Introduction

> It demands as much effort on the listener's part as the other two corners of the triangle, this holy triangle of composer, performer and listener.
>
> (Benjamin Britten, in Kildea, 2000: 261)

The impulse to combine words, music and action has existed from the very beginning of drama. Indeed, musical drama mainly preceded the purely spoken, which immediately begs the question: where does opera begin? One simple but useful answer is at the point where people called their works 'operas' (or its equivalent). But to do this gives the impression of opera coming from nowhere, born fully formed, like Athena. Looking further back than the Florentine *Camerata* suggests the multifarious nature of musical theatre, the range of its potential and priorities.

Opera has never ceased to grow and change – often quite radically. This book is an attempt to describe and show the development of the many different things that 'opera' can be. It is not a history, but its organisation is broadly chronological since opera developed in a very conscious way across Europe. It is essential to remember that specific composers and operas are included as examples of particular aspects of operatic development and not as studies in their own right even in those chapters devoted to a single individual (Wagner in Chapter 10 and the section of Chapter 8 on Verdi). This remains true in the later chapters (16, 17) which address specific examples of modern and contemporary opera exploring, often in the composers' own words, their ideas about what opera is and how it works in social and aesthetic terms. In all cases, composers and works have been chosen that an opera-goer might reasonably have been able to actually see and all of which have been recorded.

There is, then, a strong sense of linear development, but there is also an emphasis on how quite different types of opera coexisted, each demanding a different aesthetic response. Thus, while there is a study of the line between Metastasian *opera seria*, the 'internal' reforms of Rameau and Jommelli and the more radical 'reforms' of Gluck, it is essential not to adopt an evolutionary attitude and simply see opera progressing towards Gluck or Wagner and discarding its preceding achievements. The operas of Lully, Handel, Rameau and Traetta, let alone those of Rossini, Wagner, Offenbach, Berg and Adams, each have their own qualities and strengths. Each needs

to be understood in its own right while also seeing how they grew out of what came before and then led to something different.

To appreciate this requires understanding how operas work. The book is, therefore, designed to uncover the mechanisms, the working parts of opera, by looking at its major periods and exponents. This is complicated because opera combines the 'abstract' nature of music with the concrete nature of words and stage settings. As a result its development combines many things and depends upon changes beyond its own artistic world. At different points it is necessary to look away from opera to the wider aesthetic, social, political and cultural context. Only by doing this is it often possible to understand how and why the music, libretto, dramaturgy or staging changed.

The book is aimed at two complementary readerships. The student of music who needs a basis for approaching this very particular and complex musical application, and the person who is already familiar with opera and wants to know more than is provided by a history or synopses. It assumes a basic knowledge of the chronology of opera; access to a good guide such as Kobbé or *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera* for synopses; an elementary awareness of musical terms such as melody, harmony, rhythm and modulation. Its aim is to enable the reader to

- develop a clear chronological through-line, but centred on change rather than evolutionary 'progress'
- understand the many different ways in which opera and its forms work
- appreciate the formative role of opera's major exponents
- see how opera and its development reflected and reacted to changes in the world around it.

While the book may be used as a point of reference for particular periods or even composers, it is designed to be read as a whole, developing an aesthetic for opera, the terms for analysing it and the language for discussing it.

Two features are designed to help the reader gain a sense of context and the movements of which opera was a part. These are series of tables and four generic chapters.

The tables offer visual guides to the complex relationships explored in the text. Charts of this kind can falsify relationships by making them look simpler, more direct or less ambiguous than they really were. Nevertheless they are used here as frameworks within which ideas and interconnections can be studied. There are four main kinds:

1 Schematic representations of historical (social, cultural, political) movements and events (Table 7.1).
2 Chronologies relating to a genre or a composer's work (Table 8.9).

3 Structural analysis of acts or scenes (Table 10.4).
4 Detailed analysis of a selected passage (Table 8.12). These are designed to be followed with a score or aurally, and parallel the libretto with a commentary on the music and drama. The translations are literal so as to follow each line unit of text.

The date given for an opera is generally that of the premiere, but where a composer's development is concerned the date of composition is given if this is substantially different from the first performance.

The book is organised in three parts, each dealing with a key phase in opera: part I, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; part II, the nineteenth century; part III, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The four generic chapters (6, 12, 15, 18) deal with topics that arise from the particular concerns of a part but which also apply across the whole book. They are primarily meant to help focus a series of questions about opera as a living form as it encounters and uses material from an ever-expanding repertoire in time, place and culture.

