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OPERA IN BRITAIN

Abstract: *The article is devoted to describing of history of Britain opera. The authors reveal the periods of development and creating of opera in Britain.*

This article of opera in Britain considers first, the theoretical aspects of the creation of an opera, then moves to a survey of British opera companies and their productions of last and modern opera.

Key words: *opera, England, Henry Purcell, Frederick Handel, Benjamin Britten, Mark-Anthony Turnage*

I. Introduction

Ballet and opera were born out of royal entertainments in 17th-century Italy and France. These were spectacular productions celebrating marriages or political visits used by kings or nobles to show off their wealth and power. They were unashamed propaganda aimed at impressing foreign dignitaries and other royals [15].

Britain has rich musical traditions. Many famous composers and singers were born and performed in Britain. Henry Purcell (1659–1695), a prominent British composer, lived in the 17th century. He was the founder of the British Opera. His opera “King Arthur” was very popular with spectators. The main idea of this opera was the struggle for the independence of Britain [7; 13; 14].

II. Statement of the problem

This article continues with a survey of opera, briefly touching on historical examples, and focusing primarily on works from the 16th century to nowadays.

III. Results

In England, one of opera's antecedents in the 16th century was an afterpiece which came at the end of a play; often scandalous and consisting in the main of dialogue set to music arranged from popular tunes. In this respect such afterpieces anticipate the ballad operas of the 18th century. At the same time, the French masque

was gaining a firm hold at the English Court, with lavish splendour and highly realistic scenery [8]. In 1636 William Davenant secured a royal patent from Charles I to build an opera house in London but because of the Civil War and subsequent closure of the theatres in 1642 this never materialized.

The first English opera is generally regarded as Davenant's *The Siege of Rhodes* which was performed in 1656 at Rutland House. In 1661 Davenant converted a covered tennis court into Lincoln's Inn Fields theatre and presented an expanded version of *The Siege of Rhodes*. This was also the first theatrical production to use perspective scenery. This review is for the first London production of Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, which took place more than 300 years after the opera was written in 1607. Although *Orfeo* remains the earliest opera still regularly performed today, it was not heard outside Italy until the 20th century, and then usually only in concert versions. The first staged performance in England was given by a band of early music enthusiasts at Oxford in 1925, and given in London in 1929. Its austerity and formality would have seemed very strange to audiences used to the full-blooded musical sound of the 19th century, but the reviewer notes how the music remained as fresh and charming as it had been when it was written [14].

After Charles II was restored to the throne, Davenant and Thomas Killigrew were granted royal patents, which gave them virtual monopoly over presenting drama in London. These monopolies were not revoked until the 19th century.

Davenant opened the Duke's Theatre where he presented adaptations of Shakespeare's plays with music, forerunners of the semi-operas of Purcell. Henry Purcell developed a peculiarly English form of opera, the half-sung and half-spoken semi-opera. This strange English hybrid flourished in the 1670s and lasted into the 18th century. It combined spoken dialogue with elaborate costumes, scenery and effects, dancing and music. Singing was rarely required from the professional actors who took the lead roles. Purcell's most famous opera, *Dido and Aeneas* [12], based on Greek mythology, was written in 1689 for the Young Gentlemen of Mr. Josias Priest's Boarding School at Chelsea. Unusually for the time this was an all-sung opera and designed for private performance.

John Rich staged Clayton's Opera *Arsinoe at Drury Lane* in 1705. It was the first full length English opera in the Italian style. There was considerable prejudice against English opera composers and English singers – the fashionable audiences preferred 'exotic' foreign singers. Indeed it was thought that the English singers' voices were too light for serious opera [15].

The 18th century saw an explosion of opera across Europe. Opera houses were built in all the major European cities and new operas were commissioned for each season. The King's Theatre became the home of opera in the 18th and 19th centuries where operas were the main offering in the evening's entertainment, usually interspersed with dances and sometimes a short play or farce as an afterpiece. The one permanent opera company at the Royal Academy of Music lasted only eight years and played to the nobility. In the public theatres, opera was usually presented

for short seasons with star foreign singers.

It was the music of Frederick Handel that really established the popularity of opera in London. Handel was sent abroad by the Royal Academy of Music to attract the best available singers to London. Operas were composed for individual singers who were the great stars. The composer's job was to produce music to show off the star's voice and many composers could write an opera in just two or three weeks. These star singers had considerable freedom to improvise within the music. Indeed certain passages of ornamentation were left to the singer's own inclination and would change from night to night [19].

We've found one printed libretto, annotated in two different hands, is the only extant prompt of a Handel opera dating from his lifetime. It shows the Italian words as sung on the left with the English translation on the right to guide the audience through the plot (at this point, the auditorium was not darkened during performances). The annotations in this copy reveal information not usually known about productions in this period. For example, notes as to the number of attendants present on stage at various points (communicating the status of the leading characters), points of entry from left or right and the number and nature of the different stage settings required, including a practical bridge capable of bearing the weight of attendant Soldiers 'with Pikes'. Sound effects are also mentioned, notably, Zenobia's attempt to drown herself by jumping into the river is preceded by the note 'stone ready'. This is a note to the backstage hand to get a stone ready to throw into a tank of water [11].

The term 'libretto' means 'a little book', implying it is supposed to be short or abbreviated, and to present a concentration of material, thus being a suggestive more than a descriptive text, in such a way that, according to Kerman, 'the composer can sense and develop a feeling latent in the most unprepossessing bit of it' [4, 12]. 'A libretto is not a drama until music makes it one. It's the music that – under preconditions outlined in the libretto – constitutes the drama'. In other words, the composer dictates, via the dramatic pace of a scene, either how a character is to be played, or his/her attitude, as if the player were a sort of a 'silent-actor' [4, 30].

