3 The operatic event: opera houses and opera audiences

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In 1778 the Italian journalist and historian Pietro Verri, noting the frequent complaints by critics from northern Europe about the lack of dramatic coherence in Italian operas, wrote 'In my opinion, northerners are wrong to criticise our opera with the laws of the theatre; . . . ours are a spectacle of another sort.'[1] In this chapter I want to examine what Verri may have meant by 'spectacle of another sort', and to suggest that any operatic performance might usefully be understood as a 'spectacle of another sort'.

In Chapter 10 I suggest that an operatic text should perhaps be seen as the pretext for a performance, rather than the performance serving to realize the operatic 'work'. But we also have to recognize that performances themselves serve as pretexts for events. Reinhard Strohm has suggested that baroque opera in particular must be understood as primarily 'event-like' rather than 'work constituted',[2] but Carolyn Abbate insists that this is true for all operatic performance: 'what counts is not a work, not, for example, Richard Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* in the abstract, but a material, present event'.[3] Although modern cultural activities are often work focused (I attend a performance of Hindemith's *Mathis der Maler* because I want an opportunity to experience an infrequently performed opera, not to hear the particular singers or to be seen at the Royal Opera House), even today this is far from being exclusively the case: many people attend performances because they are more interested in singer x, conductor y or director z than in the work being performed. And people also attend theatrical or musical performances as a social activity: to celebrate an event in their lives; as the occasion for a date; to identify themselves as part of a particular community; to participate in a social or political ritual.

In academic theatre studies there has been a clear shift since the 1960s from the study of dramatic texts as literature to the recognition that dramatic texts can only be understood in the context of performance, and that performance itself can only be understood in the fuller context of the performance event. This includes consideration of the specific occasion of performance, the location and design of the performance space, the contribution of the audience to the event, and the social and symbolic rituals

https://doi.org/10.1017/CCO9781139024976.005 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the event. The theatre historian Thomas Postlewait says that he now uses the term 'theatre' to embrace 'the comprehensive field of the performing arts, including theatre, dance, opera, folk theatre, puppetry, parades, processions, spectacles, festivals, circuses, public conventions and related performance events'.[4] Clearly in a spectrum as broad as this, the focus of interest is going to be broad as well; many such events will not have written texts in the first place, and some make no clear distinction between audiences and performers. Study of the social aspects of performance events has indeed moved theatre theorists and historians from the disciplines of literary and dramatic criticism to the broader terrain of what are now called performance studies, which often draw on disciplinary methods associated with social and historical anthropology, and ethnography.

A similar trend can be seen in musicology. Writing in 1995, Regula Burckhardt Qureshi made a case for an anthropological approach to music history:

> Anthropologizing music history must therefore begin with a recasting of the musical product into the realm of experience . . . At a profound level this may amount to the undisciplining of music, releasing it from the boundaries of an essentialism closely linked to textualist form, so that it may be restored to the human relationships that produce it.[5]

The musicologist Christopher Small also asked us to consider the relationships that are exemplified in a musical event, in this case a modern classical music concert:

> What is going on in this concert hall is essentially the same as that which goes on during any musical performance. Members of a certain social group at a particular point in its history are using sounds that have been brought into certain kinds of relationships with one another as the focus for a ceremony in which the values – which is to say, the concepts of what constitute right relationships – of that group are explored, affirmed, and celebrated.[6]

There is always a symbolic dimension to the performance event. Like Small, theatre historian Bruce McConachie suggests that 'theatre helps people to constitute themselves as social beings', and defines the theatrical event as 'a type of ritual which functions to legitimate an image of a historical social order in the minds of its audience'.[7] This juxtaposition of statements by theatre historians and musicologists indicates how, in certain respects, the disciplines of musicology and theatre studies have drawn together to the point where, since they are both concerned with the nature of performances as events, their disciplinary concerns seem less distinct.

https://doi.org/10.1017/CCO9781139024976.005 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Places of performance

One of the key figures in the development of performance studies, the American theatre theorist and practitioner Richard Schechner, has insisted that performance studies must take into account the widest possible contexts for performance, starting with consideration of the geographical location of the performance event.[8] Since the mid-seventeenth century, when the first public opera houses opened in Venice, the opera house has provided an important social focus for urban cultures, its public rituals perhaps offering a secular substitute for the religious rituals that once structured social patterns of existence. The geographical location of opera houses within cities tells us a good deal about their function within a particular society. For monarchical regimes the opera house is often viewed as a private appurtenance of the royal family. In eighteenth-century Paris the Opéra (strictly the Académie Royale de Musique) was located within the Palais Royal, seat of the junior Orléanist branch of the French royal family. When in 1763 the theatre burned down there were proposals for it to be rebuilt on a public site fronting the Louvre, but the Duc d'Orléans successfully petitioned the king to allow him to rebuild the Opéra as a private theatre within his palace, ensuring that it would remain a predominantly aristocratic venue.[9] But many royal theatres served as a transitional space between the court and the public sphere, a place where monarchs could display themselves to their subjects. The San Carlo in Naples, for instance, adjoins the royal palace on one side and a public square on the other. The Burgtheater in eighteenth-century Vienna, home of the Court Opera, was similarly adjacent (although not actually adjoined) to the imperial palace, and in the 1780s Emperor Joseph II, who micro-managed the court opera himself, used the theatre as a useful place to conduct state affairs since he could rely on the relevant personnel being gathered there regularly; the Austrian diarist Count Zinzendorf, who was an assiduous opera-goer, reports in 1784 that during a performance at the opera the emperor summoned him to his box to discuss Zinzendorf's recent report on the proceedings of the Commission on Serf Labour.[10] In Paris the association of the Opéra with the monarchy and aristocracy meant that in 1789, when the reforming minister Jacques Necker was dismissed by King Louis XVI, the first demonstration of the Parisian public's anger was the storming of the Opéra on 12 July, two days before the better-remembered storming of the Bastille. The Opéra retained its symbolic status even after the revolution had dismantled many of the other appurtenances of royalty. When in 1800 Napoleon as First Consul survived an assassination attempt it was at the Opéra, since 1794 a public theatre, that he subsequently displayed himself.

