

PART ONE

Legacies

1 Opera in transition

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I

'More books on Wagner! Yes, the cry is still they come.' Since the first two sentences of a review article in the *Musical Times* for November 1899 (volume 40, 744) would not seem out of place in a similar context more than a century later, the reader of this introductory chapter might anticipate a sermon on the text 'plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose'. Even allowing for the fact that opera-goers in 1899 were not able to bolster their 'live' listening with a wide choice of performances on CD and DVD, and were not yet travelling to opera houses by private car in casual clothes, still less jetting off to Adelaide or Santa Fe to catch a rarity or a special, star-studded production of a classic, it might still be reassuring to emphasize elements of cultural common ground between then and now: and a description of the world of opera at the end of the nineteenth century which underlines its tradition-establishing role for the new century becomes even more plausible when the topic of repertory is considered.

During the 1899 Covent Garden season, which ran from early April to late July, there were 69 performances, all of operas which were composed during the nineteenth century, with the sole exception of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, heard three times. The programme extended from Beethoven's *Fidelio* (performed only once) through Bellini's *Norma*, Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots*, Wagner's *Der fliegende Holländer*, *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*, Verdi's *Rigoletto* and *Aida*, Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*, Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana*, Wagner's *Die Walküre*, *Tristan* and *Die Meistersinger*, as well as Gounod's *Faust*, Berlioz's *Roméo et Juliette* and Bizet's *Carmen* – with, as novelties, Mancinelli's *Ero e Leandro*, de Lara's *Messaline*, Adam's *Le Chalet* and Puccini's *La Bohème* (*Musical Times*, 1899, 536).

A year later, in 1900, the season came even closer to a present-day equivalent: *Don Giovanni*, Wagner's *Ring*, *Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin* and *Die Meistersinger*, Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Rigoletto* and *Aida*, *Les Huguenots*, *Roméo et Juliette*, *Faust*, *Carmen*, *La Bohème*, 'Cav.' and 'Pag.': the only novelty was Puccini's brand-new *Tosca*. (The *Musical Times* reviewer responded quite positively to this work, praising 'the sense of impulsive passionate life it conveys; the chief

[3]

defects are lack of strong, broad melody and of anything like development, and of crudity in the obtaining of effects': see volume 41 (1900), 536.) Not one of those operas in the 1900 programme has completely disappeared from the repertory a century later: and while a slightly different situation obtained in countries (Germany, in particular) where a greater number of companies were promoting a wider range of contemporary composers, it is clear the core operatic repertory at the start of the new century was not so much 'in transition' – poised to change considerably and constantly in the years ahead – as establishing a kind of steady state which would be inflected to varying degrees during the twentieth century itself, but not drastically altered.

II

Other constants involved matters of finance and patronage. Whether the location was Berlin, where the Kaiser and members of his entourage were actively involved in the running of the Court Opera, or Chicago, where opera meant 'commercial theatre, mounted by an impresario with the expectation of making a profit' (Marsh 1992, 841), it was already a topic of considerable controversy when taxes collected from the expanding and increasingly affluent bourgeoisie were used to fund such an elitist form of entertainment. As a result, opera companies experienced as much administrative and artistic instability as many state-funded enterprises continue to do, a century later.

The intensely hierarchical, international star system was also already in place: for example, at New York's Metropolitan Opera, 'each of the seven highest-priced singers were paid more than the entire conducting staff' and 'the audience at the popular-priced Saturday nights did not get to hear either De Reszke, even once' (Meyer 1983, 75, 73) – the De Reszke brothers being among the most highly regarded, and expensive, singers of the time.

