

11 Opera in eighteenth-century England: English opera, masques, ballad operas

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The central truth of *English* opera in the eighteenth century – as opposed to opera in *England* during the same period – is that the genre is not recognizable to those contemporary scholars and aficionados who believe that only all-sung dramatic works can be thus described. “Operas” in London could be long or short, high or low, have as few or as many characters as the playwright or librettist chose, could contain (or not, as fashion dictated) dancing, transformations, and pageants. However, unless an audience was told otherwise – by a particular work being described as “an English opera after the Italian manner,” for example – they would expect spoken dialogue between numbers, not sung recitative, an expectation which would continue well into the nineteenth century. This situation is distressing to those scholars who believe that all operas should aspire to the condition of *Figaro* or *Tristan*. It is a delight, however, to others, in particular to those who revel in the flexible nature of the genres that were present on the eighteenth-century London stage, and who do not object to dirtying their hands with this mass of related, often ephemeral, forms which such a scene produced. The dirtying of hands is of course the result of handling the genres; by definition, they are messy round the edges, with their origins not above suspicion, and their substance most frequently established as the result of the commercial concerns of the management.

It is impossible to escape such commercial concerns; Britain was the only monarchical state in Europe where opera was founded on a commercial system.¹ Moreover, demographic changes in London’s population were responsible for changes in the way audiences were constituted. After the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, the landed aristocracy and parts of the middle classes (or the “non-elites”)² began to reside for at least part of the year in the capital, a change that led, ultimately, to the development of the West End. And for those of the middle classes who were wealthy but not wealthy enough to own an estate in the country, London was their year-round residence. The theaters had consequently seen an increase in attendance by the new, now-resident non-elites. At the same time, it has been argued that after the “Bloodless Revolution” of 1689, the social and

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political center shifted from the court to the newly burgeoning social institutions such as coffee houses.³ Both these changes highlight the fact that the increase in numbers of long-term, non-elite residents, semi-permanently based in the city, formed a clientele that was a pre-requisite – and an influential one – for the existence of English opera in London’s commercial environment.⁴

Of course, that audience – aristocratic, or non-elite – went to the opera to be “seen.” This fact is usually noted with censorious overtones of a kind often reserved today for references to commercial sponsors, who by definition it is assumed do not actually listen to the operas they support financially. Not only is this presumptuous, but it is also as untrue as the assumption that eighteenth-century audiences desiring to be “seen” were therefore unconcerned (or unable) to understand what they saw. To subscribe to such snobbery is to misread the social context. In fact, the London *beau monde* went *everywhere* to be “seen,” and did so to such an extent that it has been convincingly argued that, by the Regency, the bay windows of the coffee houses were designed as much for those inside to be seen from the outside as it was for those inside to look out onto a wider world.⁵ Thus the phenomenon of being “seen” at the theater should not be interpreted as necessarily ensuring an ignorant or inattentive audience.

Even those with no operatic expertise would have possessed a basic understanding of what different types of opera were available, and been aware of the division of repertory between the London theaters. If an audience member wanted all-sung opera in Italian, he (or she) could be found at the King’s Theatre, a venue that (with a few exceptions) performed only “Italian” operas in their original language. Those operas were usually imported and adapted for the London scene, their final form being the result of negotiation between the composer, impresario, and singer.⁶ All these parties were, like the operas themselves, usually Italian imports. To be sure, some works performed were written by Italian composers living in England, but, musically, they can only be thought of as Italian operas written in London, not “English operas.”⁷ One of the few exceptions was the composition in 1765 of an all-sung setting of Metastasio’s *Olimpiade* by Thomas Arne, and this significantly proved unsuccessful, not simply because of the cartel of Italian performers which conspired to kill the work, but because, as Charles Burney commented, Arne failed to capture “a different language, different singers, and a different audience, and style.” Burney went on to say that “the common play-house and ballad passages, which occurred in almost every air in his opera, made the audience wonder how they got there.”⁸ The English seemed to have liked their foreign operas to be not only in a foreign tongue, but to sound foreign as well.

