

ESSAYS

A MOVABLE FEAST:
THE ARIA IN THE ITALIAN LIBRETTO IN LONDON
BEFORE 1800

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The purpose of this short essay is to announce a new research project, ‘The Aria in the Italian Libretto in London before 1800’, the aim of which is to list the incipits of all the arias included in Italian-language opera and oratorio librettos printed in London before the turn of the nineteenth century.¹ The notion that an opera libretto may not be the stable text it appears on the page to be is no news to scholars working on opera and musical theatre, who understand perfectly well the possible nature and origins of the sources they use, especially the libretto. At least one hopes they do; but in the case of the last, do they? The seductive lure of the printed page is strong, a lure which has an almost irresistible pull for scholars when there is a score to ‘match’; it becomes even stronger when those working on canonic composers stray out of their chosen territory to look for ‘contemporaneous examples’ from the works of ‘minor composers’, or when there is no thematic catalogue to provide even a basic chart with which to navigate the treacherous waters of the output of even some major eighteenth-century ones. A libretto is, after all, not ‘music’, they say – ‘that’s all very well, but why aren’t you talking about the *music*?’ – so why worry? Just hurry on to the matching score to identify the ‘composer’s intentions’, and all will be well.

All? In one of the most thought-provoking discussions on the aim and purpose of bibliographical studies of recent times, Robert D. Hume asks the question ‘What does a critic need in order to make a well-founded attempt at interpreting a text?’² Hume’s ‘text’ here is the whole object – hereafter the ‘work’ – and his answer can be divided into two parts. The first is that there must be a reliable source for the work itself, a source, he adds in loud italics, ‘*whose nature and origins the critic understands*’. The second is that ‘unless the critic is practising a radically anti-historical (and now ludicrous) form of New Criticism’, a work’s genesis, production, dissemination and reception are essential to its sound interpretation; ‘wishing to pretend that a work we want to interpret comes down to us in an immediate text, free of all ordinary baggage, is worse than silly’.³ Two obvious points, one might think, but the fact is that Hume proceeds to cite a number of recent examples where a failure to understand a source for a work, coupled with carelessly thought-out editorial principles in its presentation, have ultimately resulted in the development of a misleading historical picture. It should be said that in this discussion Hume’s aim, as a literary scholar and theatre historian, is not to take up the cudgels on behalf of any particular faction in a ‘textual studies vs criticism’ debate, but is rather ‘an attempt

1 The project is headed by Michael Burden, with Christopher Chowrimootoo as co-researcher. It was undertaken with research funding from the Warden and Scholars of New College, Oxford, with a generous donation from Eugene Ludwig, through the Ludwig Family Charitable Trust.

2 Robert D. Hume, ‘The Aims and Uses of “Textual Studies”’, *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 89/2 (2005), 197–230.

3 Hume, ‘Aims and Uses’, 222.



by a non-combatant to offer some common-sense observations on the point of bibliographic and textual enterprises and the way in which they can be most usefully pursued'.⁴

Hume is addressing the issue of the text of a spoken drama, but his remarks have relevance to us none the less. As hinted at above, one of the problems in eighteenth-century opera studies is the question of the stability of the libretto and score. Michael Talbot, editor of the published proceedings of a Liverpool Music Symposium entitled *The Musical Work: Reality or Invention?*,⁵ writes that 'there was a broad agreement among the contributors [to the symposium], as in the world at large, that a musical work, to merit the description, has to be discrete, reproducible and attributable', three characteristics which assume unity of conception, stability of the object and a single (usually), identifiable author. It is very clear, however, that at least as far as much such opera staged in London is concerned, the works do not necessarily answer these criteria, and there is no doubt that sensitive and informed study of eighteenth-century Italian opera seria approaches the assumption of this 'work concept' with great caution.