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Arguments for the relocation of the Opéra in Paris had been influenced by Voltaire's calls in the 1740s for the modernization and beautification of medieval Paris, in which he had suggested that new theatres should be built as 'splendid public monuments'.[11] In the nineteenth century the siting of the opera house in a city was often indeed given as much symbolic value as the siting of the buildings of municipal or state authority, and reflected the new concentration of economic and political power in the middle classes. In Vienna the current State Opera (heir to the Court Opera), commenced in 1861, was the first building to be erected on the Ringstrasse that was conceived by the Emperor Franz Joseph as a ceremonial route for the display of what Carl Schorske calls 'the great representational buildings of the bourgeoisie': political, economic and cultural buildings such as the parliament, the city hall, the stock exchange, and the state museums and theatres.[12] The cultural buildings served, in Schorske's words, as 'a meeting ground for the old aristocratic and the new bourgeois elites'.[13] Each was built in a suitable historicist style: Flemish gothic for the city hall to symbolize medieval urban privileges, classical Greek for the parliament to represent democracy, Italian Renaissance for the cultural buildings, including the opera. At the same date in Paris a new Opéra was commissioned by Napoleon III as a monument to his own imperial pretensions, his city planner Baron Haussmann carving a great avenue through the old city to link the Opéra to the royal palace at the Louvre (the broad avenue having the secondary function of making the kind of assassination attempt that the emperor had survived in 1858, whilst making his way through the narrow congested streets to the old Opéra building in the Salle Pelletier, more difficult). When the competition for the Opéra was announced, the architectural critic César Daly opined that the new building would perfectly symbolize the spirit of modern Paris, suggesting that whereas in London, a city of commerce, the representative buildings were its railway stations, in Paris, a city of pleasure, the Opéra would offer 'in architectural language the truest expression of the taste, mores and genius of Paris'.[14] Theatre historian Marvin Carlson has pointed out that the new Opéra was located 'at the centre of one of the representative quarters of the upper bourgeosie'.[15] Indeed, the Opéra sits at the hub of radiating boulevards linking the Palais Garnier (as it came to be known, after its architect) not only to the Louvre but to the Stock Exchange, the Printemps department store, and the Gares du Nord and de l'Est, also becoming the focal point for the most significant conglomeration of upper-crust cafés and restaurants in later nineteenth-century Paris.[16]

In modern states the location of opera houses continues to serve as an important sign of the relationship between the state and official culture, which is often represented by opera. In Australia the decision in the 1950s to build an opera house, locating the daringly modernist building by Jørn

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Utzon prominently on Sydney harbour, was a clear statement of Australia's desire to be seen to have acceded to cultural maturity (or what was at the time the accepted view of cultural maturity), its engineer Ove Arup declaring in 1965 that it would serve as 'a civic symbol for a city which seeks to destroy once and for all the suggestion that it is a cultural backwater'.[17] (Modern Australians are mercifully less prone to the 'cultural cringe' that prevailed in the 1950s and 1960s.) The elitist connotations of opera have meant that recently built opera houses are often located more discreetly in multi-purpose arts centres, such as the Wales Millennium Centre in Cardiff (2004–09), which replaced controversial architect Zaha Hadid's striking but rejected plans for an opera house on the same site, Hadid's winning scheme falling victim to typically British parochialism in the arts.[18] But the commercial redevelopment of the former dock areas of the Danish capital Copenhagen in the 2000s included a showcase opera house that is notably sited on an axis with the Amalienborg Royal Palace across the water, reaffirming the historical relationship between opera and monarchy in Denmark. As I write (6 March 2011) the Chinese boom city of Guangzhou (Canton) is formally opening a new opera house designed by none other than Zaha Hadid, described as 'unifying the adjacent cultural buildings with the towers of international finance in Guangzhou's Zhujiang new town', a clear expression of the current economic and cultural priorities of the capitalist-communist regime in China.[19] Not to be outdone, the Gulf state of Dubai has commissioned Hadid to build a trophy opera house to crown its consumerist desert paradise with the cultural imprimatur of opera.

In London, on the other hand, the Covent Garden Opera House occupies a more marginal space than opera houses in other great cities, squeezed tightly into an area once associated with crime and prostitution, and adjoining London's main fruit and vegetable market (until the market moved in 1974). Its unimpressive location is perhaps a sign of the ambiguous relationship of the British to the arts, and more particularly to arts that are perceived to be foreign. It also reflects the fact that the modern British monarchy has never exercised the kind of power (and rarely the vision) that is enjoyed by European heads of state (monarchic or otherwise) to stamp their mark publicly with showcase monuments such as the Paris Opéra, or the Opéra Bastille, also in Paris, built on a site representative of French Republicanism as one of the socialist President Mitterrand's *grands projets* of the 1980s. A typically private project by the Victorian impresario James Henry Mapleson to build a more strikingly located national opera house on the Thames Embankment alongside the Palace of Westminster had to be terminated in 1877, after work was well under way, due to shortage of support, the incomplete building being demolished to make way for New Scotland Yard in 1888.[20] Moreover, the British ruling classes have always preferred to

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affect the manners of the country squire to those of the urban sophisticate, and this is exemplified in the proliferation of country-house opera houses in Britain. Glyndebourne Opera, founded in 1934 in the gardens of an Elizabethan mansion in the Sussex Downs an hour outside London, is the original and best-known country-house opera, although it lost some of its quaint village-hall atmosphere when commercial imperatives required that a bigger house be built, which opened in 1994. Here the well-heeled can enjoy an essentially urban art form whilst disporting themselves (in formal attire) in a gracious pastoral setting, observed across a ha-ha ditch by sheep and cows. A helicopter landing pad in a nearby field ensures that those who disdain the tiresomeness of a journey by road or rail can arrive with more panache.