This book covers a wide range of material and would not have been possible without the interest, help and advice of many people. Chief among these I should especially like to thank my wonderful, sympathetic and witty editor, Victoria Cooper, my forbearing and unfailingly supportive wife Edmonde, the scholar and opera-lover Michael Downes and my hard-working 'lay' reader Julia Edwards.

Part I

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries

Chapter 1

Pre-operatic forms

Opera is a dramatic form whose primary language is music. A successful opera must work both musically and dramatically; to understand opera means understanding both elements, and how they interact. This is what makes the study of opera fascinating: it requires us to keep two art forms in balance to create a third. The challenge of opera lies in the potential conflict between these elements, each of which has its own priorities and structures. In some periods it has been dominated by the music – Handel or Rossini, while in others it is the drama that dominates – Gluck or Berg. But the opposition is a false one. It is never a matter of domination, but of the balance that is appropriate to what the composer is trying to achieve and the meaning he or she wants to create.

To define opera as 'a dramatic form whose primary language is music' is very broad – as it has to be if it is going to accommodate works as different as *Aida*, *The Mikado* and *Lulu*, let alone have the potential for coping with *West Side Story* or *The Phantom of the Opera*. A broad definition is useful, moreover, because it can help to avoid generic traps. Thinking about opera can be restricted by and to those works that were consciously written as and called 'operas' or one of the many variants of the word. Wagner used the term 'music drama' precisely because he had defined 'opera' to his own satisfaction and decided that what he was creating was different: 'The history of opera, since Rossini, is at bottom nothing else but the history of operatic melody' (Goldman and Sprinchorn, 1970: 107).

Pre-opera: Greek drama

The history of opera proper begins at the turn of the sixteenth century. But there are many examples of musico-dramatic works earlier than that, reaching back through the mediaeval period to the Greeks. These are of interest because they show the strong impulse to create works that combine music and drama, and because they help develop and test the criteria that are needed for the enormous variety of performance types that make up 'the opera'.

The Greek theatre made significant use of music, played, sung and danced. The term *strophe*, one of the divisions of the choral ode, means a 'turn', indicating part of the choreography, and the word *orchestra* means 'dancing place'. How the music was used, in what way and for which elements (soloists, chorus) is uncertain, although it seems unlikely that it was through-sung. What seems clear is that while the plays used music to heighten, emphasise and ritualise certain moments, it was an accompaniment rather than an integral part of the action. Despite later fascination with the Greek theatre and its performance, there was no direct continuity from the Greeks, and their influence only reappeared with the academic interest of the late fifteenth century.

Pre-opera: mediaeval music theatre (liturgical, sacred and secular drama)

The mediaeval drama, in its different forms, also made extensive use of music. In the twelfth-century *Herodes* one instruction reads:

> Tunc demum surgentes [Pastores] *cantent* intra se: Transeamus usque Bethlehem.
>
> Then let the (shepherds), arising, *sing* among themselves: *Let us now go unto Bethlehem* (emphasis added).

In the later *Second Shepherds' Play*, there is evidence that the audience would have been familiar with musical terms:

> II pastor: Say, what was his song? Hard ye not how he craykd it?
> Thre brefes to a long?
> III pastor: Ye, mary, he hakt it.
> Was no crochett wrong. (Happé, 1975: 291)

From about 1000 there developed a considerable body of dramatic works in which music played a major part. Some have spoken passages, others are set throughout. Broadly, these fall into three main groups, all of which were contemporary with one another (Table 1.1).

The Mass itself is often seen as a theatrical event accompanied by music. However by at least the tenth century the liturgy was expanded to include consciously theatrical, sung episodes. The first narrative chosen was the visit of the three Marys to the tomb (*Sepulchrum*) beginning with the *Quem quaeritis?* (Whom seek ye?) which naturally called for a response between participants:

> While the third responsary is being sung, let the remaining three [brethren] follow . . . in the manner of seeking something . . . These things are done in

