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MODERNISM AND MELODRAMA

Modernism and its effects on the operatic “text”

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Abstract

The advent of Modernism has affected various fields including opera. The 20th century has seen a rise in the number of operas written in English. Not only English and American composers but also distinguished foreign ones like Stravinsky and Henze have proposed their operas in this language. The operatic librettist instead has experienced a literary rebirth with renowned authors like W. H. Auden and E. M. Forster opting for this literary form. According to Auden, in a period in which it has become impossible to write high literature, the operatic libretto appeared to him as a valid solution to solve this impasse due to its own special conventions. In this dissertation, I will try to prove the literary validity of the libretto, even without the music, as a textual mirror of the important issues of the time. I will do this by examining initially the evolution of the librettist in time and in the English context. Then, I will focus on Modernism and finally peruse eight librettos belonging to this period.

Introduction

When one thinks about melodrama, one imagines the French *mélodrame* which is the reciting of a text with music accompaniment. In Italy, this is called *melologo* while *melodramma* is a synonym of opera. In England, instead, melodrama is a term used to express the Victorian dramas that had music accompanying the action, similar to the French model, but this term also represented the works based on exaggerated characters, feelings and events. This negative definition was the result of the natural dislike the British had towards Italian opera. This will be discussed briefly later on. In this work, I will concentrate merely on the Italian meaning of melodrama and I will use the term interchangeably with that of opera.

Inevitably, one question would immediately arise: why use the term melodrama in the title and not opera that would certainly make it more intelligible? In Italy, we have the term *opera lirica* that includes in its name the two fields of the genre, music and literature, but, in English, it simply becomes opera. We lose the "lyric" part, the textual footprint of the work. I could have used lyric opera but that would have been undoubtedly an unnatural and forced choice. For experts, it would have appeared more like a direct reference to the operatic theatre

of Chicago, known by that name. On the contrary, melodrama reflects the two parts of the category: the Greek term *mélos* means part of a musical phrase while *drama* stands for action or the play itself. Therefore, the term melodrama merges the two artistic fields without losing both connotations as with the use of the term opera. In my dissertation, I will consecrate my time to the literary text, the libretto.

All this reasoning should help us avoid other possible questions: why choose the operatic genre? Is it possible to separate the text from the music? Can the text be really independent from the music? As I have hinted previously, it would be an error to think that opera consists solely in music because, in the end, it is practically preserved in two text forms. The first one, the music score, contains the music for the orchestra and for the singers. The lyrics are also present, but they are dependent on the music notes and do not respect necessarily the original text order. Then we have the libretto, a form of booklet that is generally sold to the audience before a performance displaying only the text and the stage directions of the work. It is extremely useful because it does not only give words to the music, but it also helps the spectator follow the plot. Initially, the libretto was considered the most important element in an opera. In the 18th century, writers like Pietro Metastasio had dominated the melodramatic field with their librettos and one of his major works, *Artaserse*, had inspired over a hundred composers. In that period, the author of a libretto was known as the poet. Consequently, the wording and prosody of the text would prevail over the music. By the 19th century, the poet's predominant role would be undermined by the composer. The fact that opera had become essentially commercial had also affected the poet's status. By then, he had acquired the title of "librettist", a pejorative condition and practically an artisan status. All this would change with the Wagnerian revolution of the mid-19th century. Wagner's aim was to elevate opera to an immortal work and, consequently, restore the lyricist to his former role as a poet. These effects will be clearly visible aesthetically in the age of Modernism where Wagnerian dogma would act as the main driving force.

Modernism was a movement that arose after the consolidated development of an industrial society in the Western world. Its philosophy dealt with the side effects of the consequential "innovations" of progress, summarized by Ezra Pound in his motto, "Make it new!" It was a period of transience from an orthodox approach to an experimental one, which was similar to what opera itself was experiencing. For a great number of melomaniacs, opera

had ended with Giacomo Puccini's *Turandot* in 1926. This was a belief passed down by many bel canto disciples, but the truth was that a certain type of opera had ceased to exist while a new one had finally achieved its adulthood. Not surprisingly, in the same period, Theodor Adorno, not only a philosopher but also a musicologist, confirmed this point, corroborating the crisis of what he defined "dead music", but highlighting also, at the same time, the fact that this was referred to traditional opera. By now, operas were being produced following different aesthetic canons and evolving ultimately into new experimental works akin to its source of inspiration, the Modernist spirit.

Consequently, by the twentieth century, the librettist was to experience another shift in his relationship with the composer. He was to obtain a more egalitarian condition. The sudden interest and involvement in writing a libretto of many renowned writers from many different traditions such as Gabriele D'Annunzio, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Bertolt Brecht, Jean Cocteau and W. H. Auden have raised again the librettist to a neo-poet state. How can this be explained? Auden, discussing about his role as librettist of *The Rake's Progress*, stated that the melodrama was a fresh field, apt to inspire new challenges that were detached from the general literary trend of his time. It could nourish his quest for the "essence" of the word in the existing linguistic wasteland that had been inevitably forged by the wars.

Moreover, the Great Wars had witnessed the change in the world's balance of power. The consequence of these conflicts was a shift in the spheres of influence. The British Empire that had been a model for over a century had to pass the baton to the United States of America. In the meantime, the world had been divided by the Cold War into two fronts, the American and the Russian. Because of the risk of nuclear annihilation, the two Great Powers would avoid direct conflict by taking a non-belligerent position. The rivalry would take place, instead, in other fields. In the Western world, amongst the allies of the United States, a renewed English-speaking predominance was to influence cultural fields including the melodrama.

Therefore, English librettos rose to prominence in the 20th century. Previously, only Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* (1689), Georg Friedrich Händel's *Acis and Galatea* (1718) and Carl Maria von Weber's *Oberon* (1826), had managed to survive the strains of time, even

though only one of these operas was wholly English.[1] After centuries of barrenness in which British opera was exclusively a parody of the Italian models, the twentieth century finally welcomed the works of British composers like Ralph Vaughan Williams, William Walton and, above all, Benjamin Britten. During that period, there was a strong implicit desire to create the great English opera, a masterpiece that could fill the persistent gap in the existing operatic panorama and that could symbolise the present international status quo. As stated previously, the initially British and subsequent American hegemony had led to the English language achieving paramount importance. Not only British composers but also Americans and foreigners engaged in this effort as the operatic exploits of Igor Stravinsky and Hans Werner Henze have shown.

In this dissertation, I will examine the evolution of the writer of the libretto from poet to librettist and then back to poet explaining the motifs of this outcome. I will give also a quick overview of the history of the libretto in English. Then, I will focus on the historical period, which interests our research, Modernism, and its encounter with Melodrama. The next step will be to examine the view of modern critics in regards to the "new" libretto and the notion of literary value of a text. The dissertation will end with case studies of different operas in English, sons of the combination Modernism-Melodrama, and their relative validity as independent literary texts.

To sum up, my proposal is to study the direct effects of Modernism in the scarcely explored libretto domain. My aim is to illustrate how the new English librettos reflect and enhance the Modernist vision of the time.

[1] While *Dido and Aeneas* had both an English composer and librettist, the same could not be said of the other two. These had librettos written in English but the composers were German.

1. The libretto and the return of the poet

The idea of having a written text sung is not certainly a recent practice. Already, in Ancient Greece, a poet would sing or accompany his reading generally with a lyre. This genre was called lyric poetry, after the instrument, and it distinguished itself from "recited" poetry because of the presence of music. During the Italian Renaissance, a more collective genre, the *intermedio*, gained prominence in the Italian courts, mainly in Ferrara and Florence. It was a dramatic representation that was accompanied by songs and dances during the intervals of theatrical works. Its main task was to fill the momentary gap between the ending and the beginning of the acts. It achieved unprecedented spectacular degrees by the end of the 16th century making it the prime interest during the public events. It reached its apex of popularity in 1589 during the wedding of Ferdinando I de' Medici and Christina of Lorraine where the most celebrated composers, poets, scenographers and singers were hired for the *intermedio* that took place during the representation of Girolamo Bargagli's comedy, *La pellegrina*.

Six years later, in 1595, Jacopo Corsi and Jacopo Peri composed *Dafne*. The work had the characteristics of what we would define today as opera but, unfortunately, large chunks of the music were lost. It is in Peri's next work, *Euridice* (1600) that we have the first documented opera. In both these court operas, the author of the libretto was the poet Ottavio Rinuccini (1562-1621), considered the first librettist.

a) The First "Librettists" (17th-18th centuries)

It has been the opinion of many […] that the ancient Greeks and Romans, in representing their tragedies upon the stage, sang them throughout. But until now this noble manner of recitation has been neither revived nor (to my knowledge) even attempted by anyone, and I used to believe that this was due to the imperfection of the modern music, by far inferior to the ancient. But the opinion thus formed was wholly driven from my mind by Messer Jacopo Peri, who, hearing of the intention of Signor Jacopo Corsi and myself, set to music with so much grace the fable of *Dafne* (which I had written solely to make a simple trial of what the music of our age could do) that it gave please beyond belief to the few who heard it. […] But much greater favor and fortune have been bestowed upon the *Euridice*, set to music by the aforesaid Peri […] For this reason, beginning to recognise with what favour such representations in music are received, I have wished to bring these two to light, in order that others, more skilful than myself, may employ their talents to increase the number and

improve the quality of poems thus composed and cease to envy those ancients so much celebrated by noble writers.[2]

Ottavio Rinuccini was a Florentine courtier who started his literary career writing verses at the age of 17. In 1586, he became a member of the Accademia degli Alterati and was known as "Il Sonnachioso" [the sleepy one]. This academy specialized in drama and music. His professional consecration took place in 1589 when he was hired for writing lyrics at the previously mentioned wedding of Ferdinando I de' Medici and Christina of Lorraine. At the Florentine court, he made friends with illustrious composers like Giulio Caccini and Jacopo Peri. With the latter's opera, *Euridice*, Rinuccini became the first librettist and hence the inventor of this new genre. Rinuccini's librettos were inspired by the major Italian poets such as Torquato Tasso, Battista Guarini, Gabriello Chiabrera and the French lyricists. In these works, he successfully developed a verse style that could be sung but, at the same time, respected the accents of the spoken word. As Barbara R. Hannings states:

This style, a compromise between the blank verse typical of spoken tragedy and the uniform metres and close rhymes of traditional lyric forms, consists of an irregular mixture of freely rhyming seven- and eleven-syllable lines able to promote the rhythmic and melodic continuity suited to narrative passages without precluding the more intense lyricism appropriate for dramatically affective passages.[3]

Following Petrarch's footsteps, Rinuccini's verses included rhetorical devices like anaphoras and assonances but, nonetheless, his librettos were considered by many of his contemporaries as bad imitations of the great classical tragedies. This did not prevent Rinuccini from reaching his main goal that was to give words to a musical setting. Later on, he wrote librettos for the first renowned operatic composer, Claudio Monteverdi: *Arianna* (1608) and *Il ballo delle ingrate* (1608). With the shift of court opera from Florence to Mantua, Rinuccini's career sunk into an inevitable oblivion.

As mentioned before, Monteverdi was the first acclaimed operatic composer. His opera, *L'Orfeo* (1607), is considered the first great opera and is still widely performed today. The author of the libretto was Alessandro Striggio the younger (?1573-1630), son of

[2] Dedication to *Euridice* by Ottavio Rinuccini (1600). [Oliver Strunk, *Source Readings in Music History: The Baroque Era*, Norton, New York & London, 1965.]
[3] Stanley Sadie (edited by), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Volume Twenty-one: Recitative to Russian Federation*, Macmillan Publishers, London 2001, p. 430.

Alessandro Striggio, one of the leading madrigalists of his time. The younger Alessandro Striggio was initially a diplomat and in 1611 ambassador of Milan. He was a member of the Accademia degli Invaghiti and was known under the name "Il Ritenuto" (the reserved one). In addition, he was also the patron of Monteverdi and wrote the libretto of *L'Orfeo* as an answer to Rinuccini's *Euridice*, which had a happy conclusion that was incompatible to the original myth but understandable in a court that demanded it. Striggio wrote a libretto that was more faithful to the original but with some differences in style compared to Rinuccini. As Barbara R. Hanning states: "There are passages in blank verse inviting the flexibility of recitative, others in traditional lyrical forms such as *terza rima* demanding strophic repetition, as well as sections that move between these extremes in novel ways."[4]

Along with *L'Orfeo* (1607), Monteverdi is remembered for *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (1643), another opera in repertory today. The libretto was written by Giovanni Francesco Busenello (1598-1659), a noted lawyer and a member of several academies, above all, the Accademia degli Incogniti, a libertine circle. He became one of the early Venetian librettists and wrote also the libretto for Francesco Cavalli's *Didone* (1641). Amongst his abilities, Busenello could shape the classics in his librettos from Ovid to Virgil following the Venetian Republic's political interests and the Accademia degli Incogniti's ideals of "the comic, the serious and the erotic"[5] all mixed together. Logically, he worked always in accordance to the rules of his time, which was the inevitable happy ending. In regards to *L'incoronazione*, if the opera has survived today, a great merit must be given to the libretto that has depicted in-depth characters, introduced highly erotic expressions and offered a transgressive ending where the rules of morality are completely ignored. In the end, the emperor Nero abandons his wife to marry his lover.

The end of the 17th century saw the emerging figure of a pupil of the Venetian school, the poet Apostolo Zeno (1668-1750). In 1691, he created the Accademia degli Animosi, which aim was to restore the Arcadian values. His first libretto is dated 1696, Pollarolo's *Gli inganni felici*, a pastoral play. In the following years, he consecrated his art to producing librettos for the theatres of Venice and Milan. As a commercial genre, they were fit for the requirements of the opera at the time. Besides poetry, he founded a journal, *Giornale de'*

[4] S. Sadie (edited by), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Volume Twenty-four: Sources of instrumental ensemble music to Tait*, p. 579.
[5] S. Sadie (edited by), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Volume Four: Borowski to Canobbio*, p. 655.

letterati d'Italia in 1710 at Verona to spread his aesthetic ideals. Ironically, he left eight years later for Vienna where he became court poet. He occupied this post incessantly for 11 years before being replaced by Metastasio. Interested more in scholarly matters rather than financial issues, Zeno promoted a *riforma* in which he asked for more verisimilitude and morality in opera. His great interest in history made him write dramas of both mythical and historical topics, always respectful of the facts. In 1734, he wrote for his Venetian patron *Poesies sacre drammatiche* in which he discusses the change in ethics when comparing the commercial Venetian theatres with court opera at Vienna. His *lodevol riforma*[6] ignored the commercial rules and aimed just, like his patrons, to restore drama through a cathartic process and make it an immortal work. Even though most of his works were set to music by various composers, he didn't find them all adequate to his reform. In a letter in 1735 to the Marquis Giuseppe Gravisi, he wrote: "Save for a few of them, I consider them as failures and monstrosities."[7]

b) Poets of Music: The Viennese heritage

> The Man who sums up and embodies this stage of transition between the old and the new literature is Metastasio. The old literature, being nothing now but a musical, singable form, had its last expression in musical drama. No longer an end, it was now a means; it was melody, and subservient to music. But it was not resigned to this secondary position; it wanted to retain its importance, to be literature still. Such was the last form of the old literature; and such, precisely, was Metastasio.[8]

In the iconic book, *History of Italian Literature* (1872), Francesco De Sanctis began his final chapter XX, "The New Literature", with this eulogy of Metastasio (1698-1782). Metastasio was certainly the most distinguished writer amongst the librettists, known as the "Divine" and the *Sophocli italo* [the Italian Sophocles].[9] Metastasio was considered at the time the poet of music.

Originally called Pietro Trapassi, Metastasio was the son of a Roman tradesman. His musical and linguistic abilities were so extraordinary that already by the age of ten, he was

[6] S. Sadie (edited by), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Volume Twenty-seven: Wagon to Żywny*, p. 792.
[7] Ibidem.
[8] Francesco De Sanctis, *History of Italian Literature*, Volume two, translated by Joan Redfern, Barnes & Noble, New York 1968, p. 833.
[9] Ivi, p. 838.

professionally adopted by a jurist and scholar, Gianvincenzo Gravina, who provided for his education. This important shift in fortune was symbolized by his change in surname to the Hellenizing Metastasio [the Greek word *metastasis* means "change", "shift"] in 1715. In the following years, he studied thoroughly the classics and this passion never abandoned him as demonstrated by the themes he chose for his librettos and his later translations of Horace's *Ars Poetica* and extracts from Aristotle's *Poetics*. The young boy showed also a great ability in poetic improvisation and this quality made him extremely popular in various literary circles.

After the death of his patron in 1718, Metastasio began to work in a law office in Naples. In 1720, he wrote his first *azioni teatrale*[10], *Endimione*, for the Neapolitan court and twelve others were to follow. His success was symbolized by the appointment of Italian court poet in Vienna in 1730 after Apostolo Zeno's retirement in Venice. For Metastasio it was a great leap forward in his career and also an economic one as Don Neville tells us:

> That Metastasio was appointed in 1730 by invitation rather than by application, that his salary of 3000 florins was higher than that of the Kapellmeister, J. J. Fux, and that the appointment was made without the knowledge of Siegmund Rudolf Sinzendorf, the Obersthofmeister, under whose jurisdiction the position fell, testifies to the strength of the connections that had been forged. The salary was in fact augmented by an additional 1000 florins annually from the emperor's privy purse and 400 florins for personal accommodation.[11]

By then, Metastasio was an established poet with six operas and an oratorio in his repertory. His first libretto, *Siface re di Numidia*, was set to music in 1723 by Francesco Feo and had its first representation in Naples. Being a revised version of another author's work, he did not consider it much from an artistic point of view. He considered *Didone abbandonata* instead as his first original operatic text[12] and the opera composed by Sarro premiered in 1724 always in Naples. Amongst his other librettos of the period, there was his most celebrated work, *Artaserse*, which was written in 1726 and had its operatic premiere in 1730 in Rome with the music written by Leonardo Vinci. The opera was to be set to music by eighty

[10] An *azione teatrale* is a short drama performance which was conceived as a celebrative entertainment for the court. Metastasio was popular in this genre and composed twelve of them from 1721 (*Endimione*) to 1765 (*La corona*). His *azioni teatrale* was similar to a scenic cantata but more apt to the theatre in which a mythological or allegorical theme would be chosen [Fabrizio Della Seta (edited by), *Le parole del Teatro* Musicale, Carocci, Rome 2010, pp. 18-19].
[11] Stanley Sadie (edited by), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Second edition, Volume Sixteen: Martín y Coll to Monn*, p. 511.
[12] Ibidem.

composers amongst whom we find Gluck, Paisiello and Cimarosa.[13] So, by the time he became court poet in Vienna, Metastasio was already an accomplished poet.

His Viennese career started with an oratorio, *La Passione di Gesù Cristo,* and the maestro spent there most of his life writing his other operatic librettos which included *Adriano in Siria* (1732), *Olimpiade* (1733), *La clemenza di Tito* (1734), *Ciro riconosciuto* (1736), *Zenobia* (1740), *Ipermestra* (1743), *Antigono* (1744), *Il re pastore* (1751), *Il trionfo di Clelia* (1765) and, his last work, *Ruggiero* (1771). Similarly to *Artaserse*, these works were to be set to music by all the greatest musicians of the time and their success would continue outside the Austrian borders until the 19th century. Even though Metastasio demonstrated great versatility in his librettos, he had a clear preference for the musical dramas. On this point, Francesco De Sanctis wrote:

> Metastasio was the poet of musical drama, of which Zeno had been the architect. Metastasio's fixed idea was to construct musical drama like tragedy; in other words to construct it in such a way that it would make its effects even if acted alone, without music. His fixed ambition was to leave the low regions of idyll and comedy and rise to the higher and nobler themes of tragedy–as though the loftiness of a play depended on its theme. […] The works of Metastasio are poetry penetrated and transformed by music, which yet have their value in themselves as poetry alone.[14]

Even though Metastasio was a true tragic poet, he was degraded to the status of writer of musical dramas during his lifetime. Therefore, his works were defined simply as dramas by the public. He found himself inevitably in the middle of a very intricate situation. As De Sanctis states further on:

> […] his plays were adjudged too musical to be dramas […] and were adjudged too literary to be music. […] It is evident, then, that his dramas have an absolute value, superior to the passing moment, a value that even the dissolvent criticism of the nineteenth century has not destroyed. […] The Metastasian drama is not an artificial construction […] but is a composition filled to the brim with a rich and vivid life, which spontaneously produces results superior to the author's intentions. […] To savour the plays of Metastasio we must copy the people, and enjoy them uncritically–forget what the author intended to do and enjoy what he actually did.[15]

[13] Pietro Metastasio, *Melodrammi e canzonette*, Third edition, BUR, Milan 2017, p. 485.
[14] F. De Sanctis, *History of Italian Literature*, pp. 839-840.
[15] Ivi, pp. 840-841.

Metastasio was the forerunner of the librettist as a poet. His popularity went well beyond the European borders. It is known that the American president, Thomas Jefferson, had the 12-volume of the *Opere del Metastasio* in his own personal library.[16] In the 19th century, Stendhal, a true opera lover, wrote the following letter concerning Metastasio:

> Dante was endowed by nature with a profound cast of thought; Petrarch, with an agreeable one. She bestowed on Bojardo, and Ariosto, imagination; on Tasso, dignity; but none of them possessed the clearness and precision of Metastasio; none arrived, in their department, at the perfection which Metastasio has attained in his […] He is the only one of her poets, who, literally speaking, has been hitherto inimitable.[17]

Despite Metastasio's great popularity, he was not immune to criticism. The same De Sanctis wrote about Metastasio:

> His type of drama, tragic on the surface, but comic at bottom, fixes the life of Italy of that day in its greatest intimacy–the contrast of its grandiose exterior to its inner vacuity. The tragic in that day was not an elevation of the soul to lofty heights, but was simply a fountain of the marvellous that was so dear to the people, such as duels, suicides and conflagrations.[18]

According to De Sanctis, Metastasio's plays wanted in depth and analysis. This fact anchored his works to the sphere of the comic. For example, in Metastasio's *Didone abbandonata*, Dido could not be tragic because her status of being a "heroine is negligible and the woman is everything."[19] Her actions are exclusively guided by her passions, leading her character to incredible levels of absurdity. This is more typical of a comedy where the lower classes are contemplated and in which these characters act following more their senses and instincts. This is not certainly the main characteristic of a tragic heroine. In short, Metastasio's works were the mirror of the society of his time. The characters might even be disguised as heroes but they represent the "vulgarity and mediocrity"[20] of the social classes.

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[16] S. Sadie (edited by), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Second edition, Volume Sixteen*, p. 514.
[17] Stendhal, *The life of Haydn, in a series of letters written at Vienna. Followed by the life of Mozart, with observations on Metastasio, and on the present state of music in France and Italy*, Translated from the French by L.A.C. Bombet, J. H. Wilkins and R. B. Carter, Boston 1839, pp. 344-345.
[18] F. De Sanctis, *History of Italian Literature*, p. 843.
[19] Ivi, p. 842.
[20] Ivi, p. 849.

Of De Sanctis's same stream of thought was Ranieri de' Calzabigi (1714-1795). He was born the son of a merchant in Livorno and was educated at the Jesuit college of Prato from 1722 to 1729. He initially managed the family affairs but with little success and was forced to flee from Tuscany. In 1740, he became a member of the Arcadian Academy where his nickname was 'Liburno Drepanio'. One year later, in 1741, he settled in Naples where he started writing compositions in verse and librettos. By 1751, he moved to Paris after gaining a post from the Marquis de l'Hôpital, the French ambassador to the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. It is during his French sojourn that Calzabigi gained fame. He collaborated with Metastasio writing the "Dissertazione sulle poesie drammatiche del Sig. Abate Pietro Metastasio" in 1755. Initially, Calzabigi praised the well-elaborated plots, the detailed work on the characters and the passionate language typical of the opera seria of Metastasio that recalled the Greek tragedies but, at the same time, he advised for a modernization of the work to the new French melodramatic innovations. However, there was already a shift in his beliefs when he wrote the mock-heroic poem *La Lulliade*, in which Calzabigi expresses clearly his dislike for the tragédie lyrique and consequently Metastasio's opera seria. When Calzabigi moved to Vienna in 1761, in the new role of secretary to Chancellor Kaunitz, he was inevitably in bad terms with Metasasio. In this period, he started a collaboration with the great composer Christoph Willibald Gluck for whom Calzabigi wrote his greatest masterpieces, the so-called "reformed" operas: *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762), *Alceste* (1767) and *Paride ed Elena* (1770). In his works, Calzabigi tried to revolutionize the Metastasian style conforming his librettos to the French taste of the time with ballets, French romances and the large-scale tableaux. This might appear controversial due to Calzabigi's previously mentioned scorn for the "French language, style of singing and general approach to opera"[21] but, at the same time, the poet admired the French interpretation of the classical dramas and their theatrical mise-en-scène. In all cases, Calzabigi's language was more direct with an impressionist touch of beauty in the words that resembled to extracts put together as Lablet de Morambet stated while translating Calzabigi's *Orfeo ed Euridice*.

This reform was described in Gluck's Operatic Manifesto which appeared as a Preface to Gluck's own published score of *Alceste*. His aim was to "restrict the music to its true

[21] S. Sadie (edited by), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Second edition, Volume Four*, p. 852.

purpose of serving to give expression to the poetry." Gluck stated his beliefs in a letter he wrote to the Grand Duke Leopold of Tuscany in 1767:

When I began to write the music for Alceste, I resolved to free it from all the abuses which have crept in either through ill-advised vanity on the part of the singers or through excessive complaisance on the part of composers, with the result that for some time Italian opera has been disfigured and from being the most splendid and most beautiful of all stage performances has been made the most ridiculous and the most wearisome. I sought to restrict the music to its true purpose of serving to give expression to the poetry and to strengthen the dramatic situations, without interrupting the action or hampering it with unnecessary and superfluous ornamentations. […]; in short, I have sought to eliminate all these abuses, against which sound common sense and reason have so long protested in vain. […] These are my principles. Happily all my intentions fitted admirably with the libretto, in which the famous author [the librettist, Raniero Calzabigi], having devised a new plan for the lyrical drama, had replaced florid descriptions, superfluous comparisons, sententious and frigid moralization with the language of the heart, with strong passions, interesting situations and an ever-varied spectacle. My maxims have been vindicated by success, and the universal approval expressed in such an enlightened city [Vienna] has convinced me that simplicity, truth and lack of affectation are the sole principles of beauty in all artistic creations.[22]

After the reformed operas, Calzabigi wrote also comic librettos for renowned composers like Giuseppe Scarlatti and Giovanni Paisiello. This didn't prevent him from writing also tragic librettos, like *Ipermestra, o Le Danaidi*, a revised version of a Metastasian text, during his sojourn in Pisa in 1775, which was then set to music by Antonio Salieri and presented in Paris in 1784. Calzabigi spent his last years writing critical essays focusing on his reform ideals. As Bruce Alan Brown states:

Calzabigi's reform librettos, though few in number, stand as landmarks in the history of opera. Rarely have aesthetic idealism and a classicizing spirit (in his case, founded on a profound knowledge of ancient literature) been realized so successfully in the theatre. This success was due in large part to his having found in Gluck a composer temperamentally better equipped to portray powerful passions and 'theatrical tumult' than the decorous comparisons and maxims found in Metastasio.[23]

[22] Hedwig and E. H. Mueller Von Asow (edited by), *The Collected Correspondence and Papers of Christoph Willibald Gluck*, St. Martin's Press, New York 1962, pp. 22-23.
[23] S. Sadie (edited by), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Second edition, Volume Four*, p. 852.

Metastasio was undoubtedly the cumbersome shadow with whom Calzabigi fought throughout his life. Undoubtedly, Calzabigi managed to give that depth and tragicalness which Metastasio had only outlined in his opere serie. The only belief that he had in common with the great Poet was that operatic music was to be subservient to the text.

If Metastasio and Calzabigi focused on the opera seria, Lorenzo da Ponte (1749-1838) became famous for his librettos of opera buffa which flourished in Vienna at the end of the 18th century. Initially, his name was Emmanuel Conegliano,[24] the son of a Jewish tanner. When his father converted to Christianity, he adopted the name Lorenzo da Ponte after the bishop of Ceneda. It was no coincidence because Da Ponte entered the seminary of Ceneda in 1763 and continued his studies in Portogruaro in 1769. He was ordained priest when he was twenty-four but was then forced to leave his posts in Venice and Treviso because of his libertine life. Initially, he fled to Gorizia but then searched for fortune in Dresden where he collaborated with his friend, Caterino Mazzolà, a poet and librettist, translating and adapting plays. When Da Ponte, decided to leave for Vienna, Mazzolà immediately wrote a recommendation letter for him to Salieri.

At his arrival in November 1781, he immediately became Salieri's protégé and subsequently court poet of the Emperor Joseph II, even though he had never written a libretto in his life. As a complete newbie in this field, his career as a "poet" started in 1783 when he adjusted the text of Antonio Salieri's opera *Scuola de' gelosi*. His first completely original libretto, *Il ricco d'un giorno*, was written a year later and again set to music by Salieri but his first real success was to occur some years later in 1786 with Vicente Martín y Soler's *Il burbero di buon cuore*. In his Vienna years, he composed other four operas for Salieri, other three for Martín y Soler and, most importantly, three operas for Mozart: *Le nozze di Figaro* (1786), *Don Giovanni* (1787) and *Così fan tutte* (1790). According to some critics, Da Ponte had written four librettos for Mozart including *Lo sposo deluso* (1783) but this still needs to be fully demonstrated.[25] In a letter written to his father Leopold, Mozart illustrates the great role played by Da Ponte at the time:

[24] Giampaolo Zagonel, *Lorenzo Da Ponte – La straordinaria vita del poeta di Mozart*, Dario De Bastiani Editore, Godega di S. Urbano (TV) 2010, p. 5.

[25] The critics Georges de Saint-Foix, Alfred Einstein and John A. Rice believe Lorenzo Da Ponte to be the librettist while Anna Amalie Albert and Rudolph Angermüller doubt it.
[annselinanancystorcae.blogspot.com/2017/03/lo-sposo-deluso-de-mozart-1784.html, last seen 13/6/2019.]

I have looked through a hundred libretti, and more, but have not been able to find even one with which I am satisfied; at least, so many alterations would be required, that even if the poet were to consent to this, it would be easier for him to write an entirely new one, — in fact, it is always the best plan. A certain Abbate da Ponte is our poet here; he has at present a vast deal to do in theatrical revision, and must per obbligo write a new libretto for Salieri, which cannot be ready for a couple of months, and then he promises to write one for me; but who can tell whether he will or can keep this promise? You are aware that these Italian gentlemen are very civil to your face. Well, we know them! If he is in league with Salieri, I shall never while I live get a libretto from him. I should so like to show what I can do in an Italian opera![26]

But Mozart was wrong concerning Ponte's collaboration with Salieri. It was not all a bed of roses as he imagined. After the fiasco of Salieri's opera, *Il ricco d'un giorno*, Da Ponte blamed Salieri for the poor music and the relationship between the two deteriorated. He later composed other operas for Salieri but when Da Ponte lost his post after the death of his patron, Joseph II, he blamed Salieri for this outcome. As a result of his fall, he spent the rest of his life initially in Europe (Paris, London, Brussels, Rotterdam, The Hague and a short return to Venice), but then left for America where he lived first as a grocer and then as a merchant in New York. In his thirty years in America, he tried to import Italian culture in the continent by means first of his new role as Professor of Italian at the Columbia College in 1825 and later as manager of an Italian Opera House in the 1830s. He eventually died in 1838 but left a book, *Memorie di Lorenzo da Ponte da Ceneda scritte da esso*, which he started writing in 1823 and ended in 1830. In this autobiography, he explains thoroughly the importance of the "poet" in opera:

If the words of a dramatic poet [he wrote in 1819] are nothing but a vehicle to the notes, and an opportunity to the action, what is the reason that a composer of music does not take at once a doctor's recipes, a bookseller's catalogue, or even a spelling book, instead of the verses of a poet, and make them a vehicle to his notes, just as an ass is that of a bag of corn? [...] Mozart knew very well that the success of an opera depends, FIRST OF ALL, ON THE POET: that without a good poem an entertainment cannot be perfectly dramatic, just as a picture cannot be good without possessing the merit of invention, design, and a just proportion of the parts [...] I think that poetry is the door to music, which can be very handsome, and much admired for its exterior, but nobody can see its internal beauties, if the door is wanting.

[26] Mozart, Letter to his father, May 7, 1783 [Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *The Letters*, vol. II, translated by Lady Wallace, Hurd and Houghton, New York 1866, pp. 182-183.]

Most of the information regarding Da Ponte's life and his thoughts can be found in his memoirs even though the events are often highly romanticized. Artistically speaking, Da Ponte was undoubtedly a very skilled poet and a great improviser. His librettos show a great ability in adapting texts rather than writing completely new ones. Furthermore, his great knowledge of the Italian literary tradition and his great mastery as a versifier made him a favourite in the court of Vienna. As Tim Carter states:

> […] adaptation was common in the period, and Da Ponte's skill lay in his precise knowledge of the dynamics of opera: he condensed situations, pinpointed characters and focused the action in a manner allowing the composer freedom to create drama through music […] Again, references and quotations in his librettos emphasize the point: Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Ariosto, Sannazaro, Tasso and Guarini all make appearances […] Moreover, Da Ponte made careful use of rhyme and metre as well as complex syntactical and rhetorical patterns. The rich resonances and subtle structures give his librettos a literary emphasis that sets them apart from the workaday efforts of his contemporaries.[27]

In contrast to Metastasio and Calzabigi, Lorenzo da Ponte was above all a master of the *opera buffa*. This genre focused on the middle and lower classes mirroring also their language while the *opera seria* was composed for the king and the nobles where heroic themes and ideals were plentiful. This sharp difference amongst the two genres affected the economic situation of the librettist according to the genre he belonged to.

During his Vienna sojourn, Da Ponte met an 83 year old Metastasio, the author who gave literary dignity, coherence and verisimilitude to the libretto [the dramatic one].[28] The meeting with the great Metastasio in 1782 seemed like a handover. In a letter of 1824, Da Ponte stated that as a poet of the imperial theatres, he gained 1200 Guldens while Metastasio, instead, had gained 4000, and was obliged to compose *opere buffe*.[29] This fact already was a premonitory sign of what was happening to the figure of the Poet. From a serious and noble genre, the Poet was moving slowly to a field where commercial issues would impose a noteworthy change to his status in the incoming century.

c) The last sparks before the gradual loss of the halo

[27] S. Sadie (edited by), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Volume Seven: Đàn tranh to Egüés*, p. 9.
[28] Lorenzo della Chà, *Lorenzo Da Ponte – Una vita fra musica e letteratura (1749-1838)*, Edizioni Il Polifilo, Milan 2010, p. 91.
[29] Lorenzo Da Ponte, *Memorie*, vol. II, Laterza, Bari 1918, p. 171.