But even in eighteenth-century London, where the opera house was not so intimately associated with the monarchy as in Naples, Vienna or Paris, the King's Theatre in the Haymarket was judged to be the obvious place for King George I to display in public his reconciliation with his son the Prince of Wales after a long-running and politically divisive feud – at a performance of Handel's *Radamisto* in 1720. Despite its name the theatre had no formal royal links, but since it was primarily the Whig aristocracy who patronized the Italian opera in London, and since the reconciliation restored the prominent Whig politicians Robert Walpole and Viscount Townshend to the government, the location had clear political significance.

From selective inattention to absorbed listening

The interior layout of opera houses is equally revealing of their social function. In the few baroque opera houses that survive today, such as the Margrave's Theatre in Bayreuth or the Cuvilliés Theatre in Munich (now almost entirely rebuilt), the royal box serves as a second stage and second focus for the theatre, where the ruler is framed as theatrically as those on stage. 'In 1750 it was unfashionable to arrive at the opera on time', James H. Johnson begins his book on the history of the social etiquette of concert and opera-going called *Listening in Paris*.[21] As a result the performance on stage was often interrupted by applause for the arrival of the king or other members of the royal family. This was something that initially embarrassed Napoleon as First Consul, who always arrived late at the Opéra (and not only because someone had tried to assassinate him on the way); when he did so sometimes the singers on stage joined in the applause, whilst on one occasion a special ballet sequence that Napoleon had missed was performed again for him. In time Napoleon became adroit at manipulating such appearances, ensuring that the Opéra management was informed

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beforehand so that it could notify the press.[22] A century later Mark Twain observed with malicious glee, staunch republican that he was, that audiences at Wagner's Festspielhaus at Bayreuth continued to be awed by the presence of royalty in the theatre, although there was supposed to be no other focus of attention than the art on the stage:

> In the opera-house there is a long loft back of the audience, a kind of open gallery, in which princes are displayed. It is sacred to them; it is the holy of holies. As soon as the filling of the house is about complete the standing multitude turn and fix their eyes upon the princely layout and gaze mutely and longingly and adoringly and regretfully like sinners looking into heaven.[23]

And performances themselves continued to be at the mercy of the social preferences of whoever exercised the most control over the opera house well into the nineteenth century, as at the Paris Opéra, where the members of the aristocratic Jockey Club de Paris held numerous boxes and, according to Wagner, could override the writ of even the emperor. Their preferred part of any operatic performance was the obligatory ballet, which by tradition took place in the second act of the opera, allowing the members of the Jockey Club to dine during the first act before going on to the Opéra for their favoured part of the entertainment (often leaving immediately after the ballet). When in 1861 Wagner made a bid for success in Paris with a revised version of his opera *Tannhäuser* he agreed to add a ballet as required at the Opéra, but placed it at the beginning of the opera. The ensuing uproar from the members of the Jockey Club caused extended interruptions to the performances of up to 15 minutes (according to Wagner's account), and Wagner had to withdraw the opera after the third performance.[24]

In theatres where the aristocracy rather than the ruler were in control of the building the design of theatres allowed for tiers of smaller boxes that were owned or leased by aristocratic families. In 1816 the French novelist Stendhal described the boxes at La Scala in Milan as '200 miniature salons', 'sufficient to contain all that is of worth and value in Milanese society'.[25] Byron, who was also in Milan in 1816, wrote that 'All society in Milan is carried out at the opera',[26] and Milan society hostesses knew better than to try to entertain at home on any day but a Friday, the only night on which there was normally no performance at La Scala. In their boxes people could, Byron observed, chatter, play cards, 'or anything else' (there is a clear innuendo there).[27] In the mid-eighteenth century the French traveller de Brosses reported that, although the recitative in Italian *opera seria* was monotonous, it at least allowed him to play an uninterrupted game of chess in his box.[28]

Visiting La Scala in 1770 the English music historian Charles Burney noted in his diary that at La Scala each box 'contains 6 persons who

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sit 3 on each side facing each other', a clear indication that the priorities of sociability outweighed those of viewing the stage.[29] Burney also observed the result of such sociability, describing the 'abominable noise and inattention' that the audience paid to what was happening on stage, except for one or two favourite arias.[30] At such moments, Stendhal noted in Naples in 1817, there would be 'prolonged and urgent shushings' for people to be quiet.[31] The Italian patriot Antonio Gallenga gives us a fuller picture of an operatic audience at work at La Scala in the middle of the nineteenth century:

> In the pit, in the gallery, in the six tiers of boxes, there are other interests at stake than the catastrophe on stage. Everywhere there is nodding and smiling, and flirting and waving of fans and handkerchiefs; two-thirds at least of the performance are drowned out by the murmur of a general conversation, until occasionally, a burst of applause, or the strokes of the director of the orchestra announce the entrance of a favourite singer, or the prelude to a popular air; when, as if by common accord that confused roar of 6,000 voices is instantly hushed; all laughing, cocquetting, and iced-champagne-drinking, are broken short; and all the actors in the minor stages submit themselves for five minutes to behave like a well behaved audience.[32]