In 1890s New York, *fin de siècle* gaiety 'had a frenetic quality; the rich felt beleaguered on all sides' (Meyer 1983, 67): and this spirit, a heady mixture of excitement and anxiety, was common in other centres of civilization as the old century came to an end. It is therefore no surprise to find that opera companies did not react to this spirit of intense cultural self-examination with a sense of 'out with the old, in with the new', tending rather to take pride in the positive, commercially successful balance between old and new which had already been achieved. As the twentieth century proceeded, it added Monteverdi, Handel, Rameau, and more Mozart to the mainstream repertory, as well as operas by Strauss,

Janáček, Britten and a few other twentieth-century composers. It extended the historical span of the repertory, while gradually turning away from the near-contemporary emphasis of those 1899 and 1900 seasons. London cannot exactly be deemed typical, lacking the well-established civic and court theatres prominent elsewhere in Europe, but the thinking behind the repertory reflected that found in other major centres – understandably, since the opera manager in London between 1897 and 1900, Maurice Grau, fulfilled the same function at the Metropolitan Opera in New York.

It is therefore tempting to develop the argument that not only the operatic repertory, but also the institutional structures that brought that repertory to life in the theatre, were less explicitly dedicated to the pursuit of change and even transformation, than those forces in society and culture which might be thought to impinge profoundly – if indirectly – on any major artistic genre. Obviously enough, operatic composition from around the year 1909 did not suddenly and irreversibly attempt to match the degree of innovation evident in Schoenberg's *Erwartung*. (In any case, *Erwartung* was not staged until 1924.) When matters of scale and style are concerned, those operas composed in the twentieth century which have been most often performed, from *Tosca* and Janáček's *Kat'a Kabanová* to Britten's *Peter Grimes* and Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*, have mediated to varying degrees between nineteenth-century modes of expression and musical styles tending to challenge or even reject such modes of expression. After all, even *Erwartung*, or Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*, while inconceivable in a nineteenth-century context, cannot seriously be considered 'anti-operas'. Only with much later works like Mauricio Kagel's *Staatstheater* (1967–70) and John Cage's *Européras* (1987–91) is the genre itself approached in a deconstructive spirit. And such works are in turn inconceivable without a continuing, flourishing tradition of 'conventional' opera to be placed against them.

III

That flourishing tradition, as a cultural as well as a creative phenomenon, was a product of the nineteenth century. Even a cursory glance at the reports of opera performances in Europe and America in the 1890s indicates just how well established the genre was as a form of cultured entertainment. Yet it was still barely seventy years since 'modern music theater began, in Paris, around 1830' (Gerhard 1998, 40). What also began then was the process Anselm Gerhard calls '*Verstädterung*', or 'urbanization', with French '*grand opéra*' aimed at a bourgeois rather

than aristocratic audience. An art-form which had begun with adapting myth and legend for the enlightenment of the few moved in the direction of a style of mass entertainment appropriate for a culture whose primary values were those of capitalism, and which therefore reflected in its subject-matter the profound changes in social, political and economic life after 1789.

There are indeed enormous differences between an early seventeenth-century opera such as Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, and a late nineteenth-century one such as Puccini's *La Bohème*. Yet there are fundamental musical values shared, to do with matters of melodic shaping, rhythmic structuring and harmonic organization, which some twentieth-century opera composers challenged but did not destroy: and it is the persistence of these values which has helped to ensure that opera and mass entertainment have remained distinct cultural categories. Even if the need for mass entertainment since the middle of the nineteenth century had not been channelled into music hall, cinema and pop concert, it is very unlikely that operas with any recognizable relationship to Humperdinck's *Hänsel und Gretel*, *La Bohème*, or any other product of the 1890s, would have permanently colonized this area of cultural practice. Musical comedy in its various manifestations was never robust enough to gain mass appeal, and while those through-composed musicals beloved of the later twentieth-century might reflect certain aspects of 'veristic' operas by Mascagni, Leoncavallo and others, in one fundamental respect – the kind of singing required – there remains a clear dividing line between 'serious' and 'popular' musical theatre.