If the audience member preferred her (or his) opera regularly in English, however, that could be found mostly at either of the two Theatres Royal: Drury Lane (all through the century) and Covent Garden (from 1732). There was, at different times, a choice of other London venues as well: the theater in Dorset Garden (until 1706); Lincoln's-Inn-Fields Theatre (until 1756);⁹ the Little Theatre in the Haymarket (occasionally, from 1720, and in the summer after 1747); the theater in Goodman's Fields (1729–37); and at the end of the century, the English Opera House (from 1792, although fully staged operas are not found there in profusion until after 1812). At those venues, an audience would have encountered a program of mostly spoken drama that remained the core of the repertory. But the bill, particularly after the increased theatrical competition that marked the mid-1710s, contained a second item, typically a two-act piece often called (whatever genre it was) "the farce." This item was characteristically always shorter, and was known after 1779 as the "afterpiece."¹⁰ This second slot was the customary place for music: small all-sung operas, masques, pastorals, burlettas, and so on. It also constituted an evening's late attraction, and for those arriving in the middle of the bill at "half-price," its main attraction as well. On occasion, towards the end of the century, a third work was added before or after the afterpiece, a piece of theatrical one-upmanship that would lead in the early nineteenth century to monstrously long evenings of theater starting around 6.30pm, and ending at one or two in the morning. As well as these slots in the bill, there were also large musical sequences in the main piece spoken dramas which were, for all intents and purposes, operatic, and there came a point when the amount of music added to such entertainments enabled them to be called "English operas." Indeed, I have argued elsewhere that to try and define English opera in terms of the assumption that it must be sung throughout (rather than considering how composers wrote extended all-sung sequences) is not the most profitable way of looking at opera in England.¹¹

The arguments that were put forward in England in the eighteenth century against all-sung opera in Italian (and in English too, for that matter) were many. However, they were often polemical arguments by non-practitioners addressing non-musical or non-theatrical aspects of the genre, which included matters such as national identity; the genre's lack of reason; the "unnatural castrato"; the effeminacy of the "soft" Italian noises; and the lure of money. But other figures in the business saw the situation with greater clarity. One was the composer Daniel Purcell (c.1664–1717), the cousin (probably) of the great Henry Purcell,¹² and he had this to say about the arrival of Italian opera in London:

Introducing Italian Opera's upon the English Stage, has so altered the Taste of this Nation, as to MUSICK, that scarce any thing, but what bears some

Resemblance of the Italian Style and Manner, is received with Favour or heard with Patience. It must be acknowledg'd that those Opera's have a great deal of Beauty and Spirit: That Part of their Compositions call'd Recitative (to such as have Judgment in Musick and understand their Language) is very affecting: Most of their Airs also are very Skilfully compos'd, and well adapted; But for want of under-standing their Language, a great deal of their Beauty is undiscovered by US: We seem pleas'd, we know not why; the Performance leaves none, or at best, but very confus'd Impressions on our Minds, and our Satisfaction ceases, when the Curtain is faln: So the Most that we make of it is a transient Amusement.¹³

Unlike the assessments of other commentators, the text indicates that this is a practical musician speaking, acknowledging the effectiveness of recitative, but regretting that their audience was not able to understand the language to which they were listening, even with the provision of a dual language libretto to aid the understanding of the listener. Another figure, the librettist and theater manager Aaron Hill (1685–1750), became implacably opposed to opera in the Italian language. Hill was a somewhat erratic personality; his checkered career included a “staging” in 1711 of Handel’s *Rinaldo* while he was William Collier’s manager at the Haymarket Theatre. He also dabbled “in schemes to sell beech-mast oil and to colonise Georgia.”¹⁴ He disputed those who said – and it *was* often said – that English was a language which did not lend itself to musical setting: “*English* is soft enough for Opera, when compos’d by poets, who know how to distinguish the *sweetness* of our tongue, from the *strength* of it, where the last is less necessary.”¹⁵ Hill had a point, of course; many poets writing English texts did not have the first idea of how to deal with the complexities of text setting. Hill was also dismissive of another notion which makes its appearance throughout the eighteenth century, that of the supposed inherent ineffectiveness of the English singer:

I am of the opinion, that male and female voices may be found in this kingdom, capable of every thing, that is requisite; and, I am sure, a species of dramatic Opera might be invented, that, by reconciling reason and dignity, with musick and fine machinery, would charm the *ear*, and hold fast the *heart*, together.¹⁶

Even when those naturally gifted were located, English singers *were* not as well trained and even less able to sing to the standard of those Italian singers booked to sing in London. But this is only generally true; as the staging and continued popularity of Arne’s 1762 through-sung Metastasio opera *Artaxerxes* demonstrates, it was not beyond the bounds of possibility for composers to write something in English in a suitably operatic style.