The Romantic composer Louis Spohr, exhibiting a typically Germanic disdain for Italian musical culture, complained that 'Nothing more insufferable can be imagined for a stranger who is desirous to listen with attention than this vile noise.' And he attributed such behaviour to the fact that 'from such persons as have perhaps seen the same opera thirty or forty times, and who come to the theatre only for the sake of the society, no attention is to be expected'.[33] But what Burney, Gallenga and Spohr describe is not 'no attention'. Rather, it is what Richard Schechner has designated as 'selective inattention'. Employing the methods of an anthropologist to analyse the rituals of performance events, Schechner noted a similar kind of selective inattention at work at a concert of Carnatic music in Madras: 'There was no necessity to maintain or appear to maintain, a single-focus high-tension attention. But at the same time the use of selective inattention led not to a feeling of laxness or "I don't care", but to a selective discipline on the part of the audience. Connoisseurs knew precisely what and who they wanted to hear.' Going on to quote from his diary, Schechner writes: 'This audience is *sitting in judgment* – but that judgment is based on its knowledge and love of the music . . . the lights stay on here so the audience can see each other, and feel together.'[34]

During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries operatic works themselves were put together with the clear understanding that they would

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not receive the same level of attention throughout, exemplified by the convention of what was known as the *aria di sorbetto*, an aria sung by a minor character during which members of the audience could obtain refreshments (or avail themselves of the none-too-salubrious sanitary facilities) safe in the knowledge that they were not missing anything sensational. But just as Schechner insists that selective inattention does not indicate lack of engagement in either the event or the performance, James Johnson has reminded us that Spohr's expectation of silent 'attentive listening' is historically specific, marking a stage in a gradual cultural shift in emphasis from the sociality of theatrical attendance to a focus on the work being presented on stage. There are already signs of increasing efforts to impose decorum on audiences in the mid-eighteenth century,[35] and opera houses in Italy were usually policed for this purpose, as Byron's feckless companion Dr Polidori discovered to his cost when he asked a soldier to remove his hat at a performance at La Scala, and had later to be rescued from detention by Byron.[36] But the policing of Italian opera houses was usually more to do with maintaining social order than with aesthetic etiquette. In 1820 the dying Keats was so depressed by the theatre police at the San Carlo in Naples that he determined to move on to Rome, despite his unfit state, not wanting to be buried amongst a people so politically abject.[37]

The first signs of a shift towards discipline and attention as an aesthetic ideal rather than an issue of public order can be found in the second half of the eighteenth century, when the French critic Diderot began to encourage a new kind of absorption in dramatic action, opposing this to the 'theatricality' of modes of performance that explicitly acknowledged the audience and the theatrical occasion.[38] James Johnson had charted the gradual spread of attentive opera and concert listening in Paris through the early part of the nineteenth century, but there is already evidence of this kind of attention being sought in London at the end of the eighteenth century: in 1784 the critic of the *Morning Chronicle* complained that 'The Opera Band, perhaps as complete as any in the world, is overpowered by the noise and nonsense on the spectator side of it, and even Pacchierotti himself cannot sufficiently, without impaired effort, make his way to those who are happy in hearing him'.[39] By 1850 a *Sunday Times* reporter could note the silence with which an audience listened to an opera at the Surrey Theatre in south London (one of several popular working-class theatres that had begun to present operas) as a testimony to 'the improvement of taste among all classes',[40] although at the end of the century Mark Twain observed that the upper-crust audience at the Metropolitan Opera in New York had still not adopted the habit of listening silently: 'they hum the airs, they squeak fans, they titter and gabble all the time'.[41]

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The expectation of absorptive attention was brought to its fulfilment by Wagner (who else?). In a letter to Liszt of 1852 Wagner had imagined the ideal environment for such an experience, suggesting that operas should be performed 'in some beautiful retreat, far from the smoke and industrial odours of city civilisations'.[42] Although tempted by King Ludwig of Bavaria's offer to build a showcase theatre for his works in Munich, Wagner eventually opted to build his Festspielhaus on a hill outside the sleepily provincial town of Bayreuth to ensure its remove both from the modern metropolis and from the mundane life of the town below. Wagner encouraged a spirit of pilgrimage in his audience, and Matthew Wilson Smith suggests that the narrative of *Parsifal*, with Parsifal's long slow approach to the temple on the hill of Montsalvat, inside which is held the Holy Grail before which Parsifal stands 'bewitched', is a dramatic representation of the ideal experience that Wagner sought for his audience at Bayreuth.[43] But despite his self-conscious medievalism, just as Wagner relied upon modern stage technologies to achieve his magical stage effects, so he relied upon modern modes of transport to enable his audience to travel from afar to Bayreuth. Mark Twain also recorded that the only way for such travellers to secure tickets and lodgings for the festival was by another wonder of modern technology, the telegraph.[44]

At the Paris Opéra, which opened one year before Bayreuth, Charles Garnier had a no less sacramental view of his theatre. When criticized for the overuse of emblems such as masks and lyres in the building he responded that 'lyres and masks in theatres, like the crosses on altars, keep the thought oriented, by visual means, toward the central concern';[45] his ideas for the decoration of the *grand foyer* were taken from the staging of the religious ceremony scene in Meyerbeer's *Le Prophète*.[46] The creation of such extravagant spaces for social display and interaction at the Garnier is itself a sign of a shift of emphasis; in Italian opera houses foyer spaces were often cramped since it was assumed that social interactions took place inside the auditorium itself. Garnier described his magnificent social spaces as 'the architectural symphonies of the theatre',[47] and Garnier's critics often complained that the palatial social spaces detracted from the auditorium. But Garnier himself extended his musical metaphor to argue that whereas his foyers and staircases were like a symphony orchestra to be listened to on its own, the auditorium should be more restrained, playing second fiddle to the spectacle on stage like the orchestra that accompanies the opera (Garnier's idea of 'restrained' must be recognized as relative here). Nonetheless, it appears that Garnier's magnificently vulgar jewel box did steal the thunder of the operas performed within it: Christophe Charle has suggested that audiences increasingly came to the Opéra to admire the building rather than to hear operas.[48]