IV

General historians, like musicologists, deal in constant, complex transitions. For Eric Hobsbawm, the period from 1870 to 1914 was not only one in which 'bourgeois society' passed through 'an identity crisis', but also an 'era when both the creative arts and the public for them lost their bearings' (1994, 219). It is by no means inherently paradoxical that the accelerating popularization that went with 'urbanization' – 'the number of theatres in Germany tripled between 1870 and 1896, from two hundred to six hundred' (221) – was paralleled by the emergence of a small but potent avant-garde, dedicated to challenging the complacency and conservatism on which popularization was believed to depend. While there was no doubt that 'the public for the arts, richer, more cultured and more democratized, was enthusiastic and receptive' (222), and that 'culture in the accepted elite sense was also notably internationalized by the sheer

ease of personal movement within a broad cultural zone' (223), it was never likely that opera, with its elaborate requirements for collective performance and relatively formal institutional context, would give a higher priority to the progressively experimental, in matters of musical language and dramatic content, over the well tried.

Yet despite the evident fact that 'the crux of the crisis of the arts lay in the growing divergence between what was contemporary and what was "modern"' (226), we should not forget that the situation around 1900 was the result of a quite striking degree of absorption of the new over the preceding three or four decades. As Hobsbawm sees it, 'the fortress of the established bourgeois public, grand opera, which had been shocked by the populism of Bizet's *Carmen* in 1875, had by the early 1900s accepted not only Wagner, but the curious combination of arias and social realism (*verismo*) about the lower orders (Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana*, 1890; Charpentier's *Louise*, 1900)' (227). By 1900, clearly, the opera-going public had managed to regain its bearings. It was only later – in 1907 or thereabouts – that a 'visible break between the *fin de siècle* and the twentieth-century *avant gardes* occurred', and by then 'the innovators of the last quarter of the nineteenth century had already become part of the cultural baggage of the educated middle classes' (235–6).

V

We still lack a wide-ranging study of the relations, across Europe and America, between opera composers and operatic institutions during the *fin de siècle*. But it is clear enough that many composers were as closely involved in conducting operas, and, like Richard Strauss, in being part of the institution's management structure, as in writing operas. Half-hearted commitment to the operatic culture was not a serious option.

Strauss's career began when he was appointed third conductor at the Munich Hofoper at the age of 22, in 1886. In 1889 he moved to Weimar as Kapellmeister (as such, subordinate to the Hofkapellmeister), then back to Munich (1894–8) before becoming joint Hofkapellmeister to the Prussian Court in Berlin in 1898. With the help of the German railway system, Strauss was constantly on the move during these years, conducting programmes in theatres and concert halls which reflected his concern to promote the newer music – by Wagner, Liszt and himself, in particular (see Schuh 1982). That someone so closely involved in the day-to-day rough-and-tumble of opera-house politics should wish to compose opera himself was by no means a foregone conclusion – after all, Mahler did not do so – and the relative failure of Strauss's first two efforts, *Guntram*

(1894) and *Feuersnot* (1901), offers salutary proof that even the most expert interpreter of Mozart and Wagner might find it quite difficult to emulate their operatic achievements. Nevertheless, a late-century culture committed to the new made it possible for those early failures to be forgotten and superseded, and this in a national context where composers could succeed with operas as different as Humperdinck's fairy-tale *Hänsel und Gretel* (1893) and Eugen d'Albert's veristic *Tiefland* (1903).