Because Scribe provided the librettos for the most popular operas and operas comiques of his day, works were performed with repeated success long after his death […] Moreover, this influence extended not only beyond his own time but beyond the boundaries of his own country. […] The Italian librettists Salvatore Cammarano and Francesco Maria Piave were influenced by Scribe […][30]

As previously stated, a change was to occur to the status of the Italian librettist during the central part of the 19th century. This was not so easily predictable at the beginning of the century even though court opera was losing its dominant role in favour of a more commercial one based on comedies that would satisfy the rising middle class. The Poet still had great power and the iconic figure of this paramount role in opera was undoubtedly Eugène Scribe (1791-1861), also known as "the nineteenth-century Metastasio."[31] The French librettist spent his career writing librettos for the Opéra-Comique, the Gymnase-Dramatique, the Théâtre Lyrique and the Bouffes Parisiens in France. Amongst his most famous librettos, are the following: Boieldieu's *La dame blanche* (1825), Auber's *Fra Diavolo* (1830), Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable* (1831), Meyerbeer's *Les* Huguenots (1831), Halévy's *La Juive* (1835), Donizetti's *La Favorite* (1840), Donizetti's *Dom Sébastien* (1843), Meyerbeer's *Le prophète* (1849) and Verdi's *Les vêpres siciliennes* (1855). This list can only give a hint of Scribe's popularity not only in France but also in Europe. He was so popular and sought-after that he could refuse writing librettos and amongst his refusals can be counted a certain Richard Wagner.[32]

In his youth, Scribe worked in a law firm but playwriting was already his true passion. In 1810, he produced his first work, *Le prétendu sans le savoir*, which was not successful, but it did not prevent him from continuing this career. By 1813, he had written his first libretto, *La chambre à coucher* for Luc Guénée. Initially, he was a writer for vaudevilles but, by 1822,

[30] Karin Pendle, "Eugene Scribe and French Opera of the Nineteenth Century", in *The Musical Quarterly*, vol. 57, no. 4 (Oct., 1971), p. 561.
[31] Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music, Volume 3: The Nineteenth Century*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005, p. 207
[32] Scribe's reputation was so great that even a young Richard Wagner in 1837 had asked the French librettist to write him a libretto for his opera, *Die hohe Braut*. In the end, Wagner himself wrote the libretto but it is interesting to note that it was one of those rare cases in which Wagner was willing to commission it to someone else. In May 1840, he tried again sending a sketch of *Der Fliegende Hollander* to Scribe but nothing came out of it. [S. Sadie (edited by), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Second edition, Volume Twenty-six: Twelve-note to Wagner tuba*, pp. 932-933.]

his works were performed at the Théâtre Français and the Opéra-Comique. His breakthrough took place in 1828, when he wrote the libretto for Auber's *La muette de Portici*. This represented the first "grand opera", a genre of which he was considered one of the inventors. The libretto for Rossini's *Comte Ory* immediately followed in the same year and confirmed the birth of this new literary star. At the time, Scribe did not only write librettos but was also an affirmed writer publishing novels in serial form for the *Revue de Paris*, the *Journal des débats*, *Le siècle* and *Le constitutionnel*.

From 1830 onwards, Scribe became the leading French librettist. At the Opéra, he collaborated with the prominent composers of his time, Auber and Meyerbeer and soon became extremely rich. He bought a country estate in Montalais and then a larger property in Séricourt where he would invite all the composers and colleagues to discuss work. Success was further confirmed by the award of the Légion d'Honneur in 1827 and the admission to the Académie Française in 1836. In his entrance speech, he declared that a writer of comedies should not be a historian but should instead portray morality and a fictional world. The reason for this is because the spectator does not want to confront reality but just wants to be entertained.

In contrast to Italian librettists, Scribe did not revise existing texts of other novelists. He preferred to convert novels and historical events into librettos adapting them. Scribe was a proficient musician and Meyerbeer once stated that his librettos were "tailor-made for the music, full of dramatic, emotional and also merry situations."[33] During his lifetime, Scribe was seen as a modern King Midas that could turn everything into gold. He was given total power during the rehearsals of premieres and celebrated composers like Adam and Meyerbeer would fear his presence because he could request the music rewriting of whole scenes. Famous were also his disputes with Meyerbeer, Gounod and even Verdi. Scribe would never follow the composers' wishes because he belonged to a type of librettist that was to become extinct already during his lifetime, one of the last Poets.

Now going back to Italy, a great debate occurred after Madame de Staël's article, *De l'esprit des traductions* (1816), in which she criticized the Italian writers as anchored to the

[33] S. Sadie (edited by), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Second edition, Volume Twenty-three: Scott to Sources, MS*, p. 13.

classics and "totally devoid of modernity, dominated as it was by obstinate nostalgics […] who cared only for the sounds of words and not the ideas they contained."[34] It was a clear reference to the Italian melodrama which she saw as the main cause for this reluctance to conform to the new cultural waves such as the Romantic one. Nevertheless, the modern melodrama lived a great period of success and the remnants of the poetic Metastasian greatness were still present in the figure of Felice Romani (1788-1865). Named by Verdi, the "incomparable Romani"[35] and also exaggeratedly the "Dante of our times"[36], Romani was born into a bourgeois family and had initially tried a university career in Genoa but to no avail. After travelling around Europe, he decided to settle in Milan in 1812 and began to establish himself as a librettist. His rising popularity in Milan was linked with his successful collaboration with Vincenzo Bellini and other composers that included Rossini, Donizetti, Meyerbeer and Verdi. Even though he was highly requested by various impresarios throughout the Italian peninsula and his earnings were remarkable, Romani chose in 1834 to accept the more stable post of chief editor for the *Gazzetta ufficiale piemontese*, a Turinese ministerial paper. As a journalist, he kept this position for 15 years until he was relieved of duty because of a political incident. From 1850 to 1855, he began a second career as a librettist but not as successful as the previous one.

Amongst his most successful librettos, we can mention the following: *Il Turco in Italia* (Rossini, 1814), *Bianca e Falliero* (Rossini, 1819), *Il pirata* (Bellini, 1827), *La straniera* (Bellini, 1829), *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* (Bellini, 1830), *Anna Bolena* (Donizetti, 1830), *La sonnambula* (Bellini, 1831), *Norma* (Bellini, 1831), *L'elisir d'amore* (Donizetti, 1832), *Beatrice di Tenda* (Bellini, 1833) and *Lucrezia Borgia* (Donizetti, 1833).

Felice Romani was also a writer who belonged to the classical school and wrote articles for journals such as *La Vespa*. He was famous for a negative review he wrote for *I Promessi Sposi* by Manzoni in 1827. He stated that:

Examining freely the new historical novel of Manzoni, I will not study about misery. Now tell me, o readers, what will be the subject of a novel that occurs during that period? What will be the deeds of the Milanese,

[34] Mona Baker (edited by), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, Routledge, London and New York, 1998, p. 480.
[35] Carlo Gatti, *Verdi*, 2 vols, Milan, 1931, vol. I, p. 135.
[36] It was written by Giovanni Battista Ermans, a favourite pupil of Liszt from Vienna, on 23 April 1846. [Emilia Branca Romani (edited by), *Felice Romani ed i più reputati maestri di musica del suo tempo*, Vincenzo Bona, Turin 1882, p. 289.]

because the novel is entitled Milanese history?... Who will be the heroes? Maybe the ambitious Governor of Milan, promoter of war which has started it in Italy? Maybe the courageous Duke of Nevers, who defends with animosity the rights of his house?... None of these characters is the hero of the novel, nor none of the mentioned events forms the subject of the story discovered and revised by Manzoni. Renzo Tramaglino and Lucia Mondello, two poor workers of the rural area of Como, are the heroes for which we should be interested in; if they will get married, or not, is the important happening that keeps our souls in suspension… So here is, o readers, all the material of this revised Milanese story: if it is something which deserves the name of story, you can judge by yourself."[37]

This negative review was an inevitable consequence of Romani's beliefs that iconic heroes should lead the plot. In regards to his own works, Romani's success was attributed, according to Franco Baggiani, to "the quality of his libretto structures (clear plots, effective placing of situations, mastery of dramatic tension) and his versification (pithy language, variety of expression, metrical rhythms conducive to musical setting)."[38] Romani also took inspiration from French literature, above all Corneille and Voltaire, but also Shakespeare and the romantic authors, Scott, Hugo and Byron. His greatest ability was to shape the librettos in conformity with the tastes of the time and offer, in general, valid finished texts for the composers to work on. Once discussing about the libretto, Romani wrote:

[The libretto] is a hasty birth, but little educated, still rough and unpolished: the composer takes charge of it and sometimes subjects it to the torture of Procrustes; he cuts it and stretches it to fit the proportions of the bed on which he has laid it: the singers surround it, and turn it this way and that, as the fancy takes them; they give it the impress of their caprices […] If only it could return to its paternal home, like the son in the parable, and cast off the melancholy spoils acquired on its travels! It does not have time; it is forcibly dragged to the theatre and appears on stage so ill-used, so distorted and deformed, that its own father blushes to have given it to the light. Believe me, believe me: the dangers run by a melodrama are such that if one were to tell them all the result would be one long Odyssey of misfortunes.[39]

The 19th century saw also the rise of the eminent operatic composer, Giuseppe Verdi. Scribe and Romani had worked with him but also promising librettists like Temistocle Solera, Salvadore Cammarano and Andrea Maffei. Nevertheless, none of them had written as many

[37] Felice Romani dal giornale *La Vespa*, 1827.
[38] S. Sadie (edited by), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Second edition, Volume Twenty-one*, p. 579.
[39] F. Lippmann, *Vincenzo Bellini und die italienische Opera Seria seiner Zeit* (Analecta Musicologica, VI) Cologne and Vienna, 1969, p. 46.

librettos for Verdi as Francesco Maria Piave (1810-1876). He was the son of a glass-maker and his initial studies were focused on a future religious career. This did not occur and, instead, Piave found employment as a proof-reader. He moved shortly to Rome, frequenting important literary circles before returning to Venice in 1838 to reassume his old post. In 1842, he wrote his first libretto, *Don Marzio*, for the composer Samuel Levi but the opera was never performed. It was through the acquaintance of the Count Mocenigo that Piave was presented to Giuseppe Verdi. This collaboration brought him enormous success. He wrote for Verdi 10 librettos: *Ernani* (1844), *I due Foscari* (1844), *Macbeth* (1847), *Il corsaro* (1848), *Stiffelio* (1850), *Rigoletto* (1851), *La traviata* (1853), *Simon Boccanegra* (1857), *Aroldo* (1857) and *La forza del destino* (1862). After meeting Verdi, his career began to take off and, from the role of librettist, he became first stage director at La Fenice of Venice and achieved a further step forward when he assumed the same commanding role at La Scala of Milan in 1859. Unfortunately, in 1867, Piave suffered a stroke, which paralyzed him and left him also bereft of speech for the rest of his life.

Piave wrote librettos for other composers which include Giovanni Pacini and Saverio Mercadante, but these were of an inferior level when compared to the higher quality manuscripts for Verdi. Once, talking about Piave, Pacini wrote in his memoirs: "He said he had never written a quatrain in his life, and understood nothing of the art of writing a libretto."[40] Piave was certainly a very malleable librettist that would follow all of Verdi's wishes. He was defined as "the most docile and amenable of men."[41] Initially, Verdi and Piave were to collaborate on a two act-opera called *Cromvello* but this was immediately trashed in favour of Hugo's *Ernani*. At the time, Verdi was paid 12.000 Austrian lire while Piave 600. This already can give us an idea of the balance of power between the two. Verdi appreciated Piave's willingness to obey his commands. Nonetheless, he didn't trust at all Piave's writing skills. In this letter written by the composer in regards to some verses written for *Macbeth*, Verdi states, "I have received the cavatina, which is an improvement on the Introduction. Nevertheless how long-winded you are!!"[42] When talking about the section dedicated to the first verses of the witches, Verdi is peremptory and not accommodating in the least with the librettist: "In short, you will have to experiment and find how best to write bizarre poetry, at

[40] Alfredo Soffredini, *Le opera di Verdi*, Carlo Aliprandi, Milan 1901, p. 23.
[41] David R. B. Kimbell, *Verdi in the Age of Italian Romanticism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 128.
[42] Letter 22 September 1846 [Franco Abbiati, *Giuseppe Verdi*, 4 vols, vol. I, Ricordi, Milan 1959, pp. 644-645]

least in the first verse. The last short verse could work well with just one quatrain. (ALWAYS REMEMBER TO USE FEW WORDS… FEW WORDS… VERY FEW, BUT THEY MUST MEAN SOMETHING.)"[43] The tone at the end of the letter doesn't get better: "Before going any further please correct these two pieces for me, and do it so that I don't have to think it has been thrown off in a hurry to get finished, which is the impression I get so far… So get to work on correcting and completing these pieces before going any further, so that I can start composing… A CONCISE STYLE… FEW WORDS… Do you understand?"[44]

Despite many misunderstandings, Verdi in the end praised Piave's work. Maybe, a reason could have been the fact that Verdi himself dictated what he needed such as the phrases he wanted versified, the use of essential wordings and a person to convey into words what he wanted to express. All this was Piave who followed all the commands of the great composer like a squire with his master. "With Piave it was a matter of hit and miss, largely dependent upon the literary source chosen."[45] But all this didn't matter anymore because, by now, the librettist was a serf of the lord composer. He had lost his halo.

d) Literary Wagnerism

Music cannot think: but she can materialise thoughts, i.e. she can give forth their emotional substance as no longer merely recollected, but made present. This she can do, however, only when her own manifestment is conditioned by a Poetic aim; and when this latter, again, has been clearly set forth in the first place by the organ of the Understanding, namely Word-speech.[46]

It would be futile to discuss about Richard Wagner's life here. To put it shortly, it could be described as a life of hardships because Wagner was forced to flee from various countries due to his continuous indebtedness. It was also undoubtedly full of women, some benefactors while other mistresses, all the situation spiced up by the presence of two wives. At the same time, it was inevitably tied to Germany's political struggle for independence where Wagner was one of the greatest supporters of the populace. To sum up, Wagner wanted to express the new German spirit in a new genre that would depict his artistic ideals.

[43] Ibidem
[44] Ibidem
[45] David R. B. Kimbell, *op. cit.*, p. 230.
[46] C. F. Glasenapp, *Life of Richard Wagner* [Das Leben Richard Wagner's], Authorised English Version by WM. Ashton Ellis, Vol. III, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., London 1903, p. 134.

Initially in his juvenilia and romantic operas, which go from *Die Feen* (1834) to *Lohengrin* (1848), Wagner followed the footsteps of the German Romanticists, Ludwig van Beethoven and, above all, Carl Maria von Weber, whose opera, *Der Freischütz* (1821), became the touchstone of German romantic opera. In comparison to Italian opera, the German melodrama expressed a greater musical fluidity expressed by means of a music that in its vividness and fullness resembled more a symphonic work.

After *Lohengrin*, Wagner began to write various essays in which he formulated his famous aesthetic ideals. In his essay, *Der Künstler und die Öffentlichkeit* (1841), Wagner described the unsustainable squalor which a true artist has to face when his work of pure beauty is debased by the corrupted contemporary values of music. In another, *Die Kunst und die Revolution* (1849), Wagner denounced the loss of the artistic halo since the ancient Greek era. To regain its original status, opera had to lose its capitalist connotation so that it could express freely again the human spirit. Wagner reinforced this idea in the essays, *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (1849) and *Oper und Drama* (1850-51). His revival of the Greek model was to be achieved by means of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* [total artwork], a term that would become synonym of Wagnerian opera. Through this term, Wagner enunciated his idea of a complete fusion of the three main operatic sectors, the *Wort-Ton-Drama* [Word-Music-Drama], a convergence of three otherwise natural parallel lines. Wagner conceived this possibility by undertaking both the role of composer and librettist. As Glasenapp recounts in the *Life of Richard Wagner*: "Owing to his inadequate means of Expression, the poet was obliged to split his Content into an emotional and an intellectual one, and thus to leave the kindled Feeling in a state of restless discontent."[47] In this union, the composer could regain possession of the lost value of the undermined word and, at the same time, give that concreteness to that indefinite animal that is music. The further choice of heroic themes was to elevate the work to a new level which final goal was to achieve operatic immortality. The drama was to lose its commercial skin and look now for a place in history. Glasenapp states:

The poet therefore has to shew us his characters at first in predicaments having a recognisable likeness with those in which we have, or at least might have, found ourselves. Only from such a basis can he mount step by

[47] Ivi, p. 137.

step to the construction of situations whose force and wondrousness shall remove us from the life of everyday and shew us Man in the highest fullness of his power.[48]

From a structural point of view, the German Romanticist ideals were enhanced through the continuous flux achieved by the Wagnerian revolution. According to Wagner, the music should adhere perfectly with the words and the plot by means of the constant presence of many musical motives and musical reminiscences known as *leitmotifs* (leading motifs), the latter symbolizing a character, a given moment or a specific feeling. This is also commented by Glasenapp:

[…] we have merely to extend this definition [of the "Leitmotiv"] so as to cover not only gesture and emotion, but at times a concrete object such as the Sword, the Spear, the Ring, the Tarnhelm, and so forth – or rather, the forces those objects symbolise – and we have the whole mature Wagnerian scheme. And it works backwards, too: the *poet* thus is enabled immensely to simplify his sentences, for the musical accompaniment can now supply a commentary that weaves itself around the text without retarding it an instant.[49]

Consequently, the music will arise from a new kind of verse, the *Stabreim*, the German alliterative form that with its qualities will favour a complete merge with the music. The almost symphonic music, inspired by Wagner's predilection for Beethoven, entailed a great orchestra, another of Wagner's crucial dictates. The new aesthetic values announced by Wagner were to be visible in his tetralogy, *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (1848-1874). Nonetheless, in an essay of 1851, *Eine Mitteilung an meine Freunde*, Wagner tried to make his romantic operas, *Der fliegende Holländer* (1843), *Tannhäuser* (1845) and *Lohengrin* (1850), fit to the new aesthetic rules set out by the German composer, possibly explaining it as a work of the unconscious.

Before ending this section, it is also interesting to examine carefully the economic situation of a composer/librettist of worth like Wagner. As stated previously, he suffered various states of penury during his lifetime. At his best, the German factotum received "562,914 marks, a sum equivalent to less than one-seventh of the yearly Civil List (4.2 million marks)"[50] during his 19 years of service with Ludwig II. It was not a great sum and, maybe,

[48] Ivi, p. 136.
[49] Ivi, pp. 134-135.
[50] S. Sadie (edited by), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Second edition, Volume Twenty-six*, p. 937.

the idea of at least achieving immortality could give some value to an, otherwise, unrewarding job.

e) A new Poet

Richard Wagner's musikdramas have affected strongly the operatic world. His idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* had influenced various composers throughout the continent, including Jules Massenet, Claude Debussy and Richard Strauss. In Italy, the rising Verismo composers were similarly affected. Of this school of thought, we can enumerate Arrigo Boito (1842-1918) and Ruggero Leoncavallo (1857-1919). Like Wagner, both of them were composers and librettists of their own operas and, therefore, artists that could fully produce all the poetic and musical demands without need of compromises.

Arrigo Boito was the son of a painter and a Polish countess. He grew up in Venice and began his music studies in the Milan Conservatory in 1853. He wrote a joint cantata with a colleague and future best friend, Franco Faccio, in 1860, *Il quattro giugno*, in which half of the music was composed by Boito and also the entire text was written by him. His teacher at the conservatory was Alberto Mazzuccato, a composer and renowned conductor at La Scala of Milan who helped him achieve grants to study overseas. In Paris, in 1862, Boito met Rossini and Verdi with whom he collaborated writing the text of his cantata, *Inno delle nazioni*. In regards to his encounter with Boito, Verdi wrote:

> Last year in Paris I saw Boito and Faccio often and they are surely two young men of great intelligence, but I can say nothing about their musical talent, because I have heard nothing of Boito's, and of Faccio's music […] These two young men are accused of being very warm admirers of Wagner. Nothing wrong there, provided that admiration does not degenerate into imitation. Wagner exists and it is useless to reinvent him. Wagner is not a wild animal as the purists claim, nor is he a prophet as his apostles claim. He is a man of great intelligence who enjoys taking difficult paths, because he is unable to find the easy and more direct ones.[51]

Like Wagner, Boito wanted to revolutionize opera. On 11 November 1863, he improvised a "sapphic"[52] ode, "All'arte italiana" ["To Italian art"] during a gathering of the

[51] Marcello Conati and Mario Medici (edited by), *The Verdi-Boito Correspondence*, English-language edition prepared by William Weaver, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1994.
[52] Ivi, p. xix.

scapigliati, an Italian movement that favoured a bohemian life, in which he said: "Perhaps the man is already born, modest and pure, who will set art erect once more on that altar, befouled like a brothel wall."[53] This derisive and sardonic attack on the great Italian masters was interpreted by Verdi as a direct offensive against him. Almost certainly, Boito was deferential towards Verdi and consequently had no intention of attacking the great composer but Verdi, instead, would not forget Boito's words for decades.

During the Scapigliatura period, William Ashbrook described Boito's poems in the following way: "Here in abundance are his ironical wit, his passion for exotic words and clever rhymes and, particularly in his poem *Dualismo*, the underlying ideas that he would later elaborate."[54] Boito believed that these *scapigliati* ideals would form the art of the future and, consequently, he strongly advocated them publicly and in his newspaper articles where they were overly present.

In the meantime, Boito was meditating on two operatic subjects, Faust and Nero. After a period as a volunteer in Garibaldi's army in 1866, he tackled again the idea of composing an opera on Faust. Despite his mentor, Mazzucato, had suggested some cuts to make on the opera, Boito ignored his advice and rehearsed the opera following his own diktats. On 5 March 1868, Boito's *Mefistofele* premiered at La Scala of Milan. It was the first opera at La Scala in which the composer and the librettist were both the same person. The performance was a total fiasco. This undermined seriously Boito's beliefs in his own qualities. From then on, he used frequently the pseudonym 'Tobia Gorrio.' Amongst the librettos he wrote during this period, the most famous is without any doubt Ponchielli's *La Gioconda* (1876). He continued writing articles on opera and translating foreign operas like Glinka's *Ruslan and Lyudmilla* and Weber's *Der Freischütz*.

Meanwhile, in 1879, Giulio Ricordi organized a rapprochement between Verdi and Boito after the "sapphic" ode incident. The peace pipe was represented by a draft of a possible libretto of Othello. Verdi was positively impressed by the quality of the text but wanted to see the librettist in action in the revision of one of his own librettos. There was a revival at La Scala of Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra* in 1881 and Verdi was not so satisfied about Piave's

[53] *Forse già nacque chi sovra l'altare / Rizzerà l'arte, verecondo e puro, / Su quell'altar bruttato come un muro / Di lupanare."* [Ivi, p. xix.]
[54] S. Sadie (edited by), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Second edition, Volume Three: Baxter to Borosini*, p. 811.

libretto. Thus, it was given to Boito the task to collaborate with Verdi and improve Piave's work. The successful outcome persuaded finally Verdi to collaborate with Boito. Shortly, after this entente, Boito achieved also musical triumph thanks to his completely renovated *Mefistofele* that received a positive reception at La Scala in the same year.

Boito's collaboration with Verdi was not a very easy one due to Verdi's meticulousness in his own work which tried the librettist's patience as we have seen previously talking about Piave. The success of the premiere of *Otello*, on 5 February 1887, strengthened a relationship that now could be defined as friendship. In 1893, the duo worked on another opera, *Falstaff*, that resulted in another great hit. Boito immediately worked on a libretto for Verdi on Shakespeare's King Lear but soon the composer renounced due to his advancing old age. Within society, Boito was also a friend of illustrious personages like the great actress, Eleonora Duse, who used to call him "il santo." After the death of Verdi, Boito resumed his work on the *Nerone*. By 1901, the five-act libretto was published but the score, instead, was left unfinished due to Boito's fear of a fiasco. It was completed by Antonio Smareglia and Vincenzo Tommasini and performed after his death on 1 May 1924 at La Scala.

Boito suffered strongly in his lifetime due to the persistent dualism between his literary and musical side which were present first in the *Mefistofele* and then in *Nerone*. It was hard for him to consecrate his time to both equally. In his librettos, Boito showed a great capacity to capture the essence of the plays, such as the Shakespearean ones, and place them in a coherent plot. Probably, due to Verdi's intromission, it was certainly more visible in Falstaff rather than Otello, where, in the latter, deficiencies in the plot are plainly visible. In Falstaff, instead, as William Ashbrook says: "His fondness for word-play, his knack for hitting upon an epigrammatic phrase and his mordant irony all found full scope."[55] All of his work was also accompanied by a great research shown by the use of an original vocabulary and a mastery in the poetic language. The emphasis on the fight between good and evil was another characteristic of his works. On this point, the most interesting text to evaluate is undoubtedly *Mefistofele*. Being both librettist and composer, Boito was now in complete control. The outcome was first a literary libretto in 1868, followed by a revised one in 1875 "full of verbal felicities"[56] and with great metric variety. When Giulio Ricordi reviewed the premiere of

[55] Ivi, p. 813.
[56] Ibidem.

Mefistotele, he foresaw that Boito would "be a poet, a distinguished man of letters, but never a composer of works for the theater."[57] The 1901 libretto of *Nerone* was extremely well-built with intriguing situations and reversals but the music score would never be completed. As Ricordi had prophesized, most probably Boito, musically, could not reach his own literary grandeur.

Unlike Boito, Ruggero Leoncavallo was better known for his status as a verismo composer rather than his role as a librettist. His prologue of *I Pagliacci* (1892) is considered by many as the manifesto of Verismo:

> The author has tried to paint
> a picture of real life. He believes first that the
> artist is a man, and that he must write for
> men. And that truth has inspired him![58]

I Pagliacci is one of the most famous and widely performed operas of nowadays. Its composer, Leoncavallo, belonged to a wealthy family, his father being a magistrate while his mother a painter. He began his music studies at the school Pia di Grammatica in Montalto Uffugo before moving to the Conservatory of Naples where he graduated at the age of sixteen. There, he studied piano, composition and later, in 1876, he followed courses held by the renowned poet, Giosuè Carducci, a Wagnerian enthusiast, at the Bologna University. At the time, he was concerned with the diatribe that had started between Italian traditional opera and Wagner's *Wort-Ton-Drama*. Leoncavallo chose the latter for his first opera, *Chatterton* (1876). In his first work, Leoncavallo wrote both the music and the lyrics, a process which he would undertake in all his future major operas. The opera was not performed until 1896, due to economic problems, and the premiere did not meet a sympathetic response from the public. After another unsuccessful experience as a music master in Egypt, he went to Paris where he performed as a pianist in cafés for six years living a bohemian life. He met great authors like Emile Zola, Victor Hugo and Alexandre Dumas fils. In this period, he became friends with the great baritone, Victor Maurel, who helped him gain a commission from the publisher Giulio Ricordi in 1889, the unfinished *Crepusculum*. This was supposed to be a trilogy in

[57] Gazzetta musicale di Milano, 15 March 1868.
[58] Burton D. Fisher (edited), *I Pagliacci: translated from Italian and including music highlight transcriptions*, Opera Journeys Publishing, Coral Gables 2002, p. 5.

imitation to Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. Leoncavallo only completed the first work, *I Medici* (1893). In this work, Leoncavallo had read carefully the historical texts of Poliziano, Lorenzo de' Medici and Giosuè Carducci. His intention was to imitate Wagner by glorifying the heroes of the Italian past.[59] Meanwhile, attracted by the success of Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* (1890), he immediately composed *I Pagliacci* (1892), inspired by an account of a real event that happened during his childhood. Leoncavallo proposed the opera to Ricordi with no avail and so turned to his rival Sonzogno who published it. Furthermore, Ricordi had no intention to represent *I Medici* and so, when he saw the publisher favouring instead the production of Puccini's *Edgar*, Leoncavallo got his previous contract cancelled.

Ironically, in that same year, Leoncavallo had worked on Giacomo Puccini's libretto of *Manon Lescaut* (1893). It could be possible that Giulio Ricordi saw in this collaboration, a parallel to Giuseppe Verdi and Arrigo Boito due to Leoncavallo's greater cultural and literary preparation compared to Puccini.[60] A further cause of problems was the setting in music of Henri Murger's *La bohème*. Leoncavallo stated that he was the first one to have thought about the subject but Puccini was the first to finish composing it. Leoncavallo's representation of his opera took place one year after Puccini's work in 1897 and turned out a fiasco. He composed ad wrote other operas like *Zazà* (1900) and *I Zingari* (1912) but he could not repeat the same success of *I Pagliacci*. In 1904 the opera *Der Roland von Berlin* was performed at the Opernhaus of Berlin, commissioned by Kaiser Willem II in 1894 to celebrate the glory of the Hoenzollern but it immediately disappeared from the limelight. From 1906 to 1919, Leoncavallo consecrated his time to the composition of 9 operettas. In this case, the librettos were written by other poets, Angelo Nessi and Gioacchino Forzano. As a librettist, he wrote librettos for other composers such as *Mario Wetter* (1898) for Augusto de Oliveira Machado and *Redenzione* (1920, a posthumous work) for Giovanni Pennacchio.

Regarding his librettos for his own operas, Leoncavallo would first write the text before composing the music. Generally, he would produce the best work for himself and would "decorate" or "fill" the libretto with music.[61] In his masterpiece, *I pagliacci*, Leoncavallo had achieved a certain balance between music and text. The same cannot be said

[59] Sabrina Landi-Malavolti, *Ruggero Leoncavallo – vita, opere, aneddoti e curiosità*, Ibiskos Editrice Risolo, Empoli 2008, p. 15.
[60] Mauro Lubrani and Giuseppe Tavanti, *Ruggero Leoncavallo – I successi, i sogni, le delusioni*, Edizioni Polistampa, Florence 2007, p. 18.
[61] M. Lubrani & G. Tavanti, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

of *La bohème*. Pietro Mascagni wrote: "when I read the libretto, I had a completely different impression from what I felt when listening to the opera; at first glance it seemed that the librettist and the musician were two terrible foes, as a result of the music being so badly placed on the verses."[62] Instead, while reviewing *Zazà*, Jarro (nickname for Niccolò Piccinni, correspondent of *La Nazione*) defined Leoncavallo as "a musician and a man of letters with a unique power"[63] and this was true in all cases. In a certain sense, the librettist had by now purified himself from the commercial germs and broken the chains that had restrained him. The 20th century was to bring the reaffirmation of the Poet.

[62] Pietro Mascagni (pseud. L'Infognato), *La Bohème del M° Leoncavallo alla Fenice di Venezia*, in *La Cronaca Musicale*, Pesaro, Maggio 1897, Anno II, n. 5 [S. Landi-Malavolti, *Ruggero Leoncavallo*, p. 87.]

[63] Jarro, *L'opera "Zazà" al Teatro Verdi – Emma Carelli – Il M° Leoncavallo*, in "La Nazione", May 6, 1906. [Ivi, p. 39]

2. Opera in English: From Dryden to Gilbert

As the British government consists of three estates: King, Lords, and Commons, so an opera in its first institution consisted of Poetry, Music and Machinery; but as politicians have observed, that the balance of power is frequently disturbed by some one of the three estates encroaching upon the other two, so one of these three constituent parts of a musical drama generally preponderates, at the expence of the other two. In the first operas POETRY seems to have been the most important personage; but about the middle of the last century, MACHINERY and DECORATION seemed to take the lead, and diminished the importance both of Music and Poetry. But as the art of singing and dramatic composition improved, MUSIC took the lead.[64]

Despite the general uproar that opera brought in the European courts, in England it did not take off and it took nearly a century for an opera in English to be composed. Initially, there was the jig, a popular entertainment during the Elizabethan and Jacobean age. It was a ballad with dancing accompanied by a tabor and a pipe, which generally dealt with slanderous topics and was a sort of precursor inevitably to the ballad opera.

By the 17th century, it was not opera but the masque that prevailed in the British court. The masque was an entertainment of Italian origins, introduced by the Stuart monarchy. It had "survived and flourished as an English form of the French *ballet de cour*."[65] In the masque, nobles would dance and perform for the court with magnificent stage settings and the presence of special machinery. The principal characters would speak while the songs would be performed by other secondary characters or non-participants to the works. In these musical plays, there would be no unity, no coherent link from a scene to another. The most renowned artists of this genre at the time were the writer Ben Jonson and the architect Inigo Jones. If in the masque, the artistry of the writer prevailed on the composer, this did not occur with the architect who had the true role of prominence thanks to his work on the sceneries. The special effects deriving from these were the main attractions for the audience.

The performance of Court masques ended with the establishment of the Commonwealth under Oliver Cromwell. Even though masques and plays were officially banned, the works accompanied by music were strangely tolerated. So, in order to avoid the ban and continue his writing career, Sir William Davenant (1606-1668) was obliged to use

[64] Charles Burney, *A General History of Music, From the Earliest Ages to the Present…*, Vol. IV, Payne and Son, London 1789, p. 517.
[65] J. A. Westrup, "Stages in the History of Opera: II. Early English Opera", in *The Musical Times*, vol. 70, no. 1039 (Sep. 1, 1929), p. 797.

this subterfuge to promote his works. This is how *The Siege of Rhodes* (1656) came into existence. This work was considered by many as the first English opera[66] even though its music has not resisted the ravages of time. Furthermore, it was divided into entries and not acts so as to avoid Puritan censure. The true innovation was the movable scenery that was introduced on stage for the first time in England. The latter was to become an important operatic requirement. In 1661, after the end of the Commonwealth, it was performed exclusively as a spoken text, showing that this was a momentary solution that Davenant had undertaken to keep his career alive.

In this period, besides these subterfuges, masques had not effectively disappeared. Private ones like Matthew Locke's *Cupid and Death* (1653) were performed but, obviously, these private masques were only a cheap imitation of the originals with low costs and amateur performers.

With the return of monarchy in Britain, the Elizabethan plays and the Jacobean masques were revived. The Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, opened on the 7th May 1663 while the Theatre at Dorset Garden (first Duke's Theatre and later Queen's Theatre) opened on the 9th November 9 1671. These were initially the two opera houses in which English operas were performed. The main difference from the previous monarchy was that the great works of the past like Shakespeare's *Macbeth* were now set to music. This was the new fancy of the time. The symbol of this new fashion was Henry Purcell's *The Fairy Queen* (1692) which was a re-elaborated masque of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*. It was also defined as a semi-opera.[67] The declamatory style was a main characteristic of the English opera. This influenced negatively the creative process and constituted an unsatisfactory course in the production of the songs. In fact, "so obsessed were composers with the problem of setting words to music that they seem deliberately to have forsaken the path of simplicity for the elaborate complications of the rhetorical style."[68]

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[66] "That Sir William Davenant's *Siege of Rhodes* was the first Opera we ever had in England, no Man can deny; and is indeed a perfect Opera: there being this difference only between an Opera and a Tragedy; that the one is a Story sung with proper Action, the other spoken." [Unknown author (maybe Thomas Betterton), Preface of Henry Purcell's *The Fairy-Queen*, Jacob Tonson, London 1693, p. 1.]

[67] "English opera is not all-sung opera like the Italian one but contains English dialogue and can be defined as a semi-opera." [Robert D. Hume, "The Politics of Opera in Late Seventeenth-Century London", in *Cambridge Opera Journal*, vol. 10, No. 1 (Mar., 1998), p. 19.]

[68] J. A. Westrup, *op. cit.*, p. 798.

The Restoration also brought a change in musical tastes. King Charles II had sojourned in France during his exile and had enjoyed the Italian and French operas, which were extremely popular at the French court of that period. Consequently, he encouraged the performance of French opera and invited some French composers. One of them was Louis Grabu (1665-1694), a Catalan composer trained in the French school, who became Master of King's Musick in 1666. After composing operas in French, he set to music an opera in English, *Albion and Albanius* that is considered the first opera in English. In the following paragraph, this opera will be analysed.

a) **A court masque or "opera" during the Restoration**

Albion and Albanius (Louis Grabu, 1685). Librettist: John Dryden.