Opera with spoken dialogue in English

The origins of opera with spoken dialogue can be traced back to the earliest serious operatic developments in English under William Davenant and Thomas Betterton at the Dorset Garden Theatre in the early 1670s. This is the type of opera cultivated by Henry Purcell which dazzled the public at the end of the century: *Dioclesian* (1690), *King Arthur* (1691), *The Fairy-Queen* (1692), and *The Indian Queen* (1695). The employment of the spoken vernacular fulfilled the desires of the audience for something rational, comprehensible, and in the great traditions of pre-Commonwealth theater. “Rationality” here was most frequently expressed in terms of magic; if a magic figure waved a wand and produced a transformation of scene, followed by music, singing and dancing, it was, to them, acceptable. Characters in such a magic setting could be expected to sing, just as they could be expected to fly in on a peacock, dance with chairs, or, indeed, any number of other entertaining absurdities.

It would be a mistake, though, to assume that it was simply a notion of taking a play and adding any music to it. One commentator, for example, thought that music should be used to “alleviate the attention of the Audience, to give the Actors time and respite, but always with regard to the Scene; for by no mean must it be made a business independent of that: In this particular our Operas are highly criminal, the Musick in ’em is for the most part an absurd impertinence.”¹⁷ By commenting that music in operas is “an absurd impertinence” to give the “Actors time and respite,” demonstrates that there was a point, not always quantifiable, at which through sheer quantity of music the status of the work changed from a play with music to an English opera that employed spoken dialogue.

Purcell’s operas were unusual in that the music was the work of a single composer. What would characterize English opera with spoken dialogue thereafter was a score that not only had new tunes, but also old ones with new words fitted which worked closely with and fitted into the action. The old tunes consisted largely of melodies that the audience would be able to recognize, including folk songs, music borrowed from the repertory associated with the Opera house, and operatic favorites by composers such as Purcell and Handel. This compositional approach can be found in a variety of genres, such as ballad opera, burletta, “dialogue operas” and “pastiche operas,” including the first and most popular one, Isaac Bickerstaffe’s and Thomas Arne’s *Love in a Village* of 1762.¹⁸ As it happens, ballad opera and burletta (one always with spoken dialogue, the other with spoken dialogue on occasion) burlesqued the “foreign” competition without mercy. Perhaps more significantly, they conveyed more

about the way in which “foreign” opera was viewed in London than any written criticism. Ballad opera, which began with *The Beggar’s Opera* in 1728, had a brief flowering in the 1730s, while burletta made its appearance in the 1760s and used some similar if less vigorous methods of burlesque.¹⁹

The Beggar’s Opera has received much attention for its social and political commentary, both of which undoubtedly added to its success.²⁰ Of interest to us here, though, is the musico-dramatic texture, and the two conversations between the Beggar and the Player that (as the Introduction and as Act 3, sc. 17) act as framing devices for the entire piece. The Beggar, the “poet” of the text, claims that although he has not made his “opera unnatural, like those in vogue” for he has “no recitative,” he has used the “similes that are included in your celebrated operas; the swallow, the moth, the bee, the ship, the flower, &c.” He has, moreover, “consented to have neither a Prologue nor an Epilogue”; and therefore his piece “must be allow’d an Opera in all its forms.” The apparent lack of the Prologue and Epilogue is of course a conceit; the very dialogue which contains these words fulfils the function of the former, just as Act 3, sc. 17 does of the latter. The Poet even alludes to the great Cuzzoni–Bordoni *diva* rivalry at Handel’s Royal Academy of Music by treating his two leading ladies with “impartiality.” In Act 3, sc. 17, the cry from the Player is that if Macheath and the others are to be “hang’d or transported,” then something is wrong “for an opera must end happily.” The objection can be easily removed, claims the Poet, “for ’tis no matter how absurdly things are brought about”; thus, says the Player, they will comply “with the taste of the town.”²¹

That *The Beggar’s Opera* is an anti-opera seria is beyond doubt, but while the basis for the piece, its satire probably had less to do with its popularity than the attractive, familiar, and singable tunes (which it seems were selected by Gay himself) for unaccompanied singing, but subsequently arranged by J. C. Pepusch.²² Subsequent ballad operas, published in a similar manner to *The Beggar’s Opera*, include *The Cobbler’s Opera*, *The Quaker’s Opera*, *Polly*, *The Patron*, or *The Statesman’s Opera*, *The Mock Doctor*, and *Achilles*. There were some 86 imitations, of which at least a third appear to have been main pieces, and the balance, afterpieces; and of those, as many as 41 were published with their “airs.”²³ But for all the sound and fury, most of the activity was over by 1736, and new works thereafter were fewer, and lacked the punch and vigor of these early pieces.

