

## 13 'An exotic and irrational entertainment': opera and our others; opera as other

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One of the most often-quoted descriptions of opera is that of Dr Samuel Johnson, who famously defined opera in the mid-eighteenth century as 'an exotic and irrational entertainment'.<sup>1</sup>

Johnson's response to opera was at one with a prevailing English attitude of curmudgeonly roast-beef-and-ale xenophobia presented as bluff common sense, and was aimed primarily at Italian opera. His suspicion of Italian opera was shared by writers such as Joseph Addison and Richard Steele in *The Spectator*, the poet Alexander Pope (who represents opera as a foreign 'harlot form' in *The Dunciad*), and the painter William Hogarth, who satirized the Whig aristocracy's cultivation of Italian opera (and other such foreign affectations) in prints and paintings.

The literal meaning of exotic is, indeed, 'foreign' (as Johnson's own dictionary explains), and this may be all that Johnson implied when he used the term, in this instance quite accurately; for, despite indigenous attempts at the form in the seventeenth century, by the eighteenth century opera was perceived as an essentially foreign import to Britain, being largely performed there in a foreign language with foreign performers. And for most countries in the world for the first two centuries of its existence opera would be exotic beyond Italy since, France aside, it was generally assumed that opera was Italian *per se*. The majority of opera composers were Italians, many working in countries outside of Italy; but many non-Italian composers such as Handel, Gluck, Haydn or Mozart predominantly set operas in Italian, usually outside of Italy too. The persistence of the 'italianicity' of opera (to borrow a term from Roland Barthes<sup>2</sup>) meant that in the nineteenth century many German and French operas were translated into Italian for performances outside those countries: Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* was known to English audiences in the early nineteenth century as *Il flauto magico*; the Metropolitan Opera opened in New York in 1883 with Gounod's *Faust* in Italian; Bizet's *Carmen* was first performed at the Teatro Real in Madrid in Italian in 1887;<sup>3</sup> and all operas were performed in Italian at Covent Garden until Mahler conducted Wagner's *Ring* cycle there in 1892. Indeed, opera is still Italian today in the popular imagination: in the recent British TV show *Pop Star to Opera Star* (ITV, January/February 2010) the majority of arias

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performed were Italian, and the essential italianicity of opera meant that ‘O sole mio’, an Italian popular song much beloved of Luciano Pavarotti, qualified as operatic. The astonishing geographical dissemination of Italian opera by the early nineteenth century, when a work like Rossini’s *La Cenerentola* had been performed in Constantinople, Buenos Aires, Calcutta and Sydney within a few decades of its premiere in Rome, prefigures the modern globalization of franchise musicals like *Miss Saigon* or *The Lion King* (although without the same financial benefits to Rossini).

But, of course, the term exotic has come to mean much more than merely foreign; it also connotes something mysterious, extravagant, alluring, sensual. As such it marks the foreign as something ‘other’, and therefore a little bit scary. Herman Melville summons the ambivalent dream of the exotic perfectly in his South Seas novel *Typee*: ‘What strange visions of outlandish things does the very name spirit up! Naked houris – cannibal banquets – groves of coco-nut – coral reefs – tattooed chiefs – and bamboo temples . . . *heathenish rites and human sacrifices*.’<sup>4</sup> In linking the exotic with the irrational Johnson was confirming one of the most fundamental assumptions of exoticism, upon which Western identity has been built, based on the assumed opposition of reason and unreason, the normal and the strange. In this binary the ‘rational’ masculine European West always defines itself against the irrationalism of the feminized/barbaric/pagan (i.e. exotic) other. Historians trace such attitudes to the ancient Greek characterization of non-Greeks as ‘barbarians’, and to the Greeks’ orientalizing of the Persians, and suggest that the origins of modern European identity can be traced to the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, and to the threat presented to Europe by the Turks over the next three centuries.<sup>5</sup> This is the real truth of Johnson’s statement, for not only was opera itself literally exotic for an Englishman in Johnson’s day, but opera has also been one of Western culture’s most reliable artistic forms for the presentation of those aspects of exoticism that confirm the West’s sense of its own identity and superiority. Moreover, opera is itself ‘exotic’ in relation to the norms of Western culture. In this chapter I am going to examine both the prevalence of the exotic in opera and the exoticism of opera as it is represented in the cultural imagination. And I will suggest that the representation of the exotic in opera is perhaps one of the ways by which opera deals with the threat of its own troubling exoticism as an art form.