The first full opera that was made and prepared for the stage, was the Albanio of Mr. Grabue, in English, but of a French Genius. It is printed in full score, but proved the ruin of the poor man, for the King's death supplanted all his hopes, and so it dyed.[69]

The critic Roger North bestowed upon Louis Grabu's *Albion and Albanius* (1685) the primate of first English opera even though, as he himself says, this work was apparently misunderstood. Considered by critics as a mere copy of Lully's works, the critic Bryan White, instead, peruses carefully the work of Grabu, noticing an enhancement and innovation to its original model, Lully's *Phaëton* (1683), but with a greater attention to the various musical moments in the play.[70] Moreover, White believed that the opera was victim of unjust criticism due to a visible "anti-French bias."[71] The fact that Grabu belonged to the French school and did not know well the English language has prompted English purists to define the opera as practically "negligible."[72] Furthermore, the fact that Grabu's inappropriate music did not obey to the English rules of prosody, gave the effect of a mutilated language that ruined the libretto. A more recent musicologist, Edward Dent, defined it as a "monument to stupidity [that] is worth considering for a moment as an example of the way in which attempts have been made

[69] Roger North, *Roger North on Music: being a selection from his essays written during the years c. 1695-1728*, Novello, London 1959, p. 31.
[70] Bryan White, "Grabu's "Albion and Albanius" and the Operas of Lully: ''… Acquainted with All the Performances of the French Opera's'", in Early Music, vol. 30, No. 3 (Aug., 2002), pp. 410-427.
[71] Ivi, p. 411.
[72] J. A. Westrup, op. cit., p. 798.

[…] to achieve English opera at one blow."[73] For the English world, the opera was basically an imitation of a French opera written by a French composer with French scenery and machines. The only interest deriving from the work was the fact that the libretto was in English and, last but not least, it involved one of the greatest writers of the time, John Dryden.

Undoubtedly, John Dryden (1631-1700) was one of the greatest English poets and dramatists of his time. He achieved immediately fame in London and worked in pseudo-operas at the time as shown by his many plays that were accompanied by music. Dryden became Poet Laureate in 1668 and, in 1677, attempted to write a libretto, *The State of Innocence*, which was inspired by Milton's *Paradise Lost* but the work was never set to music. This first attempt was followed by the work on a semi-opera, *King Arthur*. This had an allegorical prologue which text was then expanded to a greater work, *Albion and Albanius* (1684), after the request of the theatre manager, Thomas Betterton and Grabu himself. The opera proved to be a complete fiasco but nonetheless Dryden left an important mark, that is the first definition of an opera. In the preface to his libretto, he wrote:

IF Wit has truly been defin'd a propriety of Thoughts and Words, then that Definition will extend to all sorts of Poetry; and amongst the rest, to this present entertainment of an *Opera*. Propriety of thought is that Fancy which arises naturally from the Subject, or which the Poet adapts to it. Propriety of Words, is the cloathing of those thoughts with such Expressions, as are naturally proper to them: and from both these, if they are judiciously perform'd, the delight of Poetry results. An *Opera* is a poetical Tale or Fiction, represented by Vocal and Instrumental Musick, adorn'd with Scenes, Machines and Dancing.[74]

Dryden was not only the first writer in England to give a definition of opera but also explained its conventions. According to Dryden, "the Subject therefore being extended beyond the Limits of Humane Nature, admits of that sort of marvellous and surprizing conduct, which is rejected in other Plays. Humane Impossibilities, are to be receiv'd, as they are in Faith."[75] Moreover, he also gave his view of the typical structure of an opera:

[73] Edward J. Dent, *Foundations of English Opera: A Study of Musical Drama in England during the Seventeenth Century*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1928, p. 165.
[74] John Dryden, *The Works of John Dryden: Volume XV*, edited by Earl Miner and George R. Guffey, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London 1976, p. 3.
[75] Ibidem.

That the Expressions should be lofty, figurative and majestical: but the nature of an *Opera* denies the frequent use of those poetical Ornaments: for Vocal Musick, though it often admits a loftiness of sound: yet always exacts an harmonious sweetness; or to distinguish yet more justly, The recitative part of the *Opera* requires a more masculine Beauty of expression and sound: the other, which (for want of a proper English Word) I must call The Songish Part, must abound in the softness and variety of Numbers: its principal Intention, being to please the Hearing, rather than to gratify the understanding. It appears indeed Preposterous at first sight, That Rhyme, on any consideration shou'd take place of Reason.[76]

Lastly, Dryden explained the rules that had to be followed which were that of the inventors of this genre, the Italians.[77] Even though the opera resulted a fiasco, it has been plucked from obscurity in the last 25 years most probably because of Roger North's assertion. Anyway, the failure of *Albion and Albanius* did not demoralise Dryden who later worked with Henry Purcell on the semi-operas, *Dioclesian* (1690), and *Amphitryon* (1690). In regards to this collaboration with Purcell, Dryden wrote:

But the numbers of poetry and vocal music are sometimes so contrary, that, in many places, I have been obliged to cramp my verses, and make them rugged to the reader, that they may be harmonious to the hearer; of which I have no reason to repent me, because these sorts of entertainments are principally designed for the ear and eye; and therefore, in reason, my art, on this occasion, ought to be subservient to his.[78]

When examining Dryden's work on *Albion and Albanius*, Bryan White showed, in the Chacon[79], "Dryden's division of the text into three verses of different length is replicated in the musical setting, providing variety in the length of the vocal passages."[80] Therefore, Dryden knew how to merge the text well with the music. According to the critic Margaret Laurie, Dryden's "concern for direct language, varied rhythms and the actual sound of words, together with his recognition of the need to differentiate between recitative and song shows a real understanding of the needs of music."[81]

Despite the clear definition of opera derived from Dryden's "manifesto", the genre seemed to include more compositions than were to be expected. In the 17th century England, opera

[76] Ivi, pp. 3-4.
[77] Ivi, p. 4.
[78] S. Sadie (edited by), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Second edition, Volume Seven*, p. 620.
[79] A chaconne (or chacon) is a musical composition in moderate triple time typically consisting of variations on a repeated succession of chords. [https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/chaconne, last seen: 13/6/2019]
[80] Bryan White, *op. cit.*, p. 422.
[81] Stanley Sadie (edited by), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Second edition, Volume Seven*, p. 620.

was also defined as "little more than a dramatic work of any genre in whose performance music and scenery figure prominently."[82] English opera was undoubtedly seen as a literary form where music was a beautiful detail in the background. The libretto played the dominant role in which politics could easily be inserted.[83] In short, the composer had no true power to mould the work following his tastes, but was subject to the librettist's will with the exception of Purcell. Often the notion of opera was used improperly as some designations of English operas show.[84] Overall, it had a loose definition falling into different categories like the simple operas, new operas, dramatick operas, pastoral operas, comick operas, etc., but these were not all necessarily operas but, at times, simply masques, comedies, tragedies and pastorals. The improper use probably was done to recall the Italian genre but, in truth, probably none of the writers had an idea of what opera really was.[85] They seemed to believe that "virtually any comedy or tragedy might be 'Made into Opera' by the addition of enough music and spectacle."[86] During the reign of Charles II, the scenery played a leading role in the operatic performances. More than the music or the text, the audience would remember the scenic displays that made opera unique. Consequently, it was obvious that this phenomenon could only take place during the Restoration where the wealth of the court could cover the heavy costs.

Not surprisingly, according to the English musicologist J. A. Westrup, opera was an "abortive" experiment in Britain where the music did not achieve a worthy support from the librettists. He defined as inept and stupid those who considered Grabu's *Albion and Albanius* as an opera. It did have music and a text but, according to Westrop, this work belonged to those so-called British "operas" where music was simply a "willing handmaid to scenic art."[87] In short, it seemed to him more the residue of a court masque rather than an opera. In the end, Westrup considered only two surviving operas as products of the Renaissance: John Blow's *Venus and Adonis* (c. 1683) and Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* (c. 1689). From his point of view, these works were not mere transpositions of operas from another language and culture but English works that followed the English linguistic structure.[88]

[82] Robert D. Hume, *op. cit.*, p. 16.
[83] Ibidem.
[84] Ivi, p. 17.
[85] Ivi, pp. 16-18.
[86] Ivi, pp. 18.
[87] J. A. Westrup, *op. cit.*, p. 797.
[88] Ibidem.

So, from Welstrup's opinion, Blow's *Venus and Adonis* could be considered the first opera in English. This view can logically be debated because some have seen it as a court masque or a semi-opera. Anyway, we could focus on this work but, in the end, there is no real need to do so. It is not the official operatic primacy that interests us but a chronology of the literary works in opera by means of the libretto and its author, the librettist. The libretto of Blow's opera seems to have been written by either Aphra Behn or Anne Kingsmill and this could be interesting from a feminist point of view but, for our research, Dryden is undoubtedly more appealing because of the nature of his work that was to understand and define this new genre. Furthermore, Dryden represented the literary superiority which his field supposedly had in opera over the music. Like in poetry, Dryden followed the rules of metrics but this time the musical ones. He did not renounce to his role as seer of this new genre, as a true precursor of a new literary experience. So, for these reasons, I have opted for *Albion and Albanius* and will skip Blow's work. Moving on, it will be the turn of what experts define as the first true opera in English due to its persistent presence, to this day, in the operatic repertory. Logically, I'm referring to Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*.

b) **"When I am laid in earth": The English lament**

Dido and Aeneas (Henry Purcell, 1688). Librettist: Nahum Tate.

> While the Frenchman is loud in the praises of a Lulli and a Rameau; the German in that of a Handel and a Bach; and the Italian of a Palestrina and a Pergolesi; not less is the pride of an Englishman in pointing to a name equally dear to his country; for PURCELL is as much the boast of England in music as Shakespeare in the drama, Milton in epic poetry, Locke in metaphysics, or Sir Isaac Newton in mathematics and philosophy. As a musician he shone not more by the greatness than the diversity, by the diversity than the originality of his genius; nor did the powers of his fancy prove detrimental to the solidity of his judgement.[89]

Eric W. White defined *Dido and Aeneas* as "the first true English opera."[90] It was the first time that the composer gained more fame than the playwright in this type of collaboration. Legends say that Purcell wrote his masterpiece at the age of nineteen but most probably he started working on it when he was twenty-two. The opera was written for a

[89] Charles Burney in an article on the *Harmonicon* on July, 1823. [William H. Cummings (edited by), *The Works of Henry Purcell, Volume III: Dido and Aeneas*, Novello, Ewer and Co., London 1889.]
[90] Eric W. White, *The Rise of English Opera*, John Lehmann, London 1951, p. 41.

performance by girls at the School for Young Gentlewomen at Chelsea, London. Only by 1700, the first professional performance took place. It was later incorporated with Charles Gildon's adaptation of *Measure for Measure* and renamed "The Loves of Dido and Aeneas, a Mark, in Four Musical Entertainments."

If previously, writers like Davenant and Dryden prevailed in the operatic collaboration, in this case Purcell's genius excelled over the libretto. The musician had surpassed the playwright in skill and the latter was given a taste of the future. Now, examining the libretto of *Dido and Aeneas*, it should be noted that the work appeared in an undated pamphlet of which only a single copy seemed to have survived. The libretto was written by Nahum Tate (1652-1715), practically a subordinate to Purcell.

Tate was an Irish poet who worked mostly on adaptations from Shakespeare and other great Elizabethan playwrights. He wrote his first play in 1678, *Brutus of Alba*. Due to its many similarities in the plot, this play is seen as a glimpse of his future libretto for *Dido and Aeneas*. Of the opera, we only know the first date of representation, that is 1689. However, there is no other official dating of when the opera was composed. In the original libretto, there is a sung prologue, which probably shows the committed side of the writer even though his political orientation is not so clear due to the lack of an official date of composition. Between the possible dates of *Dido and Aeneas*, from 1684 to 1689, there had been enormous changes. Britain had seen the end of the Restoration and the successful outcome of the Glorious Revolution. Even putting aside the historical context, Tate's work did not seem at all near to equal that of Purcell. The plot of the opera is not cohesive and results quite repetitive but, nonetheless, Margaret Laurie found that the "trochaic tetrameter, softened by artful repetitions and enjambments, proved ideal for Purcell's plastic melodies and highly expressive recitatives."[91] She added that another weak point lay in the undermined figure of Aeneas, even though this fact helps to put the limelight on Dido's personal drama.

Tate was also a Poet Laureate from 1692. He is best known for some of his versions of the psalms, with his metrical translations that were extremely popular in churches and had survived for centuries. However, he was not at all appreciated in the literary circles. While listing a number of barren poets, Alexander Pope wrote: "And own'd that nine such Poets

[91] S. Sadie (edited by), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Second edition, Volume Twenty-five: Taiwan to Twelve Apostles*, p. 120.

made a Tate."[92] Sir Walter Scott called Tate "one of those second-rate bards, who, by dint of pleonasm and expletive, can find smooth lines if any one will supply them with ideas."[93] Lastly, the term "tatefication" was coined during the Victorian era and it referred to "the debasement of great literary works."[94] Even the more modern critic, Westrup wrote: "Purcell had to struggle with the pitiful doggerel of Nahum Tate. That 'Dido and Aeneas' is a masterpiece in spite of its libretto is in itself an eloquent testimony to Purcell's genius."[95]

Amongst the few who praised him, there was the English historian, A. W. Ward, who defined him as "a painstaking and talented writer."[96] Also the critic Christopher Spencer sustained that "although Tate's work lacks the larger vision and energy of Dryden's, it has such other virtues as variety, adaptability, ingenuity, and fluency. His adaptations, imitations, and translations were almost always intelligently conceived and carried through, and many were deservedly successful."[97] Tate had obtained many literary successes and probably, as Spencer further suggests, his own melancholy was due to temperament and not personal failure. It is Scott-Thomas, who maybe, portrays Tate at his best, namely as the product of a certain historical period:

> It is now evident that historically and psychologically Tate's connection with the major intangible movements of the Restoration and post-Restoration periods is a slender one. The past and the future were his, but the present belonged to others. […] He sets aside the pure lyrics and the prosody which seems to have come most natural to him, he shackles himself with the heroic couplet and tries his hand at all the fashionable and unfashionable exercises of the day, at everything that seems to hold out the slightest prospect of monetary remuneration - occasional poems, translations, pastorals, satire, collections, paraphrases, prologue, epilogue, magazines, and journals, the historical, scientific, neo-classical, moral and religious modes, personal joys and sorrows - with anxious hope and wistful longing, but without intelligent discrimination, all are exploited shamelessly for what they will bring in pounds, shillings, and pence.[98]

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[92] Alexander Pope, *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot, being the Prologue to the Satires*, line 190 [Alexander Pope, *The Works of Alexander Pope, Volume IV*, London 1770, p. 25.]
[93] Christopher Spencer, *Nahum Tate*, Twayne Publishers, New York 1972, p. 14.
[94] Ibidem.
[95] J. A. Westrup, *op. cit.*, p. 799.
[96] Adolphus William Ward and Alfred Rayney Waller, *The Cambridge History of English Literature*, Cambridge 1912, VIII, p. 46.
[97] C. Spencer, *op. cit.*, p. 15.
[98] H. F. Scott-Thomas, "Nahum Tate and the Seventeenth Century", in *ELH*, vol. 1, No. 3 (Dec., 1934), p. 272.

In all cases, even though there were many controversies concerning the man, Tate has left a deep footmark in the operatic history, through "his" lament, "When I am laid in Earth." As the critic Bertrand H. Bronson said:

[...] critics have been unanimous in deploring Nahum Tate's text of *Dido and Æneas*. But has anyone ever gone away unsatisfied from a valid rendition of Dido's "lament" [When I am laid in Earth] in Purcell's embodiment of it? Is it even possible to conceive a more profoundly moving statement of poignant farewell than Dido's last words so expressed? But the transcendent majesty of this passage has required for its realization the unhurrying repetitions of word and phrase which are only latent in the text supplied to the composer. So supreme and perfectly matched a statement of tragic emotion in words and music does not argue any deficiency on the one side or on the other.[99]

c) **The Italian parody alias the Ballad Opera**

The Beggar's Opera (Johann Christoph Pepusch, 1728) John Gay

All is nature here, all is passion; there are no sententious reflections, no philosophy or politics, no paragons of virtue, and none of those descriptions or amplifications which are only an avoidance of difficulties and are to be found in all libretti. […] The music has no other function than to express what arises from the words, which are therefore neither smothered by notes nor used to lengthen the spectacle unduly, because it is ridiculous to prolong the sentence 'I love you' (for instance) with a hundred notes when nature has restricted it to three.[100]

Calzabigi wrote this comment while criticizing the existing opera seria in Italy. Ironically, this view fits well also for the English audience who found Italian opera so fake and exaggerated. To oppose Italian opera, the ballad opera came into existence. The ballad is a characteristic of English opera. It is a "simple melody in strophic form. It can be regarded as a sophisticated descendant of the folksong, retaining the latter's simplicity, though not its particular idioms."[101] Deferring from Italian opera, "in broad cultural terms, the ballad represents a continuation of the eighteenth-century's equation of simplicity and virtue. […] The texts always express virtuous sentiments." [102]

[99] Bertrand H. Bronson, "The True Proportions of Gay's Acis and Galatea", in *PMLA*, Vol. 80, No. 4 (Sep., 1965), p. 325.
[100] Letter from Ranieri de' Calzabigi to Prince Kaunitz, Vienna, 6 March 1767 [Patricia Howard, *C. W. Von Gluck: Orfeo*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1981, pp. 22-23]
[101] George Biddlecombe, *English opera from 1834 to 1864 with particular reference to the works of Michael Balfe*, Garland Publishing, New York & London 1994, p. 36.
[102] Ivi, p. 37.

John Gay (1685-1732) wrote *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) to express the spirit of his time. Concerning the origin of this text, we have the words of Alexander Pope who narrates the story that Spence had told him:

Dr. Swift had been observing once to Mr. Gay, what an odd pretty sort of a thing a Newgate Pastoral might make. Gay was inclined to try at such a thing for some time; but afterwards thought it would be better to write a comedy on the same plan. This was what gave rise to the *Beggar's Opera*. He began on it; and when first he mentioned it to Swift, the doctor did not much like the project. As he carried it on, he showed what he wrote to both of us, and we now and then gave a correction, or a word or two of advice; but it was wholly of his own writing. –When it was done, neither of us thought it would succeed. We showed it to Congreve; who, after reading it over, said, it would either take greatly, or be damned confoundedly.–[103]

John Gay was a great friend both of Swift and Pope, and was ready to accept the challenge proposed by the Irish dean. But instead of working on a pastoral opera, as he had done in *Acis and Galatea*, he opted this time for a ballad. The ballad was a genre which belonged to the people and the "ordinary"[104] Gay was part of them. He had been famous for his "Trivia, or the Art of Walking the Streets of London" where he gave advice, for example, on the best places to go shopping. He knew extremely well the city of London and, consequently, its people. So, the ballad was not a random choice because he wanted to promote real English music and, at the same time, create an anti-opera or better an anti-Italian opera by mimicking it. Similarly, like his friends, his aim was to denounce the society of the time. In his text, there is an open attack on both the bourgeoisie and the aristocrats.

In the opera, the bourgeoisie are criticized for their bad taste in literature. In this first part of the 18th century, the book market was flourishing and there had been an enormous increase in the amount of printed books. Unfortunately, according to the great writers of the time, the quality had remarkably deteriorated. In this period, instead of the models of virtue represented in the Italian operatic universe, the stories of rogues and prostitutes were the dominating issues in these books. Novels like Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, a seeming prostitute and rogue, were filling the shelves and the same could be said of real-life "personalities" like

[103] Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the English Poets: With Critical Observations on Their Works and Lives of Sundry Eminent Persons*, Charles Tilt, London 1840, p. 218.
[104] Caroline A. Lejeune, "Opera in the Eighteenth Century", in *Proceedings of the Musical Association*, 49th Sess. (1922-1923), p. 3.

Jonathan Wild, a fence and probably an inspiring figure for Gay's opera, whose "deeds" were overly present in the news of this period.

Regarding the aristocrats, Gay censured their preferences for Italian opera instead of favouring the domestic works and, consequently, their authors. As a keen supporter of the English traditions, he attacked the exaggerated opulence of the Italian mise-en-scene, the improbability of the characters and the Italian musical sphere of influence. With regard to the latter, he referred to the artificial structure of the Italian opera with its recitatives but also the excessive virtuosities that were performed mostly by the prima donna. It was not a random choice for Gay to include two prima donnas in his opera. The writer had openly declared that he had distributed equally vocal parts to the two, making an ironic reference to the rivalry between singers in the Italian panorama. This was a clear reference to the strong rivalry between the Italian sopranos, Faustina Bordoni and Francesca Cuzzoni, in 1727, in which the respective admirers initially caused a feud that became "a riot, with both factions attending the opera in force, and expressing their feelings practically and with no uncertain aim."[105]

Oddly enough, Gay had the faculty of speech in his opera because he placed himself as the beggar of the title. This was another indirect accusation to the nobles of the period, above all the king, for the inappropriate role Gay had to play in society, namely the position of caretaker of the King's two-year old daughter.

One week before the premiere, John Rich, the impresario, had asked the composer Johann Christoph Pepusch to rearrange and adapt all the different musical pieces in the opera. The opera itself consisted in sixty-nine different melodies, twenty-eight from the English ballad and twenty-three from popular Irish, Scottish and French songs. The remaining ones derived from the operatic repertoire of the time, which included works by renowned composers like Henry Purcell, Georg Friedrich Händel (*Rinaldo*) and the Italian, Giovanni Bononcini. The same Pepusch composed a prelude for the opera, the only original piece. Concerning the première, Pope wrote in his notes to the *Dunciad*:

This piece was received with greater applause than was ever known. Besides being acted in London sixty-three days without interruption, and renewed the next season with equal applause, it spread into all the great towns of England; was played in many places to the thirtieth and fortieth time; at Bath and Bristol fifty, etc. It made

[105] Ivi, p. 5.

its progress into Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, where it was performed twenty-four days successively. The ladies carried about with them the favourite songs of it in fans, and houses were furnished with it in screens.[106]

This pot-pourri gained an enormous success because most of the "arias" or songs were popular pieces at the time and, above all, understandable being obviously written in English. Therefore, the possibility of recognizing them was a further amusement for the spectator. This ballad opera achieved more than sixty consecutive performances and it was on the bill for more than two decades. John Rich, the theatre director of Lincoln's Inn Fields gained £4,000 out of this work while Gay £700 for four benefit nights. The motto at the time had become: "It made Gay rich and Rich gay." [107]

A sequel was later produced in 1729, *Polly*, but due to censorship it was only represented years after Gay's death in 1777. In the meantime, The Licensing Act of 1737 had declared a long time suspension for the performances of the original *Beggar's Opera*. The prime minister, Robert Walpole, had most likely censored it because of its strong satire on politicians. In regards to this matter, Jonathan Swift wrote:

It must be allowed, That the *Beggar's Opera* is not the first of Mr. GAY's works, wherein he hath been faulty, with regard to *Courtiers* and *Statesmen*. For to omit his other Pieces; even his Fables, published within two Years past, […] he hath been thought somewhat too bold upon the *Courtiers*. And although it be highly probable, he meant only the *Courtiers* of former times, yet he acted unwarily, by not considering that the Malignity of some People might misinterpret what he said, to the Disadvantage of present *Persons* and Affairs.[108]

Probably, according to Swift, Gay did not intend to attack Walpole but just express the voice of the people. Not only Walpole but also the authoritarian voice of the novelist, Daniel Defoe, criticised the work, this time, for encouraging crime.[109] Even though morality was at

[106] Samuel Johnson, *The Works of Samuel Johnson*, Vol. II, Alexander V. Blake, New York 1846, p. 172.
[107] S. Johnson, *Lives*, p. 218.
[108] Jonathan Swift, "The Intelligencer" (1728), in Herbert Davis (edited by), *The Prose Writings of Jonathan Swift in 14 volumes*, Vol. XII, Oxford University Press, Blackwell 1955, pp. 34-35.
[109] Daniel Defoe wrote: "[…] our rogues are grown more wicked than ever, and vice in all kinds in so much winked at, that robbery is accounted a petty crime. We take pains to puff them up in their villany, and thieves are set out in so amiable a light in the Beggar's Opera, it has taught them to value themselves on their profession rather than to be ashamed of it. There was some cessation of street robberies […] until the introduction of this pious opera. […] London, that used to be the most safe and peaceful city in the universe, is now become a scene of rapine and danger." [Daniel Defoe, *Second Thoughts are Best: or a Further Improvement of a Late Scheme to Prevent Street Robberies*, J. Roberts, London 1729, pp. 9-10.]

its minimum terms here, the audience appreciated the work for being topical and for letting, for once, the spectators relax and enjoy the work without having to rack their brains over it. Furthermore, it was obviously satirical and this innate quality made it a masterpiece and a milestone for the English public. Thanks to these qualities, the *Beggar's Opera* did not disappear and was still widely performed in the first part of the 20th century. It would inspire various revisions and adaptations. In 1928, the German composer, Kurt Weill, readapted the opera to a German context, renaming it *Die Dreigroschenoper* (The Threepenny Opera). Twenty years later, in 1948, also the British musician, Benjamin Britten would rearrange Gay's opera with a new production.

In the end, *The Beggar's Opera* was the success of light music, to be precise English light opera over the Italian one. To sum up, this archetype of ballad opera expressed the main themes which interested the Englishmen of the time. Its satire was both a criticism of Sir Robert Walpole's administration and of the trivialities of Italian opera. As Caroline A. Lejeune states:

> I am quite certain that Gay had never considered the possibility of his own opera making history. He was not a fighter. He was not really a reformer. He was just a perfect mirror to the people round about him, reflecting their ideas and their biasses, backed by a certain keen instinct of his own for right and wrong.[110]

Gay had just "mirrored" the people's will. He did not belong to the highbrow writers and had written the opera for money issues but he knew what the people wanted. He was a realist and had "studied the bias of the age, found out what the ordinary man wanted to see and hear."[111] The ballad opera was a phenomenal success and nearly a hundred operas followed[112], trying to copy its success. For example, from 1731 to 1735, also Henry Fielding consecrated himself to ballad operas, such as *Don Quixote in England* (1734) and *The Intriguing Chambermaid* (1734). They were very popular, thanks to his sharp satire which he would later consecrate to his novels. After 1758, the ballad opera's glory was on the wane due to the exaggerated abundance of the genre and, mostly, a lack of originality in the new works.[113]

[110] C. A. Lejeune, *op. cit.*, p. 7.
[111] Ivi, p. 8.
[112] Ivi, p. 13.
[113] Ibidem.

d) Haendel: From pastoral opera to oratorio

Acis and Galatea (Georg Friedrich Haendel, 1718) John Gay

Semele (Georg Friedrich Haendel, 1744) William Congreve

When I affirm that an Opera after the *Italian* manner is monstrous, I cannot think that I deal too severely with it; no not tho I add, that it is so prodigiously unnatural, that it could take its beginning from no Country, but that which is renown'd throughout the World, for preferring monstrous abominable Pleasures to those which are according to Nature.[114]

The aversion for opera was extremely common in the literary circles of the 18th century. Joseph Addison, the founder of the *Spectator*, and Alexander Pope in his *Dunciad*, expressed their disgust for Italian opera. The *ut pictura poesis* maxim was not considered valid in the English operatic world. This general feeling circulated in the island and was expressed into words by William Hazlitt, a keen critic of Italian opera. He believed strongly in the superiority of poetry over music. For Hazlitt, "operas were a species of intellectual prostitution; for we can no more receive pleasure from all our faculties at once than we can be in love with a number of mistresses at the same time [...] It does not subsist as an imitation of nature, but in contempt of it; and instead of seconding, its object is to pervert and sophisticate all our natural impressions of things."[115] In short, music was not important because it was common belief that "a poor libretto reveals the comparative emptiness of the music."[116] This view, unavoidably, favoured a greater use of speech material inside the operas. It is no wonder that General John Burgoyne saw music as an "accessory and not the principle subject of the drama."[117]

In England, the pastoral play was the fashion of the period. Alexander Pope published his *Pastorals* in 1709, an imitation of Virgil. Also Addison wrote a pastoral, *Rosamond*, and, obviously, John Gay. He wrote a libretto, *Acis and Galatea*, that was to be set to music by the German composer, George Friedrich Händel, in 1718. The opera was considered by many as

[114] John Dennis, *The Select Works of Mr. John Dennis in Two Volumes*, John Darby, London 1718, Vol. 1: "An Essay on Italian Operas (1706)", p. 468.
[115] G. Biddlecombe, *op. cit.*, p. 56.
[116] J. A. Westrup, *op. cit.*, p. 798.
[117] Ivi, p. 58.

a masque but it, undoubtedly, resembled more a pastoral opera. The critic Bertrand H. Bronson gives us the following list of the essential items needed in a pastoral work citing on purpose Pope's *Pastorals*:

Here are examples: the terms for large natural appearances, *mountains, rocks, plains,* and *vales*. The aspects of water, *stream, flood,* or *fountain*. The movements of air, *gales, zephyrs* gentle, soft, or cool. The vegetation, in *groves, shades, bowers, vine*, and *spray*. The painted glories of the *vernal* or *verdant* season. The *quires* of birds, *warbling* or *murmuring*. The *nymphs bathing* in *crystal fountains*; the *swains* shepherding their *flocks* and *herds*. It is with full awareness that Gay employs all these terms in his masque.[118]

In the end, he draws attention to the fact that Gay's work contains all the typical pastoral vocabulary. According to Stanley Sadie, "*Acis and Galatea* represents the high point of the pastoral opera in England, indeed anywhere. Intended typically of the genre, as a courtly entertainment about the simple, rural life, with many witty hints of self-parody in its words, it rises above itself […]"[119] Nonetheless, critics like Jeanette Marks have defined Gay's *Acis and Galatea* as "pure or finished pastoral. The operatic touch is upon it, and the banality of operatic recitative."[120] Another critic, Sven M. Armens is even harsher portraying it as "the *false* idealizations of the debased pastoral."[121] Bronson, instead, carefully examines *Acis and Galatea* from a musicological point of view and arrives to the following conclusion:

I am not asserting that by itself Gay's libretto is one of the greatest pastoral poems in English. I do say that Gay provided Handel with an almost ideal pastoral libretto; and that together they created a supreme masterpiece in that genre. It can only be truly apprehended as a pastoral opera, words and music inseparably united. This indivisibility, while it accounts for the critics' neglect, is the very proof of the achievement.[122]

According to Bronson, the libretto cannot be criticized with the omission of the music because the work represents a perfect merge between music and text. He states that "Gay's strategy in character portrayal is itself Handelian: generally speaking, to represent a single state of mind in each aria, so that by the sum of these successive personifications of emotion the whole character becomes known."[123] It was most probably this fusion with Händel that had caused Gay all those critics. In a period in which the literary text was supposed to be

[118] B. H. Bronson, *op. cit.*, pp. 325-326.
[119] S. Sadie (edited by), The Grove Book of Operas, Second edition, Vol. VII, p. 2.
[120] B. H. Bronson, *op. cit.*, p. 325.
[121] Ibidem.
[122] Ivi, p. 331.
[123] Ivi, p. 328.

superior to music, a subjection of the text was considered inconceivable. Purcell was considered a special case most probably because his superiority was accepted only due to the label of incompetence that Tate seemed to enjoy in the literary circles. Gay, instead was a renowned writer and his subjection to a foreigner, Händel, was not seen positively. Even worse if it had to do with an opera.

Händel belonged to a world in which opera was exclusively in Italian. He had composed operas in that language such as *Rinaldo* (1711), *Amadigi di Gaula* (1715) and *Giulio Cesare* (1724). In this Handelian repertoire, the castrati, with their strong and high voices, were the true "primo uomo" amongst the singers. Their *virtuosismi* reminded the English audiences that Handel belonged to the Italian school due to his musical education but, at the same time, he was German from birth and, therefore, was not recognised by the Italian circles. At all events, he set to music and modified John Gay's *Acis and Galatea*, helping the development of opera in English. He was to do the same thing with William Congreve's *Semele*.

At a certain point in his career, the playwright William Congreve (1670-1729) decided to consecrate his time to writing librettos. As Alexander Lindsay and Howard Erskine-Hill state: "It is possible that Congreve, having seemed to master comedy, tragedy, elegy, and ode, now proposed to turn seriously towards music, and write for the composers."[124] He began in 1701 when he was commissioned the libretto of *The Judgement of Paris*. Successively, a contest took place between four important musicians of the time, John Eccles, Daniel Purcell, John Weldon and Gottfried Finger. They had to compose a masque on Congreve's libretto and the winner in the end was Weldon who also won 100 Guineas.[125] Congreve followed the suggestions written by Dryden, making his text, as David Thomas states, "above all pleasing to the ear. It was full of resonant consonants and full-throated, vowel-based rhymes at the end of each line."[126] According always to Thomas, the libretto would help both the composer and the singers to perform at their best. In this work, Congreve showed his ability in giving great lyrical beauty to a singular moment, the judgement, that will be followed by a terrible event, the Trojan war.

[124] Alexander Lindsay and Howard Erskine-Hill (edited by), *William Congreve: The Critical Heritage*, Routledge, London and New York 1989, p. 24.
[125] David Thomas, *William Congreve*, Macmillan Press, London 1992, p. 112.
[126] Ivi, p. 113.

The Judgement of Paris was the first attempt in this field and represented an interesting experiment that was to prepare him for his operatic libretto, *Semele*. The libretto of *Semele* was originally written for the English composer, John Eccles, in 1707 but the opera was never performed, so none of Congreve's contemporaries could enjoy this work. The English writer put great effort in this work, as the critic David Thomas states: "Congreve deliberately allows a baroque sense of artistic festivity to triumph over chaos and destruction. With its splendid staging effects and resonant dialogue, Congreve's opera was clearly conceived as an aesthetic transcendence of tragedy and death."[127] His opera used at its best all the various machineries present in the theatre: "Full use is made of the scenic stage, its lighting and pyrotechnic effects, as well as of cloud machines and complete scenic transformations." [128]

As stated previously, in 1744, Händel decided to use Congreve's libretto, to produce an opera even though with some modifications made by Newburgh Hamilton. Thomas noted that "Congreve's sonorous verse" was "beautifully mirrored in Handel's flawlessly stylish setting."[129] In 1982, the Covent Garden decided to celebrate its 250 years of existence with a lavish production of Händel's *Semele*. Thomas states:

> In terms of singing, acting and staging, this gala production did full justice to the splendid baroque theatricality of Congreve's libretto. Some 280 years after the opera was completed, *Semele* was at last given the kind of production on the London stage that Congreve had clearly envisaged when he had prepared his libretto for the opening of London's first opera house in 1705. This production […] was a moving tribute to a playwright who passionately wished to see a specifically English form of opera developed (in opposition to the dominant Italian mode of *opera seria*) and who was the first to write a full-length opera in English for the London stage.[130]

If *Semele* was to achieve posterity success, Hazlitt at the time did not see it the same way. He wrote: "It is plain that the imagination of the author could not raise itself above the burlesque. His Mask of *Semele, Judgement of Paris,* and other occasional poems, are even worse. I would not advise any one to read them, or if I did, they would not."[131] Hazlitt saw *Semele* as an opera and it could not pass his censorship. However, *Semele* has often been listed amongst Händel's oratorios. At a certain point, Händel noticed the sharp decline of his

[127] Ivi, p. 119.
[128] Ivi, p. 120.
[129] Ivi, p. 122.
[130] Ivi, p. 123.
[131] William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, London 1819 [A. Lindsay & H. Erskine-Hill (edited by), *op. cit.*, p. 318.]

operatic works and, to revive his career, he decided to turn to the oratorio. His first English oratorio was *Esther* in 1732. As Bernard Williams notes:

> Sunk in financial disaster from his efforts with Italian opera in London, Handel turned to the oratorio, and the resulting works are not seen as a form of opera, simply because they were not designed for a theatrical style of presentation (though they do contain a number of what might be called stage directions). However, this example itself shows that, from a musical or stylistic point of view, less may turn on these classifications than one might assume. It has often been remarked that Handel's English oratorios can be intensely dramatic in their effect - sometimes more so than the examples of *opera seria* to which he had devoted his efforts in the theatre.[132]

Differently from opera, the oratorio focused on the presence of imposing choruses and the lack of sceneries and costumes. In general, they would deal with religious issues and at times with allegorical themes. Händel's *Semele* dealt with the latter and it turned out to be quite a bizarre experiment, seemingly a disguised "opera seria". The audience seemed to agree on this point as Winton Dean observed during the premiere: "The public found its tone too close to that of the discredited Italian opera, and set it down as an oratorio *manqué*; where they expected wholesome Lenten bread, they received a glittering stone dug from the ruins of Greek mythology."[133] If Händel had tried to mask his work in the guise of an oratorio, Hazlitt and the English audience did not fall in the trap. If this was not the case, Händel learnt anyway a lesson and this was his last English experiment of a pseudo-opera. He would continue his oratorio career until 1757 with his final work, *The Triumph of Time and Truth*.