When it appeared in the 1760s, the burletta took on classical myths and similar to ballad opera, had one run-away achievement, in this case *Midas*, first performed in London in 1764. It was created by the Irishman Kane O’Hara and was not an obvious candidate for a sure-fire success. Indeed, it

initially did relatively poor business, but after it had been cut to two acts and played as an afterpiece, it was scarcely off the bills. The composers are not named in the libretto, but the tunes are, and include the “King of Prussia’s March,” “Fanny’s fairer than a flower,” and “Tune in Pantomime of *Fortunatus*.” The inclusion of these titles only serves to emphasize the extent to which the audience’s acceptance of the piece relied upon the theater-going public already knowing the music. But there was one big difference between *The Beggar’s Opera* and *Midas*; although later burlettas often had spoken dialogue, *Midas* had sung recitative that was predictably the subject of complaint: “The entertainment *Midas* – Mattocks sings well – ye rest indifferent. Good Scenery – Mr & Mrs Hamoir dance well at least the man does. Too much recitative.”²⁴ The success of *Midas* spawned other, all-sung works in a similar vein including *The Golden Pippin* (a burlesque on *The Judgment of Paris* story), and James Hook’s setting of Thomas Bridges’s *Dido and Aeneas*, in which the unfortunate Queen of Carthage hangs herself in her own garters, an incident which has resonances in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, where Pyramis threatens to hang himself in Thisbe’s garters.²⁵

The trajectories of both genres (ballad opera and the burletta) are nevertheless essentially the same, for each genre had one outstandingly successful work, and a large number of unsuccessful imitators. The popularity of *The Beggar’s Opera* and *Midas* should not, however, disguise from us the fact that neither genre was influential on the mainstream product. As I have suggested elsewhere, the performances of both works in New York (rather than, say, Paris or Vienna) in the nineteenth century (as late, for example, as Louisa Pyne’s two-year residency there in the 1850s)²⁶ highlight the fact that English opera was essentially a parochial affair. It was an export that was only of real interest to English-speaking countries, and none of its developments influenced the course of continental opera.

All-sung English opera

In putting forward the case for English opera with spoken dialogue both here and elsewhere, I am not intending to deny that there were serious attempts to establish a tradition of all-sung English opera, attempts were made by several interested parties with a range of motives. Firstly, there were those made by London composers desirous of having a more heavy-weight medium in which to compose. Secondly, there were those made by London opera promoters hoping (vainly as it turned out) that they could cause English opera to compete on its own dramatic terms with the Italian all-sung model. And thirdly, there were those made by theater managers,

who were more than happy to use music as a draw card and in pursuit of which embarked on all-sung operatic (and operatic-style) experiments, sometimes with grotesque results. An examination of three of these attempts will illustrate the rewards and pitfalls of mounting all-sung operas in English written in London. The works come from quite early in the period, from 1700, 1715, and 1732 respectively. There were later attempts to write works in the manner of all three groups, Galliard's *Calypso and Telemachus* (1712) being one, and J.C. Smith's *The Fairies* (1755) another. It is impossible to tell which (if any) of these later efforts were related to or inspired by such earlier attempts, and which were efforts entirely in their own right, but this is perhaps less important than the fact that such efforts were made.

1700. The 1700 attempt consists of those works that were the result of the competition announced to the public that year in *The London Gazette*:

Several persons of quality having for the encouragement of musick advanced 200 guineas to be distributed in 4 prizes ... this is therefore to give notice that those who intend to put in for the prizes are to repair to Jacob Tonson at Grays Inngate before Easter next day, where they may be further informed.²⁷

Those wishing to be “further informed” and who called on Jacob Tonson were presumably given a copy of the libretto to *The Judgment of Paris*, a new masque text written by William Congreve, and told to get to work. What the real motivation was behind or beyond “the encouragement of musick” in this venture is less than clear, although there are circumstances which suggest that a non-musical agenda may have been followed. It seems no coincidence that the role of Venus, the winner of the competition for the golden apple in the masque, was sung (in all four settings, as far as we know) by Anne Bracegirdle, whose apparently platonic relationship with the author of the text, William Congreve, had been the subject of some public speculation.²⁸