One could exemplify the problem with reference to the received, late twentieth-century approach from the work of Winton Dean. Addressing the interrelationship of the characters in Handel's *Giulio Cesare*, Dean comments:

Secco recitative cannot do it [that is, create these relationships] as it carried a minimal emotional charge. It must be done through the aria . . . Handel tackles the problem by building up the character facet by facet in the course of arias until he or she stands complete . . . Cleopatra in *Giulio Cesare* begins as a tease and a scheming minx; when she falls in love with Caesar she passes through passion, anxiety and desolation before emerging as a mature woman.⁶

Dean's approach, dealing the composer's intentions as presumed by the critic, is explicit (though arguably ahistorical⁷), and in the comparatively settled world of Handel opera, where the sources are numerous and the histories of the operas' performances well understood, it can be part of a coherent debate.

But say, in an opera of the period not by Handel, and unbeknownst to anybody except the original parties, there is a careful (or tempestuous) negotiation between the prima donna and that season's impresario. Say that when the impresario, calling on the prima donna at her lodgings, presents her with a newly composed score to a pre-existing libretto, she responds that she does not *like* the arias written for the title role by composer A. She has, besides, sung that role before in another city. Not only that, but she still has composer B's settings from that city, which have become part of her collection of *arie di bagaglio*. Why, she asks the impresario, could she not just sing those? To keep the prima donna happy, the impresario agrees to this strategy, which results in the singer singing someone else's settings of the arias for that character. The reception would not, then, be of composer A's score with 'character development', 'dramatic tension', overall key-structure and the like, but of A's with something of B's added, with a *possibly* quite different result. However, because the aria *texts* are the same, no change is made in the libretto as published and sold to the audience; and because the score and orchestral parts for those arias have been copied onto loose-leaf inserts and come from the singer's collection, no change is made in the theatre score; and because no public announcement is made (however much the composer might be fuming in private), the authors of contemporary reports are left in ignorance and do not therefore mention that the music for her arias – or indeed, perhaps many arias – has been substituted. A later critic is, therefore, none the wiser.

4 Hume, 'Aims and Uses', 189.

5 Michael Talbot, ed., *The Musical Work: Reality or Invention?* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), 3.

6 Winton Dean and John Merrill Knapp, *Handel's Operas: 1702–1726* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 7.

7 'For eighteenth-century audiences, for whom any aria represented the expression of a particular *affekt* or emotion regardless of the 'character' giving voice to it, Dean's account can only be viewed as an ahistorical apologia for Handel specifically directed to modern audiences with expectations formed by the Gluck–Wagner tradition'. Herbert Lindenberger, *Opera in History from Monteverdi to Cage* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 55.



Far-fetched? But no. And we need look no further than London in 1755 for a similar sequence of events. The impresario was Francesco Vanneschi, the prima donna Regina Mingotti and the opera in question Giovanni Lampugnani's setting of a version Metastasio's *Siroe re di Persia*. In this instance, Mingotti reported in a self-justifying (and perhaps responsibility-shifting) pamphlet that:

THE Musick . . . was all composed by *Lampugnani*; but when *Vanneschi* heard me privately sing the Songs that were allotted me in this Opera, he found them so little to his Taste, that he begged of me as a Favour, to substitute other Songs of other Masters, knowing that I had better Compositions in my Possession.⁸

In other words, the settings of the aria texts written for Mingotti by Lampugnani were not to the impresario's taste, but because the soprano had better settings of those same aria texts in her luggage, Vanneschi asked her to substitute those. Since Mingotti did as Vanneschi requested, we can presume that she agreed with him; what we know of her character suggests that had her opinion not coincided with his, the arias would have stayed in her suitcase! The information concerning this incident became public only because a later row between impresario and prima donna resulted in Mingotti describing the nature of their discussions in two self-published *Appeals to the Public*, in which she poured vitriol over Vanneschi's competence as manager and impresario.⁹