## **Exoticism in opera**

Any brief survey of opera reveals the astonishing incidence of exotic topics, whether in relation to operatic narratives, or in relation to the musical

forms employed – often both. This would include not only the works by major composers with obviously exotic or oriental settings (Purcell's semi-opera *The Indian Queen*; too many of Handel's operas to list;<sup>6</sup> Vivaldi's *Montezuma*; Rameau's *Les Indes galantes*; Gluck's *La Rencontre imprévue*; Haydn's *L'incontro improvviso*; Mozart's *Zaide*, *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* and *Die Zauberflöte*; Rossini's *L'italiana in Algeri*, *Il turco in Italia*, *Maometto II* and *Semiramide*; Weber's *Abu Hassan* and *Oberon*; Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine*; Verdi's *Zelmira* and *Aida*; Wagner's *Parsifal*; Bizet's *Les Pêcheurs de perles*; Mussorgsky's *Salammbô*; Saint-Saëns's *Samson et Dalila*; Delibes's *Lakmé*; Borodin's *Prince Igor*; Massenet's *Le Roi de Lahore*, *Hérodiade*, *Thaïs* and *Esclarmonde*; Strauss's *Salome* and *Die Frau ohne Schatten*; Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* and *Turandot*; Stravinsky's *The Nightingale*; Philip Glass's *Satyagraha* and *Akhenaten*; Judith Weir's *A Night at the Chinese Opera*; Tan Dun's *Marco Polo* and *The First Emperor*) but also operas that deal more broadly with encounters between Western and non-Western cultures, in many of which a male warrior on a colonizing mission encounters the orient through the person of a seductive female (the story of Jason's relationship with the barbarian princess Medea or the encounter of Aeneas with Dido being amongst the most obvious examples from myth; operas based on Cleopatra's relationship with Julius Caesar and Mark Antony from history). It has been estimated that one-third of all operas written between 1640 and 1740 had 'oriental' settings.<sup>7</sup> If we include operas that represent Europe's own exoticized others such as gypsies (Rossini's *Il turco in Italia*, Verdi's *Il trovatore* and *La forza del destino* and Bizet's *Carmen* are the obvious examples, but remember Verdi's gypsy maskers in *La traviata* too), and if we include operas in which the margins of Europe itself are exoticized (in particular Spain – *Carmen* again, but also evident in Princess Eboli's Moorish song in Verdi's *Don Carlos* – or the south-eastern margins of Russia, often exoticized by Russian composers in an attempt to affirm their own precarious identity as Europeans); and if we include works that are influenced by non-Western dramatic forms such as Japanese Noh theatre (e.g. Brecht's and Weill's *Der Jasager*, the theatrical works of the American composer Harry Partch, or Benjamin Britten's *Curlew River*) then we must realize that the exotic is one of the most compelling constituents of opera. Indeed, Theodor Adorno believed that the subject of exogamy (the term for a sexual or marital relationship outside one's own cultural group) is one of the core themes of opera.<sup>8</sup>

Many of these works derive, of course, from non-operatic literary sources. The story of the rescue of a European woman from the clutches of an oriental tyrant, upon which Rameau's *Le Turc généreux* (one of the four short operas that makes up *Les Indes galantes*) and Mozart's *Die Entführung* are both based, has a literary pedigree that can be traced back to the story

of Iphigenia's captivity on Tauris (the subject of a play by Euripides) via the Hellenistic prose romance to numerous medieval romances. Versions also occur in *The Decameron*, *Don Quixote*, Thomas Heywood's play *The Fair Maid of the West* of c.1600, and beyond. That is to say that there is nothing particularly 'operatic' about it. And modern Western prose literature repeatedly turns to exotic subject matters, from Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* of 1688 to Flaubert's *Salammbô*, Melville's *Typee*, and Pierre Loti's adventures in the South Seas, Turkey and Japan that provided the sources for both *Lakmé* and *Madama Butterfly*. There is also a flourishing historical tradition of exotic architecture and visual art. The Chinese pagodas at Kew Gardens in London and the Englischer Garten in Munich, or the playful Indian exoticism of the Brighton Pavilion, attest to the association of these architectural styles with pleasure and fantasy. Exotic paintings range from the sultry harem scenes of Ingres and Delacroix to Gauguin and Matisse, who, like many early modernists, turned to the more decorative elements of non-Western arts as a way out of representational realism.