It is interesting to note that before Händel, another composer had used a libretto written by Congreve. It was the English composer, Thomas Arne who set to music *The Judgement of Paris* in 1742. He was the most renowned English composer of the time and was the first to write an English *opera seria*, *Artaxerxes*. Arne had most probably written himself the English adaptation from Metastasio's original Italian libretto of 1729. The opera premiered at the Covent Garden in 1762 obtaining a satisfying success and was appreciated by many great composers like Mozart. But, according to the critic Edward J. Dent, it was a copy of an Italian opera with its strengths and, more importantly, its weaknesses:

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[132] Bernard Williams, "The Nature of Opera: Entry for the New Grove Dictionary of Opera", in Bernard Williams, *On Opera*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2006, p. 1.
[133] Winton Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1959, p. 365.

Even at the Italian opera, managements were always obliged to play for safety and box-office success; the most that the English could do was to imitate, generally rather feebly, something that had been done on the continental stage a generation or more before. The same has to be said of the composers, even of the best of them. Arne's *Artaxerxes* (1762) is a noble and dignified piece of work, both words and music, but it was completely out of date when it was written.[134]

Arne had tried to revive a genre, the opera seria, which had been practically untouched in England but, by then, it was out of date after Calzabigi's manifesto in Europe. More than eighty years will pass until another English opera written by an Irish composer will achieve a certain success, Michael William Balfe's *The Bohemian Girl*.

e) A German/English Romantic Opera

Oberon (Carl Maria von Weber, 1826). Librettist: James Robinson Planché.

I must repeat that the cut of the whole is very foreign to all my ideas and maxims. The intermixing of so many principal actors who do not sing, the omission of the music in the most important moments – all these things deprive our *Oberon* the title of an Opera, and will make him unfit for all other Theatres in Europe; which is a very bad thing for me […][135]

In England, the turn of the century saw the rise of the Romantic current. William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge had published their *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798. The *Preface* written by Wordsworth to introduce the collection of poems became the manifesto of the movement. Opera in England, at the beginning of the 19th century, was monopolised by the masterpieces of Mozart and Rossini which were achieving great success in London. The situation of the operas in English, instead, was practically stagnant. In Europe, the operatic world in general was moving from Classicism to Romanticism, with the poetry of Ossian playing the role as main catalyst. Even though, the ancient bard proved to be a hoax, it affected

[134] Edward J. Dent, "The Future of British Opera", in Tyrone Guthrie et al., *Opera in English*, John Lane the Bodly Head, London 1945, p. 32.
[135] Letter from Carl Maria von Weber to James Robinson Planché, Dresden, February 19, 1825 [James Robinson Planché, *The Recollections and Reflections of J. R. Planché in Two Volumes: A Professional Autobiography*, Tinsley Brothers, London 1872, Vol. I, pp. 76-77.]

significantly the tastes of that epoch, especially in Germany. In literature, it influenced the works of the writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe while in music, Ludwig van Beethoven and Robert Schumann were amongst the greatest exponents of this current.

The composer who reflected best the spirit of Romanticism in opera was Carl Maria Weber. His masterpiece, *Der Freischütz* (1821), became the landmark for all other romantic operas. It was a great victory for English opera when Weber accepted to compose an opera in English. He was called by Charles Kemble to write an opera for the Covent Garden and he was given two possible subjects, Faust or Oberon. Weber opted for *Oberon* (1826), which then became the climax of English romanticism. The task of writing the libretto was given to James Robinson Planché (1796-1880).

The son of French citizens, Planché grew in London and started his career as an apprentice in a bookshop. He then joined a theatre company of amateurs for which he wrote plays. One of them, *Amoroso, King of Little Britain* (1818), was performed at Drury Lane. After this success, he continued his career as a playwright and wrote in 1822 his first libretto, *Maid Marian; or, the Huntress of Arlingford* (1822) which obtained a great success. Planché, in his memoirs, explained the consequences of his entrance in the operatic field:

> After the success of "Maid Marian," I had piles of novels sent me by not only authors but by their publishers, requesting my acceptance of them for that purpose. They knew it was the finest advertisement for a book in the world; and I have been offered money by some to obtain for them that advantage. The author was especially on the safe side; for if the adaptation was good, and the piece successful, he had the chief glory, and a brisk sale for his book; while if it failed the dramatist was the sufferer in purse as well as reputation.[136]

Planché's reputation soared and, by 1824, he had already written or adapted at least 14 dramas not counting the libretto, *Maid Marian*. Later on, he accepted a position as stock writer in the Covent Garden. He found himself in the right time and place when Kemble asked him to write the libretto for Weber. In the meantime, Weber had learned English in order to participate fully in the production of his work. The collaboration between the two seemed to be idyllic according to Planché's autobiography. This can be inferred from their many letters they exchanged. Weber stated that "poets and composers live together in a sort of angels'

[136] J. R. Planché, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

marriage, which demands a reciprocal trust."[137] Planché recounted their collaboration in his autobiography:

My great object was to land Weber safe amidst an unmusical public, and I therefore wrote a melodrama with songs, instead of an opera, such as would be required at the present day. I am happy to say that I succeeded in that object, and had the great gratification of feeling that he fully appreciated my motives, and approved of my labours. On the morning after the production of the opera (April 12), I met him [Weber] on the stage. He embraced me most affectionately, and exultingly exclaimed, "Now we will go to work and write another opera together, and *then* they shall see what we can do!"[138]

The opera turned out a complete triumph with encores. Weber was thrilled about the result. He could not hold back his enthusiasm and wrote:

By God's grace and help I have tonight had such a perfect success as never before. It is quite impossible to describe the dazzling and touching effect of such a complete and cloudless triumph. God alone be praised for it! When I entered the orchestra the whole house rose as of one accord, and an incredible applause, cheers, waving of hats and handkerchiefs received me and was hardly to be quieted […] Performances are to continue now every evening as long as the singers can hold out. I have undertaken to conduct the first twelve.[139]

Charles Kemble was very pleased by Planché's work and wrote to him in a letter: "I think I like your verses better in print than manuscript. That is not the case with the verses of most authors, for many of whom it would be better never to have gone to press."[140] Nevertheless, the libretto has been attacked from all directions and labelled as a symbol of literary incompetency. As John Warrack wrote in his biography of Weber, the German composer was not alien to this view:

It was too late to withdraw from a venture about which Weber had been developing doubts […] In the early stages the idea must have seemed attractive enough, while the then primitive stage of his English would not have allowed him to be sure enough of the gaucheness of Planché's style to protest […] Only when he was irrevocably committed did he begin to realize the nature of the piece; and resolving to rewrite the work as an opera with recitatives for Germany when he returned home, he set about making the best of the job.[141]

[137] Letter from Carl Maria von Weber to James Robinson Planché, Dresden, February 19, 1825 [Ivi, p. 78.]
[138] Ivi, p. 83.
[139] E. W. White, *The Rise*, pp. 89-90.
[140] Letter from Charles Kemble to James Robinson Planché, Glasgow, April 17, 1826 [J. R. Planché, *op. cit.*, p. 85.]
[141] John Warrack, *Carl Maria von Weber* (1968), Second Edition, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1976, p. 331.

About 40 years after the premiere, Weber's son, Max Maria, stated that the libretto had been "put together by the caprice of the author in a series of detached and almost incongruous scenes."[142] Even harsher was the critic, Donald Tovey, who stated:

> At present it is only relevant to say that this libretto has murdered the third and last mature opera of Weber, who devoted his dying energies to learning the English language in order to set it. Again and again he implored Planché to send him the whole text, or at all events to give some explanation of the position in the plot of the single pieces […] It was bad enough to have to work thus in the dark; but Weber eventually discovered something worse. He discovered that it did not matter. So he poured his last and finest music into this pig-trough, and shared the applause with the magnificent scenery.[143]

According to Tovey, the libretto was not bad but "the merest twaddle [was] for regulating the operations of scene-shifters.[144] Planché was not certainly the most valid librettist around, he was more an artisan, but he had a great experience on stage and knew the public's taste. His work was conservative and he did not deviate too much from Wieland's poem *Oberon*, the source of the libretto. Planché was very practical and thus the perfect choice for this work. While examining the text, the musicologist Joseph E. Morgan uses words like economy, clarity, conciseness to describe Planché's touch. The librettist uses a lot of spoken text, favours the spectacle and the magical transformation onstage because he knows too well the English taste. Weber was worried that the work would turn out into a drama with songs but this was an inevitable consequence if the work was to achieve success in England and that is what happened. Art was sacrificed to success and money.

After the commercial success deriving from Weber's *Oberon*, Planché seemed the right choice for a potential libretto of another great German romantic composer, Felix Mendelssohn. The musician had been convinced to write an opera by William Chappell for London in 1838. Planché accepted the task and suggested *The Siege of Calais* as the subject of the opera. Mendelssohn wrote the following comments to Planché:

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[142] Franklin Mesa, *Opera – An Encyclopedia of World Premieres and Significant Performances, Singers, Composers, Librettists, Arias and Conductors, 1597-2000*, McFarland & Company, Jefferson 2007, p. 193.
[143] Donald Francis Tovey, *Symphony & Other Orchestral Works: Selections from Essays in Musical Analysis* (1981), Dover Publications, Mineola 2015, p. 558.
[144] Ivi, p. 559.

I received the two first acts of the opera last week, and you [may] imagine how eagerly I perused them immediately. I was struck with the many beauties they contain, and have to thank you most sincerely for the delightful prospect which such a poetry holds out to my music. My only wish is that I might be able to do justice to it, as I feel it ought to be done.[145]

But, shortly after, problems deriving from the plot, the weakness of the characters chosen and the lack of originality in the subject convinced Mendelssohn to desist from this project. Moreover, Mendelssohn had written to Chappell that Planché did not want to make the alterations requested but Planché fully declined this: "I would have made any sacrifice or concession sooner than have had my opera definitively rejected."[146] The about-turn of Mendelssohn not only affected Planché's reputation but the librettist suffered also a great economic loss: "No list of required alterations was sent me, and the affair fell to the ground with the immediate loss of £200 to Mr. Chappell, and a prospective one to me beyond calculation, setting aside the £100 I was to receive after the first performance of the opera."[147]

In defence of Mendelssohn's withdrawal from the project, the work was not different from Planche's previous project, Weber's *Oberon*. It could have fit for an English audience but it did not fulfil Mendelssohn's requirements. This was supposed to be his first opera but, according to the composer, it did not have any characteristic scenes and the plot had too many flaws. In the end, Mendelssohn stated: "Planché's text can never, even with the best will on both sides, becomes such a work as I want."[148] Anyway, the libretto was complete by then and, despite Mendelssohn's complete rejection of the project, it was offered to other composers including Balfe. The Irish musician knew both the English and the Italian operatic world. Although he was experienced in the field, he also gave up and agreed with the German composer on the libretto's inadequacy.

The Romantic current saw a second wave of new poets in England. Lord George Byron, John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley reaped the heritage of Wordsworth and Coleridge. Especially Byron's works, in the operatic milieu, achieved international fame amongst major Italian composers like Donizetti and Verdi who based their operas on his texts. Another, British author, the Scottish novelist, Sir Walter Scott, obtained a great success

[145] Letter to James Robinson Planché from Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, Leipzig, August 12, 1838 [J. R. Planché, *op. cit.*, pp. 286-287].
[146] Ivi, p. 295.
[147] Ivi, p. 309.
[148] Ivi, p. 310.

abroad, above all in France, and inspired foreign composers like Auber, Bizet, Donizetti and the same Rossini. In England, Balfe composed an opera, *The Knight of the Leopard* (1874), which was performed after his death. This work was to be performed in its Italian translation, *Il Talismano*. Only in 1891, with Arthur Sullivan's *Ivanhoe,* an opera in English based on Scott could be performed with success in London.

f) **Search for a true Grand English Opera**

The Bohemian Girl (Michael William Balfe, 1843) Librettist: Alfred Bunn.

If opera is to succeed in this country it must be, I think, on these lines: it must be in the tongue of the country where it is performed, and it must have not only intelligible action but also intelligible music. I have never subscribed to the opinion that the English are not an opera loving people, because they are. But it is necessary to fulfil certain conditions, and not to set up impossible and artificial ones. But given a good story, good music, good singing, and good acting, I do not think there is any doubt at all but that we can develop opera on our own lines, and not as imitators of foreign models.[149]

Opera has always been a matter exclusively for Londoners. If the King's Theatre in the Haymarket performed operas in Italian, the Drury Lane, from 1663, focused on operas in English and also the Covent Garden after its opening in 1732. By the 19th century, opera was far from the court genre of the Restoration. It had become commercial and consequently more popular. As a result, there were very low standards of conduct in the theatres. For example, certain women would "exhibit their boundless effrontery in the most revolting manner."[150]

As stated previously, opera was not financed by the government as were the operatic theatres in France. As a consequence, figures like Alfred Bunn (c. 1797-1860) prevailed in this new business. Bunn was the theatrical manager of the Drury Lane in three different intervals from 1833 to 1853 and shortly also of the Covent Garden. His aim was to bring English opera to high levels and achieve the same popularity and success as French opera. For this reason, he favoured the career of British composers like Julius Benedict, William Wallace and, above all, the Irish Michael William Balfe. During this time, there was obviously no English school and the composers learnt their skills abroad. Benedict followed the style of

[149] Comment by J. Percy Baker. [C. A. Lejeune, *op. cit.*, p. 19.]
[150] Ivi, pp. 4-5.

the German school while Wallace and Balfe that of the Italian one. Bunn's goal was to assemble all the best English composers and create a number of great operas completely sung in English that could form an English repertory. One of the first of these operas was Balfe's *Catherine Grey* (1837). British musicians like Adelaide Kemble and her father rejoiced at this "success in the establishment of a real English Opera."[151] Bunn also wrote the libretto of Balfe's *The Daughter of St. Mark* (1844), "the first of his English operas in which the whole of the action was expressed in music."[152] Other positive comments showered this feat like those written on The Times Newspaper: "As the lyrical drama of Italy declines, that of England seems to rise, and the ultimate extinction of the one appears likely to be the epoch of the other's arriving at perfection."[153]

Even though some reviews gave positive comments on these works, the theatrical world did not see it in the same way. For example, the actor William Macready and other famous writers like Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Thomas Carlyle, Charles Dickens and Thomas Talfourd opposed Bunn's "operas" at Drury Lane because they saw them as "meretricious animal shows"[154] rather than a continuation of the great Shakespearian tradition. Macready went so far as to give a punch to Bunn in 1836. As a consequence, the previously listed eminent writers would never write a libretto for Drury Lane. Furthermore, Bunn did not only fall out with the intellectuals but also became a sworn enemy of the weekly magazine of satire, *Punch*. Inevitably, Bunn's feud with these two groups discouraged writers to undertake the librettist career and, as a result, some English composers wrote their own librettos.[155] In general, great authors like Dickens did not completely ignore the operatic world but contributed to just one libretto[156], normally a light opera, focusing more on other better paid genres.

With this lack in librettists, as mentioned previously, Bunn tried to fill this gap writing himself eleven librettos, seven for Balfe. His most prestigious work was certainly the libretto of Balfe's *The Bohemian Girl* (1843). Before perusing the text, it is important to see how the operatic field had changed by the 19th century.

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[151] Letter from Charles Kemble to Alfred Bunn, c. 1839. [Ivi, pp. 7-8.]
[152] E. W. White, *The Rise*, p. 99.
[153] The Times, 10 November 1846, p. 5. [Ivi, p. 8.]
[154] Ivi, p. 8.
[155] Biddlecombe cites Fitzwilliam, Glover, Linley, Loder, Lover and Rodwell. [Ivi, p. 10.]
[156] In 1836, Dickens wrote the libretto of John Pyke's operetta, *The Village Coquettes*.

The melodramatic ethos for opera in Britain was quite simple at the time. The Shakespearian legacy was omitted from possible themes for an opera because the plays were considered exclusively propriety of the theatre, above all the tragedies. Therefore, the selection of the plots derived mostly from French operas and ballets. No British authors except the novels of Sir Walter Scott, who was highly appreciated in France, were taken into consideration. Often the opera was not original but simply a re-adaptation of a translated work. The intent was to maintain the feeling of familiarity by means of a popular novel. All English operas were comedies with a happy-ending and with its essence in melodrama. For example, the librettist Planché explained that he was forced to alter Scribe's tragic plot of Halévy's *La Juive*: it is "my deep regret that it was considered vitally important to the success of this Drama, on the English Stage, that the catastrophe should be altered; - that truth, power, and poetical justice should be all sacrificed […] to a prejudice."[157] The libretto was in fact a mirror of contemporary taste with the Manichean ideas in the limelight and the positive ending as the main prerogative. So there was no interior or psychological depth in the characters but just the representation of mannequins to the tastes of society. The audience wanted the existing reigning forces and their morality, in a typical tripartite format. Firstly, the virtuous, innocent heroine, similar to Queen Victoria, who does not fall to madness but like Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* pursues the path of purity. The heroine would defend her virtue like Richardson's *Pamela*[158] but with no interior growth. Briefly, she would be a motionless and unchanging stock character throughout the entire story. Secondly, there will be the hero who is similar to the heroine for his love steadiness and his respect for virtue. He represents "the archetypal preserver of the society's values—chastity, family, home."[159] Thirdly, there is the villain, the obnoxious character, who generally seeks "revenge and hate caused by rejection in love, and lust for wealth and power."[160]

Because of Bunn's ideal of reaching the levels of French opera, in the end the French mélodrame influenced strongly the English compositions. Examining Bunn's libretto, the lack of depth in the characters of Balfe's *The Bohemian Girl*, supports the low opinions which the melodramatic plots had at the time. It did not suffice to include sections of speech to help fix

[157] J. R. Planché, *The Jewess – A grand operatic drama in three acts*, Porter and Wright, London, 1835, p. 48.
[158] G. Biddlecombe, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-21.
[159] Ivi, pp. 34-35.
[160] Ivi, pp. 25-26.

in the minds of the spectators the characters' identities and roles, even though the recitatives were written in heroic couplets. Bunn and Balfe had decided jointly that a minimum number of recitatives would have helped achieve a comprehensive operatic formula for the audience. It is only in regards to the villain, that "there is more psychological penetration. To a degree, the opera libretto was following the advances already made in other literary spheres –the novel and play."[161] Differently from the novel, Balfe was forced to come to terms with an absolutely irrational happy ending. This was obvious in the abrupt alteration of the finale of some of Balfe's work. In 1844, Bunn had explained that he had to make a similar choice in Balfe's *The Daughter of St. Mark*: "I was apprehensive of introducing any representation of those fearful events which signalized Cyprus in 1473, and which, while forcefully delineated by the pen of this able writer and through that medium too faithfully imitated on the Parisian stage, are repugnant to the taste of an English audience."[162] Obviously, also the tragic ending of *The Bohemian Girl* had to be altered.

To conclude, in regards to Bunn, Biddlecombe noted: "Bunn's contribution to the English libretto is as much a compound as the man himself. Dramatically, much of the writing is superficial, rarely exploiting the potential of a situation, and weak in characterization."[163] Another critic, Nigel Burton stated instead that "his highly stylized librettos, set mainly by Balfe and Benedict, were carefully tailored to middle-class tastes. In lyrics such as 'The light of other days' (Maid of Artois) and 'When other lips' (Bohemian Girl) there is no doubt, however, that Bunn unerringly touched on a vein of plaintive nostalgia which lies at the heart of early Victorian opera."[164] In accordance with Burton, Bernard Shaw took into consideration the requirements of an operatic libretto and stated:

> The authorship of the inimitable Bunn is conspicuous in the singableness, the sentiment, and the outrageous absurdity of the lyrics. He never wrote words quite so pleasant to sing, so melting to hear, so irresistibly funny to read as those of *When other lips and other hearts*, but *Let me like a soldier fall*[165] is by no means unworthy of him. A literary man who is not musical may always be detected by his inability to perceive the least merit in Bunn. Musicians know better, and envy Balfe and Wallace their librettist.[166]

[161] Ivi, p. 31.
[162] Ivi, p. 52.
[163] Ivi, pp. 10-11.
[164] S. Sadie (edited by), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Second edition, Volume Four*, p. 604.
[165] "When other lips" is from Balfe's *The Bohemian Girl* while "Yes, let me like a soldier fall" is from William Wallace's *Maritana* (1845).
[166] Bernard Shaw, *Shaw's Music*, 2nd rev. edition by Dan. H. Laurence, 3 volumes, London 1989, Vol. 1, p. 226.

To highlight Bunn's merits, Shaw also mentioned John Oxenford, a dramatist and translator, who wrote nine librettos but was considered by Shaw as a "literary man who is not musical."[167] Bunn's career, from an entrepreneurial point of view, suffered several ups and downs. He ended his long career in bankruptcy in 1848. The fact was that English operas at the time were not very remunerative. If you examined the opera catalogues of Cramer, Wood, & Co., a famous firm that published music scores, all the various composing schools would be present except for the English one. After Bunn, the English operas would suffer a period of barrenness as the musicologist Cecil Forsyth pointed out:

> The English opera-books written in the last half of the nineteenth century are a complete contrast to those of the preceding period. […] On looking at these operas we feel instinctively that their authors were as a rule amateurs, and amateurs with little sense of the theatre. The result is that it is extremely difficult to cite a single opera whose contents were sufficiently dramatic one might almost say sufficiently theatrical to make success possible. […] They were […] all foredoomed to failure on the operatic stage where a single "Ha, ha!" aside (and in the right place) has more value than the finest string of poetical images and philosophical reflections (in the wrong place). Thus the ungrammatical Bunn and all his tribe are, in a way, avenged on their less practical, if more widely accomplished, successors.[168]

In any case, operas in English, although second-rate, continued to have a life of its own also at the Covent Garden, where it achieved a decent success thanks to Royal support until 1866. However, after the death of Queen Victoria's mother followed by that of the Prince Consort, the great leap forward made by opera was to end.

g) **The rise of light opera [Gilbert and Sullivan]**

> But whereas the earlier composers were usually handicapped by the low standard of the librettos they had to set, Sullivan had the good fortune to find as collaborator a man of genuine talent. In no other operatic partnership has the importance of the librettist been so fully recognised; and here he is always given precedence insofar as the operas of this collaboration are universally referred to as being by Gilbert and Sullivan rather than by Sullivan and Gilbert.[169]

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[167] G. Biddlecombe, *op. cit.*, p. 12.
[168] Cecil Forsyth, *Music and Nationalism: A Study of English Opera*, Macmillan, London 1911, pp. 179-180.
[169] E. W. White, *The Rise*, p. 112.

William Schwenk Gilbert (1836-1911) started writing comic poems and burlesques at the age of eighteen. His official job was that of the lawyer. In 1866, he achieved recognition in the literary field when he wrote a burlesque, *Dulcamara*, drawing inspiration from Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore*. From then onwards, he wrote stage works, specializing in all the popular genres of the Victorian era: burlesque, melodrama, pantomime, comedy, farce and comic opera.[170] He showed also a variety of styles from cynicism in *The Wicked World* (1873), where he stated that love was the root of all evil, to nonsensical satire in *Topsyturvydom* (1874). More interestingly, he made a "whimsical parody"[171] of the conventions of melodrama in his prose comedies, *Tom Cobb* (1875) and *Engaged* (1877). In the literary environment, Gilbert was defined as an iconoclast, as the English Ibsen.[172]

Arthur Seymour Sullivan (1842-1900) instead had grown up in a family of musicians. He was a musical prodigy and at the age of fourteen he had won a scholarship at the Royal Academy of Music in London. From 1858 to 1861, he completed his studies in Leipzig. The young musician seemed to be destined to great enterprises and when he composed music for Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in 1862, he received the following review: "Years on years have elapsed since we have heard a work by so young an artist so full of promise, so full of fancy, showing so much conscientiousness, so much skill, and so few references to any model elect."[173] The richly talented Sullivan will just produce one opera, the previously mentioned, *Ivanhoe* (1891). The composer was greatly talented but, at the same time, he lived an epicurean life. He would pass most of his time in aristocratic circles and compose anything for money. Fate seemed to knock at the door, when the comic and ironic librettist, Gilbert, and the not so serious but talented composer, Sullivan, met. As Hayter wrote: "For both men, attempts to write in a serious way seemed stilted and unnatural. Gilbert, like Sullivan, attempted to establish a reputation for himself as a serious artist, but unlike his partner recognised early on the futility of doing so. This realisation only came to Sullivan late in his career […]"[174]

[170] Charles Hayter, *Gilbert and Sullivan*, Macmillan, London 1987, p. 9.
[171] Ivi, p. 10.
[172] Ivi, p. 12.
[173] Review by Henry Chorley. [Ivi, p. 13.]
[174] Ivi, p. 15.

Finally, in 1871, the two managed to work together for the first time after the manager of the Gaiety Theatre, John Hollingshead, decided to hire them for the production of the grotesque opera, *Thespis, or The Gods Grown Old*. The representation was a success but, nonetheless, it quickly vanished from the theatrical programmes. This collaboration turned out to be a single-one time event, a short-lived glimpse of the glorious future.

The true Annus Mirabilis for the two was 1875 when Richard D'Oyly Carte, the manager of the Royalty Theatre, asked the duo to compose a one-act cantata, *Trial by Jury*, as a prelude to Offenbach's work, *La Périchole*. Acknowledging immediately the potential of this duo, D'Oyly Carte solidified the collaboration by requesting other operas. He was tired of seeing performed bad translations in English of the French operettas or English burlesques of an extremely low level. As he himself stated: "It is my desire to establish in London a permanent abode for light opera, played with all the completeness and attention to detail which is recognised in the representations given at even mediocre Continental theatres."[175]

Consequently, the D'Oyly Carte Company was created in 1875 to perform solely the light operas of Gilbert and Sullivan. The performers of these works had to be completely alien to the operatic universe of the time. D'Oyly Carte leased the Opera Comique Theatre to represent this new genre of operas that would be called the Savoy operas. Gilbert and Sullivan rewarded the manager, composing operas of resounding success. In Table 1, you can see the list of operas they produced and, above all, the number of runs these works had in London.

#	Work	Premiere	London runs
1	*Thespis*	26/12/1871 (Gaiety Theatre, London)	63
2	*Trial by Jury*	25/3/1875 (Royalty Theatre, London)	131
3	*The Sorcerer*	17/11/1877 (Opera Comique, London)	178
4	*H.M.S. Pinafore*	25/5/1878 (Opera Comique, London)	571
5	*The Pirates of Penzance*	30/12/1879 (Bijou Theatre, Paignton)	363
6	*Patience*	23/4/1881 (Opera Comique, London)	578
7	*Iolanthe*	25/11/1882 (Savoy Theatre, London)	398
8	*Princess Ida*	5/1/1884 (Savoy Theatre, London)	246
9	*The Mikado*	14/3/1885 (Savoy Theatre, London)	672
10	*Ruddigore*	22/1/1887 (Savoy Theatre, London)	288

[175] Ivi, p. 16.

11	*The Yeomen of the Guard*	3/10/1888 (Savoy Theatre, London)	423
12	*The Gondoliers*	7/12/1889 (Savoy Theatre, London)	554
13	*Utopia, Limited*	7/10/1893 (Savoy Theatre, London)	245
14	*The Grand Duke*	7/3/1896 (Savoy Theatre, London)	123

Table 1: The operas produced by the duo Gilbert-Sullivan.[176]

The success was obtained also by the meticulous work done by Gilbert who travelled to the various places where the operas were set to achieve the maximum realism in the representations of the sceneries and of the manners. He would also supervise the rehearsals to check the precision of every scenic gesture. These works had their own particular style which Charles Hayter describes in the following way: "The facetious tone of the operas is borrowed from the Victorian burlesque, their comic devices from the well-made play tradition of melodrama and farce, and their musical structure from the English romantic opera."[177]

The great success of these light operas encouraged D'Oyly Carte to go on tour abroad, especially in the United States, to gain and retrieve profits which would otherwise have been lost to the pirate copies of their works. This triple collaboration also led to an equal distribution of the profits amongst the three in 1879 and the building of a new theatre, the Savoy Theatre in 1881, in honour of the Savoy operas. Like Bayreuth for Wagner, this would represent the temple for the Gilbert-Sullivan operas.

Every now and then, Sullivan would feel intolerance for light operas. This occurred, for example, during the composition of *The Yeomen of the Guard* in 1889. As Sullivan wrote: "I have lost the liking for writing comic opera, and entertain very grave doubts as to my power of doing it."[178] Believing that his talent was minimised in these works, Sullivan needed a new exploit and so, after a quarrel with Gilbert, the partnership ended in May 1890. Sullivan thus wrote his serious opera, *Ivanhoe* (1891), with a different librettist, Julian Sturgis. The opera had an unprecedented 160 consecutive performances at the newly built Royal English Opera House in Cambridge Circus, directed by D'Oyly Carte. This would also be the only serious opera composed by Sullivan. Gilbert, for his part, wrote librettos for other composers but did

[176] https://www.musicals101.com/gilbertcanon.htm [Last seen: Sunday 13/10/2019.]
[177] Charles Hayter, *op. cit.*, pp. 2-3.
[178] Ivi, p. 19.

not achieve the same success as with Sullivan. The two would collaborate in other two operas, *Utopia, Limited* (1893) and *The Grand Duke* (1896) before Sullivan's death in 1900.

In the letters exchanged between Gilbert, Sullivan and D'Oyly Carte, Gilbert seemed to play an authoritarian role in which his libretto seemed to command over the music. The feeling of serfdom, which derived from Gilbert's behaviour, seemed to have irritated Sullivan and was considered one of the leading causes for the split. Nevertheless, there is evidence that Gilbert would modify plots or wordings if Sullivan did not agree with him. So, in truth:

> William Schwenk Gilbert was not only a sound theatrical craftsman, but also a meticulous versifier, with an extraordinarily wide command of metre, rhyme and assonance. The technical accomplishment of his lyrics was an unfailing stimulus to Sullivan and undoubtedly helped him to devote that extra degree of care to their setting that led to the perfect marriage of word and note which is the hallmark of the best Gilbert and Sullivan operas. Gilbert's satire has not always been appreciated at its proper value, perhaps because it is presented with such a sugary coat of non-sense that no one feels any serious effects after swallowing it. But even a comparatively unsuccessful opera like *Utopia Ltd.* has a libretto of great interest, and its pungent satire on English institutions anticipates some of the more telling strokes in plays like Bernard Shaw's *The Apple Cart* and *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles*.[179]

Gilbert and Sullivan's operas were the true descendants of Gay's *Beggar's Opera*. Like Gay's work, they reflected the English Victorian society and the most current topics of the epoch. For example, the themes of various works like *Trial by jury* or *The Mikado* tackled popular topics like the English legal system and orientalism. The long runs in London demonstrated their ability in dealing with such issues and, at the same time, in entertaining the Londoners. They also offered an extremely valid alternative to the French operetta represented by Offenbach and built an exclusively English trademark that would last for another century after their deaths.

[179] E. W. White, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

3. Modernism

a) Definitions of Modernism

Whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide. Nevertheless, we go on perseveringly, conscientiously […] after a design which more and more ceases to resemble the vision in our minds. So much of the enormous labour of proving the solidity, the likeness to life, of the story is not merely labour thrown away but labour misplaced to the extent of obscuring and blotting out the light of the conception.[180]

These were the words written by Virginia Woolf in 1919 after analysing the modern novels of her time. She saw that the traditional models were now unfit to contain the literary products of the new century. Modernism had just taken its first steps and, as Ezra Pound had stated, the fundamental task now was "to make it new!" In the following years, Modernism would consolidate itself gaining more definite features. Undoubtedly, the fact that Modernism is a current which, for some critics, is still in progress while, for others, has ceased to exist in a recent past, makes it difficult to examine in such a short time lapse. For this reason, it would be useful to consider the various definitions given in time. Let us start from the literary critic, M. H. Abrams, who defined modernism in 1957 in the following way:

The term modernism is widely used to identify new and distinctive features in the subjects, forms, concepts, and styles of literature and the other arts in the early decades of the twentieth century, but especially after World War I (1914–18). The specific features signified by "modernism" (or by the adjective modernist) vary with the user, but many critics agree that it involves a deliberate and radical break with some of the traditional bases not only of Western art, but of Western culture in general. Important intellectual precursors of modernism, in this sense, are thinkers who had questioned the certainties that had supported traditional modes of social organization, religion, and morality, and also traditional ways of conceiving the human self—thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and James G. Frazer […][181]

In 1973, the critic Malcom Bradbury focused instead on the timespan of Modernism and its main features:

[180] Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction" (1919), in Virginia Woolf, *Selected Essays*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008, p. 8.
[181] Meyer Howard Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (1957), Ninth Edition, Wadsworth, Boston 2009, pp. 201-202.

Modernism means the ruffling of the realistic surface of literature by underlying forces; the disturbance may arise, though, from logics solely aesthetic or highly social. Hence, modernism still remains a loose label. We can dispute about when it starts […] and when it ends […]. We can regard it as a timebound concept (say 1890–1930) or a timeless one (including Sterne, Donne, Villon, Ronsard). The best focus remains a body of major writers (James, Conrad, Proust, Mann, Gide, Kafka, Svevo, Joyce, Musil, Faulkner in fiction; Strindberg, Pirandello, Wedekind, Brecht in drama; Mallarmé, Yeats, Eliot, Pound, Rilke, Apollinaire, Stevens in poetry) whose works are aesthetically radical, contain striking technical innovation, emphasize spatial or 'fugal' as opposed to chronological form, tend towards ironic modes, and involve a certain 'dehumanization of art.'[182]

According to J. A. Cuddon in 1977, modernism was:

A comprehensive but vague term for a movement (or tendency) which began to get under way in the closing years of the 19th c. and which has had a wide influence internationally during much of the 20th c. The term pertains to all the creative arts, especially poetry, fiction, drama, painting, music and architecture. There have been various theories as to when the movement (or its tendencies) was at its height (some suggest the 1920s for this) and as to whether the modernist movement is actually over. […] As far as literature is concerned modernism reveals a breaking away from established rules, traditions and conventions, fresh ways of looking at man's position and function in the universe and many (in some cases remarkable) experiments in form and style. It is particularly concerned with language and how to use it (representationally or otherwise) and with writing itself.[183]

In 1990, the British academic, Chris Baldick, focused on the differences between Modernism and its past. He examined the Modernism's need of emancipation from the traditional rules and its search for experimental roads:

modernism, a general term applied retrospectively to the wide range of experimental and avant-garde trends in the literature (and other arts) of the early 20th century […] Modernist literature is characterized chiefly by a rejection of 19th-century traditions and of their consensus between author and reader: the conventions of realism, for instance, were abandoned by Franz Kafka and other novelists, and by expressionist drama, while several poets rejected traditional metres in favour of free verse. Modernist writers tended to see themselves as an avant-garde disengaged from bourgeois values, and disturbed their readers by adopting complex and difficult new forms and styles. […] Modernist writing is predominantly cosmopolitan, and often expresses a

[182] Peter Childs and Roger Fowler, *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms* (1973), Third edition, Routledge, London and New York 2006, p. 145.
[183] John Anthony Bowden Cuddon, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (1977), Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1998, pp. 515-516.

sense of urban cultural dislocation, along with an awareness of new anthropological and psychological theories. Its favoured techniques of juxtaposition and multiple point of view challenge the reader to reestablish a coherence of meaning from fragmentary forms.[184]

In 1999, the critic Edward Quinn, instead, described the detachment of Modernism from the past and the immediate coming of its successor, Postmodernism:

A development in literature and the arts that began in the late 19th century and, in a variety of evolving forms, dominated the cultural landscape until the 1950s when it began to be displaced by Postmodernism. Perhaps the distinguishing feature of modernism is its determination to dispense with the past, in Ezra Pound's phrase "to make it new." In one sense this impulse lies at the basis of every literary movement in history, but what distinguished modernism was the profound sense of intellectual crisis in which it developed. Modernism was a response to the shift in thought and belief precipitated by intellectual developments and discoveries associated with, but not limited to, the names Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud and Albert Einstein.[185]

The last definition considered is the one given by the Professor David Mikics in 2007. He goes back to 1849 to search for the origins of this movement and then focuses on the eternal lack of certainties in a world which feeds itself with chaos:

The term *modernité* was first applied to literature in 1849, by the French writer François René de Chateaubriand. Charles Baudelaire, in the course of his writings on modern art in the 1860s, reflected continually on the revolutionary character of modern life: its speed, confusion, and reckless, sensational moods. But modernism is normally associated with the years from about 1910 through the 1920s, and (frequently) the following few decades. […] Modernists often had a belief in the crisis of twentieth-century civilization: the world's fall into chaos, decadence, or other dismal, yet dramatically exciting, straits. […] Modernism frequently exalted difficulty. The works of writers like Joyce, Ezra Pound, and Gertrude Stein resist the reader, relying on the discordant, the dispersed, and the esoteric. Joyce's intricacies, especially, have kept scholars busy for generations. Modernist difficulty often becomes a way of testing the idea of the work and its tradition: asking us to define anew what a novel or a poem is, or might be.[186]

[184] Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (1990), Second edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001, pp. 159-160.
[185] Edward Quinn, *A Dictionary of Literary and Thematic Terms* (1999), Second edition, Facts on File, New York 2006, pp. 266-267.
[186] David Mikics, *A New Handbook of Literary Terms*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2007, pp. 190-191.