As it happens, we do know a little more about the settings Mingotti sang, for, unusually for such substitute arias, she published them later that year. The role she performed in *Siroe* was Emira, a character that in the 1755 version had four of the opera's twenty arias allotted to it. Of those four arias, two are Metastasio's original texts, and the adapter has left them in (approximately) the correct scenes in Acts 1 and 2; these were 'Publish'd by particular Desire' as *THE Two favorite SONGS IN THE OPERA CALL'D SIROE, SUNG BY Sign^{ra} Mingotti*, and were clearly two of the 'better Compositions' that Mingotti claimed Vanneschi preferred.¹⁰ It therefore comes as no surprise to find that they were *not* included in John Walsh's *Favourite SONGS in the OPERA Call'd SIROE*, all of which were settings by house composer Lampugnani.¹¹ Of course, this incident does not mean that this sort of thing *always* happened, but the fact remains that if Mingotti had not been constrained to publish her *Appeal* and then, most unusually, her arias, we would be none the wiser. And it does emphasize that our knowledge of the performance – and therefore of the 'work' on one hand, and its 'reception' on the other – always runs the risk of being imperfect, even when the sources appear to be offering an unambiguous text for interpretation.

The preceding discussion is not designed to revisit the issue of aria replacement in detail – it is, in any case, a familiar topic to those working in opera and musical theatre studies, and we need not pursue it further here¹² – but it is intended to illustrate some of the problems that have inspired the project. And there is no doubt that it owes much to previous projects, most notably the monumental *I libretti italiani a stampa dalle origini al 1800* (Cuneo: Bertola & Locatelli, 1990–1994) compiled by Claudio Sartori; those working in the English corner of this field have had both the older *English Short Title Catalogue* and the later *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online* at their fingertips. Sartori and the ESTC have produced workable listings of the librettos, while ECCO has made available a large number of the libretti as texts. It is safe to say that without

8 Regina Mingotti, *An Appeal to the Public* (London: Printed for Regina Mingotti [1755]).

9 See, Mingotti, *Appeal*, and Regina Mingotti, *A Second Appeal to the Public* (London: Printed for Regina Mingotti [1756]).

10 London, British Library, shelfmark G.201.(3.).

11 London, British Library, shelfmark H.348.e.(1.).

12 Lowell Lindgren, 'Venice, Vivaldi, Vico and Opera in London, 1705–17', *Nuovi studi Vivaldiani* (Florence: Olschki, 1987), 633–666; Curtis A. Price, 'Unity, Originality and the London Pasticcio', *Harvard Library Bulletin* 2/4 (1991), 421–444; and Michael Burden, 'Metastasio's "London Pasties": Curate's Egg or Pudding's Proof?', in *Pietro Metastasio (1698–1782), 'Uomo Universale'*, ed. Elisabeth Th. Hilscher and Andrea Sommer-Mathis (Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2000), 293–309.



their existence, this project would have been unlikely to have made the progress it has. But there is still a long way to go.

The project is divided into two parts; a listing of the librettos and a listing of the arias. The former is, to some extent, a revision of Sartori's listing, with omissions rectified and ghosts removed. Its importance here is to provide detailed bibliographical information on the *copy* of the libretto from which the aria incipits have been extracted; the copy may, for example, be lacking mid-season pasteovers which are contained in only one copy of the libretto. In the second part, the incipits are listed with other relevant information: the singer who performed the aria, the opera in which it appeared, the date, the presumed composer and the librettist. These details allow the 14,000 or so arias to be sorted in a number of different ways in order to find out exactly how, when and where particular arias recurred, who sang them on different occasions, what composers set how many texts for London, and so on.