It was Siegfried Wagner, no less, who declared in 1894 that *Hänsel und Gretel* was 'the most important opera since *Parsifal*', thereby provoking Hanslick's tetchy rejoinder: 'the best in a full twelve years? An irritating pronouncement, and the worst of it is – that it is true'. The by-then aged Viennese critic also noted that Humperdinck's opera skilfully matched the spirit of the time: 'The public desires new themes and yet adheres to Wagnerism. Humperdinck satisfied both requirements' (Hanslick 1951, 321). For all the stylistic affinities, Humperdinck most certainly did not 'adhere to Wagner' when it came to the choice of subject-matter, but his skill in keeping afloat in the immediate aftermath of the Wagnerian hurricane without abandoning all possible points of contact with the Master's work points to the larger paradox of the *fin de siècle* on the German front expounded by Carl Dahlhaus: 'legitimate Wagnerianism lay in departing from mythological tragedy, in avoiding the overwhelming presence of Wagner's legacy by seeking refuge in musicotheatrical genres considered peripheral by Wagner himself' (1989, 341). As a fairy-tale opera, *Hänsel und Gretel* is linked by Dahlhaus with Pfitzner's early *Der arme Heinrich* (1893) and Wolf's *Der Corregidor* (1896) as moving significantly into those 'peripheral' areas: and Siegfried Wagner's own operas, beginning with *Der Bärenhäuter* (1898), continued this trend. Despite evidence of a certain dependency on Richard Wagner's musico-dramatic style, these works are most successful when seeking to recreate the pre-1850 world of the romantic opera. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the 'transition' apparent in German opera in the 1890s was wholly retrogressive. No composer was more aware than Humperdinck of the challenges facing contemporary composers, and his prescription for the future involved moving more firmly away from Wagnerian precedent, and from symphonic, musical continuity, in the interests of supporting the currently fashionable search for realism.

In 1898, Humperdinck argued that 'modern opera is moving along a road which must lead to melodrama. With the endeavour to get reality on to the stage which is endemic to our time, a form must surely be found which will answer this call of the times, and in my opinion that form is melodrama' (Dahlhaus 1985, 100). It is difficult to conceive of anything more peripheral to the Wagnerian heritage than this idea. A more realistic

operatic advance into non-Wagnerian territory lies in the view of the medium, attached especially to Pfitzner by Dahlhaus, that ‘saw language rather than stage configurations, as the primary medium for communicating [the] “poetic idea”’. As Dahlhaus observes, this is the aesthetic of a *Lieder* composer rather than of a Wagner, for whom action on stage, or ‘pantomime’, was ‘the main complement to music in musical drama’ (1985, 100). As such, it was well suited to an operatic culture in which conservative and more radical impulses were often fiercely at odds.

This tension was not the result of German operatic culture in the 1890s being wholly dependent on connections between its institutions and royal or aristocratic patrons – Hamburg was one example of a free city whose opera house flourished, if turbulently, with Mahler as chief conductor (1891–7). Nevertheless, in Hamburg the influence of the reigning Intendant, Bernhard Baruch Pollini, might well have been even more significant than that of the chief conductor. Pollini was ‘a skilled manager and talent-scout who had a shrewd, well-developed sense of what the public wanted and who might therefore be regarded as more representative of the tastes and prejudices of the time than Mahler himself’ (Whittall 1991, 346).

The importance of such managers in the determining of artistic policy and in influencing repertory and personnel should not be underestimated, even though other areas of commercial activity were becoming increasingly important – like that of the music publisher, who was often a closer ally of the composer, and the composer-conductor, than were his institutional colleagues and superiors. And not the least of the general manager’s problems were the result of finding himself caught between idealistic musicians on the one hand, and hard-headed providers of financial support on the other.

The fact that, to prosper, opera companies needed a combination of artistic vision and practical competence, is well illustrated in Vienna. From the mid-1850s it had been accepted that the general director or chief administrator of the Hofoper might be a musician, and from 1881 to 1897 the post was held by Wilhelm Jahn – a far less familiar name than that of Hans Richter, the principal conductor. Jahn was nevertheless

an extremely able conductor who specialized in Italian and French opera, while Richter excelled in the German repertory. The two men were also complementary in temperament and, aided by the general prosperity of the Habsburg monarchy in the 1880s, they made the Vienna Hofoper one of the foremost musical institutions in Europe; the works of Wagner and Verdi were actively promoted; Mascagni came to conduct his *Cavalleria rusticana* (1891); Massenet’s *Manon* and *Werther* (1892) were produced, the latter a world première, as well as Smetana’s *Bartered Bride* (1896) and *Dalibor* (1897).
(Carner and Klein 1992, 996–7)