So, in summary, according to Abrams, Modernism was a name given to define a new current which involved all the innovative arts of the 20th century. It was a revolt against the tradition and its promoters were the intellectuals who questioned the certainties on the brink of that period. Bradbury, instead, focuses on the uncertainties concerning the dating of this phenomenon, that could be from 1890 to 1930 or timeless, and offers a list of intellectuals who brought innovations with their radical ideas. Cuddon considers the artistic fields that Modernism influenced after the end of the 19th century and questions whether Modernism is still active. Furthermore, he considers the split with tradition and its experimental characteristics. Also Baldick insists on the rejection of the tradition and the view of the Modernists as an avant-garde movement that started at the beginning of the 20th century and that focused on the innovations of the period, trying to give sense to a fragmentary world. From Quinn's point of view, Modernism goes back to the 19th century and ends in the 1950s, supplanted by Postmodernism. Its objective, always according to Quinn, was to distance itself from the past even though it ended up trapped in an intellectual crisis caused by the new discoveries in the various fields of knowledge. Finally Mikics, like Quinn, finds the origins of Modernism in the 19th century but considers it a real movement only from 1910 onwards. The chaos derived from the world instability created a literature that was difficult to understand and that was discordant to the reader. Always according to Mikics, the Modernist work urged the reader to search for a new definition of what was literary.

The differences resulting from the various definitions is a consequence of the period in which each of them was written. In general, the issues are always the same: the origins of the movement, the opposition to tradition, the war effects and its experimental nature.

To conclude, the fact that Modernism resulted in a long extended period led to different variations of the term. There is, for example, the term "High Modernism" referring to the modernism that came after the First World War. It generally considered all the arts including "the achievements of Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Picasso, and Giacometti as well as Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and Virginia Woolf."[187] Frank Kermode instead uses also terms like "palaeo-modernism and neo-modernism. The former refers to early manifestations of new movements concluding,

[187] Ivi, p. 190.

perhaps, c. 1914-20; the latter to movements since that time."[188] One of the most popular terms, Post-Modernism, represented to some a direct succession to Modernism in the 1950s.[189]

b) Modernity and Modernism

This quarrel first began (as I have heard it affirmed by an old dweller in the neighbourhood) about a small spot of ground, lying and being upon one of the two tops of the hill Parnassus; the highest and largest of which had, it seems, been time out of mind in quiet possession of certain tenants, called the Ancients; and the other was held by the Moderns. But these, disliking their present station, sent certain ambassadors to the Ancients, complaining of a great nuisance; how the height of that part of Parnassus quite spoiled the prospect of theirs, especially towards the *East*; and therefore, to avoid a war, offered them the choice of this alternative– either that the Ancients would please to remove themselves and their effects down to the lower summity, which the Moderns would graciously surrender to them, and advance into their place; or else the said Ancients will give leave to the Moderns to come with shovels and mattocks, and level the said hill as low as they shall think it convenient.[190]

Jonathan Swift in his *The Battle of the Books* describes the famous quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns. It began in the 16th century and involved great European thinkers like François Rabelais and Francis Bacon. In the past, Modernism had a negative connotation. The term "modern" meant something that was taking place at the moment and was consequently undervalued. It was equivalent to something ordinary, fashionable and only transitory. The culture of the Renaissance and the 18th century, instead, exalted the ancient forms of art, particularly drama and sculpture.

With the beginning of the famous quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns, something was changing. The main question which the opposing parties would confront themselves was concerning the greatest amongst those belonging to the Ancient world and those to Modernity. The main argument of the Ancients was that they were the first to introduce literary innovations while the Moderns just presented a dismal reproduction of their work. The Moderns' point of view can be summed up by Isaac Newton's famous sentence: "If I have

[188] J. A. B. Cuddon, *op. cit.*, p. 515.
[189] E. Quinn, *op. cit.*, p. 266.
[190] Jonathan Swift, "The Battle of the Books" (1704), in Jonathan Swift, *A Tale of a Tub and Other Works*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008, p. 106.

seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of Giants."[191] According to Newton, the Moderns have made further discoveries thanks to the previous knowledge acquired from the Ancients. This quarrel would continue in the centuries showing that the question concerning modernity has always been in the mind of every writer of his own generation.

Concerning Modernity, the French symbolist poet, Charles Baudelaire in the mid-19th century, wrote:

> Modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable. There was a form of modernity for every painter of the past; the majority of the fine portraits that remain to us from former times are clothed in the dress of their own day. […] You have no right to despise this transitory fleeting element, the metamorphoses of which are so frequent, nor to dispense with it. If you do, you inevitably fall into the emptiness of an abstract and indefinable beauty, like that of the One and only woman of the time before the Fall.[192]

In this quotation, Charles Baudelaire was referring to art and, to be more precise, to the modern painter. The French poet tells us that modernity did not belong solely to the period in which he wrote but also to every artist in every period. In brief, the period which the artist was living was the modernity for his time. Baudelaire belonged to a period in continuous change with "its speed, confusion, and reckless, sensational moods."[193] Above all, Paris, his home city, was being reconstructed by the Baron Haussmann after Napoleon III's order to demolish part of the city from 1854 to 1870. Baudelaire could see the results of this destruction, this modernization, this mixture amongst the different classes and all its consequences. In poems like, "The Swan", the French poet portrayed the image of a city damaged by the new changes that Modernity had brought. By means of his poetry, Baudelaire wanted to express the culture of the "vie moderne."

The voluntary destruction of Paris was to resemble to the various destructions, consequences of the Great Wars, that were to occur in the 20th century, the period that was to be known as Modernism. In Baudelaire, both modernity and modernism coincided.[194] The 20th century was also going to be remembered as the "Short twentieth century." This derived

[191] Letter by Isaac Newton to Robert Hooke on February 5, 1676.
[192] Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life" (1863).
[193] D. Mikics, *op. cit.*, p. 190.
[194] Michael P. Steinberg, "The Politics and Aesthetics of Operatic Modernism", in The Journal of Interdisciplinary History, Vol 36, No. 4, Opera and Society: Part II (Spring, 2006), p. 629.

from the title of a book written by the historian Eric Hobsbawm in 1994. The period was defined "short" because of the two Great Wars and the Cold War which followed that had affected the entire world and cost many lives. As a consequence, also the century had been shortened with the world economies beginning to take off only by the 60s towards an affluent and consumer society. Before examining the effects of Modernism, let us look briefly at the historical context that moulded it.

c) The 20th century: a historical account

The beginning of the 20th century saw the reaffirmation of the Western powers. The British, the French, the German and the Austro-Hungarian empires were dominating the international scenes with their policies of colonialism and capitalism. Another power, the United States of America was also growing at an incredible rate. The year 1905 was to bear witness to an unprecedented event in world history, the loss of the Russian empire to the Japanese one in the Russo-Japanese War. It was the first time that a European power had lost to a non-European state and this event will have a deep impact on the Russian monarchy.

The next fundamental event occurred in 1914. It was the start of the First World War, also called the Great War or World War I. The heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne was assassinated by a Serbian nationalist. This started a war between the Central Powers (the German Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria) and the Allied Powers (initially France, the British Empire, Russia and Serbia). In 1915, with the signing of the Treaty of London, the United States and Italy decided to enter the war with the Allied Powers. The year 1917, instead, saw the surrender of Russia to the Germans. One year later, Russia became the first Communist country. In 1918, the war ended with terrible consequences. Theoretically, it was not different from a nineteenth century war with the exception that modernization had brought new inventions, viz. machine guns, tanks and other lethal weapons. This was one of the bloodiest conflicts in which around 9 million fighters and 7 million civilians died. The trenches, the mud, the feeling of desolation would be unforgettable symbols of this conflict.

The Treaty of Versailles of 1919 represented a crucial crossroad in world history. The idea of organizing a peace treaty in France, a country which Germany had invaded twice in

the last fifty years was a great error. The French prime minister, Georges Clemenceau, had experienced these two invasions and wanted to weaken considerably Germany. Consequently, the Germans were forced to sign a document in which they promised to pay reparations and take full responsibility for the War. Furthermore, part of their territory was to be occupied by the Allied Powers. The British economist, John Maynard Keynes, participated to the peace conference and wrote in the same year his book, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*. The text was an account of the decisions taken by the leaders of the winning countries and it became famous for his admonishment concerning Germany:

> Economic privation proceeds by easy stages, and so long as men suffer it patiently the outside world cares very little. Physical efficiency and resistance to disease slowly diminish, but life proceeds somehow, until the limit of human endurance is reached at last and counsels of despair and madness stir the sufferers from the lethargy which precedes the crisis. The man shakes himself, and the bonds of custom are loosed. The power of ideas is sovereign, and he listens to whatever instruction of hope, illusion, or revenge is carried to them in the air.[195]

The treaty has left other lasting effects. The American president, Woodrow Wilson, supported fourteen points of which the most important was ethnic self-determination. Consequently, the Austro-Hungarian Empire crumbled into smaller states like Czechoslovakia, Austria and Yugoslavia. The American support for these smaller independent countries led to the failure of the Allies to keep the promise made to Italy, that of giving them the region of Dalmatia. Moreover, after the signature of all the countries involved, there was the sudden decision of the United States to live in isolation from Europe. Now, the German question was a problem solely for the British and the French.

The mutilated victory of Italy, because of the unkept promises, encouraged nationalist parties to gain prominence. One of them, the Fascist party, achieved power democratically in 1922. Nationalism was a response to the communist wave which was spreading around Europe in the first post-war period. The Great Depression of 1929 was to affect dramatically all the World powers. France tried to get out of this situation by exploiting to exhaustion the German Saar territory. This resulted in a terrible stagflation in Germany that ultimately caused the feelings described accurately by Keynes. The Germans needed a saviour who could bring

[195] John Maynard Keynes, *The Economic Consequences of Peace* (1919).

back Germany to its prestigious past and Adolf Hitler was the right man at the right time. In 1933, his Nazist party won democratically the elections in Germany and built a warmongering system that would lead to another major war.

The German foreign policy was one of expansion in which they regained control of their territory, the Saar, followed by the annexation of Austria and then Czechoslovakia. In the meantime, a civil war took place in Spain from 1936 to 1939 in which the Fascists had the better over the Communists. In 1939, after the invasion of Poland by Germany, Great Britain and France declared war against Hitler. It was the start of the Second World War.

The "Consequences of Peace" mentioned by Keynes had caused the outbreak of the Second World War. Basically, World War II was the continuation of World War I. It was the result of the wrong decisions made by the winners at the time. During the first conflict, no battle had been fought on the German soil. So, the Germans knew nothing about the war except what was written on the newspapers which were controlled by the government. They believed they were winning and, consequently, the treatment that they had received after Versailles was considered unexpected and unfair. In the long-run, the choice of the Allies to humiliate Germany had backfired against them, stirring up the desire of their opponents for a rightly-deserved revenge.

The Second World War was fought by two opposing military fronts. On the one side, there were the Axis (Germany, Japan and Italy) and, on the other, the Allies (Great Britain, France, United States and Russia). Initially, Germany and Russia had signed a non-aggression pact which ended after the Germans invaded Russia in 1940. Before this event, nearly all of Europe, above all France, had fallen to the German "blitzkrieg", the so-called German lightning war. In the meantime, Britain was suffering from German air raids. After the surprise attack of the Japanese at Pearl Harbor, the United States entered the conflict with the Allies, influencing considerably the final outcome of the War. After the failed invasion of Russia, Germany was practically attacked in two fronts. On the east, the Russian troops were now advancing to Berlin while, on the west, Allied troops with mostly American and British soldiers had landed in Normandy, France, in 1944. In 1945, the War in Europe had ended with Germany's capitulation. In August of the same year, the entire conflict was put to an end by the atomic bombings at Hiroshima and Nagasaki made by the Americans that killed about 226,000 Japanese civilians. Japan immediately surrendered and the War was over. The

casualties of the Second World War marked a tragic record of about 85 million people making it the bloodiest war in history.

Learning from the errors of Versailles, the Allies (United States of America, Great Britain and Russia) decided to avoid retaliations as done in the past. There have only been trials at Nuremberg to judge the Nazis who had participated in the Holocaust and in other war crimes. The most relevant fact was the choice of the United States to participate to European life by creating the United Nations and promoting the Marshall Plan, an economic assistance plan to help European countries avoid economic crisis.

Despite these positive premises, tormented years of peace followed the Post-war period. Instead of a natural phase of human rehabilitation and solidarity, a new "cold" breeze stirred the old and new continents. The differences amongst the winners, concealed previously during the conflict, had started to be overtly visible. By 1947, the Allies' *marriage de convenance* had ended due to the differing and irreconcilable ideologies, which unavoidably clashed, creating a new scenario. The explosion of a Russian nuclear bomb in 1949 had confirmed the new balance of power. The remnants of the Great War were about to face a new conflict, a "cold war" with two new dominating superpowers: the Soviet Union and the United States of America.

The US, during this time lapse, had seen a great change in its domestic propaganda. The initially affectionate and trustworthy Uncle Joe (so was called Joseph Stalin), was now promoted as the new Hitler, the new terrible foe of mankind. As a consequence, communism was described as the new peril. A Red Scare spread in the country from the late 40s onwards. By now, there was the firm belief that communists in heart were laying snares inside the American capitalist society. These were on the point of sabotaging the system and so sell confidential material to the enemy. The senator J. R. McCarthy took up the reigns of this anti-communist campaign. Lists were made of possible collaborationists, which included mostly intellectuals, people who had once talked favourably about Communism or who had ideas that resembled to it. Amongst these could be found great personages like Charlie Chaplin, Albert Einstein, Thomas Mann and Orson Welles.

In Europe, the situation was even worse. Great cities like Warsaw and Dresden had been razed to the ground. Berlin, in the end, had been split into two areas while Vienna, instead, had managed to avoid the same fate. London had been strongly bombarded during

the War years and whole areas were being reconstructed. Furthermore, Great Britain was experiencing decolonisation and granted India independence in 1947, losing its Superpower status. Other capital cities like Rome and Paris were slowly emerging from the years of forced, unwanted occupation. The greatest change was what Churchill called the setting up of an "iron curtain." In his famous speech of 1946, he said:

From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic aniron curtainhas descended across the Continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe. Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest and Sofia, all these famous cities and the populations around them lie in what I must call the Soviet sphere, and all are subject in one form or another, not only to Soviet influence but to a very high and, in some cases, increasing measure of control from Moscow.[196]

Now "from Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic", Europe had been separated in two opposing fronts, the Western and the Eastern one. The old continent had maintained its status of danger zone and the so-called peace settlement longingly yearned for was replaced by a chess-match scenario, based on possible threats and ideological wars. To consolidate the existing status quo, the North Atlantic Alliance, also called NATO, was signed by 12 members in 1949 that included the United States, Great Britain, France and Italy. After the inclusion of West Germany in the NATO in 1955, the Soviet Union created an opposing faction, the Warsaw Pact, which was signed by 7 countries of the Eastern Bloc (Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland and Romania). The Cold War, a war which could not admit a direct confrontation between the two nuclear Superpowers, had begun.

After the Berlin blockade that took place for the control of the German capital city, the two Superpowers confronted themselves indirectly in Korea from 1950 to 1953. In this event, the newly proclaimed People's Republic of China, part of the Communist bloc, intervened. A period of adjustment followed in Hungary (1956) and again Berlin (1961) before the next major and fundamental crisis, in which humankind risked extinction, the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962). The miscomprehensions between the two Superpowers and the installation of missiles by the Soviets in Cuba had caused the escalation to a quasi nuclear war. Fortunately, the

[196] Winston Churchill in a speech given at Fulton, Missouri in the United States on March 5, 1946. [Patrick Wright, *Iron Curtain: From Stage to Cold War*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, p. 43]

United States did not intervene in Cuba and the Soviets decided to dismantle the weapons in the island in time. The term MAD (Mutual assured destruction) was coined in that period to remind of the consequences of a possible direct conflict. From that date onwards, a period of détente and coexistence began between the two sides.

The 50s and mostly the 60s saw rapid economic growth in the European countries belonging to the Western bloc, the American allies. New terms such as consumerism and welfare state spread around the continent. The 1960s saw the USSR fixing internal problems like the Prague Spring (1968) while the Americans were trying to win the Vietnam War, the first war broadcasted on TV. The violence of this conflict favoured the rise of anti-war movements.

The 1970s saw the rapprochement of the United States to Communist China and the collapse of the Russo-American détente after the Soviet-Afghan War (1979). Meanwhile, the Soviet Union was imploding after a prolonged economic stagnation which had brought the Russians to buy American corn. This dependence to America and the economic crisis had corroded the Superpower status of the Soviet Union and the final collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 was the inevitable consequence. The Cold War had ended.

Ironically, the Cold War was the period in which less conflicts occurred. This was because of the fear that a conflict could ultimately lead to Armageddon. In the Post-Cold War era, many conflicts broke out around the world like the Yugoslav Wars (1991-2001). The forced peace was replaced by a state of uncertainty. Today, there is an attempt to fill the gap left by the fall of the Soviet Union. There are many claimants like the European Union, the rising China or the Soviet Union to re-adjust the existing balance of power. Time will tell us if any of these will succeed but, in the meantime, a renewed Pax Americana is overly present.

d) The "Age of Anxiety." A literary overview of the period

Crisis is inevitably the central term of art in discussions of this turbulent cultural moment. Overused as it has been, it still glows with justification. War! Strike! Women! The Irish! Or (within the popular press), Nihilism! Relativism! Fakery! This century had scarcely grown used to its own name, before it learned the twentieth would be the epoch of crisis, real and manufactured, physical and metaphysical, material and symbolic. The catastrophe of the First World War, and before that, the labor struggles, the emergence of feminism, the race for empire, these inescapable forces of turbulent social modernization were not simply looming on the outside

as the destabilizing context of cultural Modernism; they penetrated the interior of artistic invention. They gave subjects to writers and painters, and they also gave forms, forms suggested by industrial machinery, or by the chuffing of cars, or even, most horribly, the bodies broken in the war.[197]

In Britain, the beginning of the 20th century was not different from the last years of the Victorian age. The working conditions of the lower classes were always terrible and inhuman while the situation of the bourgeoisie was always flourishing. This general order of things seemed destined to last forever but the First World War was to change the overall scenario. Andrew Sanders starts his chapter on Modernism[198] with the interesting story of a British architect, Sir Edward Luytens, who went in France to see whether there was a need for permanent memorials. In 1917, in a letter to his wife Emily Lytton, he wrote:

What humanity can endure and suffer is beyond belief. The battlefields – the obliteration of all human endeavour and achievement and the human achievement of destruction is bettered by the poppies and wild flowers that are as friendly to an unexploded shell as they are to the leg of a garden seat in Surrey. It is all a sense of wonderment, how can such things be. […] The half-ruined places are more impressive for there you can picture what a place might have been. The graveyards, haphazard from the needs of much to do and little time for thought. And than a ribbon of isolated graves like a milky way across miles of country where men were tucked in where they fell. […] One thinks for the moment no other monument is needed. […] But the only monument can be one where the endeavour is sincere to make such a moment permanent – a solid ball of bronze![199]

The First World War had broken the feeling of optimism that had derived from the first years of progress and economic growth, a strong characteristic of the first part of the century. In truth, the war had only eliminated the tarnish that had beguiled a generation with false promises. It was no coincidence that Virginia Woolf stated in 1924: "On or around December 1910, human character changed. […] The change was not sudden and definite like that. But a change there was, nevertheless."[200] According to Virginia Woolf, something had already occurred before World War I. Undoubtedly the new art exhibitions of the Post-Impressionists

[197] Michael Levenson, "Introduction", in Michael Levenson (edited by), *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2005.
[198] Andrew Sanders, *The Short Oxford History of English Literature*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1994, p. 505.
[199] Jeroen Geurst, *Cemeteries of the Great War by Sir Edwin Lutyens*, 010 Publishers, Rotterdam 2010, pp. 19-20.
[200] Virginia Woolf, "Character in Fiction" (1924), in Virginia Woolf, *Selected Essays*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008, p. 38.

in 1910 had altered the view of the Londoners, but there was certainly more to that. The acceptance of an art that was not traditional was the consequence of events that had already started the century before. Edward Quinn lists a sequence of events that have altered the human perception of the world:

> Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) uprooted the traditional view of "man made in the image and likeness of God," replacing it with one of man as the descendant of an ape. Marx's view of the economic determinism that governed western history and culture directly challenged the idealist philosophy of its time. Nietzsche's declaration of "the death of God" summarized the dismissal of the very ground of the Hebraic/Christian tradition, while Freud's representation of the significance of the unconscious called into question the notion of rational free choice, and Einstein's conception of space/time uprooted the straightforward chronological narrative forms of the 19th century.[201]

T. S. Eliot, one of the main exponents of the Modernist thought, compared this situation of uncertainty to the one that the Metaphysical poets had suffered three centuries before. The idea of mankind as the centre of the universe was called into question by the recent scientific discoveries. The demonstration of a heliocentric universe and the consequent fallibility of the Church had caused a terrible stir in the intellectual world of their time. The similarities to the Modernist uncertainty made current the poems of John Donne and George Herbert. It also demonstrated the timeless relationship between history and all the various "new" movements, as simple enhancements of the past. Modernism could be seen as an enhancement of the Metaphysical movement, with different tools but the similar feeling of anguish. Inevitably, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) represented a sort of collage of fragments belonging to the great traditions of the past and the feeling of barrenness that civilization had achieved by then.

This impasse was not tolerated by the younger generation. For example, intellectuals like Auden went to fight with the Spanish communists in the Spanish civil war in 1936 but returned dejected by the impossibility of changing things. Virginia Woolf described perfectly the situation of the writer during this period in her essay, "The Leaning Tower" (1940). She starts first depicting the writer of the previous century, the intellectual belonging to the middle-class:

[201] Edward Quinn, *op. cit.*, p. 267.

[…] if you look closely you will see that almost every writer who has practised his art successfully had been taught it. […] He sits upon a tower raised above the rest of us; a tower built first on his parents' station, then on his parents' gold. It is a tower of the utmost importance; it decides his angle of vision; it affects his power of communication.

Then Virginia Woolf talks about the last writers who have had the possibility of standing on this "steady tower":

All through the nineteenth century, down to August 1914, that tower was a steady tower. The writer was scarcely conscious either of his high station or of his limited vision. Many of them had sympathy, great sympathy, with other classes; they wished to help the working class to enjoy the advantages of the tower class; but they did not wish to destroy the tower, or to descend from it—rather to make it accessible to all. […] For when the crash came in 1914 all those young men, who were to be the representative writers of their time, had their past, their education, safe behind them, safe within them. They had known security; they had the memory of a peaceful boyhood, the knowledge of a settled civilisation. Even though the war cut into their lives, and ended some of them, they wrote, and still write, as if the tower were firm beneath them. […]

The problem lies with the generation which has not known the steadfastness of the tower. As a result, life was not similar to the stories that had been related to them. It was completely different and needed, therefore, to be recounted in a different manner:

From that group let us pass to the next—to the group which began to write about 1925 and, it may be, came to an end as a group in 1939. […] They adhere much more closely than the names of their predecessors. But at first sight there seems little difference, in station, in education. Mr. Auden in a poem written to Mr. Isherwood says: Behind us we have stucco suburbs and expensive educations. They are tower dwellers like their predecessors, the sons of well-to-do parents, who could afford to send them to public schools and universities. But what a difference in the tower itself, in what they saw from the tower! When they looked at human life what did they see? Everywhere change; everywhere revolution. In Germany, in Russia, in Italy, in Spain, all the old hedges were being rooted up; all the old towers were being thrown to the ground. Other hedges were being planted; other towers were being raised. There was communism in one country; in another fascism. The whole of civilisation, of society, was changing. There was, it is true, neither war nor revolution in England itself. All those writers had time to write many books before 1939. But even in England towers that were built of gold and stucco were no longer steady towers. They were leaning towers. The books were written under the influence of change, under the threat of war.

Realism and naturalism could not reflect 20th century. There had been a clear radical break from the traditional outlook on life. The Western culture was experiencing a period of dissonance and harshness that the War had magnified. The place of mankind in the world, in religion, morality and society was strongly questioned. Any movement that could explain these changes was accepted. Therefore, Modernism gave rise to various new currents in all the creative arts such as Post-impressionism, Expressionism, Futurism, Imagism, Vorticism, Dadaism and Surrealism.[202] Everything that appeared experimental and against the tradition was taken into consideration. It was important to create and not preserve the past. Experiments in forms and style like the stream of consciousness, Joyce's idiosyncratic languages and epiphany became the norm. It was important to find a solution to free people from the apocalyptic and disaster scenarios that the "Age of Anxiety"[203] had created.

e) The Modern Melodrama

In regards to the problematics with the term "modern" which was seen in the past as something ordinary and of an inferior quality, melodrama and particularly music did not suffer from such problematics. The Ancients had left little evidence of their music and so what was modern practically was also "ancient" musically speaking. Music was an infant in the arts and due to its recentness, it adhered perfectly to the Modern ideals because it "had always tended to assign privilege to the up to date and the novel."[204]

The 19th century, saw the rise of the Wagnerian aesthetics which influenced the first operatic Modernist movements. One of its consequences was the Verismo school that gained its prominence with Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* (1890) and Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci* (1892). The 20th century saw the Verismo school continue to dominate the operatic scenes or at least for the first quarter of the century. Giacomo Puccini's *Tosca* (1900), *Madama Butterfly* (1904) and *Turandot* (1924-1926) gained a stable place in the world operatic repertory. Also other operas like Francesco Cilea's *Adriana Lecouvreur* (1902), Gustave Charpentier's *Louise* (1900) in France and Eugen d'Albert's *Tiefland* (1903) in Germany were widely

[202] P. Childs & Roger Fowler, *op. cit.*, p. 145.
[203] It is the title that Mario Praz gave to the chapter XXI of his manual, *Storia della Letteratura Inglese*, on Modernism. It is also the title of a long poem written by W. H. Auden in 1947.
[204] Daniel Albright (edited by), *Modernism and Music: an Anthology of Sources*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 2004, p. 1.

performed. But all this was simply a flash in the pan. It did not represent the actual situation of opera at the time.

A glimpse of the future had been anticipated by Richard Wagner with the introduction of a specific chord, known as the Tristan chord[205], in his first leitmotiv consecrated to the male protagonist of the opera. Its use distanced the work from the traditional tonal harmony and was the first step towards atonality. As the British philosopher, Bryan Magee explained:

> The first chord of *Tristan*, known simply as 'the Tristan chord', remains the most famous single chord in the history of music. It contains within itself not one but two dissonances, thus creating within the listener a double desire, agonizing in its intensity, for resolution. The chord to which it then moves resolves one of these dissonances but not the other, thus providing resolution-yet-not-resolution.[206]

Wagner's ideals, aesthetics and innovation stroke initially the young Claude Debussy. He belonged to the Symbolist movement which had been strongly affected by the Wagnerian reform. The French composer set to music Maurice Maeterlinck's symbolist play *Pelléas et Mélisande*, which premiered in 1902 and had an obvious Wagnerian influence. Obviously, the Tristan chord was present with its dissonances and its continuous cross-reference to Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. Both operas recounted love stories in a mythical world. Like Wagner, Debussy had re-elaborated himself the libretto and his music was represented as a continuous flow. Debussy's work had many similarities with Wagner's opera but the French composer avoided copying the German maestro. His music was not as impetuous as Wagner's but soft and caressing. For this reason, it was defined also as an impressionist opera. The text with its rhythm and its clarity prevailed acoustically over the music, leaving a French alternative to Wagner's revolution. At all events, *Pelléas et Melisande* was not an easy opera for a spectator to attend "but its difficulties also measure its achievement, as being one of the few operas to have engaged with the typically twentieth-century idea that reality is not merely given, but both demands interpretation and can defeat it." [207]

Dissonance is, instead, the main feature that is immediately perceivable when listening to Richard Strauss's first operas, *Salome* (1905) and *Elektra* (1909). With the latter, Strauss

[205] "A chord named after the first chord in Richard Wagner's Tristan und Isolde. The original Tristan chord consists of F, B, D-sharp, and G-sharp, but the name applies to any chord with the same intervals. It is also called the half-diminished seventh chord." [https://musicterms.artopium.com/t/Tristanchord.htm, last seen: October 21, 2019.]
[206] Bryan Magee, *Wagner and Philosophy*, Allen Lane, London 2000, p. 208.
[207] B. Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

began his profitable collaboration with the poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal. Furthermore, his music had undergone a sudden change leaving less space to dissonance and a return to a late-Romantic music style. Other outcomes of this partnership were successful operas like *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911), *Ariadne auf Naxos* (1912) and *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (1919).

The First World War brought a change in the music tastes. There was a revolt against all the rhetoric, the exhibitionism of all the feelings in favour of solid techniques and a sentiment of antipathy towards those works that were obscure, nuanced and indefinite. Music needed to represent now the inner disorders and the spiritual needs of this epoch hit by a world war. The uncertainties caused by it made it impossible to stick to the previous tangible laws. There was a need for exact and stable lines to follow. A solution was found by the Second Viennese School.

Arnold Schoenberg had taught in Vienna from 1903 to 1925 to a group of students that would be known as the Second Viennese School. Amongst his pupils, there were Alban Berg and Anton Webern. Schoenberg had focused on an expressionist musical style which was called atonality. It was the opposition to the tonal music, the one that is present in all the classical music pieces and that follows a key. The Austrian maestro expressed his ideals in the monodrama, *Erwartung* (1909). Later on, he developed a dodecaphonic system, a twelve-note serialism. This theory was based upon the equality of the notes where no note would receive a major use than the others. By doing this, the music would not belong to a determinate key. In addition, Schoenberg developed what he called *sprechgesang*. This was accomplished by:

> […] being precisely aware of the difference between a *sung tone* and a *spoken tone*: the sung tone maintains the pitch unaltered; the spoken tone does indicate it, but immediately abandons it again by falling or rising. But the performer must take great care not to lapse into a singsong speech pattern. That is absolutely not intended. The goal is certainly not at all a realistic, natural speech. On the contrary, the difference between ordinary speech and speech that collaborates in a musical form must be made plain. But it should not call singing to mind either.[208]

Alban Berg followed in a certain way the diktats of his maestro when composing *Wozzeck* (1925) and *Lulu* (1935), the latter left incomplete after his sudden death. In these

[208] Arnold Schoenberg, "Composer's Foreword, *Pierrot Lunaire*, op. 21", in Arnold Schoenberg, *Verklärte Nacht and Pierrot Lunaire*, English translation by Stanley Appelbaum, Dover Publications, New York 1994, p. 54.

operas, Berg showed the dramatist's narrative authority followed by a psychological opacity of the depersonalised characters. The style used would be Expressionism, similar to an imperfect musical analogy with painting. The only main difference with Schoenberg was his use of a Romantic lyricism that preserved Berg's operas in the repertory. In regards to the great English operatic renaissance that followed, this will be treated in the next section.

To sum up, according to Michael P. Steinberg, operatic modernism had as its referents the German speaking artists and stretched "from 1883 to 1933, even more precisely from February 1883 (Richard Wagner's death) through January 1933 (Adolf Hitler's accession)."[209] Of this period, Schorske used two operas, Berg's opera *Wozzeck* and Richard Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*, to explain the two different Modernisms present in opera:

> What we have, then, is a confrontation between two Modernisms: first, a Modernism that rejects its prehistory in favor of exploring in depth, frontally, the new issues as they present themselves to us now (this is the case of Berg); and a second Modernism, which addresses the issues obliquely, nuanced, and deeply respectful of the historical legacy that provides the material and the means with which the contemporary situation can be faced metaphorically (the case of Strauss). By looking at all these strands, we can indeed find operatic Modernism.[210]

f) The Twentieth Century Opera in English

> English opera always seems to me, perhaps too hopefully, the Cinderella of the arts. […] The three things English opera needs, as does any opera, are business organisation (including cash), public goodwill, and composers to write new operas. Never yet in this country have these three things coincided. […] All the same, one wonders whether there may not be one or two satisfactory ones among them all. After all, the operatic repertoire of today is terribly narrow; only prejudice or undue box-office caution can be keeping out the masterpieces we already know exist.[211]

The 20th century saw the continuation of the successful English Musical Renaissance. Its main representatives had been Gilbert and Sullivan. By the turn of the century, other exponents belonging to the second generation of this movement achieved success. The most

[209] Michael P. Steinberg, *op. cit.*, p. 632.
[210] Carl E. Schorske, "Operatic Modernism", in *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 36, No. 4, Opera and Society: Part II (Spring, 2006), p. 681.
[211] Introduction by Benjamin Britten. [E. W. White, *The Rise*, pp. 13-14.]

renowned were undoubtedly Gustav Holst and Ralph Vaughan Williams. Holst composed and wrote the libretto himself of his chamber opera, *Savitri* (1909) while Vaughan Williams composed *Hugh the Drover, or Love in the Stocks* (1919), with a libretto written by the theatre critic Harold Child. He would compose also another opera, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1951) in the last years of his career, writing himself the libretto. These operas would achieve a moderate success.