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Bayreuth, on the other hand, has exiguous social spaces (visitors often complained about the lack of facilities), ensuring that the pilgrim's attention is focused on the holy grail within. Inside the auditorium Wagner designed all the seats to face the stage in a semicircle, rather than the classic horseshoe-shaped auditorium of the baroque theatre in which the sightlines to the stage are of lesser significance than those across the auditorium. The long rows of tightly packed seats also pin the audience down in their places throughout the performance – something that Garnier explicitly rejected when he designed broad passages between seats at the Opéra in the belief that people had a right to circulate during the performance, and 'to come and go freely'.[49] And whereas in theatres whose primary function was social the auditorium would remain lit throughout the performance so that the audience could see each other, at Bayreuth Wagner dimmed the lights in the auditorium so that the audience had to concentrate on the stage – something that was still considered worthy of note when the practice was first introduced in London by Mahler at a performance of *Siegfried* at Covent Garden in 1892.[50]

Wagner himself had enjoined that since *Parsifal* was a 'sacred' work there should be no vulgar applause or curtain calls to break its spell until the end of the opera. But by this date it was already common to frown upon applause during a performance, the ideal of the coherent work having taken hold more generally. Writing of a performance of *Lohengrin* at Covent Garden in 1875 the critic of *The Times* newspaper noted that 'In a work constructed as is *Lohengrin* frequent plaudits cannot be expected since each successive act may be regarded as almost one continuous piece.'[51] Visiting 'the shrine of St Wagner' in 1891 Mark Twain wrote a vivid account of the pall of reverence that was encouraged at performances at Bayreuth after Wagner's death:

> Absolute attention and petrified retention to the end of an act of the attitude assumed at the beginning of it. You detect no movement in the solid mass of heads and shoulders. You seem to sit with the dead in the gloom of the tomb. You know they are being stirred to their profoundest depths; that there are times when they want to rise and wave handkerchiefs and shout their appreciation, and times when tears are running down their faces, and it would be a relief to free their pent emotion in sobs or scream.[52]

Performance as event

By the end of the century this kind of reverential silence and immobility had indeed become the ideal of concert-, theatre- and opera-going. But there are, of course, other ways of displaying attention or marking appreciation than immobile or silent listening. At the beginning of the

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eighteenth century Joseph Addison commented how in France there was an 'Inclination of the Audiences to sing along with the Actors'[53] (something which the Metropolitan audience still did at the end of the following century). Visitors to Italy often noted how freely Italian audiences physicalized their responses to key moments in a performance in displays of a more baroque-style religious ecstasy than the puritanical mode practised at Bayreuth. The English traveller John Moore attending a performance in Italy in 1787 described how 'At certain airs, silent enjoyment was expressed in every countenance; at other the hands were clasped together, the eyes half shut, and the breath drawn in with a prolonged sigh, as if the soul was expiring in a torrent of delight.'[54] Stendhal gives an account of how, at the premiere of Rossini's *La gazza ladra*, there was a muttering of 'O bello!, o bello!' after the applause for the overture had died down.[55] The later eighteenth-century cult of sensibility also had an impact upon audiences' behaviour in the theatre. Sensibility was a manifestation of the new middle-class ideology of naturalness, formed in explicit opposition to the control and artifice of absolutist and aristocratic cultures. The ethos of sensibility demanded that people display their emotions as a sign of their openness and honesty, rather than concealing them. In the era of sensibility theatre and opera audiences were similarly encouraged to make extravagant displays of their emotional responses to the drama, and sentimental theatrical genres such as the *comédie larmoyante* or the *opera semiseria* came into being to provide audiences with opportunities to demonstrate their sensibility. When Paisiello's opera *Nina*, one of the most popular examples of operatic sensibility, was performed in Naples in 1790 the audience were moved to rise from their seats with cries of sympathy to reassure the opera's heroine that everything would turn out for the best after her pathetic aria 'Il mio ben'.[56]

More vigorous forms of appreciation, such as the practice of throwing bouquets, were also common, and an institution unique to opera to this day is the claque: people who are hired by theatre managers and singers to encourage the audience to applaud (often, in the case of singers, in a spirit of rivalry), or sometimes to voice signs of disapprobation. From informal beginnings the claque became an important institution at the Paris Opéra in the 1830s, when the theatre manager Louis Véron employed a permanent manager of the claque, Auguste Levasseur, who studied the score of each new work carefully to determine where the applause would be needed, attended rehearsals, and regularly discussed tactics with Véron. Levasseur organized a quasi-military operation, commanding his troops from an orchestra seat in the centre of the theatre by tapping his cane to signal applause. A later leader of the claque expressed his view of the valuable role he played, claiming that the claque was necessary 'to animate and encourage the actors, to warm up