Under Jahn, the Hofoper was the very model of an enlightened international house, strongly committed to contemporary music and well able to capitalize on the fact that this music did not challenge the general public to the extent that the soon-to-emerge avant-garde, in Vienna and elsewhere, would aim to do. As a multitude of cultural historians have argued, such avant-garde initiatives emerged at precisely the time when the Austro-Hungarian Empire began to lose its confidence and virtually, it seems with hindsight, to will its own disintegration. Thus Mahler's fabled period as Jahn's successor in Vienna (1897–1907) enriched the repertory, and advanced performance standards in the direction of those that prevail today, at precisely the time when the institution, and the kind of music drama it supported, were in increasing danger of seeming irrelevant to authentically twentieth-century modes of thought. That the triumphant survival of opera in Vienna between 1900 and 1914 can be seen as setting the pattern for comparable survivals throughout the world of high culture for the rest of the century should not be allowed to conceal the extent to which this survival was achieved at the cost of constant struggles at every level, both within the institution itself and between it and the civic and social authorities on which it depended for its day-to-day existence.

VI

In late nineteenth-century Italy, too, civic priorities would often conflict with artistic imperatives:

With the extension of suffrage and the coming of democratic politics, municipalities were less willing to spend local tax revenue on subsidizing the pleasures of the rich. In 1897, a mere four years after the première of Verdi's last opera *Falstaff* there, the Milan city council refused, though only temporarily, to pay anything towards the La Scala season. There followed a long period of wrangles and attempted compromises. (Rosselli 1991, 148)

This, it should be noted, was at a time when, in Italy, 'impresarios went into eclipse; . . . their role was taken over by the publishers, who . . . exercised increasing control over the material of opera and could even cripple a composer's career' (Dean 1999, 129). In such circumstances it was the composer able to balance the public's interest in a medium still dominated by the new – if not the 'modern' – and the commercial criteria of this new breed of managers who was most likely to succeed.

The wrangling between opera-house managements and civic fund-holders would nevertheless hardly have happened at all had opera not

continued to be valued by enough citizens able to make their voices heard, and even to argue that opera was evolving in ways that showed some sense of civic concerns. What else was ‘realism’ (*verismo*) but an attempt to bring musical drama closer to the real world of contemporary society? As John Rosselli noted, few of the operas written according to these new desiderata have survived, not least because composers like Leoncavallo, Giordano and Cilea were far less adept than Strauss or Debussy at transcending the sordid or bizarre aspects of their subjects with music of genuine substance. What they excelled at was ‘using music for theatrical effect; they knew . . . how long an episode should last or where a high note should be placed for maximum applause. Their music tended to work best when it was most utilitarian and was advancing the action and to sound tawdry or empty when striving for beauty or significance’ (Rosselli 1991, 140). There also seems reasonably solid agreement among musicologists and music lovers alike that Puccini was able to provide sufficient ‘genuine substance’ in his music to achieve a no less genuine beauty and significance, and place his work on a different level from that of his Italian veristic contemporaries.

Comparing Charpentier’s *Louise* with *La Bohème*, Dahlhaus contrasted the French composer’s ‘deficient sense of form’ with Puccini’s ability to develop and control his diverse materials ‘according to the strictures of motivic-harmonic logic’ (1989, 355). If this does indeed go to the heart of Puccini’s special achievement, as well as explaining his survival, it is the more remarkable given an autograph manuscript which is a ‘patchwork quilt of experiments, rejections, additions and refinements’ (Groos and Parker 1986, 114). This document gives ‘an overriding impression of the enormous difficulty of *fin de siècle* opera composition’ (54), a claim which fits well with Mosco Carner’s argument that Puccini must be placed against a fully-detailed picture of *fin de siècle* culture ‘if his artistic personality, with its inner contradictions and morbid traits, is to be fully comprehended’ (1992, 299).