It is with Benjamin Britten that English opera starts to gain worldwide acclaim. His *Peter Grimes* (1945) became immediately an international hit after its premiere at the Sadler's Wells Theatre. Two years later, it was performed at the Covent Garden and later on in the greatest operatic theatres throughout the world, including the Metropolitan of New York and La Scala of Milan. He composed other twelve operas which include *Albert Herring* (1947), *The Beggar's Opera* (1948), *Billy Budd* (1951), *The Turn of the Screw* (1954), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1960), *Owen Wingrave* (1971) and *Death in Venice* (1973). Britten's popularity abroad could be testified by the premiere of *The Turn of the Screw* that took place at the Teatro La Fenice in Venice. In his works, Britten collaborated with different types of writers for his librettos. In one case, Britten himself wrote the libretto of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with the tenor, Peter Pears. The famous novelist, E. M. Forster worked instead on the libretto of *Billy Budd* together with Eric Crozier, a theatre director and librettist. Crozier wrote the libretto of *Albert Herring* and other two operas. Three were also the librettos written by the British art critic, Myfawyny Piper. Probably the most renowned female librettist, she worked on three of the last operas of Britten, *The Turn of the Screw*, *Owen Wingrave* and *Death in Venice*. In his greatest operas like *Peter Grimes*, *Billy Budd* and *The Turn of Screw*, Britten showed a great ability in giving life to the sense of alienation of the protagonists.

After World War II, two English composers dealt with mythical personages. Sir William Walton composed *Troilus and Cressida* (1954) while Sir Michael Tippett, *King Priam* (1962). They both obtained moderate successes but anyway distant from Britten's exploits.

Opera in the United States, instead, was living a new productive phase. The driving force were the economic innovations that derived from the first recordings and the radio broadcasts. The microphone was also introduced in 1925. Besides, the growing American hegemony had favoured the diffusion of jazz and blues, two purely American products. The

United States had at the time, the two world dominant composers, Arnold Schoenberg and Igor Stravinsky but the first to make himself a name was George Gershwin with his "folk" opera, *Porgy and Bess* (1935), an adaptation from DuBose Heyward's novel done by the author himself. While Schoenberg did not produce operas in English, Stravinsky instead composed the neo-classical opera, *The Rake's Progress* (1951), with Chester Kallman and the great poet, W. H. Auden, as librettists.

Auden had previously collaborated with Benjamin Britten on his first vocal work, the operetta, *Paul Bunyan* (1941), which obtained only negative reviews due to the inexperience of both artists. After *The Rake's Progress*, Auden's greater knowledge of the operatic field and the collaboration with Kallman, helped to produce another important libretto in English, Hans Werner Henze's *The Bassarids* (1966). In America, other operas in English like Gian Carlo Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors* (1951), Leonard Bernstein's *Candide* (1956), Samuel Barber's *Vanessa* (1958) and Philip Glass's *Einstein on the Beach* (1976) obtained success. I will not dwell too much on these works because some of them will be examined thoroughly in the "Case studies" section. After the Second World War, it was obvious that the operatic field was speaking English. Most of the newest works were written in English and not always by English-speaking composers.

4. "The Last refuge of the High style": literary critics on the libretto

a) Critics on the Libretto.

For the composer, I should like to believe that the essential problem is to clarify the central dramatic idea, to refine the vision. This cannot be left to the librettist; the dramatist is the composer.[212]

Let us begin with a comment made by a famous musicologist of the 20th century, Joseph Kerman. The situation does not seem to have changed with the turn of the century. Librettos are still valued as texts that have to do more with music than with literature. In Kerman's words, there is the traditional view of the composer playing the role of the puppeteer while the librettist represented a mere puppet who obeyed to his master. The second citation, instead, comes from the first edition of the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*:

In Italy, opera emerged, based on the assumption that the dialogue of Greek tragedy was sung rather than spoken; but when music dictates the meter of dramatic dialogue, relegating language to a secondary function, the work does not fall into the province of dramatic poetry and hence will not be considered here.[213]

The musicologist Cohen does not even consider the libretto. It is because of this so-called "secondary function" that makes the libretto appear as totally dependent on the music and not a valid independent literary text. This idea of its dependency on music, in this century, is well portrayed by Richard Strauss. In a letter to his librettist, he states: "Except for the person who wants to set it to music, nobody is able to judge a serious and poetically accomplished libretto before having heard it performed together with its music."[214]

As happens during any process of change, the following orthodox viewpoints represented the beliefs of a majority, but not of all the intellectuals of the period. The

[212] Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama*, Vintage, New York 1956, p. 267.
[213] M. Cohen, *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1965.
[214] Richard Strauss, *Letter to Hugo von Hofmannsthal*, May 3, 1928. [Ulrich Weisstein, "The Libretto as Literature" (1961), in Walter Bernhart (edited by), *Selected Essays on Opera by Ulrich Weisstein*, Rodopi, Amsterdam and New York 2006, p. 3.]

comparative literature professor and critic, Ulrich Weisstein, wrote an interesting essay, "The libretto as literature" in which he said:

It is well to remind the denunciators of the libretto that the spoken drama itself is based on a number of highly artificial conventions, few of which, to be sure, are as far removed from 'lived' reality as are their operatic counterparts. Every drama is a Gesamtkunstwerk whose printed text resembles a musical score in that it merely suggests the theatrical possibilities which are inherent in it.[215]

Weisstein believed that the existing differences between a spoken drama and a libretto were, in the end, just a front because both followed conventions that went against the dictates of realism. From his point of view, these similarities should elevate the value of the libretto to its more appreciated brother.

By the 20th century, there had been an interesting evolution in the figure of the opera critic thanks mostly to the Wagnerian revolution, which had turned opera to an elitist status. There could be found now amongst the critics, great authors like James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, André Gide, Jacques Rivière, W. H. Auden and George Bernard Shaw. In regards to Shaw, his mother was a mezzosoprano and a professional music teacher. Shaw grew up in a musical environment. As he stated:

My method, my system, my tradition, is founded upon music. It is not founded upon literature at all. I was brought up on music. I did not read plays very much because I could not get hold of them, except, of course, Shakespear, who was mother's milk to me. What I was really interested in was musical development. If you study operas and symphonies, you will find a useful clue to my particular type of writing.[216]

In Shaw's words, opera had affected his literature strongly. At the same time, the step from the role of opera reviewer to librettist was very short. This is how Shaw narrates his experiences as a potential librettist:

Unfortunately I have a prior engagement with Richard Strauss, which is at present rather hung up by the fact that I want to write the music and he wants to write the libretto, and we both get along very slowly for want of practice. […] "I wonder whether Elgar would turn his hand to opera," he wrote to Mapleson. "I have always

[215] U. Weisstein, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
[216] George Bernard Shaw at the Malvern Festival (1939). [Christopher Innes (edited by), *The Cambridge Companion to George Bernard Shaw*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998, p. 286.]

played a little with the idea of writing a libretto; but though I have had several offers, nothing has come of it"[217]

According to the musicologist and biographer, Mosco Carner, even Puccini had asked him for a libretto in around 1913 but Shaw declined the request because he was not ready for this final step.[218] This was not the case for D'Annunzio, Hofmannsthal or Brecht. Furthermore, the post-war period brought further issues to the literary field such as the problem of writing dramatic poetry. The poet, W.H. Auden, wrote in his essay "A Public Art":

Dramatic poetry, to be recognizable as poetry, must raise its voice and be grand. But a poet today cannot raise his voice without sounding false and ridiculous. The modern poetic dramatist seems faced with these alternatives: either he writes the kind of verse which is natural to him, in which case he produces little closet dramas which can only make their effect if the audience is a small intimate one, or, if he wishes to write a public drama, he must so flatten his verse that it sounds to the ear like prose. Neither alternative seems to me satisfactory.[219]

Auden had no intention of organising private closet dramas like Yeats had done in the past nor corrupt his form to prose. He found a third solution that thanks to its natural conventions could solve this problem. It was opera and to be more precise the operatic libretto. Auden wrote:

What I have tried to show you is that, as an art-form involving words, Opera is the last refuge of the High style, the only art to which a poet with a nostalgia for those times past when poets could write in the grand manner all by themselves can still contribute, provided he will take the pains to learn the metier, and is lucky enough to find a composer he can believe in.[220]

The figure of the librettist was changing and this could be seen by Stravinsky's words concerning his collaboration with Auden on the opera, *The Rake's Progress*: "At a different level, as soon as we began to work together I discovered that we shared the same views not

[217] Ivi, p. 285.
[218] Mosco Carner, *Puccini: A Critical Biography* (1958), Third edition, Duckworth, London 1992, p. 212.
[219] W. H. Auden, "A Public Art" (1961) in W. H. Auden, *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden, Prose – Volume V: 1963-1968*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2015, p. xxviii.
[220] W. H. Auden, "Secondary Worlds", in W. H. Auden, *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden, Prose – Volume V*, p. 307.

only about opera, but also on the nature of the Beautiful and the Good. Thus, our opera is indeed, and in the highest sense, a collaboration."[221]

Stravinsky had left to Auden and Kallman the choices concerning the plot and the text. The Russian composer's sole interest was in the music. Therefore, Auden's experimentalism was given carte blanche. Consequently, the libretto would tackle issues like free will, homosexuality, etc., with Stravinsky setting up the music. Auden was so ravished by this experience that he would work later on, on other four librettos. Operatic librettos were his solution to the existing literary barrenness he felt at the time. Even if opera had its constraints and conventions, it was a field which offered infinite possibilities. Regarding this point, I would like to end with a citation of Hugo von Hofmannsthal, who stated:

There is more freedom within the narrowest limits, within the most specialized task, than in the limitless vacuum which the modern mind imagines to be the playground for it.[222]

b) A Valid Literary Text

Historically, as Anthony Easthorpe cites in his book, *Literary into Cultural Studies*, the literary value has fallen into three main categories: the mimetic, the expressive and the formalist. The mimetic focuses on the representation of a nature as through a mirror. The expressive view instead considers literary value as the nature that is enhanced by the passions. It is a representation of the imagination of the author. In the formalist approach, the formal linguistic properties of the text must be considered to assure whether it is a literary or non-literary text.[223] This is in general the hegemonic approach to literary value.

Concerning Modernism, Easthorpe states that: "the modernist reading distinguishes good literature from bad and literature from popular culture by showing literature bears the imprint of imagination, that is, discovering that everything in the verbal texture is significant."[224] Modernist reading thus is "exercising their literary competence [of the reader]

[221] Paul Griffiths, *Igor Stravinsky: The Rake's Progress*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1982, p. 4.
[222] J. D. McClatchy, *The Whole Difference: Selected Writings of Hugo von Hofmannsthal*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford 2008, p. 149.
[223] Anthony Easthorpe, *Literary into Cultural Studies*, Routledge, London 1991, p. 41.
[224] Ivi, p. 42.

within the interpretive community."[225] The meaning of literary competence and interpretive community will be explained later on.

In the years, literary value has been put under siege. It has been stated that texts do not have a real identity and that they do not have an eternal essence that makes them unique in time. It is only the consequence of the discourses and the institutions of the period, a mere construction for their own use. The main symbol amongst all the constructions, according to them, is the literary canon.

It was generally thought that literary canons had an intrinsic value inside the texts themselves, independent from the reader. Therefore, they would contain a linguistic and imaginative propriety. But critics like Raymond Williams[226] stated that literary value was an institutional construct. He believes that a literary text is a list of notions and not an object. For this reason, it is more interesting to examine the nature of the text and its use. Of a similar view is Tony Bennett who states in his *Formalism and Marxism* (1979):

> The production of 'Literature', that is, the social production of texts as Literary and of the effects which thus accrue to them in the light of the position which they occupy in relation to other texts and the uses to which they are put within the social process. In spite of all its apparent concreteness and facticity, the text is not the place where the business of culture is conducted. Culture is not a thing but a process and a system of relationships within which the production of meaning takes place. […] The text is not the issuing source of meaning. It is a site on which the production of meaning—of variable meanings—takes place. The social process of culture takes place not within texts but between texts, and between texts and readers [...][227]

According to Bennett, the texts themselves are void of true meaning. They have a value only as a place where meanings occur, where interpretations take place. As Harold Bloom says: "When I observe that there are no texts, but only interpretations, I am not yielding to extreme subjectivism, nor am I necessarily expounding any particular theory of textuality."[228] Jane Topkins, when examining the literary value of the American canon, remarks that it is simply a reflection of the period, of the male tradition that has created and controls the canon.[229] She insists that the canon may change according to a certain political direction that

[225] Ivi, p. 47.
[226] Raymond Williams, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory" (1973). [A. Easthorpe, *op. cit.*, pp. 43-44.]
[227] Tony Bennett, *Formalism & Marxism*, Routledge, London and New York 1979, pp. 188-189.
[228] Harold Bloom, "The Breaking of Form" (1979). [Harold Bloom and Paul De Man, *Deconstruction and Criticism*, Continuum, London and New York, 2004, p. 6.
[229] A. Easthorpe, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

may have created it and this may affect the texts that could be the same but could change meaning according to the collection in which they are placed. To sum up, it is not the text itself which gives it a value but the structure to which it belongs to.

In 1970, Stanley Fish, another critic, also saw literature as a construction. He believed initially in literary value but, in the years, his view has changed. He saw that the literary proprieties practically represented an event in one's own experience. They are humanly perceived and thus centred on subjectivism and relativism.[230] In 1975, he avoided the problem of subjectivism by inserting "interpretive communities" that will affect the textual reading of the texts guiding it to a more correct literary competence. If the texts may vary in time, the interpretative communities will stay fixed. Always according to Fish, the text has no material identity but are effects of interpretation and do not exist outside interpretive communities. Easthorpe defines Fish's belief as "degree zero of literature-as-construction."[231]

Fish's extreme view is notably softened by Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory*. Also Eagleton believes that literature does not exist because there is no distinctive and specific study on the subject because the object of the study itself is not stable. In regards to literary criticism, Eagleton states:

> Literary theory is supposed to reflect on the nature of literature and literary criticism. But just think of how many methods are involved in literary criticism. You can discuss the poet's asthmatic childhood, or examine her peculiar use of syntax; you can detect the rustling of silk in the hissing of the s's, explore the phenomenology of reading, relate the literary work to the state of class-struggle or find out how many copies it sold. These methods have nothing whatsoever of significance in common. In fact they have more in common with other 'disciplines' – linguistics, history, sociology and so on – than they have with each other.[232]

Eagleton's assumption concerning literary theory only shows that there are many different methods but this doesn't mean that the topic does not exist. Literature can be a process with its function. It cannot necessarily be only the repetition of the same view when reading the same text in the years to come.

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[230] Ivi, p. 46.
[231] Ivi, p. 47.
[232] Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory – An Introduction* (1983), Anniversary Edition, Blackwell Publishing, Malden 2008, p. 172.

We have examined a critique which has taken place from the inside, from the construction or better deconstruction of the text. The critique from the outside has the risks of reproducing those infections which one would like to avoid, that argument which is the reason for its own existence. A school that believed in literary value were the Russian formalists in the period 1915-1930. They used the term literariness to represent literary value. A member of the current, Viktor Shklovsky, introduced the idea of defamiliarisation as a method. The aim of defamiliarisation is to make the objects described unfamiliar. They should make us think, bring out their artfulness opposed to the ordinary vision we have of them. Literariness is logically an evolution of the literary tradition and had its validity only in the time concerned. The Prague school added to literariness also the term "foregrounding" of the text. As Jan Mukařovský wrote in his essay, "Standard Language and Poetic Language" (1932):

> The function of poetic language consists in the maximum foregrounding of the utterance […] in poetic language foregrounding […] is not used in the service of communication, but in order to place in the foreground the act of expression, the act of speech itself.[233]

As foregrounding is opposed to backgrounding, the same could be said of familiarisation with defamiliarisation. We have a relation between the terms making literariness a relational effect.

Some view literary value in the aesthetical value of the text. With this term, we mean the fact that the beauty of the text itself fulfils the phantasy desires of his readers. Another important feature seems to be the transhistorical function of a text, the fact that it survives in time and is not superseded nor falls in disuse. Examples of these are the Greek plays or the Shakespearean ones which seem contemporary in all the various periods.

From a linguistic point of view, Umberto Eco started to examine the literary value concerning the linguistic features of a text. Maria Corti, an Italian semiotician, expresses Eco's thoughts:

> […] the more artistically complex and original a work of art, the higher it rises over the works that surround it, the greater is its availability to different readings on both the synchronic and diachronic levels. Or rather, that quality of presence, that sense of perennial contemporaneity and universality produced by a masterpiece,

[233] A. Easthorpe, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

results from the fact that the polysemic weight of the text allows it to be 'used' in functions of the literary—and, above all, the socioideological—models of various eras. Every era applies its own reading codes, its changed vantage points; the text continues to accumulate sign possibilities which are communicative precisely because the text is inside a system in movement.[234]

It is important to remember that the literary value also depends on the innovations that a text brings. Logically, texts change in value when more modern texts with innovative ideas come out. The "old" text is seen differently and if it has a certain value, it may become also ahistorical and last for a longer period. Another function, the intertextuality of a text is extremely important because it gives it validity through the centuries thanks to the plurality of different readings it could give rise to. Also continuous translation of texts, show their validity because it means that the ideology and context of a period can change also the text making it valid also in periods way beyond its original composition date.

To sum up, some critics see literature as a mere construction and literary value as an empty container. It is the structure from which the text was born that must be taken into consideration. Others instead believe that a valid literary text has, above all, a transhistorical function. In my dissertation, I am going to follow obviously the last approach.

c) An Evaluative Model

In the first section of this chapter, "Critics on the libretto", I could have cited many others authors like T. S. Eliot, Joyce, Berg, Schoenberg but I did not find the need to do so. I had achieved my goal which was to show the initial views of the musicologists concerning the libretto and then provoke in a certain sense the reader. My objective was to demonstrate that a libretto could be considered a valid literary text thanks to the recommendations of two great authors like George Bernard Shaw and W. H. Auden. If they had received great acclaim for their works, I presumed that also their thoughts would receive the same effect.

I must admit I had in mind the famous case of Melville's *Moby Dick* which had been considered initially his tombstone. Thanks to the intellectuals belonging to the French symbolist movement, the most important literary circle at the time, the novel was revived and

[234] Maria Corti, *An Introduction to Literary Semiotics*, Indiana University Press, London 1978, pp. 5-6.

was to be known as the great American novel. If the symbolists had not intervened, probably, the novel would have stayed where it was.

In the second section, "A Valid Literary Text", I wanted to offer a wide view of the theories concerning the validity of a text. Logically, I will opt for those which favour the existence of a literary text otherwise this dissertation would have no raison être. I intend to examine the eight different musical works in the next chapter following the different approaches mentioned in the last part.

Furthermore, I will analyse thoroughly the plot, the origins of the opera (showing the relationship between composer and librettist) and the context. I will also consider briefly some linguistic, stylistic and structural aspects of the texts studied. As I have mentioned previously, the traditional opera had been strongly affected by the Wagnerian revolution which changed practically the static condition of the genre to a more dynamic one where epic figures and topics would solely be considered. A prosaic structure with action at the centre of the scene was the consequence of all this. As the case studies will show, the Modernist period with its great flexibility will bring further revolutions.

5. Case studies

In this section, I will examine eight musical works which I have chosen for specific reasons. One of the primary factors was the success these operas had achieved or, otherwise, the great names which collaborated to the work. In the latter case, these great names would belong mostly to the literary field.

The first opera examined is Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. By many, this has been considered the first great American opera. It might appear a bizarre choice having mostly examined operas belonging to the English panorama. What interested me was the author of the libretto, Edwin DuBose Heyward, who had written a novel, a play and, logically, a libretto on the same subject, *Porgy*. From my point of view, this presence was to preserve the true spirit of the original text in the libretto. Even though it might appear a folkloristic work on the outskirts of the operatic world, this libretto offers a contemporary theme, which makes it a success even today.

The next section will be consecrated to W. H. Auden. Initially, I will briefly consider his libretto of *Paul Bunyan*, his first experiment in the operatic field. Then, I will focus on his first true attempt, together with Kallman, *The Rake's Progress*, which will be perused thoroughly. A third work, *The Bassarids*, instead, will be examined simply to view the final evolution of Auden in the libretto field.

After Auden, I will consider the great novelist E. M. Forster who decided to collaborate with Britten on the opera *Billy Budd*. Forster was already in his 70s but this did not prevent him from working on this libretto. Not only the music but the relevant modern themes which are dealt in this work have attracted my interest.

Then it will be the turn of Gian Carlo Menotti, an example of a composer-librettist. There were many operas I could have chosen like *Amelia goes to the Ball* (1937), *The Medium* (1946), *The Telephone* (1947) or *The Consul* (1950). I opted instead for *Amahl and the Night Visitors* because of its many unique features which also express the incredible extendibility of Modernism. Menotti's libretto for Barber's *Vanessa*, instead, will recall the relationship between Boito and Verdi but from a Modernist scenario.

The next case study is appealing mostly from an authorial point of view. Beckett wrote a sort of libretto, if we can call it that, for Feldman's *Neither* and I thought it interesting to examine what critics named an anti-opera.

a) Edwin DuBose Heyward: Adaptation from an original novel

Porgy and Bess

Opera in three acts by George Gershwin.

Libretto written by DuBose Heyward and lyricist Ira Gershwin, based on DuBose Heyward's novel *Porgy* (1925).

Characters and Premiere Cast [Boston, Colonial Theatre, September 30, 1935]

Colonial Theatre Orchestra, conducted by Alexander Smallens.

Porgy, *a disabled beggar* (bass-baritone)	Todd Duncan
Bess, *Crown's girl* (soprano)	Anne Brown
Crown, *a tough stevedore* (baritone)	Warren Coleman
Sportin' Life, *a dope peddler* (tenor)	John W. Bubbles
Robbins, *an inhabitant of Catfish Row* (tenor)	Henry Davis
Serena, *Robbins' wife* (soprano)	Ruby Elzy
Jake, *a fisherman* (baritone)	Edward Matthews
Clara, *Jake's wife* (soprano)	Abbie Mitchell
Maria, *keeper of the cook-shop* (contralto)	Georgette Harvey
Peter, *the honeyman* (tenor)	Gus Simons
Frazier, *a black "lawyer"* (baritone)	J. Rosamond Johnson
Undertaker (baritone)	John Garth
Detective (spoken)	Alexander Campbell

Other characters: Mingo (tenor), Lily (Peter's wife, soprano), Annie (mezzosoprano), Strawberry woman (mezzo-soprano), Jim (a cotton picker, baritone), Nelson (tenor), Crab

man (tenor), Scipio (a small boy, boy soprano), Mr. Archdale (a white lawyer, spoken), Policeman (spoken) and Coroner (spoken).

The story is set at Catfish Row, a fictitious black tenement on the waterfront of Charleston, South Carolina, in a recent past. (c. 1930)

Synopsis:

ACT ONE

Scene 1: Catfish Row, a summer evening

The scene starts with Clara singing a lullaby for her child while the men are preparing to play a game of craps. It is Saturday and all the male community are participating in the game. Serena pleads her husband Robbins to not play but he ignores her wishes. There are fishermen, stevedores entering and amongst them Crown with his lady, Bess. There is also Porgy, a disabled beggar, who in helps the organization. While everyone scorns Bess, only Porgy seems to have nice words for her. In the meantime, Robbins and Crown are the two last players in the game. Robbins wins and an extremely drunk Crown stabs him with a cotton hook killing him. He flees because the police is coming but promises to Bess, before leaving, that he will come back to fetch her when the situation will have calmed down. Bess is immediately courted by the peddler Sportin' Life but she refuses him and searches for a place where she can find shelter. Nobody wants to host her except Porgy who opens his door to her before the police arrives.

Scene 2: Serena's Room, the following night.

The community of Catfish Row is mourning Robbins' death and his wife, Serena, is collecting money for his burial. Bess enters with Porgy and puts her money in the saucer. When she states that she is with Porgy, her money initially refused is accepted. Porgy intonates a hymn to the Lord asking for the filling up of the saucer. Shortly after, a white detective enters and

incriminates Peter for Robbins' death. The latter accuses Crown of the murder and Peter is arrested anyway as a witness of the crime. The detective also intimates Serena to get rid of the dead body or otherwise it will be given to the medical students to practice. The money collected is only 15 dollars while other 10 are needed. Therefore, Serena promises the undertaker to give the 10 dollars the day after and, in the end, the undertaker agrees. The act ends with Bess singing a gospel in which she says that Robbins is ready for the train to the Promised Land.

ACT TWO

Scene 1: Catfish Row, a month later. Nine o'clock in the morning.

Despite the possibility of a storm, Jake goes out fishing because he needs money for his child. Sportin' Life is seen wandering around trying to sell his happy dust but Maria prevents him from doing so. Porgy ponders on his happy situation and decides to pass his life with Bess. He buys her divorce from the fake lawyer, Frazier. In the meantime, a true white lawyer, Archdale, informs Porgy of Peter's release and, at that moment, Porgy sees a buzzard flying, a symbol of bad omen. When Sportin' Life sees Bess alone, he courts her again promising her a better life but she rejects him because she loves Porgy. The two declare their love and then Porgy insists that Bess should go to the church picnic at Kittiwah Island. She initially does not want to leave Porgy alone because he cannot come due to his handicap but, in the end, after Porgy's insistence, she accepts and follows Maria.

Scene 2: Kittiwah Island, that evening.

The picnic is at its peak and Sportin' Life is amusing himself by citing ironically key characters from the Bible. When Serena stops him, the boat arrives and is ready to return back. While Bess, who has lagged behind, is about to catch up with the others, she hears somebody calling her from the bushes. It is Crown who has come to remind Bess of his promise. Bess tells him about her love for Porgy but Crown only laughs at her and kisses her passionately. He then forces her to follow him in the bushes.

Scene 3: Catfish Row, a week later, just before dawn.

A storm seems to be coming but Jake goes fishing despite his wife's pleas. At the same moment, Peter has been freed and wanders around meditating on his life. Bess, in the meantime, has returned but with a terrible fever and after Serena's prayers, she seems to have fully recovered. Porgy tells Bess that he knows of her meeting with Crown. She informs him that she will return to Crown once the cotton will be in town and, for this reason, she feels she doesn't deserve Porgy's love. A stoic Porgy tells her that nothing will change as long as she loves him. She immediately swears her love for Porgy but explains to him how Crown's hypnotic powers influence her. In the end, Porgy promises that he will deal himself with Crown.

Scene 4: Serena's room, dawn of the next day.

The various members of the Catfish Row community pray together for the end of this terrible tempest. Clara is worried for her husband and the other members try to comfort her. They hear some knocking at the door and it is Crown who has survived the storm. He tries to grab Bess but she refuses him. When Clara sees Jake's boat upside-down, she runs out to succour him. She leaves her baby to Bess and at the latter's request that a man should go and help Clara, Crown decides to follow her. Before leaving, he taunts Porgy for not being a man due to his handicap.

ACT THREE

Scene 1: Catfish Row, the next night.

Clara and Jake have died and Bess is singing a lullaby for Clara's child. When the community start to mourn Crown's death, Sportin' Life starts to laugh because he does not believe in his death. He is right because Crown stealthily goes to Porgy's abode but gets killed by the latter, who states triumphantly that he is now the only man for Bess.

Scene 2: Catfish Row, the next afternoon.

Crown has been murdered and the white detective comes to ask questions to Serena, the wife of Robbins who had been killed by Crown. Since Serena seems to have an alibi for that night, the detective decides to summon Porgy as a witness. Porgy is scared after hearing Sportin' Life's story that cadavers bleed when they find themselves in front of their murderers. So he does not want to identify Crown and is brought to the police station. Bess, alone, is courted by Sportin' Life who forces some happy dust on her and offers her a high style life in New York. She refuses him but he leaves, for all eventualities, other dust at the door.

Scene 3: Catfish Row, five days later.

Porgy has returned home after having been arrested for contempt towards the court because he would not look at Crown's dead corpse. In jail, he has made money winning at craps and has bought many presents for his friends, above all a red dress for his Bess. When he sees Clara's baby in the hands of Serena, he understands that something is wrong. After calling the name of Bess in vain, he discovers that she has fled with Sportin' Life to New York and has fallen back to the addiction of the happy dust. She believed that Porgy would never return. However, Porgy is not disheartened and decides to depart for New York in search for his beloved Bess.

Origins

I think it should be a Negro opera, almost a Negro 'Scheherazade.' Negro, because it is not incongruous for a Negro to live jazz. It would not be absurd on the stage. The mood could change from ecstasy to lyricism plausibly because the Negro has so much of both in his nature. The book, I think, should be an imaginative, whimsical thing, like a Carl Van Vechten story; and I would like to see him write the libretto. That type of opera could not, I am afraid, be done at the Metropolitan. It is a typically opéra comique venture. I would like to see it open an opéra comique on Broadway. I would like to see it put on with a Negro cast. Artists trained

in the old tradition could not sing such music, but Negro singers could. It would be a sensation as well as an innovation. [235]

These were the words of Gershwin when he discussed the possibility of a jazz opera in 1925. These words proved to be an anticipation of what was to come. At the time, he enquired Van Vechten for a suitable libretto and found one in the summer of 1926. The Paley family had given him DuBose Heyward's novel, *Porgy*. It fitted perfectly with his operatic idea. The first meeting between Gershwin and Heyward took place in November 1927 at Atlantic City. Heyward defined Gershwin as a young man "who knew exactly what he wanted and where he was going."[236] Nevertheless, the collaboration was postponed because Gershwin wanted to master first the art of composing an opera. When he was commissioned to write an opera in 1929 for the Metropolitan, the jazz opera was no more in fashion. He opted initially to set to music Szymon Ansky's *The Dybbuk* but the project failed because Gershwin couldn't purchase the rights. So in March 1932, Gershwin finally decided to compose his jazz opera or, as he defined it, a "folk" opera. Heyward would adapt *Porgy* to an operatic libretto.

Porgy (1925) was the first novel of Heyward. It was written in a mix of Standard English and various Afro-American dialects. The character of Porgy had been inspired by Samuel Smalls, a lame black beggar and vendor of peanut cakes who had been arrested for trying to shoot a woman. This duality between the "half-man" and the "man of passions" intrigued Heyward and convinced him to write a novel on Smalls' story. The book achieved such a success that it was adapted into a play in four acts in 1927. It ran for a total of 55 weeks and it was now obvious that Heyward was sitting on a gold mine. In 1932, Al Jolson wanted to make *Porgy* a musical but Heyward had already agreed with Gershwin in the collaboration for an opera. Knowing well that it would take time to compose one, Gershwin gave him permission to work on the other project but, in the end, nothing came out of that.

The next step was to choose a venue and the Metropolitan made a bid, offering even a five-thousand dollar bonus to Gershwin if he accepted but, in the end, he opted for the Theatre Guild in October 1933. In December, Gershwin spent some days in Charleston to visit DuBose Heyward and, above all, listen to some authentic Afro-American folk music. Because

[235] Howard Pollack and *George Gershwin: His Life and Work*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London 2006, p. 567.
[236] Ivi, p. 568.

of various tours and commissioned work, Gershwin started to consecrate his time to the opera from February 1934 to the date of the premiere. Due to distance problems, Heyward would mail to Gershwin the various scenes giving suggestions on the music to use. In regards to this, there was a first clash because Heyward suggested that the dialogues should be all spoken while Gershwin instead chose Schoenberg's *Sprechgesang* with the only difference that the black characters would have a musical accompaniment. Furthermore, because of some problems in the collaboration, Heyward accepted the presence of Ira Gershwin, George's brother, to work on some of the lyrics. The collaboration worked in this way:

> Accordingly, whereas Gershwin generally set Heyward's words to music, for Ira he provided music to versify. Porgy's second-act aria, "I Got Plenty o' Nuttin'," represented an exception, as Heyward, after hearing Gershwin play the tune in New York in April, requested the opportunity to put words to the melody. Armed with the opening line, invented by Ira, and a dummy verse, he completed the lyric on his own; Ira subsequently revised the text, claiming the end result "a 50–50 collaborative effort." The two writers similarly cowrote the duets "Bess, You Is My Woman" and "I Wants to Stay Here."[237]

In the end, Ira Gershwin wrote seven lyrics while Heyward all the rest including "Summertime." Regarding Heyward's abilities, Stephen Sondheim wrote that the opera included the "best lyrics ever written, I think, for the musical stage. They are true poetry, but the music doesn't overblow them, only enriches them, and they enrich the music, too. 'My Man's Gone Now.' 'Summertime.' Genuinely poetic."[238] Furthermore, it was Heyward who convinced Gershwin to name the opera, *Porgy and Bess*, to avoid the risk of confusing the opera with the play and to follow the operatic tradition of the couple, for example *Tristan und Isolde, Pelléas et Mélisande*, etc.[239]

Gershwin returned to Charleston in June and spent other five weeks there to understand better the region's music. This was fundamental because it was supposed to be the basis for his first opera. After many cuts and improvements on the score during the rehearsals, the premiere took place with a moderate success even though it ran for 124 performances. Anyway, the opera would gain international prominence after the 1952 tour in Venice, Paris and London.

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[237] Ivi, p. 576.
[238] Ibidem.
[239] Ivi, p. 580.

Analysis

The black press often adopted the role of cheerleader for those African American performers who broke through to mainstream success with white critics and audiences. *Porgy and Bess* gave them a great deal to cheer about. If *Porgy and Bess* was a triumph for Gershwin, it was also a victory for the seventy black singers who performed in it, the first large group of African Americans to perform opera professionally for predominantly white audiences.[240]

The presence of such a great number of black singers was something completely new. The feat was even greater because they were playing the role of protagonists in the first opera of one of the most well-known American composers, George Gershwin. A possible venue for the premiere of the opera had been the Metropolitan but as Ira Gershwin stated: "George was of course greatly flattered and did consider it for a time, but finally felt that for the Met to acquire an all-Negro cast to be available six to eight performances a season, was not too practical a project."[241] In America, racial segregation existed and was strongly visible. In March 1936, when *Porgy and Bess* was on tour at the Washington's National Theatre, the two protagonists, Todd Duncan and Anne Brown protested against the theatre's whites-only policy and managed to have black spectators during their performances.

Porgy and Bess could be seen as the great epic of the black people. At first, it gave this impression but, further on, critics started accusing it of not portraying the truth. The fact that the authors of this work were all white people did not help much:

Although a number of commentators over the years have criticized the opera, above all, for engaging racial stereotypes, the work's colorful characters seem more broadly drawn—sometimes verging on caricature, in the tradition of humorous folktales—than stereotypes per se. The work's blend of satire and melodrama even lends a certain incongruity to the work, one that helps explain the kinds of audience uncertainties—such as whether to laugh or cry—that attended the opera from its beginnings.[242]

[240] Ellen Noonan, *The Strange Career of Porgy & Bess: Race, Culture, and America's Most Famous Opera*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 2012, p. 145.
[241] H. Pollack, *op. cit.*, p. 574.
[242] Ivi, p. 582.

It would be a great error to label the opera as an attempt to portray realistically the black world. The opera depicted a black community in South Carolina seen through white man's eyes. It is an attempt to set to music what Gershwin perceived as truly and solely American. Gershwin wanted to portray this community and create a true American opera. In his work:

> […] the main characters belong to a larger community that itself takes center stage, a group victimized within by substance abuse, violence, quackery, and superstition, and without by racism, injustice, and nature, yet still hopeful and inspiring in its compassion and faith. [...] But Gershwin's alternately satiric and tragic portrayal of a provincial community on the threshold of modernity assumes its own flavor, with the conflict of sin versus salvation taking special prominence throughout. Considering that nearly all of the principals either die or leave […], the survival of this community remains—along with Porgy's ability to overcome his humiliation and loneliness through his unconditional love for Bess—the story's ultimate triumph. The whole opera is like a prayer or rite, each act concluding in a state of communal supplication or exaltation; even the craps game begins with an invocation that reflects on man's transience.[243]

Gershwin was an observer of this American community, one where faith was its essence and which created spirituals and folk songs. For this reason, Gershwin named *Porgy and Bess* a folk opera. This is clearly visible when examining Heyward's libretto. Even though the work follows the typical operatic structure, the unveiling of the plot is often slowed down by the presence of hymns inside the various acts, a choice completely in opposition to the Wagnerian dictates of time representation. Besides, a vernacular language, the American slang, is used throughout the opera by the black people while the white characters "speak", and do not sing, the standard American language. This is another point that distanced the work from the elitist operatic world. The continuous repetitiveness in the words of the characters and in the events, such as the arrest of the black character, gives a sense of social immobility that only Porgy can interrupt with his final departure.

b) W.H. Auden (& Chester Kallman): Poetic experiments

[243] Ivi, p. 583.