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a sluggish audience, and to emphasise the most beautiful passages'.[57] This latter point is telling, for it suggests that the new bourgeois audience that was increasingly filling the seats at the Opéra (and at other opera houses in Europe and the Americas) was less confident of its taste and judgement than its predecessors. The development of musical and operatic criticism in the press during this period is symptomatic of the same tendency. Despite the growth of the public press in the eighteenth century, musical, theatrical and operatic criticism remained during that century very much an aspect of the marketing and public relations operation of theatres (or what the early nineteenth-century English critic Leigh Hunt, one of the earliest opera critics in England, described as 'puffery' in exchange for 'plenty of tickets').[58] Since audiences would attend the opera pretty much regardless of what was played they did not need to be persuaded or dissuaded by reviews of the aesthetic quality of what was on offer. The object of greatest interest in a performance was the skills of the performers, and, as Jennifer Hall-Witt has pointed out, aristocratic audiences were often well informed about singing since many of them took singing lessons themselves as a part of their general education; like Schechner's expert audience at the concert of Carnatic music, they didn't need critics to tell them who was any good.[59]

As the social status of opera audiences expanded to include the wealthier middle classes, attendance at the opera became less exclusively the preserve of the aristocratic elite. For the new audience, going to the opera was less a matter of social obligation. Instead it was one of a number of choices as to how to spend one's leisure time and money, and such audiences needed guidance and advice in an increasingly diverse market. As Terry Eagleton has explained, public criticism serves to create a critical consensus of taste and judgement, but to some extent it only becomes necessary when the grounds for making such judgements are no longer certain; when the aristocratic assumption that good breeding and aesthetic taste go together gives way to a more contested set of values.[60] Like the claque, public criticism served to give confidence to an increasingly middle-class audience who needed to be told what to attend, and what to think about what they experienced.[61] The development of programme notes and musical guides was also part of this trend. In a recent article on the publication of popular guides to Wagner's operas (such as the American music critic H.E. Krehbiel's *How to Listen to Wagner's Music* of 1890), Christian Thorau suggests that such guides can be seen as part of a wider provision of self-improvement manuals for the middle classes that included the Swiss art historian Burkhardt's *Cicerone*, 'a guide for the enjoyment of art in Italy', or the ubiquitous Baedeker travel guide books.[62]

Institutions like the claque affirm that the relationship between audience and performance in an art form like opera is always two-way. The operatic

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event is neither purely a social event for the audience alone, nor is it purely focused on the imaginary world being represented on stage, even if the historical move from the social display of seventeenth-century opera-goers to the darkened auditorium at Bayreuth marks a clear historical shift from one tendency to the other, the reasons for which we must return to at the end of this chapter. In the seventeenth century it was common for prominent people to sit on the stage in full view of their peers, and this practice suggests that there was at that time no clearly marked distinction between the rituals on stage and social rituals in the theatre. Even after this practice had been discontinued almost everywhere by the latter part of the eighteenth century it was common for actors to perform on a forestage in front of, rather than within, the illusionistic stage sets, occupying a liminal space between the fictional stage space and that of the audience. The fact that there was little attempt to provide historical or geographical authenticity in costuming in the eighteenth century, operatic costumes being largely a theatricalized version of the anyway extravagant contemporary fashions, also reduced the gap between fiction and reality. In a diary entry of Lady Coke, an assiduous opera-goer in late eighteenth-century London, we are at first unaware that Lady Coke has transposed a discussion about the clothes on display at an opera performance from the costumes on stage to what the audience was wearing.[63]

The opera historian John D. Drummond suggests that in the eighteenth century the 'division between theatre and life was at times a tenuous one',[64] and, in a study of the culture of Italian *opera seria* that can be described as anthropological in approach, Martha Feldman has suggested that the highly artificial conventions of *opera seria* should be seen as a mirror of the social conventions of the society to which it played, its elaborate codes serving as a kind of affirmation of the codified rules and social hierarchies of courtly social etiquette. The theatre historian Joseph Roach describes acting treatises of the time as exemplifying 'the technique of reifying the social order', citing a manual of 1813, that he considers to be retrospective of earlier practices, which describes the hierarchical disposition of the actors on stage: 'The principal person stands in the middle of the others; then these stand according to rank, age, and sex.'[65] More generally, the codification of social etiquette is part of what the social historian Norbert Elias characterized as the 'civilising process' by which natural bodily functions and emotions are increasingly either concealed or brought under control in modern societies.[66] Reinhard Strohm describes this aspect of *opera seria* as a form of 'social modelling',[67] in which, as Feldman explains it, rules of behaviour were 'not learned primarily as content but as feeling, feeling internalized through the expressive power of ceremonial recitation'.[68] In such a society, Drummond suggests, 'to be a virtuoso was not an act of Romantic

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rebellion, it was an image of absolute control'.[69] Just as the courtier had to keep his inner feelings under control, the singer demonstrated her mastery over the emotions being displayed musically. Both might be seen as indicative of the wider social imperative for the citizen of the modern state to learn to suppress personal inclinations for the greater good of the state, reflected in the conflicts between love and duty that lay at the heart of almost all of the narratives of classical *opera seria*.

Drummond also argues that in seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century society more emphasis was placed upon appearances than upon substance. Baroque art is related to rhetoric, which is concerned 'not with what is said, but with the way of saying it',[70] placing value upon persuasion rather than upon representation or self-expression. In Romantic aesthetics there is an insistence upon emotional sincerity as the touchstone for artistic truth, but in classical rhetoric and *opera seria* the purpose is to move people to accept a particular view of things rather than to express oneself. (Expression was one of the tools of rhetoric, but it served as a *sign* rather than an *index* of emotion.) Just as the classical rhetorician deployed a whole range of figures of speech (or 'tropes') as rhetorical devices (repetition, metaphor, exaggeration, understatement, irony, etc.), so the baroque composer deployed musical tropes. These were not considered as dead conventions to be challenged as inauthentic, but as a sign of artistry. Martha Feldman has also described the way in which the music of *opera seria* 'strategically choreographed both the delivery and the reception of the text rhetorically, simultaneously staging the singer's performance and moulding the demonstrations of the audience'.[71]

