *Les origines du drame contemporain: Nivelles de La Chaussée et la comédie larmoyante* (Paris: Hachette, 1903), p. 301; Ernest Bernbaum, *The Drama of Sensibility: A Sketch of the History of English Sentimental Comedy and Domestic Tragedy, 1696–1780* (1915; Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1958), p. viii; Edward J. Dent, ‘Rossini’, in his *The Rise of Romantic Opera*

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).² 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’³ – 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.⁴ 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’.⁵ 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. 457; 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. Connors, *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, 1995), p. 97.

² See, for example, Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre*, pp. 4–5. ³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴ 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).

⁵ Nicholas Paige, ‘Rousseau’s Readers Revisited: The Aesthetics of *La nouvelle Héloïse*’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 42, no. 1 (fall 2008), 131–54, here 132.

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).

⁷ The sentence opens Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*: Henry Fielding, *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews and of His Friend Mr. Abraham Adams, and An Apology for the Life of Mrs. Shamela Andrews*, ed. Douglas Brooks-Davies, revised with a new introduction by Thomas Keymer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 15. It has already been used in association with genre theory by Michael Sinding, 'After Definitions: Genre, Categories, and Cognitive Science', *Genre*, 35 (2002), 181–220, here 185.

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).

Studi musicali, 15 (1986), 101–38; Mary Hunter, *The Culture of Opera Buffa in Mozart's Vienna: A Poetics of Entertainment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Emanuele Senici, *Landscape and Gender in Italian Opera: The Alpine Virgin from Bellini to Puccini* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Jessica Waldoff, *Recognition in Mozart's Operas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); James Webster, 'Aria as Drama', in Anthony R. DelDonna and Pierpaolo Polzonetti (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Eighteenth-Century Opera* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); and James Webster, 'Haydn's Sensibility', *Studia musicologica*, 51, nos. 1–2 (2010), 13–27.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Work on the subject of this book has been on my mind (and on and off my desk) for the best part of twenty years, during which time I have accumulated debts towards a great many people and institutions.¹ It is a pleasure to acknowledge them here.

My enterprise was made easier by financial assistance from the American Musicological Society, St John's College (Cambridge) and the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Board.

I have had opportunities to air and discuss portions of the book in a number of settings, including the 1996 meeting of the American Musicological Society (Baltimore, Maryland), the Colloquio malatestiano 'Le passioni in scena' (Torre in Pietra, Rome, 2005), the symposium 'Divo and the Scholars' (University of Chicago, 2010), and colloquia given at Cornell University, the Institute of Advanced Musical Studies (King's College London), the Open University, the Restoration to Reform Seminar (University of Cambridge), and the music departments of the universities of Bristol, Durham and Leeds.

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.

I was able to spend a research period at the University of Chicago in 2007 thanks to a Visiting Associate Professorship generously funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. For the warm hospitality I received in the Department of Music I would like to thank all members of the faculty, the chairman Robert Kendrick, the department's administrator Kathy Holmes and the students in my graduate seminar.

Material has been made available to me by numerous libraries and archives, which it would be impossible to list here. I should certainly acknowledge the two libraries that have been my home for much of the last two decades – Cambridge University Library and the University of Chicago's Joseph Regenstein Library – and would like to single out the following individuals for their especial kindness: Maria Ida Biggi (Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venice), Andrea Harrandt (Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna),

¹ The book has its remote origins in my doctoral dissertation, 'Sentimental Opera: The Emergence of a Genre, 1760–1790' (University of Chicago, 1996).

Anna Bogo (Biblioteca di Studi Teatrali di Casa Goldoni, Venice) and the staff of the Biblioteca Comunale of Udine.

I would also like to thank those who have assisted in procuring sources, ancient and modern, or in other practical ways: Anna Laura Bellina, Alice Bellini, Francesco Blanchetti, David Bryant, Bojan Bujić, Fabrizio Della Seta, Valeria De Lucca, Paolo Fabbri, Francesco Izzo, Marco Marica, Federico Marri, Alessandro Roccatagliati, Arturo Sala, Guido Salvetti, Marcello Sorce-Keller and Lucio Tufano.

Over the years I have benefited from the comments of many readers. Ample portions of an early draft were read by Laurence Dreyfus, Daniel Hertz, Martha Feldman, Roger Parker and Bruce Redford. I am also very grateful to the many people who have commented on drafts of parts of the book or discussed aspects of it with me: Derek Beales, Bruce Alan Brown, Patrick Carnegy, Edmund Goehring, Kathleen Hansell, Jane Heal, Andrew Jones, the late Walter E. Rex, Emilio Sala, Simona Venuti, William Webber and Dora B. Weiner.

At various stages, Cambridge University Press has involved readers for one or another version of the book, most of whom eventually agreed to have their names disclosed. For their many comments and suggestions, I would like to thank William D. Howarth, Roger Parker, Edmund Goehring and one anonymous reader, as well as the general editor of the Cambridge Studies in Opera series, Arthur Groos.

At a late stage, Karol Berger and John A. Rice kindly agreed to read and comment on the entire manuscript in its nearly final form. I cannot thank them sufficiently for this, and will only say that it is a true privilege to enjoy the intellectual fellowship of such fine scholars and generous colleagues.

The commissioning editor at Cambridge University Press, Vicki Cooper, began to talk to me about the book long before it existed, and has patiently seen it to completion many years later. I am also grateful to Rebecca Taylor, Fleur Jones and Sarah Payne for their assistance during the final stages of production at the Press, and to Kathryn Bailey Puffett for typesetting the musical examples so beautifully. I cannot express the extent of my debt towards my copy-editor Laura Davey: both the quality of her work and her (almost) limitless patience with me far exceeded the call of professional duty. Without her contribution, this would be a very different book.

My father Renato and his wife Maria Teresa have been of great help to me in many ways, both practical and personal. My partner Laura has had to bear the more or less daily burden of my 'finishing the book' for the last fifteen years, during which she has given me more support than I would ever have dared to ask for and done much to keep me sane.

Finally, I would like to thank Philip Gossett for many years of unflagging support and invaluable advice, and for providing throughout a model of *scientia* and intellectual rigour. This book is dedicated to him.

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).