Paul Bunyan

Operetta in two acts and a prologue by Benjamin Britten.

Libretto written by W. H. Auden, based on the folks songs, blues and hymns on Paul Bunyan.

Characters and Premiere Cast [New York, Columbia Theater Associates of Columbia University, May 5, 1941]

Columbia University Orchestra, conducted by Hugh Ross.

The Voice of Paul Bunyan (spoken)	Milton Warchoff
Tiny, *Paul's daughter* (soprano)	Helen Marshall
Johnny Inkslinger (tenor)	William Hess
Hot Biscuit Slim, *a good cook* (tenor)	Charles Cammock
Narrator and Balladeer (baritone or tenor)	Mordecai Bauman
Sam Sharkey, *a bad cook* (tenor)	Clifford Jackson
Ben Benny, *another bad cook* (bass)	Eugene Bonham
Hel Helson, *foreman* (baritone)	Bliss Woodward
Cross Crosshaulson, *a Swede* (bass)	Walter Graf
Jen Jenson, *a Swede* (bass)	Ernest Holcombe
Pete Peterson, *a Swede* (tenor)	Lewis Pierce
Andy Anderson, *a Swede* (tenor)	Ben Carpens

Other characters: Fido (a dog, soprano), Moppet (a cat, mezzo-soprano), Poppet (a cat, mezzo-soprano), Western Union Boy (tenor), John Shears (a farmer, baritone), Quartet of the Defeated (contralto, tenor, baritone, bass) and Four cronies of Hel Helson (four baritones). Heron, Moon, Wind, Beetle and Squirrel are spoken roles. Lumberjacks, farmers, frontier women, animals, trees, wild geese.

The story is set in and around the American forest in the early- to mid- 20th century.

Synopsis

PROLOGUE: In the forest

Nature, represented by trees, and the animal world, symbolised by the wild geese, discuss about the arrival of a great man who will be born when the next Blue Moon appears. This superhuman figure is Paul Bunyan, who he will be the protagonist of great deeds.

ACT ONE

Scene 1: a clearing in the forest

Paul Bunyan is looking for some lumberjacks who are ready to work in America. Lumberjacks from Sweden, France, Germany and England present themselves. Bunyan nominates Hel Helson his head-foreman after a message received from the King of Sweden. The bad cooks Sam Sharkey and Ben Benny are hired to feed the lumberjacks. The first is a specialist in soups while the second in beans. Johnny Inkslinger, after some initial manifestations of protest towards authority, accepts the role of accountant to feed himself. Also two cats and a dog are recruited to help in the work. The narrator then starts to talk about Paul Bunyan's quest for a wife. He falls in love with a lady equal in size, Carrie, but their marriage is not happy. Carrie departs from Paul Bunyan with their only child, Tiny. He returns to meet them but just an instant before Carrie's death. A desperate Paul Bunyan blames himself for the end of the marriage and promises to take care of Tiny.

Scene 2: The camp

The food given in the camp is terrible and the lumberjacks start moaning about it. Not only insects can be found in the soups or beans but also iron instruments as Inkslinger recounts. The accountant asks the two cooks, Sharkey and Benny, to change every now and then the food but these two feel offended and leave the camp. Suddenly, a cook hunting his shadow, Slim, appears. He can cook anything and the lumberjacks are happy. Inkslinger, instead, starts to talk about his love for culture and not accounts but also the need for food to survive. In the

meantime, Paul Bunyan has returned with his daughter, Tiny. The lumberjacks start courting her but she is in mourning for her mother's death. She then joins Slim in the work in the kitchen. Paul Bunyan asks Inkslinger if there are any news. The accountant informs Paul that Hel Helson is brooding too much and is always in bad company while another lumberjack, John Shears, would like to try farming. The act ends with Paul Bunyan meditating on the future and bidding good night to his workers.

ACT 2

Scene 1: a clearing

Paul Bunyan summons all the lumberjacks and tells them that farmers are needed to grow the food for the camp. He asks if there are men who would like to follow this career. John Shears volunteers and Paul Bunyan leads Shears and the other volunteers to Heart's Desire, the land where they will cultivate wheat and barley for the lumberjacks. Hel Helson is put in charge of the other workers and is ordered to clear the Topsy Turvey Mountain. Alone, Hel Helson asks nature and the animal world what they have heard about him and he is upset because they tell him he is nothing and will never be great. Consequently, he decides to kill Paul Bunyan to make a name but loses. Eventually, they reconcile and Helson finally achieves inner peace. During their row, Slim and Tiny declare their love. In the last section, the Narrator recounts the success deriving from the collaboration of Bunyan and Helson. He also mentions the increasing love that derives from the relationship between Slim and Tiny.

Scene 2: the Christmas party

With the arrival of Christmas, there are many announcements to make. Inkslinger informs that Slim will be in charge of a very large Hotel in Mid-Manhattan and Tiny has accepted to marry him. Hel Helson, instead, will join the Washington Administration to help in the public works. John Shears is still working as a farmer and has taken a break to join the party. Then, a Western Union Boy arrives with a telegram from Hollywood for Inkslinger in which he is

invited to become a technical adviser for an all-star lumber picture. The operetta ends with Paul Bunyan stating what he represents: he is the Eternal Guest, the Way, the Act.

Origins

Britten and Auden met for the first time on 5 July 1935. Auden was seven years older and had made a strong impression on the British composer. In a letter, Britten wrote:

I haven't had time to read much of the Auden yet – but I feel that most of it is definitely going to be for me – knowing him as I do, & feeling quite a lot in sympathy with his ideals. I am working with him on various projects outside films – it is a treat to have someone of his calibre to think with![244]

Britten's admiration soon turned out into frustration because of the great minds he had to collaborate with. He was much younger and felt also more stupid due to his prolonged silences which were consequently inevitable during their meetings. The influence of Auden's intellectual circle, made his interest in politics grow, with him becoming a left-wing supporter. By 1939, the limits imposed by the European society concerning political but also sexual issues made the United States seem a promised land. Britten, like Auden, was homosexual and the fear of intolerance and social outcasting encouraged his departure to the United States on April 1939. Auden had already departed with Isherwood three months before. Like Auden, Britten thought he could make his future there.

Immediately, in the United States, the two started to work together on the operetta, *Paul Bunyan*. The choice of an American legend was quite bizarre and Claire Seymour stated that it was "perhaps intended by composer and librettist, W. H. Auden, as a naïve offering of their artistic credentials for American citizenship."[245] Britten's first opera, or better operetta, was immediately dismissed by the composer himself after the premiere of 1941. It was only after Auden's death that Britten decided to unearth it and re-elaborate it. Possible reasons will be exposed in the next paragraph.

Analysis

[244] Letter from Benjamin Britten to Marjorie Fass, December 30, 1935 [C. Seymour, *op. cit.*, p. 19.]
[245] Claire Seymour, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

What any composer thinks he can do with a text like 'Paul Bunyan' is beyond me. It offers no characters and no plot. It is presumably, therefore, an allegory or a morality; and as either it is, I assure you, utterly obscure and tenuous. In addition, its language is not the direct speech of dramatic poetry. It is deliberate parody. […] Every sentence is indirect and therefore unsuited to musical declamation. Every dramatic moment has the afflatus taken out of it before the composer can get it over to the audience […] it never did get going, and I never did figure out the theme.[246]

This was the review written by the journalist Virgil Thomson after the premiere. It analyses perfectly all the main problematics concerning this absurd operetta. The work was too disorganised and quite incoherent. It had many intellectual references, made mostly by Inkslinger, to Cezanne, Keats and Tolstoy but these were simply ends in themselves. As another journalist, Olin Downes added:

[…] the libretto […] seems to wander from one to another idea, without conviction or cohesion. In the plot, as in the score, is a little of everything, a little symbolism and uplift, a bit of socialism and of modern satire, and gags and jokes of a Hollywood sort, or of rather cheap musical comedy […] the operetta does not have a convincing flavor of inevitable conglomeration. It seems a rather poor sort of a bid for success, and possibly the beguilement of Americans.[247]

Auden saw Paul Bunyan's legend not as merely an American folk-tale but also as a universal character. In this legendary figure, he could perceive the idealized vision of America's promises. Like the ending of the opera, Auden is the "Eternal Guest", the "Way", the "Act". He is the guest coming from a continent in which art had not managed to prevent the rise of totalitarian states. He is also a wanderer in search for a solution. His way could be found in the American democracy where the poet can finally act freely.

Unfortunately, this view was too complex for an operetta where Auden showed all his limits. If Britten's music could be saved in certain parts, it could not be said the same of Auden's libretto. For Britten to become a great composer, the first thing he had to do was to emancipate himself completely from Auden and this is what happened.

[246] Virgil Thompson's Review in the *New York Herald Tribune*, May 6, 1941. [C. Seymour, *op. cit.*, p. 20.]
[247] Olin Downes's Review in the *New York Times*, May 5, 1941. [C. Seymour, *op. cit.*, p. 21.]

The Rake's progress

An opera in three acts and an epilogue by Igor Stravinsky.

A fable written by Wystan Hugh Auden and Chester Kallman.

Characters and Premiere Cast [Venice, Teatro La Fenice, September 11, 1951]

Orchestra del Teatro La Fenice, conducted by Igor Stravinsky.

Trulove, *a gentleman* (bass)	Raphaël Arié
Anne, *his daughter* (soprano)	Elisabeth Schwarzkopf
Tom Rakewell, *a rake* (tenor)	Robert Rounseville
Nick Shadow, *a manservant* (baritone)	Otakar Kraus
Mother Goose, *a whore* (mezzo-soprano)	Nell Tangeman
Baba the Turk, *a bearded lady* (mezzo-soprano)	Jennie Tourel
Sellem, *an auctioneer* (tenor)	Hugues Cuénod
Keeper of the madhouse (bass)	Emanuel Menkes

Servants, chorus of whores and roaring boys, citizens, madmen.

The action takes place in the 18th century England.

Synopsis:

ACT ONE: "I wish I had money."

Scene One: The garden of Trulove's country cottage. Spring afternoon.

Tom and Anne are enjoying their time in Trulove's country house. Trulove, Anne's father, is perplexed about Tom's wedding proposal due to the fact that the young man has no fixed job. He tries to invite the future son-in-law to accept one but Tom declines. As soon as Tom wishes to have money, Nick Shadow appears. This grim figure tells Tom that he has inherited a great

fortune from an uncle. Tom is surprised because he has never heard of this relative and is thankful for this stroke of good luck. His joy is shared with the Trulove family who tell him to hurry to London, so as to speed the marriage arrangements. While boarding the coach, Tom asks Nick his wages. The latter tells him that after one year and a day, he will claim his due. Tom agrees and "THE PROGRESS OF A RAKE begins".[248]

Scene Two: Mother Goose's, a London brothel. Summer.

Nick is now the mentor of Tom and has introduced him to the pleasures of life. They are both drinking at Mother Goose's brothel when the clock strikes one o'clock. The youngster finds that it is getting late and is about to leave the place when Nick, with a gesture, makes the clock go back one hour. Tom, noticing that it is still midnight, stays in the brothel. Shadow introduces him to some prostitutes but, at closing time, Tom ends sleeping with the proprietor.

Scene Three: The garden of Trulove's country cottage. Autumn night.

Anne has not had news from her beloved for months. She is worried that his lover has encountered deceit and prays the Lord, night and day, to protect him. At the end, tired of waiting, she decides to go to London in search for her fiancée.

ACT TWO: "I wish I were happy."

Scene One: The morning room of Rakewell's house in London. Autumn morning.

In his solitary room, Tom is obsessed by the memory of Anne. He is now tired of his dissipated life and ponders the idea of reuniting himself to his beloved. While flooded with these thoughts, Nick challenges the rake by inciting him to marry Baba the Turk, the bearded woman of the circus. He encourages this act only to demonstrate Tom's total freedom by demolishing all moral canons and human conventions. This challenge attracts Tom who decides to accomplish the idea.

[248] The end of the Act I, Scene I, ends with these words uttered by Nick Shadow towards the audience.

Scene Two: The street before Rakewell's house. Autumn dusk.

Anne has reached London and is desperately in search for Tom. She sees a procession of servants and recognizes herdear Tom amongst the crowd. Tom, astounded and confused, invites his loved one to forget him but she recalls him their love promises. The tender scene is interrupted by the appearance of Baba the Turk, his wife, from the sedan chair. She is tired of waiting and asks Tom who the girl is. He tells her she is a friend and a desperate Anne exits hurriedly. Tom helps his wife dismount and then she shows her famous beard to the acclaiming crowd.

Scene Three: Morning room of Rakewell's house. Winter morning.

The life of Tom is dreadful. His wife never stops talking and, inevitably, they have a quarrel which ends with Tom throwing a wig at his wife. The bearded woman is petrified by the act and remains motionless for the rest of the scene. Tom feels tired and goes immediately to sleep. While he is in the arms of Morpheus, Nick appears on the scene with a mysterious machine. He shows its mechanism by putting initially a loaf of bread. After adding a piece of china, the loaf of bread comes out making the audience understand that "the mechanism is the crudest kind of false bottom." Shortly after this exhibition, Tom wakes up and tells Shadow of his dream. He narrates of a special baroque machine which can transform stone to bread. He is stupefied in noticing that Shadow's machine is the exact copy of the one he dreamt. He doesnot understand that he is being frauded and decides to invest all of his capital in this absurd project. By doing this, Tom believes that he can defeat poverty and famine in the world. More importantly, he thinks he can redeem his past life and merit again Anne's love.

ACT THREE: "You wish in all your fear could rule the game instead of Shadow."

Scene One: The morning room of Rakewell's house. Spring afternoon.

There is an auction at Tom's house. Various citizens are examining carefully the merchandise put up for sale. Anne appears, in search for Tom who has gone bankrupt after the failure of his investment. Sellem, the auctioneer, introduces the throng to the beauties of the products but when he is about to sell Baba the Turk, motionless from the last act, the freak of nature suddenly wakes up after her wig is removed. Baba is furious for the situation but calms down at the sight of Anne. The empathic bearded lady encourages her rival to save Tom from his evil servant. Suddenly, the voice of Tom and Nick are heard coming from the street and Anne runs away in search of them.

Scene Two: A Churchyard. The same night.

Nick and Tom can be seen in front of a tomb just dug up. A year and a day have passed and now Nick's deadline for his wage has come. He does not request money from Tom but his soul. Tom asks for mercy and Nick offers him a last chance to save himself. He must guess the three cards he will draw from his pack of cards. The first is the Queen of Hearts which Tom guesses thanks to his love for Anne. He also hits the mark with the second card, the two of spades, which he interprets from a fallen spade. Nick does not want to lose and cheats by putting again the Queen of Hearts in the pack. Instead of being the "Queen of Hell", Anne's voice prompts Tom to choose again the Queen of Hearts again and the incarnation of the Devil is defeated. But before disappearing, Nick grabs Tom's mental sanity.

Scene Three: Bedlam, the madhouse.

At the madhouse, Tom believes to be Adonis and is waiting for his Venus. Anne arrives and gently lulls him. Her father, Trulove tells her that they have to leave. Before their departure, Anne whispers to a sleeping Tom that she will love him forever. She leaves and then Tom awakes, feeling the pangs of death. Before dying he prays Orpheus to sing for him and cry for Adonis' fate.

EPILOGUE:

After the end of the opera, the curtain is raised again but with all the cast appearing without costumes. This is to invite the audience to stay a little bit more and listen to the moral lesson of this story which still needs to be said and that is:

For idle hands / And hearts and minds / The Devil finds / A work to do, / A work, dear Sir, fair Madam, / For you and you.

Origins

Since his arrival in the United States, Stravinsky was already thinking of composing an opera in English. He had postponed the project because of his numerous engagements which included the composition of new orchestral pieces, the conduction and recording of his own music. In the meantime, during his American sojourn, he made acquaintance with Aldous Huxley, "his vade mecum on all matters to do with English literature and culture generally."[249] On 5 December, during his annual winter trip to the East Coast, he stopped in Chicago and visited an Art exhibition of English paintings which included Hogarth. He must have thought that it had been ordained by fate. In particular, there was a Hogarth show, which included the series of prints of his "A Rake's Progress." These attracted strongly his attention because, in this period, he was in search for a subject to set to music.

Previously in January of the same year, he had met Ralph Hawkes, his publisher, in New York and had signed a new contract. This agreement guaranteed him ten thousand dollars a year for five years. The amount would increase to twelve thousand dollars after two years. This meant that he had finally achieved a fixed wage, a novelty which could permit him a greater serenity. Now, this newfound economic solidity encouraged the Russian composer to opt for a greater project.

It was only after the completion of *Orpheus* on September, that he proposed to Hawkes his new subject for an opera, Hogarth's *A Rake's Progress*. What he needed now was a librettist and he immediately asked his friend Huxley for advice. The latter recommended the Anglo-American poet, W. H. Auden. Stravinsky had known the poet thanks to the General

[249] Stephen Walsh, *Stravinsky: The second exile – France and America, 1934-1971*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 2006, p. 230.

Post Office film, *Night Mail*, with the verse commentary by Auden and the music by Britten. The Russian composer must have been struck by the profitable collaboration between the two in this short film.

In regards to the libretto, Auden was enthusiastic with the idea of collaborating with Stravinsky. He had just finished writing *The Age of Anxiety* and was ready to start a totally new experience. Since 1942, Auden had made attempts of this kind through the composition of three long poems and *Paul Bunyan* but had never really succeeded in this exploit. Stravinsky gave several directives but was also careful not to give too many details on the plot:

"Please," he insisted, "do feel absolutely free in your creative work on the chosen theme. Of course there is a sort of limitation as to form in view of Hogarth's style and period. Yet make it as contemporary as I treated Pergolesi in my Pulcinella." Had he known that Auden was already thinking in terms of the Seven Deadly Sins, and had a vision of the Bedlam scene as a coronation service in which the hero is anointed with a chamber pot (since "piss is the only proper chrism"), he might have felt less indulgent on the question of theme. He was, though, adamant about the type of opera he wanted to write. "Bear in mind that I will compose not a musical drama, but just an opera with definitely separated numbers connected by spoken (not sung) words of the text, because I want to avoid the customary operatic recitative."[250]

Auden was ready to proceed along the lines traced by Stravinsky. He was compliant and ready to abase himself. His own principles were in accordance with the Russian maestro:

The verses which the librettist writes are not addressed to the public but are really a private letter to the composer. They have their moment of glory, the moment in which they suggest to him a certain melody; once that is over, they are as expendable as infantry to a Chinese general: they must efface themselves and cease to care what happens to them.[251]

Auden and Stravinsky met on 10 November in the latter's house in California. The two immediately began to work on a draft of the future opera the day after. In these eight days, Stravinsky invited the English poet to see an amateur production of *Così fan tutte* with piano accompaniment. The Russian genius wanted Auden to gain familiarity with the model he

[250] Ivi, p. 235.

[251] Wystan Hugh Auden, *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays*, Random House, New York 1962, p. 473.

intended to use for his *Rake*. In these days, Stravinsky would admire the English ability of his partner.

Auden fascinated and delighted me more every day. When we were not working he would explain verse forms to me, and almost as quickly as he could write, compose examples; I still have a specimen sestina and some light verse that he scribbled off for my wife; and any technical question, of versification, for example, put him in a passion; he was even eloquent on such matters.[252]

Auden was positively impressed by the manners of the Russian giant. As he wrote in a letter on 20 November 1947: "I loved every minute of my stay, thanks to you both, and shall look forward with impatience to the next time we meet."[253] In the same letter, in an enclosed note to the maestro he added in post scriptum: "I can't tell you what a pleasure it is to collaborate with you. I was so frightened that you might be a *prima donna*."[254]

After discussing the main points together and creating a draft, Stravinsky was awaiting the final result of the collaboration. It was to his great surprise that he would see written on the final copy of the libretto, "The Rake's Progress by W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman." Auden explained this inclusion in the following letter to the Russian maestro: "Herewith Act I. As you will see, I have taken in a collaborator, an old friend of mine in whose talents I have the greatest confidence."[255]

At first, Stravinsky was left aghast by this turn of events with his lawyer advising him to sue Auden but after knowing better Kallman, he accepted the duo.

The day they arrived in New York, the Stravinskys had dined with Auden, and there they for the first time met his co-librettist, Chester Kallman. Luckily they got on well with him from the start, and they even found that, in some ways, Auden was more relaxed and amenable when Chester was there, being entertaining in the extrovert, slightly theatrical way that came naturally to him. It was nevertheless, Vera recorded, a "strange dinner," whether because of the food or the company is not wholly clear.[256]

[252] Robert Craft and Igor Stravinsky, *Memories and Commentaries* (1959), University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1981, p. 157.

[253] Ivi, p. 159.

[254] Ivi, p. 160.

[255] Letter to Igor Stravinsky from W.H. Auden, 16th January 1948.

[256] S. Walsh, *op. cit.*, p. 250.

Auden's choice was not certainly fortuitous. There had always been some disequilibrium in the relationship with Chester Kallman due to the great knowledge and experience of Auden himself. The idea of writing a libretto might have appeared to Auden, the possibility of achieving a "marriage of true minds"[257] between the two. Let us not forget that Kallman was not only an opera melomaniac but mostly an opera reviewer, who knew at heart many operas, especially the Italian ones. His knowledge ranged from operas of Monteverdi to Händel, from Mozart to the more modern ones. He was also an expert in the singing techniques. The outcome from this collaboration could only bring to mutual growth. In the end, the written work would be divided amongst the two in the following way:

Act I scene 1: W.H.A. to the end of the aria 'Since it is not by merit', then C.K.
Act I scene 2: C.K.
Act I scene 3: W.H.A.
Act II scene 1: C.K. to the end of the aria reprise 'Always the quarry', then W.H.A.
Act II scene 2: C.K.
Act II scene 3: W.H.A.
Act III scene 1: C.K., with off-stage words for Tom and Shadow by W.H.A.
Act III scene 2: C.K.
Act III scene 3: W.H.A.
Epilogue: W.H.A.[258]

Analysis:

Bordel — Le plaisir.
Baba — L'acte gratuit.
La Machine — Il desire devenir Dieu.[259]

[257] Edward Mendelson, *Later Auden*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 1999, p. 269.

[258] Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Stravinsky in pictures and documents*, Simon and Schuster, New York 1978, p. 650.

[259] Brothel — Pleasure. / Baba — The gratuitous act. / The Machine — He wishes to become God. [R. Craft & I. Stravinsky, *Memories and Commentaries*, p. 161.]

Auden and Kallman made some slight alterations to the plot in order to make unique each choice made by the rake. In the plot, a restless and ambitious Tom Rakewell does not satisfy himself with the sincere and constant affection of Anne Trulove but gets cheated by the devil, reincarnated in the figure of Nick Shadow. The servant grants Tom three wishes, "all of them tempting in their promise of freedom, all of them empty in their impersonality."[260]

His first desire concerns wealth. The instant he wishes for money, Nick, like a genie, immediately appears and fulfils his request. There is an inheritance to claim from an unknown, dead uncle and Tom, at once, leaves his garden of Eden. With the money just acquired, Tom spends it for impersonal sex with Mother Goose, a clear reference to the children storyteller and symbol of childhood. The loss of his innocence, his "original" sin is achieved. By following Shadow as a new mentor, Tom learns by heart all the theories concerning the elevation of paganism and its natural cycle. He follows the philosophy known as hedonism or classic libertinage in this case. Pleasure is the supreme good for mankind and its achievement should be its exclusive purpose.

The second wish is that of happiness. The idea of trying to find it in Anne is immediately blocked by Nick Shadow. The latter persuades him using the disinterested theory of the *acte gratuit*. Shadow reinterprets André Gide's philosophic point[261] of freedom from passions and obligations as a key for true happiness. For this reason, he encourages Tom to marry Baba the Turk.[262] The young rake does not love her nor has any obligation on her regards. By making this choice, Tom would demonstrate to be utterly free and thus happy.

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[260] E. Mendelson, *op. cit.*, p. 270.

[261] André Gide first considers this existential concept in his novel *Lafcadio's Adventures* (1914). The protagonist, Lafcadio, commits a crime without any reason, any goal nor has any consequential remorse. "The gratuitous act has always been used to argue against the existence of God. The argument is thus: if God exists, gratuitous evil would not exist; gratuitous evil exists, therefore God cannot exist. This, of course, presupposes that the gratuitous act actually exists and that there can indeed be effect without cause. Most, however, would scoff at such a suggestion. There cannot be an effect without a preceding cause, and perhaps the phrase is nothing more than a convenient label to describe acts that have no psychological explanation." [Robert Arp (edited by), *1001 Ideas that changed the way we think*, Atria Books, New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, New Delhi 2013, p. 644.]

[262] Baba the Turk, the female singer with a long beard, was a risky bet made by the two librettists. Its presence inevitably appeared as a direct reference to homosexuality at the time. Moreover, her character, too sentimental, seemed to portray more a "soap" opera character rather than a drama one. Nonetheless, it seems that Auden and Kallman had got an insight into the future, as the 2014 Eurovision winner, Conchita Wurst, demonstrates. What might have appeared a strange and bizarre choice then, today appears normal and up-to-date.

The third and last wish is the desire to help mankind. He believes that he can achieve this result through the use of a miraculous bread producing machine which turns stone to bread. Tom feels predestined to solve the poverty question by means of this philanthropic product. But the truth is that this is an egoist attempt to restore the lost Eden and so regain Anne's love. For Auden, this swindle was not different from the various programs offered by the politicians in those years.

The opera ends with an epilogue which criticises the lack in willingness of the hero to grow up. The fact that he wants to remain an eternal Peter Pan is demonstrated by his refusal to search for a job. He has the childish belief that things will come by themselves. This opera is an open attack to all the people who want to avoid responsibility, a necessary requirement for adulthood. The absolute refusal of the real world with its laws brings his death. With regard to Tom, Auden wrote a note in his *New Year Letter*:

> The lost are perfectly free to leave whenever they like, but to do so would mean admitting that the gates were open, that is, that there was another life outside. This they cannot admit, not because they have any pleasure in their present existence, but because the life outside would be different, and, if they admitted its existence, they would have to lead it. They know this. They know that they are free to leave and they know why they do not. This knowledge is the flame of Hell.[263]

The libretto itself needs an even more thorough analysis. It has unexpectedly the structure of a typically traditional opera of the 18th and 19th century. It was no coincidence that the opera was considered a neo-classical work and for this reason highly criticised at the time. The lack of a dissonant atmosphere and the static nature of the work (represented by the arias and recitatives in the traditional style) must have appeared like a punch in the gut to a Modernist. The initial lines of the opera reveal the estrangement that a contemporary critic like Theodor Adorno[264] must have felt reading the text:

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[263] P. Griffiths, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

[264] The famous German philosopher, musicologist and critic, Theodor W. Adorno wrote in 1928: "How distant I at first feel from music that does not draw any consequences from the current state of musical material, but rather seeks its effect by transforming old, atrophied material." [Daniel Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent: Modernism in Music, Literature, and Other Arts*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 2000, p. 122.]

Anne

The woods are green and bird and beast at play
For all things keep this festival of May;
With fragrant odours and with notes of cheer
The pious earth observes the solemn year.

Tom

Now is the season when the Cyprian Queen
With genial charm translates our mortal scene,
When swains their nymphs in fervent arms enfold
And with a kiss restore the Age of Gold.

The opera begins with a simple rhyme scheme A-A-B-B in the initial duet. In the 20th century, operas were written in prose and using rhymes was seemingly absurd. Auden and Kallman have instead inserted rhyming schemes in all the various sung sections (arias, duets, trios, etc) and a high poetic register following the operatic tradition. This was a voluntary act that could be interpreted as a challenge to the existing Modernist ideology but also as a parody of the traditional opera in the Gilbert-Sullivan style.

Moreover, a mention must be made to the great intertextuality present in the libretto. The initial panegyric of the Age of Gold can be interpreted as an homage to Monteverdi's *Orfeo* which begins in a similar pastoral scene. *Orfeo* is generally considered the first major opera in history and is still represented nowadays. The libretto is full of other references. The initial ode to the Cyprian queen made by Tom is a hymn to Venus, which may recall ironically Wagner's *Tannhäuser*. Venus is the goddess of love and the two lovers exalt their feelings in the process. The reference to Venus will return in the last scene of the opera. This time, a literary classic will be beckoned: Ovid's *Metarmophoses* (book 10). In this text, we are told of Venus's love (Aphrodite in the original manuscript) for Adonis, which is destined to be killed by a wild boar. The choice of this mortal being anticipates the inevitable ending. The libretto mentions indirectly many other masterpieces in the literary and the musical domain from the *One Thousand and One Nights* to Goethe's *Faust*, from Mozart's *Don Giovanni* to Bizet's *Carmen*. As stated previously, it is hard to state whether the opera is a homage or a

collage of traditional operas or rather a parody of the operatic tradition. For this reason, it gives the sensation of a hybrid work that makes it very difficult to evaluate even today.

The Bassarids

Opera seria in one act and an intermezzo by Hans Werner Henze.

English libretto written by W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman, based on Euripides's *The Bacchae* (405 B.C.).

Characters and Premiere Cast [Salzburg, Großes Festspielhaus, August 6, 1966]

Wiener Philharmoniker, conducted by Christoph von Dohnányi.

Dionysus, *voice and stranger* (tenor)	Loren Driscoll
Tiresias, *an old blind prophet* (tenor)	Helmut Melchert
Cadmus, *founder and former king of Thebes* (bass)	Peter Lagger
Agave, *his daughter, mother of Pentheus* (mezzo-soprano)	Kerstin Meyer
Beroe, *an old slave* (contralto)	Vera Little
Captain of the Royal Guard (baritone)	William Dooley
Pentheus, *king of Thebes* (baritone)	Kostas Paskalis
Autonoe, *daughter of Cadmus* (soprano)	Ingeborg Hallstein

Chorus of bassarids, citizens of Thebes, guards, servants.

The story is set in ancient Thebes.

Synopsis:

First movement: Sonata

The chorus recounts Cadmus' abdication and hails the new king of Thebes, Pentheus. Meanwhile, the God Dionysus has arrived at Boeotia and the citizens of Thebes have decided

to go and greet Dionysus at Mount Cytheron. Also Tiresias leaves with the exception of King Pentheus who stays in his palace. He then orders the Captain of the Guard to read a royal proclamation in which the king proclaims that Zeus never had a son from Semele. By doing this, Pentheus does not acknowledge Dionysus. The king ventures to distinguish the fire on Semele's tomb by placing his cloak on it and decreeing death to all those who would dare to relight it. Cadmus is horrified by Pentheus' actions while Agave and Autonoe agree. The latter later on get hypnotised by a voice that invites them to go to Mount Cytheron.

Second movement: Scherzo e trio

Cadmus admonishes Pentheus of his actions but the king insists on eliminating the cult of Dionysus, even at Agave's expense. He orders the Captain of the Guard to arrest all the people on Mount Cytheron. Meanwhile, Pentheus recounts to his old nurse, Beroe, his fears regarding the wildness and irrationality of the cult. When, at the Judgement Hall of the Palace, the followers of Dionysus arrive, he finds amongst the prisoners Agave, Autonoe, Tiresias and a Stranger. They all hum continuously in in a state of trance. He orders the Captain to torture all the prisoners who do not come from Thebes and gather information. Pentheus tries to talk to Tiresias but he babbles about Dionysus' relationship with the vineyards. The conversation with his mother Agave does not go any better because she narrates her enlightening experience at Mount Cytheron. In the end, he decides to confine Agave and Autonoe to their rooms and orders the destruction of Tiresias' abode. After the Captain returns saying that nobody had given him information, Pentheus decides to quiz the Stranger, who Beroe has recognised in the meantime as Dionysus. She tries to warn Pentheus but the latter believing the stranger to be a priest of Dionysus, gives him an ultimatum. The Stranger ignores him and recounts Dionysus' trip to Naxos.

Third movement: Adagio e Fuga

Part 1: Pentheus orders the torture of the Stranger. After he utters this command, there is a sudden earthquake and Pentheus' cloak suddenly gets removed from Semele's tomb by unknown forces and the flame is relit. The prisoners are freed by this magic force and return

to Mount Cytheron. The Stranger advances towards Pentheus and offers him the possibility of observing what his mother saw on the mountain by means of his mother's mirror. A hesitant Pentheus, in the end, agrees to look.

Part 2: Pentheus is disgusted by what he sees but, at the same time, remains fascinated. He decides to go to Mount Cytheron but the Stranger obliges him to wear female clothes not to be recognised. Pentheus goes there to the dismay of Beroe and Cadmus who believe he will not return having angered Dionysus. During the night, in the forest of Mount Cyteron, the Bassarids chant hymns to Dionysus. While a chorus of maenads invoke the god, a voice declares that there is a spy amongst them. They start to hunt him down and Pentheus invokes his mother to recognise him but this does not occur. In the darkness the scream of Pentheus is heard and then the huntress Agave is honoured by the other maenads.

Fourth movement: Passacaglia

Cadmus, Beroe and also Tiresias are waiting for the return of Pentheus. They hear instead the maenads hailing the huntress Agave. Under the magic spell of Dionysus, she presents herself at the court with what she considers a lion's head. However, it proves to be the head of her son, Pentheus. When she recovers from the trance, she wants to commit suicide. The Captain and some soldiers enter carrying the rests of Pentheus on a litter. Autonoe, now also awakened, blames Agave for her actions. Tiresias, avenged for the destruction of his house, sentences that men should never challenge the gods. The chorus, horror-stricken by the event, deny their presence on the mountain at the time of this tragedy. At the end of this scene, Dionysus enters and openly proclaims his identity. He exiles Cadmus' race from Thebes and orders the Captain to set the palace on fire. While leaving, Agave reminds Dionysus of the fate of the self-conceited gods like Chronos and forebodes Tartarus to the cruel deity. In the meantime, flames cover the scene. Dionysus summons his mother Semele from the underworld and she ascends to Mount Olympus becoming the Goddess Thyone. Thebes is now in ruins and a vineyard grows there. Now, on Semele's tomb, can be found two statues, one of Dionysus and the other of Thyone. The chorus prostrates to them.

Origins

Henze had already collaborated with success with the duo Auden-Kallman. They had written the libretto of *Elegy for Young Lovers* (1961). In 1962, after working on a translation of Dittersdorf's opera *Arcifanfano, King of Fools*, the duo proposed another project to Henze. They wanted to set to music Euripides's *Bacchae*. As Auden wrote, the work had an "excellent potential material for a grand opera libretto."[265]

The German composer showed interest in the project and their second collaboration produced *The Bassarids*, which was commissioned by the Salzburg Festival. The choice of the title was made by Auden himself who wrote: "The word *Bassarids* or *Bassariden* really does not exist, though to my astonishment it is not in the O.E.D. It means followers of Dionysus of both sexes."[266] The libretto was ready in 1963 but Henze had to first complete his previous work, *Der junge Lord* (1964). In 1966, the premiere took place and achieved a greater success than their previous collaboration, *Elegy for Young Lovers*.

Analysis

> […] a librettist or composer looking for a suitable operatic subject would probably have rejected the *Bacchae* as too unnatural. Such events, they would have said, may have occurred in a primitive barbaric society but social and intellectual progress had made it impossible for anything of the kind ever to occur again. In the nineteenth century, the myth, one might say, was moribund. Today we know only too well that it is as possible for whole communities to become demonically possessed as it is for individuals to go off their heads.[267]

At the time, the Red Terror and the Cold War issues were features of everyday life and the historical context affected strongly all the production of the time. The sense of perpetual instability called into question important strongholds like religion and rationality. This can be perceived in this work with the new Modernist ideas giving light to new interpretations.