To the extent that there was a musical agenda, it may be surmised that it involved the inclusion of recitative as evidenced by the scores awarded the four prizes – those by John Eccles, Gottfried Finger, Daniel Purcell, and John Weldon – all of which provided for it. The music of the scores was otherwise fairly predictable in idiom and form, and written in a lighter, post-Purcellian style. The exception was Weldon's setting, which won the prize probably because of the novel use (for London) of the split grouping for the chorus settings typical of an Oxford choir. Weldon had been organist at Magdalen College, Oxford until 1695. Not a lot was achieved, therefore, in terms of new elements of musical style. But the competition did succeed in producing four all-sung albeit short works in English, in as public a manner as possible. Further, by choosing a *masque* as the basis

for the competition, Tonson was emphasizing the Englishness of the enterprise. The genre is the one indigenous form that England at this time possessed, and was indelibly associated with ideas of national identity, the court, and Charles I only 50 years after he was executed.

1715. But times were changing. Starting in 1705 with *Arsinoe, Queen of Cyprus* that offered Italian arias, with new recitative and English words, the intelligentsia gradually became the welcoming slave of all-sung opera in Italian.²⁹ The genre made rapid if unsteady progress through translations and bilingual texts until London's first all-sung Italian opera in Italian, *Idaspes*, premiered in 1710.³⁰ From this point on, Italian opera was here to stay as an exotic, attractive genre, but one whose separateness has been outlined above. There were two major attempts early on to bridge the gap between the foreign import and the local product: Eccles's *Semele* (1707) and Aaron Hill's input to the adaptation of the libretto for Handel's *Rinaldo* (1711). But the *Semele* – a text by Congreve and a score that included both da capo arias and Purcellian-style airs – remained unperformed.³¹ And Hill's attempt in the *Rinaldo* libretto to meld English and Italian conventions, in particular his indebtedness to the 1706 dramatick opera *The British Enchanters*, was a one-off, and Handel turned to others for libretti which answered more to the Italian taste. So when, during the 1714–15 season, Colley Cibber (1671–1757) at Drury Lane faced not only the popularity of Italian opera, but also competition from John Rich (1692–1761) at the new Lincoln's-Inn-Fields Theatre, Italian-style music must have seemed the obvious choice to him to add a novelty to the bill.³² Instead of attempting full-scale, all-sung works, however, Cibber concentrated on programming such works as “afterpieces,” the second item on the program. Although this was an accepted spot for musical items, its use was to increase under his management by around 700 per cent; it would remain the most important position on the bill for all-sung works in English, of whatever genre.³³

Cibber's intention could not have been more clearly stated than it was in the preface to the first of the English masques “after the Italian manner”: “The following entertainment is an attempt to give the town a little good musick in a language they understand.”³⁴ The resultant work, *Venus and Adonis*, is a version of the tale in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, book X: the older Venus tries to seduce the youth Adonis, but Mars, her jealous lover, objects, and is ultimately implicated in Adonis's death. The score has a preponderance of da capo arias (fourteen out of the seventeen numbers), uncomplicated recitatives, and a single closing chorus. Pepusch's Handelian style has been described as having “something not only of his energy but also of the serene spaciousness of his melody.”³⁵ After *Venus and Adonis*, Cibber went on to stage three other masques set by Pepusch in

the same style: *Myrtillo and Laura* (Cibber), *Apollo and Daphne* (John Hughes), and *The Death of Dido* (Barton Booth).³⁶ Although the series had a moderate attendance and spawned a number of later works, the “town” did not take to the dramas thus presented, and Cibber’s attempt resulted in no discernible tradition.

1732. The third case dates from about fifteen years later, when a group of works appeared at the Little Theatre in the Haymarket and at the Lincoln’s-Inn-Fields Theatre.³⁷ It remains unclear to what extent all the works mentioned below formed a coherent design, as they do not appear to have had one single promoter. The move to promote opera in English in opposition to the Italian variety seems nonetheless obvious enough. The first work was *Amelia* (Henry Carey/J.F. Lampe) staged at the Little Theatre in Haymarket in March 1732. It was advertised as “a new English opera after the Italian manner” and set the tone for the season. The surviving music cannot really claim to be “Italianate,” and it becomes clear that unlike the masques two decades previously, a composition in the “Italian manner” means here “sung throughout.” *Amelia* was followed by a staged revival of *Acis and Galatea* (John Gay/G.F. Handel), with Lampe also being the prime mover in this endeavor.