But it is in opera that exoticism surely finds its definitive form. Insofar as opera is not a realistic art form it has often been argued that subjects that are not drawn from everyday life are most suited to it. From opera's beginnings the demands of Aristotelian verisimilitude have meant that stories with extraordinary characters and settings were judged to be more plausible for representation through singing and dancing.<sup>9</sup> Eighteenth-century French theorists argued that opera naturally inhabited the realm of the 'marvellous', Voltaire insisting that opera places us 'in a land of fairies' and that because of this 'we suffer extravagancies, and are even fond of them'.<sup>10</sup> Categorizing the settings most appropriate to opera in 1763 the Italian writer Algarotti duly listed exotic locations such as Egypt, China and Mexico as being particularly suitable since 'the marvellousness of theme will furnish the author with an opportunity of interweaving therein dances, choruses and a variety of scenic decorations'.<sup>11</sup> When adapting Thomas Corneille's history play *Le Comte d'Essex* as an opera libretto the writer Antonio Salvi explained why he had moved the setting from England: 'since the tragedy has to serve the music, the cast, and the Italian stage, I rather decided to set the scene in Persia'.<sup>12</sup> But there is a further reason why exoticism should have become so particularly associated with opera: from the mid-eighteenth century onwards composers started to characterize exotic subjects with 'exotic'-sounding music, including the use of exotic instruments, modal and chromatic harmonies, pentatonic melodies and melismatic vocal lines. Carl Maria von Weber expressed his pride at finding 'original' Chinese and Turkish tunes for his incidental music for *Turandot* and his opera *Oberon*.<sup>13</sup> Even more so than the exotic poem or novel, the exotic opera was able to evoke its exotic subject matter directly (to the European listener, at least).

Combined with exotic stage and costume designs, and exotic dances, opera was the perfect vehicle for conjuring all-embracing fantasies of alluring other worlds. In 1835 the Paris Opéra was described as an ‘open bazaar’ full of the marvels of the Orient.<sup>14</sup> And not only was opera the home of the exotic: the exotic had become inherently operatic. When the French Romantic poet Gérard de Nerval visited Egypt in the 1840s he despaired of finding ‘the real Egypt’. ‘Instead’, he wrote, ‘I will find at the Opéra the real Cairo . . . the Orient that escapes me.’<sup>15</sup>

Operas from the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, in particular those based on the model of classical drama, make little obvious attempt to exoticize their exotic subjects. The dramaturgy of a work like Vivaldi’s *Montezuma* (1733), about the conquest of Mexico, replicates that of any number of Metastasian *opere serie* which centre on the conflict between love and duty that occurs when the lovers are from powers in conflict with each other – a format that survives well into the nineteenth century in works like Rossini’s *Maometto II* and Verdi’s *Aida*. The setting prompts no particular exotic musical response from Vivaldi, any more than the libretto attempts to reflect on the specific nature of the historical encounter between the Spanish and the Aztecs, which is shown to exemplify universal issues. The same can be said for Handel’s numerous operas with exotic subjects. But in their *opéra-ballet* *Les Indes galantes* (1735/36) Rameau and his librettist Louis Fuzelier, working in Paris, where cultural life was already being informed by Enlightenment values, attempted to convey the distinctiveness of foreign peoples in the three European encounters with native and exotic others that make up a part of this composite work. And Rameau presented the ‘sauvages’ of North America, characterized as ‘noble’ savages, through dance music reportedly inspired by the dancing of two Native Americans in Paris.

As a theatrical form that draws attention to the body, dance has often been associated with the feminine, exotic and erotic in opera, and French and Russian opera in particular made dance a central component of the genre, with the obligatory incorporation of full-scale ballets in French opera from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. Examples of exotic–erotic dance in opera are numerous: the orientalist bachannale in *Samson et Dalila*; the seductive dancing of exotic femme fatale characters such as Carmen and Salome; the homoerotic gymnastic display in Benjamin Britten’s *Death in Venice*, which is accompanied by gamelan-inspired music. In French and Russian operas the ballet is often the place where the composer can let his hair down: the ethnic dance sequences in Delibes’s *Lakmé* and Massenet’s *Hérodiade*, or the Polovtsian dances in Borodin’s *Prince Igor*, are typical in this respect. Algarotti complained that in eighteenth-century opera ‘if the scene of action be in Rome, the dance is often made to be in Cusco or Peking’,<sup>16</sup> but similar associations of dance and the exotic