According to the two librettists, the characters were to be represented following their attitude towards religion and in this case, the Dionysian one: "Pentheus was to be […] a

[265] Humphrey Carpenter, *W. H. Auden: A Biography*, Faber and Faber, London 1981, p. 1859.
[266] Ibidem.
[267] Edward Mendelson (edited by), *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden, Prose, Vol. V: 1963-1968*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2015, p. 471.

'medieval ascetic', and his mother Agave 'a French Second Empire sensual sceptic', while Tiresias was to be dressed as 'an Anglican Archdeacon.'"[268]

Inevitably, the opera also dealt with the famous dichotomy stated by Nietzsche in his *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). We have the Apollonian and Dionysian concepts represented by King Pentheus and Dionysus himself. King Pentheus is the symbol of order and rationality in the plot while Dionysus represents chaos and irrationality. As Auden's biographer, Davenport-Hines writes:

> The fate of the Theban monarch and his people symbolises the terrible revenge taken by the sensual Dionysian aspect of human character if its existence is denied or its desires repressed. The conflict between Pentheus and Dionysus is between tense, repressive masculine intellect and passive, instinctual sensuality.[269]

Another important theme is undoubtedly that concerning Freud's castration anxiety. Pentheus is the victim of this fear. First, Dionysus obliges him to disguise himself as a woman, an act which goes against his virility. In the end of the opera, he is literally cut to pieces by his mother. The fear of losing the penis becomes a fact. Also, metaphorically, he suffers from emasculation. This can be seen by his fear of being insignificant which has led him to extreme acts of pride like his actions against Dionysus demonstrate.

Lastly, examining the libretto, it is immediately clear that Auden and Kallman have given great prominence to the music. This is symbolised by the choice of a musical structure instead of the normal division in acts. The work is theoretically written in one act but divided into four movements, a structure that belongs to symphonic music. The latter was considered by Wagner as the model for operatic music due to its continuous flux. This does not mean that the two librettists have renounced to have their say. An intermezzo disrupts this flux in the third movement, expressing the interposition of the librettists in the work through a voluntarily misplaced comic scene in which Pentheus imagines the activities of the Bassarids. From this point of view, the relationship between Pentheus and Dionysus might also appear as an allegory of the librettist-composer relationship where the composer seems to have the better.

[268] Humphrey Carpenter, *op. cit.*, p. 1859.
[269] Richard Davenport-Hines, *Auden*, Minerva, London 1995, p. 313.

c) Edward Morgan Forster (& Eric Crozier): A novelist at work

Billy Budd

Opera in a prologue, two acts and epilogue by Benjamin Britten, Op. 50.
Libretto written by Edward Morgan Forster and Eric Crozier, based on Herman Melville's short novel *Billy Budd* (1891).

Characters and Premiere Cast [London, Royal Opera House, December 1, 1951]

Orchestra of the Royal Opera House, conducted by Benjamin Britten.

Captain Vere *of HMS Indomitable* (tenor)	Peter Pears
Billy Budd (baritone)	Theodor Uppman
John Claggart, *Master-at-arms* (bass)	Frederick Dalberg
Mr. Redburn, *First Lieutenant* (baritone)	Hervey Alan
Mr. Flint, *Sailing Master* (bass-baritone)	Geraint Evans
Lieutenant Ratcliffe (baritone or bass)	Michael Langdon
Red Whiskers, *an impressed man* (tenor)	Anthony Marlowe
Donald (baritone)	Bryan Drake
Dansker, *an old seaman* (bass)	Inia Te Wiata
A Novice (tenor)	William McAlpine
The Novice's friend (baritone)	John Cameron
Squeak (tenor)	David Tree
Bosun (bass)	Ronald Lewis

Other characters: First Mate (bass), Second Mate (bass), Maintop (tenor), Arthur Jones (an impressed man, tenor or baritone), Cabin Boy (spoken), Four midshipmen (boy sopranos). Also Midshipmen, Powder monkeys, Officers, Sailors, Drummers, Marines and Children.

The story is set on board of the battleship HMS Indomitable, a "seventy-four" at the time of the French Revolutionary Wars in 1797.

Synopsis:

PROLOGUE

The retired old Captain Vere re-examines his life and the events that took place in 1797. He questions himself whether he had made the right decisions at the time.

ACT ONE

Scene 1: Upper deck of the Her Majesty's ship the "Indomitable"

Sailors are cleaning the deck while the officers control their actions. Due to war, young sailors are enlisted by force and carried to the ships by means of patrol boats. The officer, John Claggart, questions three new recruits and finds only the last one, Billy Budd, the only worthy one. His positive, democratic and humanitarian ways make him a danger for the officers. Claggart is unhappy because he has to share the ship with such incompetent colleagues. He asks his informer Squeak to check Billy and provoke him. When a Novice is whipped on the ship, Billy goes against the rules and takes the part of the Novice. Claggart threatens Billy asking him to remove his blue scarf. Consequently, Old Dansker advises Billy to avoid contact with Claggart. In the meantime, Captain Vere spends his time on the ship reading Plutocrat and comparing the ancient World with the modern times. Officers talk about the revolutionary French ideas which have spread also on British ships. They name Billy Budd as a possible subversive but Captain Vere dispels immediately these doubts.

Scene 2: The Mooring Deck

Billy spends his time singing with his comrades. When he notices that Old Dansker is a bit demoralised, he looks for some tobacco to give to his friend. In doing so, he discovers Squeak

searching through his belongings and they have a fight. Suddenly, Claggart appears and sends away Squeak treating Billy nicely. He admires Billy for his good looks and his positive nature but, at the same time, desires his ruin for these same reasons. Claggart bribes the Novice, who does not want to be tortured again, to convince Billy Budd to join a group of rebels but Billy, despite the gold he is offered, refuses mutiny. He informs his friend Dansker of what happened and the latter insists that Billy should be careful in regards to Claggart but he is too happy for his role as mizzentop to take into consideration his friend's advice.

ACT TWO

Scene 1: Upper deck, a few days later

The act opens with the ship surrounded by fog. Claggart tells Captain Vere about the risks of mutiny but as soon as the fog disappears, a French ship is seen in the distance. They prepare for the attack but the canon misses and there is not enough wind to follow the ship. With the return of the fog, Claggart informs Captain Vere of the possible mutiny of Billy Budd and his attempt to bribe the Novice. Captain Vere does not believe Claggart's words but promises to question Billy Budd in front of the officer.

Scene 2: Captain Vere's cabin

Captain Vere immediately perceives Claggart's malice and Billy Budd's good nature. The captain summons Billy Budd who expects a promotion but suddenly finds himself accused of an infamous act by Claggart without understanding the reason for this. Billy starts to stammer and, in the end, reacts by punching Claggart. Unfortunately, Claggart dies after this punch. Consequently, Billy gets locked in a cell where he gets interviewed again by the other officers asking why Claggart should have falsely accused him. Billy has no idea whatsoever and so he receives capital punishment for his action. Captain Vere agrees at first with the decision but when left alone he understands that it is wrong. Nevertheless, he goes to inform Billy of the death sentence.

Scene 3: Dawn, a corner on the deck, ready for the execution

Billy is ready to die. His friend Dansker informs him that the other sailors are willing to mutiny to help him avoid the execution but Billy does not want to. He has accepted his destiny just like the death of Claggart and Vere's indifference.

Scene 4: Upper deck, dawn.

The execution begins and an officer reads the death sentence to Billy. Before dying, he blesses Captain Vere. Shortly before his death, a revolt occurs on the ship but it is immediately settled by the officers.

EPILOGUE

Old Captain Vere remembers Billy's burial at sea. He asks himself why he did not save Billy but he acknowledges that Billy had saved him in the end. The old sailor concludes that good and evil are two inseparable parts of life.

Origins

Billy Budd represented the return of Britten to the great scenes after Peter Grimes. Previously, Britten had consecrated himself to chamber operas like *Albert Herring*. This opera was commissioned for the Festival of Britain in 1951 and its premiere was to take place at the Covent Garden.

Its librettist was E. M. Forster who Britten knew since 1937. Both of them participated in the various cultural circles with Auden and Isherwood. Even though they were friends, the idea of having them collaborate together in an opera seemed inconceivable. As the English writer Ronald Duncan stated:

When Britten turned to E. M. Forster in 1951 for a libretto for Billy Budd, I was amazed at his selection. I knew he admired Forster's novels; a taste I did not share; I knew Forster had no experience of music, of libretti

writing, and I suspected little ear for music, either. I realised that Britten had sympathy for Forster as a man, but thought that insufficient to make him a suitable collaborator.[270]

Britten himself had the idea of setting to music Melville's final novel. Forster accepted the offer provided that an expert librettist would help him in his work. Eric Crozier, the librettist of Peter Grimes, was the choice. The two would visit the "Victory" ship moored at Portsmouth and read books concerning the life of the sailor during that time. Melville's novel was very concise and culminated in the final confront between Claggart and Billy. Thus, the initial part of the opera had to be totally invented, just like Claggart's solo in which he describes his feelings for Billy. Furthermore, Vere's death in the novel was eliminated and Vere became the narrator of this story through a framing device. In the end, the opera premiered at Covent Garden achieving an enormous success with seventeen curtain calls.

Analysis:

We never for a moment forget the physical confinement of the ship, the rigid hierarchy of the Service, the continuous activity which is required simply to keep going, and the underlying tension of possible clashes with the enemy.[271]

The first thing which strikes us is the choice of a delimited area, that of a ship. The libretto manages to recreate the right atmosphere through the naval terms used by the sailors and also depicts the repetitiveness of the sailors' life and scenario by means of the continuous and mechanical command-response dialogues in this solely male naval environment. The choice of the year 1797 to set the story, brings to mind the idea of the "floating republic." There was the fear at the time of British sailors mutinying after the republican ideals had spread after the French revolution. This fear was not different from the existing Red Terror in Europe.

The presence of the Novice in the opera and his punishment recall the theme of masculinity. For having committed an error, the novice gets flogged. This practice was still in force until the end of World War II. For many, this humiliation was interpreted as the

[270] Claire Seymour, *op. cit.*, p. 133.
[271] Patricia Howard, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten: An Introduction*, Barrie and Rockliff, The Cresset Press, London 1969, p. 78.

equivalent of a rape for a man. Therefore, the Novice becomes a violated man. In the opera, he goes further becoming a sort of lover of Claggart by obeying to his desires in exchange for protection, a fact which would have qualified him at the time as a homosexual.[272] Claggart, undoubtedly, allures the novice and tries to do the same with Billy, who stammers at the "proposal." The presence of E. M. Forster, a declared homosexual, working on the libretto and famous at the time for his novel, *Maurice*, a book published post-mortem which dealt with homosexuality, could not be merely a coincidence.

In the end, Billy Budd is the only character who sings in the classic tonal manner. This symbolizes his great inner beauty but also creates a feeling of estrangement with the surrounding characters. As E. M. Forster wrote concerning the characters of Billy Budd and Captain Vere:

> Each adaptor has his own problems. Ours has been how to make Billy, rather than Vere the hero. Melville must have intended this: he called the story Billy Budd, and unless there is strong evidence to the contrary one may assume that an author calls his story after the chief character […] But I also think that Melville got muddled and that, particularly in the trial scene his respect for authority and discipline deflected him. How odiously Vere comes out in the trial scene. […] His unseemly harangue arises, I think, from Melville's wavering attitude towards an impeccable commander, a superior philosopher, and a British aristocrat. Every now and then he doused Billy's light and felt that Vere, being well-educated and just, must shine like a star […] We (Eric Crozier and I) have, you see, plumped for Billy as a hero and for Claggart as naturally depraved, and we have ventured to tidy up Vere. Adaptors have to tidy up. Creators needn't and sometimes shouldn't.[273]

The framing device present instead in the narration through the figure of Captain Vere in the prologue and in the epilogue could make him appear as the true protagonist of the opera. Billy Budd instead appears as the protagonist of Vere's flashback. As Britten wrote:

> Billy always attracted me, of course, the radiant young figure; I felt there was going to be quite an opportunity for writing nice dark music for Claggart; but I must admit that Vere, who has what seems to me the main moral problem of the whole work, round [him] the drama was going to centre.[274]

[272] Emanuele Di Marco, "Perduto nel mare infinito", in Cosimo Manicone (edited by), *Benjamin Britten: Billy Budd*, Programma di Sala, Edizioni del Teatro dell'Opera di Roma, Rome 2018, pp. 162-164.
[273] E. M. Forster, *The Griffin*, vol. 1, 1951, pp. 4-6. [C. Seymour, *op. cit.*, pp. 134-135.]
[274] C. Seymour, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

The role of Captain Vere is sung by a tenor, a voice which normally represents a character who is evolving during the opera. Vere is similar to the mist present throughout the work and his final redemption through Billy Budd does not appear totally convincing. The captain is just like human justice which has left him more doubts than certainties.

Before concluding the analysis, it is also important to state that *Billy Budd* has also been interpreted as a Christian allegory. Billy could represent a Christ-like figure who redeems Captain Vere's sins while Claggart could symbolize the fallen angel who knows well Billy because he had been similar to him in the past.

d) Giancarlo Menotti: on the footsteps of Boito and Leoncavallo

Amahl and the Night Visitors

Television opera in one act by Gian Carlo Menotti.

Original English libretto written by Gian Carlo Menotti, based on Hieronymus Bosch's *The Adoration of the Magi* (1510).

Characters and Premiere Cast [New York, NBC Opera Theatre, December 24, 1951]

NBC Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Thomas Schippers.

Amahl, *a crippled boy* (boy soprano)	Chet Allen
His Mother (soprano or mezzo-soprano)	Rosemary Kuhlmann
King Kaspar, *slightly deaf* (tenor)	Andrew McKinley
King Melchior (baritone)	David Aiken
King Balthazar (bass)	Leon Lishner
The Page, *traveling with the kings* (bass)	Francis Monachino

Chorus of shepherds and villagers.

The story is set around the hills of Bethlehem, at the first century.

Synopsis:

During the time of the first Christmas, near the hills of Bethlehem, Amahl, a crippled boy of about 12 years old, is standing outside admiring a big star with a long tail. His mother orders him to enter their small hut and go to sleep but he prefers to stay outside. For this reason, she reprimands him because, from her point of view, he daydreams too much and does not consider the fact that they have nothing to eat nor to keep them warm. In addition, he often recounts lies and his mother is tired of this. Imagining all of this, she falls in despair and ponders their distressed situation. While she pictures her son as a beggar, he comforts her by portraying a life in which they live off music. They will eat roast goose and sweet almonds and sleep with the sheep under a starry sky. Amahl manages to calm her mother and then they go to sleep.

In the meantime, three kings are seen following the star with the tail. They knock at Amahl's house and Amahl goes to open the door. He tells his mother that there is a king at the door but she is tired of his son's lies and demands that he tells the truth. He goes down and finds a second king and then a third one after his mother repeatedly urges him to not tell lies. The mother pulls herself out of her bed and goes to see herself. His astounded mother then greets the guests. They ask for hospitality and tell the mother about the star. The kings inform her that they are going to the new-born king. Amahl's mother goes out to gather some firewood while Amahl asks questions to the visitors. He starts asking questions to Balthazar to which he talks of his past when he worked as a shepherd. Then it is the turn of Kaspar, who is quite deaf, and talks to him about a box with which he always travels containing magical stones, beads and liquorice. As Amahl's mother returns, she notices that Amahl has become the centre of interest receiving questions from the kings. She tells his son to go on a mission and ask other shepherds to bring gifts for the visitors. His mother talks to Melchior about the packages that they are carrying which are destined to a child the star is leading them to. The king describes the child they are looking for to whom they are bringing incense, myrrh and gold.

In the meantime, the other shepherds, called by Amahl, come and bring gifts like citrons, lemons, laurel, garlic, etc. They offer them to the guests, who thank them, and after some

dancing, they ask gently to bid farewell because they are tired. Everyone leaves and goes to sleep. Looking at the gold, the mother meditates on how much good it would do to them and steals some of it. She gets caught by the page and a struggle starts. Seeing his mother in trouble, Amahl intervenes to help her. In the end, Melchior lets the mother keep that gold because it is only love that the king they seek wants. The mother gives back the money and, as they are about to leave, Amahl offers to give his crutch as a present to the new-born child. After he has uttered these words, he discovers that he can now walk again. It was the holy child who has blessed and healed him. To thank him, Amahl decides to go with the kings to meet the child and thank him personally. The mother agrees and Amahl departs with them at dawn.

Origins

This is an opera for children because it tries to recapture my own childhood. You see, when I was a child I lived in Italy, and in Italy we have no Santa Claus. I suppose that Santa Claus is much too busy with American children to be able to handle Italian children as well. Our gifts were brought to us by the Three Kings, instead. I actually never met the Three Kings —it didn't matter how hard my little brother and I tried to keep awake at night to catch a glimpse of the Three Royal Visitors, we would always fall asleep just before they arrived. But I do remember hearing them. I remember the weird cadence of their song in the dark distance, I remember the brittle sound of the camel's hooves crushing the frozen show, and I remember the mysterious tinkling of their silver bridles.[275]

It all started with the NBC channel commissioning to Menotti a Christmas opera, the first to be broadcasted on TV. The composer found initially some difficulties in choosing the theme for his work. In his introduction to the original TV production, Menotti explained how he found his inspiration:

One November afternoon as I was walking rather gloomily through the rooms of the Metropolitan Museum, I chanced to stop in front of the *Adoration of the Kings* by Hieronymus Bosch, and as I was looking at it, suddenly I heard again, coming from the distant blue hills, the weird song of the Three Kings. I then realized they had come back to me and had brought me a gift.[276]

[275] Giancarlo Menotti, *Introduction to the Original TV production* (1951). [https://pipromusica.org/events-calendar/2019/1/4/amahl-and-the-night-visitors, last seen: 26/10/19]
[276] Ibidem.

This fable, or living nativity set to music, achieved immediate success. As stated previously, it was the first opera written for television. The fact that the opera did not need necessarily professional singers, that it was tonal and could be sung by amateurs, made it performable everywhere from theatres to churches. Furthermore, having been written for children and lasting only about 45 minutes, it made it a favourite amongst the various communities, achieving an average of 500 performances each Christmas.

Analysis

I am often asked how I went about writing an opera for television, and what are the specific problems that I had to face in planning a work for such a medium. I must confess that in writing "Amahl and the Night Visitors," I hardly thought of television at all. As a matter of fact, all my operas are originally conceived for an ideal stage which has no equivalent in reality, and I believe that such is the case with most dramatic authors.[277]

As Menotti stated here, his operas were composed for explicit functions. Here, the use of simple English and the elaboration of a coherent Christmas plot favoured its success. All the main Christmas ingredients are present here. Amahl, a child, symbol of innocence, has a disability but, nonetheless, lives a happy life. He is happy in his poverty because he does not care about the earthly goods. Three kings come to visit him and he offers hospitality like all the other shepherds, another important precept of Christianity. The great love for Amahl of his mother makes her sin but the kings immediately forgive her. Forgiveness is achieved by means of devaluating what is highly considered on earth and trusting on the Christian principles that the new-born child will profess. Amahl, in his desire to give his crutch to the Messiah which represents all that he possesses, reaches a state of grace and sees the performance of a miracle in him. He can now walk and follow the steps of the Lord as the Bible recites.

Analysing the text, this libretto might just appear as a commercial work of not great importance. To think this would be a great error. As Menotti stated in the introduction of this opera, it is an opera made for children. It is an educational opera which lasts just one act

[277] Ibidem.

because the author does not want to weary the young listener. *Amahl* represents an introduction to opera where all the main features (such as arias, duos, choruses, ballets and costumes) are inserted but following the modern standards. It is an experiment of which the prime aim has been achieved, namely the representation of the work every Christmas throughout the United States and, consequently, a first approach to opera for the generations in formation.

Vanessa

Opera in four acts by Samuel Barber, opus 32.

Original English libretto written by Gian Carlo Menotti, inspired by Isak Dinesen's *Seven Gothic Tales* (1934).

Characters and Premiere Cast [New York, Metropolitan Opera, January 15, 1958]

Metropolitan Orchestra, conducted by Dimitri Mitropoulos.

Vanessa (soprano)	Eleanor Steber
Erika, *her niece* (mezzo-soprano)	Rosalind Elias
The Old Baroness, *Vanessa's mother* (contralto)	Regina Resnik
Anatol, *the son of Vanessa's original lover* (tenor)	Nicolai Gedda
The Old Doctor (baritone)	Giorgio Tozzi
Nicholas, *the major-domo* (bass)	George Cehanovsky
The Footman (bass)	Robert Nagy

About 1905. Vanessa's country house in a northern country.

Synopsis:

ACT ONE: At the dining room in a dark winter night.

Vanessa has been waiting for twenty years, her beloved Anatol. She orders her niece, Erika, to organize the meal with French delicacies for her ex lover who should be coming despite the snowstorm outside. It gets very late but finally Anatol arrives. Vanessa is disappointed when she sees a young man instead of her Anatol and wants him out of the house. She calls for help to Erika and flees up the stairs. The young man presents himself to Erika as Anatol, the son of Vanessa's lover, who carries the same name. He was curious to know the woman his mother hated so much. Seeing the food, he invites Erika to eat with him and stays due to the snowstorm.

ACT TWO: One month has passed.

Erika tells the old baroness the story of that night. She has kissed and slept with Anatol just that night. He proposed to marry her but Erika didn't answer him. Although she strongly loves him, she believes that Anatol is incapable of love. Erika wants true love and not that "mocking laughter from his lips." She tells the baroness that another person seems to have fallen in love with Anatol. Meanwhile, the voices of Vanessa and Anatol can be heard coming from the garden. The two, dressed for ice-skating, meet the doctor and start talking. The doctor recalls those days in which the house used to be gay and there used to be country dances. He teaches Anatol some dance steps while Vanessa opens her heart to Erika. She tells her niece that Anatol has been sent to her by fate. Not coincidentally, she has kept her youth for him, the younger version of her lover. Vanessa then tells her that while skating, Anatol has proposed to her saying that he had come as a guest and yearned now to leave as master. Vanessa leaves when she sees the pastor and Erika seizes the moment to approach Anatol and ask him about his feelings. Anatol offers passion but not love and Erika does not answer him because Vanessa has come in the meantime. They all go to the chapel for mass except Erika, alone, who declares that she will not marry Anatol but will leave him to Vanessa.

ACT THREE: New Year's Eve at the Castle.

There is a great ball. The Doctor is amongst the invited and is amusing himself. He is supposed to announce the betrothal of Vanessa with Anatol. Vanessa is in a bad mood because neither

her mother nor her niece have decided to participate to the ball. Their silence is irritating her. The Doctor goes to talk to Erika but she won't speak with him. This "wall of silence" makes Vanessa doubt Anatol's love but he immediately reassures her. They enter the ballroom where the Doctor finally makes the announcement of their betrothal. Erika is then seen descending the stairs. She is pale and touches her chest all the time. She is pregnant of Anatol's child and prefers to leave the house during the night. The old baroness goes to search for her and shouts her name from the open door. At the same time, Vanessa and Anatol are seen dancing together.

ACT FOUR

Scene 1: The bedroom of Erika.

Vanessa has discovered that Erika has run away from the house. She is heartbroken because Erika is like a daughter to her. She cannot understand the reason for her flight. Suddenly, the Doctor sees Anatol and some peasants arrive carrying Erika. The doctor visits her while Anatol recounts to Vanessa the small ravine where they found Erika covered in blood. Vanessa asks Anatol to tell her the truth and whether Erika loved him. He denies her love stating that their love was predestined. Foreshadowing the horror that is to come, Vanessa asks Anatol to flee with her. The Doctor suddenly reappears and tells them that Erika wants to be alone with her grandmother. Erika confesses that the child is no more a problem and the grandmother leaves the room.

Scene 2: At the dining room, two weeks later.

Anatol and Vanessa are ready to depart for Paris in their new home. The Doctor talks of how he will miss Vanessa. The latter talks with Erika and tells her that she has willed the house to her so that she can continue to live there. Vanessa one last time asks Erika to tell her the truth of that night. She answers that it was a silly error of her youth and that she had fallen in love with the wrong man. Vanessa leaves with Anatol and Erika calls for the last time the name of Anatol before accepting her fate. Now she is the new Vanessa. Her grandmother will not talk

to her anymore and she decides to cover all the mirrors and portraits. It is now the turn for Erika to wait.

Origins

During the thirty years that I have been going to opera, all the time I have thought seriously about it. But before I wrote one, I wanted to make a long-term preparation for the job. This meant working in all concomitant techniques necessary for opera writing. That is, how to write for orchestra, how to write for chorus and ballet, how to write for solo voice and orchestra. When I had learned that, I was ready.[278]

Since 1934, Samuel Barber was looking for the right libretto on which he would compose his first opera. He had refused a commission for an opera by the Metropolitan in 1942 because the libretto that had been presented to him was uninspiring.[279] Barber had also met the poet Dylan Thomas with whom he had talked about opera and had planned a possible collaboration but World War II practically closed the doors to this possibility. Barber had very clear ideas concerning libretto writing:

Most librettos are entirely too wordy. That is why I say that in this day, when everyone is looking for new American librettists, there should be new relationships between writers and opera houses. [...] Writers must get the feel of the lyric stage—the real smell of the stage. One must be a habitué of the opera, like Stendhal at La Scala. It has always seemed curious to me that he never wrote an opera libretto.[280]

It was only a question of time before Barber could find his librettist. In 1952, in a letter to his uncle, he wrote:

Gian Carlo has offered to write me a libretto and will submit a couple of scenes first to see if I like it; if not, no harm done and he won't mind; of course, we will discuss the story together. This may or may not be a good idea; certainly his knowledge of the stage is tremendous, and if we can hit on a subject which would interest us both, who can tell? Anyway it is a great secret, and you are the first person I have told.[281]

[278] Jay Harrison, "Samuel Barber Discusses 'Vanessa'", in *New York Herald Tribune*, 12 January 1958, p. 6. [B. B. Heyman, *op. cit.*, p. 375.]
[279] B. B. Heyman, *op. cit.*, p. 375.
[280] Emily Coleman, "Samuel Barber and Vanessa", in *Theatre Arts*, January 1958, p. 88 [B. B. Heyman, *op. cit.*, p. 377.]
[281] Letter by Samuel Barber to his uncle, April 24, 1952. [B. B. Heyman, *op. cit.*, p. 377.]

Gian Carlo Menotti, as mentioned previously, was a composer who had achieved great success in the operatic world. He had always written his own librettos for his operas and in this case he was writing one for another composer. In regards to writing a libretto for another musician, he stated:

First of all, you must admire the composer. And that was easy enough for me; I have admired Sam Barber's music since we were students together at the Curtis Institute of Music. Secondly, you must love the composer, because, believe me, it is rather heartbreaking to give up a libretto to another composer, particularly if you happen to like the libretto yourself. Thirdly, you must be pestered by the composer, almost daily. I don't know how severely Verdi harassed poor Boito, but I can assure you that Sam haunted me in my dreams until the very last words of the opera were written.[282]

The first decision was to choose the story. They finally opted for a Gothic story inspired by the tales written by Isak Dinesen. It would be set in Europe because of the need of a poetic English that would be far from the American accent. It would be an American opera because it was written by American artists and not necessarily because it must be set in America. The most important point was to write a decent plot. Barber was pleased with Menotti's work because he appreciated his economy of words and his sense of theatrical timing. The inclusion by Menotti of references to Barber's past like the "French menu to open the opera, a skating scene, a waltz and a Protestant hymn"[283] and the ending which was similar to one of Barber's favourite plays, Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, made the collaboration perfect.

With the completion of the libretto, now Barber had to focus on setting the music on the text and, after finishing that, he had to choose the right singers for each part. This was done scrupulously even though the chosen Vanessa, Sena Jurinac, was substituted six weeks before the opening night. Her substitute, Eleanor Steber, did an excellent job and the opera turned out a success.

Analysis

Erika is a passionate idealist. Vanessa is more human. […] Anatol is charming; I have many friends like him. He has imagination, fantasy, even if he's not a very strong character. The one who is really strong is the

[282] Menotti during an interview by John Gutman on February 1, 1958. [B. B. Heyman, *op. cit.*, pp. 378-379]
[283] B. B. Heyman, *op. cit.*, p. 383.

Baroness. She represents the affirmation of life and order; she speaks only to those who accept life for what it is. And she values life above order; from the moment she learns that Erika succeeded in destroying her baby, even though it is illegitimate, she will no longer speak to the girl—just as she has not spoken to Vanessa, who sacrificed her youth in a dream.[284]

If the baroness represents the distant past, the recent past and the present do not appear very promising. There is an aura of existential pessimism perfectly reflected by the gothic atmosphere. We have three generations taken into consideration. Belonging to the recent past are Vanessa and the Doctor. They both represent a failure because Vanessa could not marry her beloved Anatol, the father of the other Anatol, while the Doctor, the comic figure, had not achieved his other objectives and had to accept his role of doctor in society. The present generation symbolised by Anatol "fils" and Erika show the existing barrenness of a generation. Anatol, "the man of today", does not want to create a family but just accepts all the easiest and most comfortable solutions. Erika, instead, searches for an impossible love which leaves her at the end completely alone. The barrenness is also symbolised by the absence of children in the work. The only child is the unborn one of Erika which is destined to die. Also, the relationship between Vanessa and Anatol is doomed to natural sterility due to Vanessa's old age.

In the 1958 representation at Salzburg, the opera was criticised because it seemed to recall a realism, which by now, was seen out of style. In his libretto, Menotti had tried to continue the tradition of the various realist operas but the result by now seemed old-fashioned. As Heyman reports: "Thus the focus of criticism was on the libretto—at best "dated, old-fashioned, Strindbergian, Ibsenesque, 'plush—a combination of fin de siècle realism and pseudopsychology"; at its worst "disgusting," "wretched," and "enough to make one cry."[285] That might explain why the first great American opera practically disappeared, receiving few revivals, in the years to come. Nonetheless, even though *Vanessa* might appear to critics as a late 19th century opera, the structure of the libretto is undoubtedly very well built. Furthermore, suspense is created by the continuous foreshadowing which is overly present from the beginning to the end in a perfectly circular narrative.

[284] Ibidem.
[285] Ivi, p. 396.

e) Samuel Beckett: the librettist of an anti-opera

Neither

Opera in one act for chamber orchestra and soprano by Morton Feldman.

Libretto inspired by a 16-line poem written by Samuel Beckett.

Characters and Premiere Cast [Rome, Teatro dell'Opera, May 13, 1977]

Orchestra of the Teatro dell'Opera, conducted by Marcello Panni.

Soprano	Martha Hanneman

Synopsis:

There is no plot. Beckett wrote the following text which inspired Feldman:

to and fro in shadow from inner to outer shadow
--
from impenetrable self to impenetrable unself by way of neither
--
as between two lit refuges whose doors once neared gently close, once away turned from gently part again
--
beckoned back and forth and turned away
--
heedless of the way, intent on the one gleam or the other
--
unheard footfalls only sound
--
till at last halt for good, absent for good from self and other
--
then no sound
--
then gently light unfading on that unheeded neither
--

Origins

In 1976, the American composer, Morton Feldman, met Beckett in Berlin at the Schiller-Theater during the rehearsals of *Footfalls* and *That Time*. Feldman had visited the renowned Irish playwright because he wanted to ask him if he could write a libretto for his new opera, commissioned by the Teatro dell'Opera in Rome. Until that moment, Feldman had exclusively composed instrumental music. The response of Beckett was not very promising. He told Feldman that he did not like opera and suggested him to use one of his own existing texts, as his friend the French composer Marcel Mihalovci had done adapting *Krapp's Last Tape* to a chamber opera in 1961. Not according to Feldman who replied that these works were already complete and did not need any addition of music in them. Besides, Feldman did not like opera as well and had no idea of what he wanted from Beckett. He just felt that the latter could offer him the "quintessence" of what he needed. After Feldman showed a score of one of his own pieces, Beckett wrote what he considered the main theme of his life on it: "To and fro in shadow, from outer shadow to inner shadow. To and fro, between unattainable self and unattainable non-self."[286] By the end of the month, Beckett sent a card to Feldman with a hand-written text called *Neither*, containing 86 words in 10 lines. The opera premiered at the Teatro dell'Opera in Rome on 13th May 1977 but was immediately defined by some critics as an anti-opera.

Analysis

I wanted to treat each sentence as a world. And there was much to think about, because I noticed that, as the work went on, it became much more tragic. It became unbearable, while here [at the beginning] it's tolerable. It wasn't until page 30 that I had a glimpse of what To and fro is in the text. What he's talking about is the impossibility of fathoming either the "self" or the "unself." You're back and forth, back and forth. Well, I said to myself, I certainly know more than anybody else in my generation what the "self" is in terms of personal music. I had to invent the "unself". I saw the "unself" as a very detached, impersonal, perfect type of machinery.[287]

[286] James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, Bloomsbury, London, 1996, pp. 781-782.
[287] Howard Skempton, "Beckett as Librettist", in *Music and Musicians*, May 1977, p. 6.

Feldman had started to compose the piece before he received Beckett's text. Explaining the absence of a voice at the beginning, Feldman said: "That's why the piece begins textless. I was waiting for the text. I discovered what an overture is: waiting for the text!"[288] When it arrived, he found it extremely peculiar for the fact that it seemed the same phrase reworded each line. This sort of repetition with a different wording seemed to change the meaning of the message. Feldman's innovative music fit perfectly with these words. There is no plot, no scenery, no unfolding of a story, but an escalation deriving from the "repetition" of those words that gain greater depth in the mind. The repetition is reproduced by the orchestra and the voice of a soprano that sings in a seemingly wordless manner. The soprano has the unique possibility of choosing which vowel she prefers to focus her wailing on.

So, more than an anti-opera, it can be defined as a monodrama that focuses on minimalism, existentialism and experimentalisms. In short, music and words coexist together where the success of this experiment derives from the similarities of the two artists, Beckett and Feldman. It is more than a collaboration which existed only at the origins of the work. The endless music and hopelessness which derives from it represents that understanding of the inner self and of what surrounds us which is unreachable, mostly if calculated in a single life. It also mirrors a period, the Cold War era, where M.A.D. (acronym for Mutual Assured Destruction) is more than a possibility and the Nuclear arms race a fact. *Neither* fully represents this period of uncertainty and anxiety.

[288] Ivi, p. 5.

Conclusion

After this long disquisition on the story of the libretto and the perusal of a selection of what I consider important case studies of Modernism, it would be foolish to state that the libretto has really emancipated itself from the music. Unquestionably, the libretto has recovered part of its ancient value, but music will always be a constant presence in an opera, even when it is dissonant. It represents other voices, other interpretations of the story and often an omniscient narrator in its orchestral parts. What the librettist has undoubtedly gained from Modernism has been the possibility to experiment, to achieve a greater autonomy which had been lost from the epoch of Metastasio. Most of the operas I have selected have survived due to their modern themes, like gender studies, which have been engaged by the librettists or better "poets". The possibility given by the operatic conventions of dealing with any possible theme, even the most disputable, has opened the doors to many of the great writers and thinkers of the century.

In regards to literary value, it is one of those topics which suffer subjectivity. As stated previously, a canon generally may represent the culture of a period, its beliefs. A text also needs a certain lapse of time to be judged. The libretto, mostly the modern ones I considered, are still too recent. Amongst the works I examined, most probably operas like Beckett's *Neither* will fall into oblivion because they are too elitist and tied too much to a specific context. The others instead have, from my point of view, the quality which was present in avant-garde art movements like Cubism at the beginning of the 20th century. They can foresee the future, create a feeling of estrangement, defamiliarization, which can anticipate us a glimpse of the future. The recent themes which these poets had already acknowledged in the past, brings me to this conclusion.

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