Both *Amelia* and *Acis* were moderately successful, and Lampe could have reasonably hoped that this reception of his English serious opera and Handel’s pastoral masque indicated a future for such all-sung works. But after this initial success, rivalry (friendly or otherwise) set in. In the next season (1732–3) Lampe, in the Haymarket, staged *Britannia* (Thomas Lediard/Lampe), a revival of *Amelia*, and *Dione* (Gay/Lampe). In competition against him was Thomas Arne, who rented the old Lincoln’s-Inn-Fields from John Rich (who had moved his company to his new Covent Garden building) and mounted *Teraminta* (Carey/J.C. Smith) in direct opposition to *Britannia*. In March, Arne mounted his first full-length stage work, *Rosamond* (Joseph Addison/Arne), the dates of which clashed with Lampe’s *Dione*. And in April, although probably not under Arne’s auspices, there was a single performance of *Ulysses* (Samuel Humphreys/Smith).

Regardless of who promoted them or how these operas finally reached the stage, they were all attempts to produce serious operas in English. Not equal attempts to be sure, for the emblematic *Britannia* owed more to masque and dramattick opera than to any Italian model, but attempts nonetheless. Such experiments (whether taken as a whole or as individual works) were killed off by the success of *The Opera of Operas* (Henry Fielding/Lampe) at the Little Theatre, an operatic version of Fielding’s *Tragedy of Tragedies*. It was an entertaining burlesque of serious opera that was also “set to musick after the Italian manner,” a claim that can only

have been a poke at the previous self-conscious labeling used by Lampe himself. Ironically, Lampe turned to ballad opera with spoken dialogue in 1737 when setting *The Dragon of Wantley*, also a parody of Italian opera conventions. It had 69 performances in its first season, and was in fourteen editions by the end of the year; Lampe never again returned to serious opera. Arne, too, was taken in another direction. Early in 1738, he had a hit with his setting of Milton's *Comus*, a full-length masque with spoken dialogue, and his efforts were subsequently focused on similar works.

Conclusion

As this discussion suggests, attempts to establish a school of all-sung English opera were ultimately unsuccessful. The situation is best summed up in James Sterling's new Prologue to the 1736 revival of that quintessentially English opera, *King Arthur*, with words by John Dryden and music by Henry Purcell:

OUR Scenes no soft Italian Air dispense;
 Guiltless of Meaning; Innocent of Sense:
 But lo! a Feast! for British palates fit!
 'Tis Purcell's Music, serv'd with Dryden's Wit!
 Old Merlin's Ghost Rises with honest Rage
 To mend your taste, and vindicate the Stage:
 Surperior magic here enchants your souls
 And feeble thrills with manly charms controls.³⁸

The English audience's taste required Dryden's wit and Purcell's music, but it did not want *all* of Dryden's verse sung to them, accompanied *throughout* by Purcell. The blind Emmeline, the heroine of the opera, called to choose between the Briton (Arthur) and the Saxons (Oswald), selects Arthur, and therefore the Britons; she, blinded, also avoids choosing Italian music since it is "guiltless of meaning; innocent of sense." Emmeline's blindness emphasizes that musical "taste" is not a question of seeing, but a question of listening and of judgment. The "British palate" was not one based on ignorance; theater-goers were well aware of continental opera and clearly understood what it was and how it functioned, so that (despite their appreciation and affection for one or two all-sung works such as Handel's *Acis and Galatea* and Arne's *Artaxerxes*) when they rejected the all-sung English mode, they rejected it consciously and knowledgeably. Even when Purcell was writing, there would have been audience members who had knowledge of all-sung French opera (*Ariane, ou le mariage de Bacchus*, 1671) and all-sung English opera (*Albion and Albanus*, 1685). If well connected

they might also have seen all-sung English masques (Blow's *Venus and Adonis*, c.1682 and Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, before 1690, possibly 1684). Yet this manner of presentation never became central to the English genre.

Musically, the sort of "English" operas that they *did* accept remained the same throughout the century. They were collections of new (or old) elegantly written tunes in both high and low styles with an emphasis on clarity of text, but with a musical approach that never developed into an identifiable and consistent national tradition. Or perhaps that *is* the national tradition. When all is said and done – and the contemporary preoccupations for linking Italian opera to castrati, effeminacy, exotica, and foreignness are stripped away – the English, from the seventeenth to the late nineteenth centuries, preferred their native operas to have spoken dialogue, and the heroines Venus, Laura, or Britannia were unable to make any headway in their quest to have a constant sung input into the drama.