It was not normal practice to print the libretto far enough in advance of the performance for it to be annotated by the stage management, which makes this copy even more unique and puzzling to scholars [2].

The German composer George Frederick Handel, who settled in London with his patron George I, introduced opera seria to London when his Italian opera *Rinaldo* [5] which was first performed in 1711. Opera seria literally translates as 'serious opera'. The characters were all noble or mythological and the plots about political intrigue or history. *Rinaldo* played for 15 performances and was considered a great success. The opera was staged with dramatic settings: an enchanted palace with blazing battlements; a black cloud filled with monsters spitting fire and smoke. Handel's operas were vocally elaborate, with long arias designed to display the virtuosity of the castrato stars. His works were full of complicated arias that thrilled English audiences [19].

Castratos were male singers [1] who had been castrated (had their testicles removed) to prevent their voices breaking (becoming deeper) as they went through puberty. They had truly beautiful voices which combined the clarity and purity of a boy soprano with the power of the mature male voice. Understandably the fashion for castratos died out some time ago and there is only one very poor recording of such a voice available. Castrato singers were very popular in the 18th century, even though castration was illegal. In Italy poor families keen for their sons to make good money in opera, would have their sons castrated [19].

The first Italian castrato stars to visit England were Valentini and Nicolini. Nicolini sang the title role of Handel's Rinaldo in 1711. Other major stars included Senesino and Farinelli. The hysteria aroused when the great castrato, Senesino, (Francesco Bernardi, 1680–1750) left London in 1730 is commemorated by this songsheet. The great castrati were feted like rock stars. Women fainted or became hysterical with admiration during their performances. Many wore several miniature portraits of their heroes, like fans wearing the badges of their favourite group today.

Going to the opera was a social occasion in the 18th and 19th centuries. The rise in the popularity of theatre and opera reflected the growing leisure time and wealth of the upper middle classes. Theatres were noisy, chaotic places and the aim was to see and be seen. The stage and the auditorium were lit from great chandeliers that hung from the ceiling and the audience was as visible as the performers. Audiences would chat, walk around and play games. It wasn't unknown for ladies to have a card table in the box for a game of cards during the performance [19].

A succession of great divas dominated opera from the mid 19th century and no male singer could match their popularity. Jenny Lind, Adelina Patti and Nellie Melba were all sopranos, the highest-range female voice, which had the clarity and flexibility to cope with elaborate passages of flamboyant music. Opera at this time had no particular sense of unity in performance despite a strong sense of stage design. The stars traditionally toured with their own costumes and often had scant regard for either their colleagues or the composers [20].

Rehearsals in the modern sense were unheard of and star singers would rarely rehearse with the rest of the cast. In performance the stars stood centre stage and ignored everyone else – even if that person were another star singing a love duet with them. Sometimes they would even insert their favourite aria or song into the opera, whether it was appropriate or not [20].

Princess Ida, or *Castle Adamant* [9], was the first three-act opera by Gilbert and Sullivan that Richard D'Oyly Carte produced and opened at the Savoy Theatre on 5 January 1884. Coming after their sparkling fairytale *Iolanthe* in 1882 [6], *Princess Ida* was a completely different proposition, dealing with the subject of women's education. It was based on a burlesque act that Gilbert had written which, in turn, was based on Tennyson's poem *The Princess* [10].

We must notice that until the mid 20th century, the Royal Opera House was only used for opera for part of the year and the rest of the time presented plays,

pantomimes, revues and even ice shows. During World War II (1939–45) it was a dance hall. English singers of talent, like Eva Turner, did sing in London, but spent most of their careers abroad. The turn of the century saw a revival of interest (mostly by small, specialist societies) in 17th- and 18th-century opera, some of which had not been performed for over 200 years [16].

The Royal Opera is currently the most famous and wealthy opera company in the United Kingdom; it performs operas in their original languages, and some of the most distinguished artists in the world appear in its productions. The Royal Opera House, in Covent Garden, London, is its base. Originally the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, the venue became the Royal Opera House in 1892 [4, 48].

The modern opera composer must be competent in writing for voice and instruments. The instrumental ensemble in an opera must support the singers while still allowing the words to be heard and understood; its music may enhance the action, yet avoid impeding the drama. A good example of an operatic score that presented a remarkably skilful instrumentation is *Anna Nicole* (2010), by Mark-Anthony Turnage (b. 1960), premiered by the Royal Opera House in February 2011 [17; 18], which includes jazz and rock musicians, as well as a jazz band in the orchestra itself [4, 35–36].

Many operas were indeed created in Britain during the first half of the twentieth century by, for example, Charles Villiers Stanford, Ethyl Smyth, Gustav Holst, Rutland Boughton, Frederick Delius, and Ralph Vaughan Williams, it was only after the immense success of Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes* [3] in London in 1945 that the genre seemed to present convincing possibilities to leading British composers. In fact, for composers like Britten himself, Michael Tippett, Peter Maxwell Davies, Harrison Birtwistle, Gavin Bryars, and Judith Weir, among others, the making of opera has granted them a crucial opportunity to forge or improve their compositional style, so much so that in most cases such works are central to their *oeuvre*. *But* it is not possible to define an English operatic tradition, given the great diversity of compositional techniques and styles of these works, which also include operas by composers such as Jonathan Harvey, Oliver Knussen and Mark-Anthony Turnage. This stylistic breadth, as well as the evolution of the genre itself during the last 40 years, is clearly illustrated amongst the productions of opera companies during this period, through their policies of commissioning and producing new works [4, 47].

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