Table 1.1 *Mediaeval dramatic forms*

Liturgical Drama	**Sacred Drama (Created outside the church)**	**Secular Drama**
Dramatic episodes written as part of the liturgy	Plays dramatising sacred themes and episodes (Biblical, Saints' lives, etc.)	Plays with non-sacred subjects
▼	▼	▼
Quem quaeritis? *Les Trois Maries*	Mystery Play cycles *Ordo Virtutum* *Ludus Danielis*	*Jeu de Robin et de Marion*

> imitation of the angel seated on the monument, and of the women coming with spices to anoint the body of Jesus. When therefore that one seated shall see the three . . . let him begin in a dulcet voice of medium pitch to sing*: Whom seek ye in the sepulchre, O followers of Christ?* (J.Q. Adams, 2008: 9)

The liturgical dramas dramatise Biblical events as part of the church service. Starting from the *Quem quaeritis*, these became increasingly complex. A particularly fine late example is the early fourteenth-century *Les Trois Maries* from Origny-Sainte-Benoîte. The musical form is monodic chant which, while very beautiful, makes little if any differentiation between the characters of the Maries, the Merchant, the Angels, etc. However there is a truly dramatic moment as Mary Magdalene encounters Christ, portraying her sense of loss and mystical rapture at the '*Noli me tangere*'. The text contains clear stage directions:

Our Lord says:	*Marie!*
Marie Magdalene says at the foot of Our Lord:	*Raboni!*
and stays thus until Our Lord has sung:	*Do not touch me. I am not yet ascended unto my Father.* (*Les Trois Maries*)

To what extent the music is dramatic, as distinct from part of a dramatic moment, is a moot point.

The sacred drama is a dramatisation of Biblical episodes, saints' lives, or moral tales, but not as part of the liturgy. They are sacred, moral entertainments. The earliest extant example is Hildegard of Bingen's twelfth-century morality *Ordo Virtutum* (Order of the virtues), a battle between Good and Evil for the human soul. Like *Les Trois Maries* the music is monodic chant, but there is also spoken text – since the Devil

was denied divine harmony. Like *Les Trois Maries* the plainchant does not vary with the narrative. But the conflict inherent in the text implies dramatic performance as do the stage directions in the early thirteenth-century *Ludus Danielis*. Unlike *Les Trois Maries*, this consists of a series of distinct melodies interspersed with plainchant. In the episode of the Writing on the Wall, Belshazzar is instructed '*stupefactus clamabit*' (he will cry out in amazement), which must have at least affected the singing.

By contrast, Adam de la Halle's late thirteenth-century *Le Jeu de Robin et de Marion* is a purely secular drama. It combines a boisterous folk play for the common people with a pastoral, depicting the life of (idealised) shepherds. The music consists of secular forms: chansons, motets and rondeaux which alternate with comic, vernacular dialogue to produce something very like the later *Singspiel*.

Le Jeu de Robin et de Marion comes closer to the modern idea of opera than any of the other pieces so far. On the other hand Olivier Messiaen's *Saint François d'Assise*, Virgil Thomson's *Four Saints in Three Acts*, or Philip Glass' *Satyagraha* are, perhaps, closer to *Les Trois Maries* or the *Ordo Virtutum* than *Le Nozze di Figaro* or *Tosca* in the relatively distanced way in which the action and music relate to one another. This means that any simple ideas of what opera is are challenged as soon as the lyric theatre is considered seriously. The danger is always to look for a single definition by which to determine if any musico-dramatic piece is or is not an opera. To do so is always likely to create false oppositions. Any definition has to be as inclusive as possible, a basis for analysing the multitude of ways in which words and music have worked together. In these examples the music accompanies the flow of the dialogue and action, but neither characterises nor comments, it is not a positive dramatic voice.

Mannerism and the growth of overtly expressive music

It often seems extraordinary that, from the very start, something as complex as opera should have been able to produce masterpieces that are part of the mainstream repertoire. More than this: the objectives and problems of the first opera composers set an agenda that remains fundamental. One reason is that, although opera proper was created around the year 1600, the elements it drew on, both secular and sacred, were already highly sophisticated. These included a range of vocal forms; texts written to be set to music and independent poetry; and a variety of dramatic forms. Significantly for one aspect of the way opera was to develop, almost all operated within courtly or state circles, under the patronage of educated men and women who wanted to use the arts to promote their prestige.

The range of musical and performance activities was enormous, some of which are indicated in Table 1.2. Music for its own sake included settings of texts as solo songs and madrigals, often to words by major literary figures such as Petrarch.