For example, take the aria 'Disperato, in mar turbato' which closes Act 2 of Metastasio's *Demetrio*. The index indicates that it was used in a variety of London opera librettos, including *Artamene* (1745), *Alessandro nell'Indie* (1764), *Adriano in Siria* (1765), *Eumene* (1765), *Astarto re di Tiro* (1770) and both the 1780 and 1782 versions of *Quinto Fabio*. The settings can be attributed to Gluck (1745), (possibly) Cocchi (1764), J. C. Bach (1765), Ponzo (1765), Bertoni (1780) and to an anonymous composer (1782), while the versions were sung respectively by an unrecorded singer (1745), Nicolo Peretti (1764), Giovanni Manzoli (1765), Ercole Ciprandi (1765), Anna Pozzi (1780) and Caterina Lorenzini (1782). But, unaccountably, the text is omitted from every one of the different versions of the original *Demetrio* staged in London in 1744, 1757, 1763, 1785 and 1786. To be able to make this comparatively simple series of statements without the index, a vast amount of material has to be sifted and searched; with the project and its indices, the task is at least possible.

There are difficulties and drawbacks, of course. It could be argued, for example, that incipits do not represent the whole picture, and we do not suggest that they do; however, as others have pointed out, the first line of a poetic text is its most stable.¹³ In any case, the index is meant to be an aid to others' further research, not something that provides all the answers to textual problems in eighteenth-century Italian operas performed in London.

The project, which started with the fairly simple aim of listing the aria incipits, has, like most such projects, grown in scope as it has progressed and its potential become apparent; the libretto catalogue will, for example, now also include a detailed listing of seasons and performances, and its appendices include a list of printers to the opera house. The one (as yet) unresolved issue is that of the musical sources. The problem (as emphasized by Regina Mingotti's outburst in 1755) is not whether a setting of the aria still exists – something like two fifths of the arias appear to have at least one setting surviving from eighteenth-century London – but whether or not that music relates to the libretto. For example, a tune may not have been used in all the performances given; it may have started out in the production but been replaced by another during the run. Or it may be that an independently popular text was set and never heard inside the opera house, but had a circulation of its own. Or, in a similar case to that of Mingotti, the soprano may have simply refused to sing any of the arias provided, and sang what she chose, the arias settings actually written for the performances never being heard at all. The impossibility of ever being able to answer these questions with any certainty means that, at the moment, we do not intend to expand the project to include surviving musical settings. In what form the results will finally be available has yet to be determined, since both CD-ROM and hard copy versions are desirable.

The index will certainly make the study of the librettos easier; whether or not the index will result in a reassessment of opera in London remains to be seen. The London pasticcio – the extreme version of the replacement aria and a lack of an overriding notion of the 'whole work' – is a genre which Hume, Judith Milhous and Curtis Price have argued elsewhere 'remains a bugbear to an objective assessment of the nature

13 Hume, 'Aims and Uses', 223–224.



and quality of Italian opera in eighteenth-century London'.¹⁴ This is true; such assessments are difficult to make. But in one sense, the pasticcio – and its method, interpretation and ideology – *is* an essential element of 'the nature and quality' of eighteenth-century London Italian opera, and one we cannot afford to ignore. London opera was a fluid, vital, commercially driven genre which needs to be treated as such¹⁵ and not measured up to a one librettist–one composer opera gold standard, even if some cognoscenti of the period¹⁶ despised the alternatives as much as some modern commentators!

14 Curtis A. Price, Judith Milhous and Robert D. Hume, *Italian Opera in Late Eighteenth-century London. Vol. 1. The King's Theatre, Haymarket 1778–1791* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 29.

15 See Robert D. Hume, 'The Economics of Culture in London, 1660–1740', *Huntington Library Quarterly* 69/4 (2006), 487–533, for a detailed discussion in context of the early part of the eighteenth century, and Michael Burden, 'Opera on the London Theatre Bill, 1739–1843', in *The Cambridge Companion to the English Theatre*, ed. Jane Moody and Daniel O'Quinn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), for a consideration of the importance of adaptation in staging opera in London.

16 To cite but one: 'the pasticcios (a term so irreconcilable to the very genius of an opera) will be served up to our inexpressible delight with a greater variety of ingredients than the ablest pastry-cook in musick has yet been able to croud in'. Richard Phelps to James Harris, 8 April 1756; Donald Burrows and Rosemary Dunhill, *Music and Theatre in Handel's World: The Family Papers of James Harris 1732–1780* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 310–311.