were already present in some seventeenth-century French operas. The chaconne, a dance employed extensively by composers such as Lully, had both exotic and sexual connotations. It was popularly associated with the Moors, although it is known to have been imported into Spain from Peru, and had been condemned in Spain as ‘a bawdy dance song’, ‘from far away’.<sup>17</sup> Lully incorporated chaconnes into five of his thirteen *tragédies lyriques*, and the dance was often associated in these works with the exotic–erotic; in his first true opera *Cadmus* (1673), Cadmus conveys his love to Hermione through a ballet of Africans dancing a chaconne. The chaconne continues to have orientalist associations for the minimalist composer Philip Glass, who refers to its derivation from flamenco guitar music (‘introduced by the gypsies who, it is believed, originated in India’), to justify its use in his 1980 opera on the life of Gandhi, *Satyagraha*.<sup>18</sup>

The chaconne in *Cadmus* is accompanied by guitars, a further signifier of its exoticism. In a French dictionary of 1690 both the chaconne and sarabande are also described as being danced ‘with castanets, or tambourines’, instruments that are indelibly associated with the exotic in opera.<sup>19</sup> Castanets appear on stage in the hands of Carmen, but also make obligatory appearances in the orchestral accompaniment to the quasi-exotic bacchanale in Wagner’s *Tannhäuser*, in the bacchanale in *Samson et Dalila*, and even more prominently in Salome’s fatal dance. In the mid-eighteenth century there also arose a vogue in Austria for ‘Turkish’-style music, in which a whole battery of exotic percussion instruments derived from Turkish Janissary military bands were employed to convey a kind of jangling barbaric crudeness that confirmed Austrian representations of the Turks as an ongoing threat on Europe’s eastern borders. *Alla turca* music is employed in Gluck’s *opéra comique La Rencontre imprévue* of 1763/64, but the best-known example of ‘Turkish’ music in opera is in Mozart’s *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*. Here the Turkish music characterizes the Turkish characters specifically: the Pasha and his harem-keeper Osmin, both of whom exemplify the supposedly ‘oriental’ characteristics of sexual lasciviousness and cruelty. At the end of the opera, when the Pasha redeems himself and exercises clemency, Osmin spins off into a vindictive rage in which he imagines the instruments of torture he would like to employ on the Europeans who have duped him, spurred on by a frenzied salvo of Turkish percussion.

Eighteenth-century opera concentrated upon the sexual rapacity and cruelty of the male Turk. But this characterization of the Turks as quasi-barbarians became increasingly redundant during the course of the nineteenth century as Ottoman power waned, as the Turks sometimes became an ally of European powers, and as the Ottoman Empire sought to modernize and Westernize itself. Increasingly Turkish or middle-eastern characters were characterized as comic rather than threatening in operas like Rossini’s

*L'italiana in Algeri* (1813) and *Il turco in Italia* (1814). The use of non-sense speech to characterize the ignorant foreigner is a frequent device in comic exotic operas, begun by Molière and Lully in the Turkish initiation scene in their *comédie-ballet Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*. It is found in *La Rencontre imprévue* and most famously in the 'Pappataci' trio and in the onomatopoeic nonsense language in the Act I finale of Rossini's *L'italiana in Algeri*, the story of which is a comic inversion of the 'abduction from the harem' trope, in that it is the feisty 'Italian girl' Isabella who has to rescue her wimpish lover from captivity.

## **Orientalism**

Our understanding of the politics of exoticism in Western culture has been dominated since the early 1980s by the work of the Palestinian-American critic Edward Said, whose book *Orientalism* was published in 1978.<sup>20</sup> In this study Said defined the orient as an idea rather than a place, and described oriental studies (or orientalism) as a field that was driven by the needs of nineteenth-century European imperialism. Said argued that the typical representations of the orient in terms of irrationalism, barbarism and sensuous passivity served the purpose of justifying the imperialistic claims of the Western world to rule the non-Western world, shown to be in need of the civilizing and modernizing hand of European culture. (If there is any doubt about the institutionalization of such attitudes, consider this comment from an essay in the booklet for the 1987 CD re-issue of Callas's *Aida*, in which the author describes the Egyptian Khedive Ismail, who commissioned *Aida*, as 'a dreamer in the oriental mode rather than a stern realist'.<sup>21</sup>)