VII

The leading proponents of French *fin de siècle* operatic culture, challenged as severely as the Italian by tensions between commercial imperatives and artistic perceptions, benefit no less from such contextualized consideration. The principal opera house in Paris, the Théâtre National de l’Opéra, had opened in 1875, and the first director ‘profited from public interest in the novelty of the building but made few significant musical inaugurations, and during ten years of directing operas produced not one foreign

work'. Perhaps for that very reason, box-office receipts during the later 1870s were so healthy that the director 'was called before members of the grant-awarding national assembly to discuss reduction of their support. However, after he underlined the precariousness of the political future and the sudden downturn in attendances that might easily befall the opera house, the level of subsidy was sustained' (Langham Smith 1992b, 875). By the 1890s foreign operas – Wagner and the later Verdi along with revivals of Rossini – were to be heard more often than formerly, but the emphasis remained on French works. Among the most notable were Saint-Saëns's *Samson et Dalila* (1893) and Alfred Bruneau's *Messidor* (1897), this last a 'half-fantastic, half-*vériste*' extravaganza 'marking a substantial departure from the Opéra's conservative policy with regard to subject-matter in an era when the librettist's name almost always preceded that of the composer' (876–7). The veristic aspect is no surprise, since the libretto of *Messidor* was by none other than Emile Zola, and the work was first heard 'at the height of the Dreyfus affair, in which Bruneau actively followed Zola's support of Dreyfus'. As an indication of how directly matters musical could be affected by wider social and political contexts, Bruneau's pro-Dreyfus stance led to 'a marked fall in his popularity and for some years his works were less than welcome in Paris' (Langham Smith 1992a, 620).

It was nevertheless not the Théâtre National but the Opéra-Comique which cultivated a series of 'staged works in the naturalist tradition of Zola' (Langham Smith 1992b, 878), culminating in Charpentier's *Louise* in 1900. It also mounted no fewer than five Massenet premieres during the 1890s, and can generally be seen as a more enterprising institution than its grander rival: Verdi's *Falstaff* in 1894 and Puccini's *La Bohème* in 1898 had their first French airings there. Yet the Opéra-Comique's main claim to twentieth-century fame remains its staging of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* in 1902. Even though Debussy's symbolist aesthetic did not instantly eliminate all the alternatives on offer, it provided new perspectives on other, earlier styles of French opera which have remained relevant ever since.

St Petersburg was another major operatic centre in which, during the 1890s, the new and local were able to co-exist with the more longstanding foreign repertory. As a result of the relatively stable period of government under Tsar Alexander II, 'an indigenous classical repertory began to accumulate. It was largely the work of a new generation of professionally skilled composers', pre-eminently Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov who, as early as the end of the 1870s, had 'laid the cornerstone of an enduring – and exportable – repertory'. Indeed, 'by 1890 the indigenous repertory [centering on the operas of Rimsky-Korsakov] had achieved

incontestable dominance at the Mariinsky and had been expanded to include works of Musorgsky and Borodin made performable by Rimsky-Korsakov' (Taruskin 1992b, 133). It was Savva Ivanovich Mamentov's opera company in Moscow which 'became the main outlet for Rimsky-Korsakov's voluminous late operatic production, from *Sadko* (1897)' (Taruskin 1992a, 477): but even before the new century had begun, Rimsky's influence and achievement were sufficient to ensure that those composers who came after him would have to contend with his example, even as they determined (not always successfully) to escape it.

VIII

As this brief survey has shown, that stage in the Age of Empire represented by the 1890s was far from exclusively backward-looking or decadent. There was much more to contemporary opera than the treatment of sordid subjects in the most easily accessible manner, and there were already plentiful hints of that Age of Extremes which, after 1914, would replace the Age of Empire in Hobsbawm's grand chronological (and ideological) scheme. The well-rehearsed contrasts between 'number' and 'symphonic' opera, and between relatively epic or relatively realistic subjects, so significant before 1900 (though never absolute), would remain matters of debate, and of inspiration, right through the twentieth century itself. So much so, indeed, that it might plausibly be claimed that opera as both genre and institution survived into the twenty-first century at least in part because it did not abandon the most fundamental qualities which made contemporary opera in the later nineteenth century so successful.