But Feldman also suggests that in *opera seria* neither what took place on stage nor what took place in the auditorium was entirely predetermined, noting that there was a 'dialectic between both political and textual fixity on the one hand and behavioural and performative freedom'.[72] Indeed, it was the very reliability of the conventions that permitted and encouraged performative freedom; audiences hearing the same opera night after night expected the performers to vary the music. Moreover, Schechner found that in such performance cultures the principle of selective inattention could apply as much to the behaviour of the performers as to that of audiences, noting that the ability of performers to step in and out of role, to transgress the frame of the performance, is an essential aspect of the recognition of performance as event. Dr Burney describes a touching example of a singer stepping out of role as recounted to him by the elderly Farinelli. When Farinelli and Senesino, the two great rival castrati of the age, first appeared together on the London stage, Senesino playing 'a furious tyrant' and Farinelli 'an unfortunate hero in chains', Farinelli's singing 'so softened the heart of the enraged tyrant, that Senesino, forgetting his stage-character,

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ran to Farinelli and embraced him in his own'.[73] Another castrato Caffarelli was notorious for his capricious nature, his refusal to rehearse, and his rather less generous behaviour to his peers, 'making obscene gestures and remarks, joking with the audience, making fun of other singers on the stage, mimicking and anticipating their phrases, and more'.[74] At the San Carlo, where a stuffier royal etiquette prevailed, Caffarelli once found himself put under arrest for overstepping the mark, but this was for *lèse majesté*, not for breaking the stage illusion. Louis Spohr found that such practices were still prevalent in Roman opera houses in 1816, complaining that 'One is accustomed . . . to hear one of the persons performing sing alone for a quarter of an hour at a time, in situations of the most impassioned kind, while the others walk about in the background, or partly behind the scenes, and chat and laugh with acquaintances.'[75] Writing in 1838 Liszt noted that Italian audiences never forgot the singer over the character that he or she represented: 'One knows always that one is in the presence of Madame Schoberlichner and not in the presence of Semiramis'.[76] But during the course of the nineteenth century this focus on the 'eventness' of performance would give way to the presumption of absorptive attention in the fictive world of the drama.

The fall of the public man

The effect of Wagner's reforms was to create a passive solitary spectator lost in his or her own absorption in what is happening on stage. 'They leave themselves at home when they go to Bayreuth', Nietzsche complained, in one of his more unpleasantly misogynist moments, becoming 'mob, herd, woman'.[77] The 'feminization' of the Wagnerian spectator is made explicit in Aubrey Beardsley's print 'The Wagnerites' (1894) which shows an audience consisting almost entirely of women (and exotic looking women, at that). This audience passivity was not, in fact, Wagner's intention. Although he had railed against the socializing frivolity of Italian opera-going, he hoped to replace this with a more genuine social experience modelled on the civic theatre festivals of ancient Athens. But in general the Romantic ideal of the theatrical event encourages a relationship in which the performers on stage convey emotions that are supposed to be interior and authentic to an audience that is encouraged to experience these in a private and personal way. The subjectivity of such experience is replicated in much recent critical writing about opera, in which the academic presumption of critical objectivity gives way to what David Levin has identified as writing 'in explicitly lyrical, intensely personal ways', noting that such critics 'have been doing a great deal of emoting, finding ways to, as Madonna would

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have it, justify their love'.[78] Such accounts often openly acknowledge the eroticism of the operatic encounter: Wayne Koestenbaum describes how the singer's voice 'enters me, makes me a "me", an interior, by virtue of the fact that I have been entered',[79] recalling the homosexual Walt Whitman's fantasies of a tenor's voice filling his body a century earlier.[80] 'When I go to the opera house', writes Sam Abel, another exponent of Levin's 'new lyricism', 'the performance is a physical sex act between my body and the singer's voice-body'.[81] Levin also notes that the tendency towards solipsism in operatic experience often leads such critics to focus on the experience of listening to opera at home, which in the writing of Abel and Koestenbaum becomes a kind of 'masturbatory fantasy'.[82]

The passage from opera as social event to the silent, petrified but erotically suffused retention of the modern audience demands some explanation. It is clearly related to the parallel development of the ideal of the autonomous, coherent operatic work discussed in Chapter 10: one assumes the other. But that still begs the question why such a development took place. If, as McConachie suggests, 'theatre helps people to constitute themselves as social beings', then we have to ask what notions of social being the theatre and opera of the later nineteenth century were modelling. The historical sociologist Richard Sennett may be able to help here. Sennett has argued that one of the most fundamental social changes that took place between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was the retreat from public life as a sphere of self-expression and social interaction, greater value being placed instead upon private life and domesticity as the realms of authenticity and selfhood.[83] The German sociologist Jürgen Habermas has defined the eighteenth-century 'public sphere' as a discursive space for the formation of public opinion and for the modelling of a shared social consensus,[84] and Sennett suggests that the theatre was one of the most significant institutions of this eighteenth-century public sphere. Martha Feldman describes Italian cities in the eighteenth century as 'veritable citadels of public opinion', suggesting that 'cities and city spaces [in particular opera houses] were places to argue, judge and pronounce'.[85] Writing in Milan in 1816 Stendhal described La Scala as 'the focal point of the entire city'.[86] This effect may have been even more pronounced in Italy, where authoritarian rule allowed little leeway for more direct political expression. Attending an especially rowdy performance in Genoa in 1844 Charles Dickens opined that 'as there is nothing else of a public nature at which they are allowed to express the least disapprobation, perhaps they are resolved to make the most of this opportunity'.[87]