Although some examples of exotic opera (such as *Aida* itself, Bizet's *Les Pêcheurs de perles* or Mascagni's *Iris*) restrict the narrative to the inhabitants of the exotic locale, a significant number present an encounter between Western and non-Western cultures. The predominant narrative structure for such operas, found for instance in *L'Africaine* (mostly set in the 'Indies'), *Lakmé* (set in India) and *Madama Butterfly* (set in Japan), stages the encounter between the Western male and a native female. The native female is often portrayed as weak and passive, inviting the love of (and domination by) the conquering Western male, although the dangers of the European encounter with the exotic other are also conveyed by the femme fatale, who uses her sensuous attributes to lure the innocent white male to his fate, evident in *Carmen* and *Dalila* and the oriental seductress Konchakovna in Borodin's *Prince Igor*. (Although Jewish characters are often orientalized in opera, Samson and the Israelites in *Samson et Dalila*, like John the Baptist in *Salome*, pass as honorary Westerners in such works,

and are associated with music that tends to be four-square and diatonic in contrast to the chromatic and melismatic music of the sultry seducer.) In these narratives the Western male is often a soldier – an aspect of narrative verisimilitude, but also an attribute that sharpens the contrast between the sensual oriental female and the upright (uptight) male Westerner. James Parakilas notes a shift in such narratives during the nineteenth century from ‘Age of Discovery’ operas (which allow the possibility of love between Western and non-Western) to what he calls ‘The Soldier and the Exotic’ operas, which reflect the increasing racism of later nineteenth-century imperialism, and emphasize the impossibility of cross-cultural unions.<sup>22</sup>

Although Said was an accomplished musician who also wrote about music, he only once engaged with opera in any depth, including a discussion of *Aida* (alongside works by Jane Austen, Conrad and Kipling) as a work symptomatic of nineteenth-century imperialism, describing imperialism itself as ‘the determining political horizon of modern Western culture’.<sup>23</sup> It is useful to examine the debate arising from Said’s reading of *Aida*, since it exemplifies contrasting understandings of the apparatus of orientalism. Liberal critics tend to read *Aida* as typical of Verdi’s more general opposition to imperial domination and religious tyranny, at one with his role as a cultural figurehead for the Italian Risorgimento’s struggle against the Austrian domination of northern Italy and the clerical regimes of the Papal States in pre-unified Italy.<sup>24</sup> In this reading it is pointed out that the Egyptians are presented as the imperialist aggressors against the Ethiopians, spurred on by bloodthirsty priests, and that they are portrayed with largely diatonic music, whilst *Aida* and her father Amonasro are given music that is, in Paul Robinson’s words, ‘distinguished by its sensuous irregularity, its long lines, its close intervals, its chromatic harmonies’, all of which are signifiers of musical orientalism.<sup>25</sup>

Robinson’s argument is therefore that Said has missed the mark in arguing that *Aida* presents an ‘orientalized Egypt’ since it is the Ethiopians and slaves who are represented in the exotic mode. Actually Said pays relatively little attention to the plot of the opera, or to the specific attributes of the music. Instead, in a critical method he describes as ‘contrapuntal’, Said establishes how *Aida* sits at the apex of a complex set of political negotiations between the different colonial powers that had an interest in Egypt: the Ottoman ruler Khedive Ismail, and the French and the British, both of whom were hoping to exercise control over Egypt after the building of the Suez Canal in 1869. Paradoxically, *Aida* was key to the Khedive Ismail’s plans to modernize and Europeanize Cairo, and to present Egypt as a major player on the world stage.<sup>26</sup> It was this geopolitical ambition of Ismael and his predecessor Muhammed Ali Pasha that rendered Egypt vulnerable to the attention of the European powers, and Ismael’s desire to represent a



glorious Egyptian past is described by Timothy Mitchell as a form of self-orientalization that played into the hands of the imperial imagination of Europe.<sup>27</sup> In Verdi's portrayal of the warlike and priest-ridden Egyptians he was simply perpetuating one well-worn trope of orientalist discourse (pagan priests play a malign role in many exotic operas) whilst displacing the feminized version onto the Ethiopians.