But, according to Sennett, from the late eighteenth century onwards in general public life increasingly came to be seen as inauthentic. This rift

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between public and private is clearly marked in Wagner's claims that the expression of subjectivity lies at the core of music's contribution to drama since music conveys authentic feelings (whether known or unknown to the dramatic character) which have otherwise been made 'unintelligible to ourselves by State-politics or religious dogmas'.[88] But, as Hegel insisted, pure interiority is also pure emptiness.[89] Where the theatre was once a space for the public modelling of the subject as citizen, it now serves as a place where the private individual goes to gain emotional experiences; the member of the modern audience comes to the theatre not to interact socially with other people but to replenish his or her interior world. This is what Sennett describes as 'the paradox of visibility and isolation' in modern public life: 'the public man as passive spectator'.[90]

Sennett talks of how Wagner 'disciplined' his audience.[91] Following the work of Michel Foucault on the 'technologies' by which power inscribes itself as discipline in human subjects, cultural historian Jonathan Crary has also described the inculcation of 'attentiveness' in the public as a key technology of the social disciplining of people in both work and leisure in the nineteenth century.[92] The prerogative of attentiveness in the opera house is clearly a part of this broader tendency,[93] and Crary also notes that as modern urban life offered more and more distractions, technologies of attentiveness had to up the ante to compete. In his study of the Paris Opéra in the nineteenth century Anselm Gerhard suggests too that 'the urban space of experience exerted a strong influence on the forms of spectacle with which grand opera attempts to combine a wide range of perceptual stimuli'.[94] But we can also see in the shift from a social to an attentive model of theatre-going a clear illustration of what the French economist Jacques Attali describes as the general tendency of capitalism to reify and commodify all social activities: 'Fetishized as a commodity, music is illustrative of the evolution of our entire society: deritualize a social form, repress an activity of the body, specialize its practice, sell it as spectacle, generalize its consumption, then see to it that it is stockpiled until it loses its meaning.'[95] The latter condition is reached when recordings make it possible to listen to opera in the home, so that people can enjoy 'the imaginary museum of musical works'[96] divorced from the social or performative contexts that originally gave them meaning. But Attali's diagnosis is equally evident in the deritualization of the social aspects of theatre- and opera-going during the course of the nineteenth century, the rendering immobile of the body in the cause of mental absorption, and the audience's Parsifal-like bewitchment at the spectacle presented on stage that is the legacy of Wagner.[97]

Although most opera performances continue to be confined to purpose-built opera houses, there has been a move in recent years towards exploring

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alternative spaces for performance, often with the intention of attracting new audiences, or creating different modes of audience engagement with the operatic event. In Germany the conductor and director Christoph Hagel has presented Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* in the Reichstag subway station in Berlin (2008), and *La clemenza di Tito* in the Bode Museum in Berlin (2010), making use of the dramatic architectural properties of these locations. In Britain the Birmingham Opera has been presenting works in less architecturally marked venues since 2001, including Berg's *Wozzeck* in a dilapidated warehouse on the edge of a housing estate, Beethoven's *Fidelio* in a big top pitched beside Aston Villa Football Club, and Bernstein's *Candide* in an old car-parts factory. The productions allow experimentation with space and acoustics, and, in the company's own words, 're-write the rules of engagement between audiences and performer', often drawing the audience into the action as participants rather than merely observers.[98] In the company's production of Monteverdi's *Il ritorno d'Ulisse* (2005), set in an immigration detention centre, the audience was required to undergo the kind of identity check that asylum seekers regularly experience before entering the performance, and observed much of the first half of the performance from outside a wire fence. For Verdi's *Otello* (or *Othello*, since all Birmingham productions are sung in English), which engaged with contemporary issues of race and religion, the audience had to remove its shoes to enter the performance space as if entering a mosque, and at times became, in effect, an extension of the chorus (which is itself often largely amateur in such productions).

Such projects evidence a desire to challenge both the spatial and the sociocultural barriers of conventional performance spaces for opera. A number of contributors to this book have commented also on the recent explosion of new technological media by which opera can be disseminated. Many of these media could be said to extend the more solipsistic mode of engagement first made possible by sound recording technologies. The German opera scholar Clemens Risi has drawn attention to YouTube clips in which the empathetic breathing of a fan who has posted a clip of Natalie Dessay singing the mad scene from *Lucia di Lammermoor* can be heard accompanying Dessay's performance. Risi notes that opera fans also post videos of themselves singing along, or lip synching, to their favourite opera stars, referring us to a virtuoso performance of an aria from Vivaldi's *Griselda* by Cecilia Bartoli as rendered, with the full panoply of Bartoli's mannerisms, by one Chris Jones, alias 'divoboy'.[99] The public-facing performativity of such clips and the resultant online comments and exchanges suggest that a more interactive process is taking place here than with old-fashioned singing along in the bath. Opera houses have also learned to use

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social networking platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to engage with younger audiences and to create new online operatic communities. A witty publicity video for Nico Muhly's opera *Two Boys*, ironically about the dangers of social networking sites, performed at the English National Opera in 2011, even went viral on YouTube.[100] Live broadcasts of opera performances in cinemas that create a sense of occasion, and the use of mobile media to organize spontaneous 'pop-up' or 'flashmob' operatic events,[101] suggest that new technologies can also offer opportunities for more sociable, less isolating forms of engagement. The British composer Craig Vear has created 'a digital opera for a mixed ensemble of technologies, remote audiences and live performers' based on Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* (2010/11),[102] and it cannot be long before the methods of the virtual YouTube choir are applied to an operatic work.[103] All of these developments suggest that the future may involve very different concepts of the performance space of opera, and of what constitutes an operatic audience or an operatic event.

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