Said, however, argues that *Aida* is an opera 'not so much *about* but of imperial domination',<sup>28</sup> noting that when Verdi was writing the opera he was obsessed with being able to create 'unified' works, 'in which', to quote Verdi, 'the idea is ONE, and everything must converge to form this one'.<sup>29</sup> Said also notes that the creation of *Aida* came after the frustrating experiences of presenting *Don Carlos* in Paris, and that Verdi seems to have supposed that he would be able to obtain more control when dealing with the less savvy Egyptians; Verdi's 'imperial notion of the artist dovetailed conveniently with an imperial notion of a non-European world whose claims on the European composer were either minimal or non-existent'.<sup>30</sup>

In one of Said's most provocative statements he claims that '*Aida*, like the opera form itself, is a hybrid, radically impure work that belongs equally to the history of culture and the historical experience of overseas domination'.<sup>31</sup> The sentence may only mean that opera is like *Aida* in being 'hybrid and radically impure'; but it could also mean that opera itself is convicted in its very form of being complicit with European imperialism. Certainly for Said, whose main concern as a critic was with the European novel, there is a kind of spatial confidence and restlessness in the novel that he believed is only made possible by an imperialistic attitude to the world.<sup>32</sup> Musicologists have suggested that the tonal system, developed around 1600, should similarly be identified as a quasi-spatial expansion of the language of music, an argument first put forward by Edward Lowinsky, who suggested that 'it was the same spirit of adventure, the same desire to open new and unexplored spaces, that lured the sailors across the sea and beckoned the musicians to their discoveries of remote and distant keys and new harmonic conquests'.<sup>33</sup> More recently Timothy Taylor has suggested that such musical developments should be seen in relation to the impact that colonialism had upon European notions of selfhood and otherness, arguing that tonality 'arose to a long supremacy in Western European music in part because it facilitated a concept of spatialization in music that provided for centers and margins, both geographically and psychologically'.<sup>34</sup> Both Eric Chafe and Taylor suggest that there was also a close relationship between the development of tonality and the rise of opera as an art form that responded to the 'newly awaked desire to extend the human hegemony into hitherto unexplored regions' (although we might wish to rephrase that in less universalizing terms).<sup>35</sup> The story of Orpheus, the defining myth of opera, was

frequently used in the early colonial period to exemplify the spirit of the New World conquistadors since the music of Orpheus had the power to control unruly and uncivilized peoples, to tame wild beasts and even to make nature dance to its tune.<sup>36</sup>

One of the recurrent problems with Said's argument in *Orientalism* is that it vacillates between the suggestion that orientalism is a historically specific attribute of Western imperialism and alternatively that it is grounded in a more fundamental human tendency for communities to define themselves in contrast to the exogamous other. Said's predominant construction of orientalism as a nineteenth-century imperialist phenomenon means that he rather surprisingly sees Mozart's orientalism in *Die Entführung* and *Die Zauberflöte* – in the latter the Moor Monostatos is a miniature version of Osmin in his uncontrollable lust and salacious relish for torture – as examples of a sympathetic identification with the East,<sup>37</sup> overlooking the fact that Austria was engaged in its own imperial expansion at the expense of the Ottomans in the eighteenth century. We should not be misled by the beneficent magnanimity displayed by the oriental despot in many versions of the abduction story; there is almost always some narrative twist, such as the revelation that the oriental ruler is in fact a renegade of European origin, that the eloping lovers are members of his family, or even, in one version, that the renegade despot is a freemason.<sup>38</sup> If Said had practised his own contrapuntal method here he would have been more circumspect. Between the Treaty of Vienna of 1683 and the Treaty of Jassy of 1792 there were some forty years of war between Austria, Russia and the Ottoman Empire, bolstered by propagandistic representations of the Turks as dangerous fiends. Mozart and his librettist Stephanie intended *Die Entführung* for the visit to Vienna in September 1781 of the Grand Duke Peter of Russia to discuss plans by Russia and Austria for a new campaign against the Turks in the Crimea and Balkans. The opera's caricature of the cruel and lascivious Turks was clearly designed to support proposals for the further containment of the Turks. In the event the opera was not given the go-ahead in time for the Grand Duke's visit. In its place was presented a German adaptation of Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride*, based on the original 'Western woman rescued from barbarians' story. In this opera Gluck represents the violent and lustful King Thoas and his Scythian followers (often identified in the eighteenth century as the forbears of the modern Turks) through the use of 'Turkish' music much like that employed by Mozart in *Die Entführung*. To our ears the music seems rather comical in an otherwise serious opera; but to the audience in Vienna it would have sounded suitably barbaric and threatening.<sup>39</sup>

Nonetheless, there is some truth in Said's suggestion that certain aspects of eighteenth-century exoticism and orientalism were indicative of the

Enlightenment's more benign curiosity about different cultures. And it is also the case that Enlightenment artists often used their sometimes lurid depictions of oriental benightedness as a means of critiquing the despotic government or religious backwardness of their own society. We have direct evidence that opera audiences recognized such critiques from the diary of a Viennese opera-goer who noted that the portrayal of the obsequious fake dervish in Gluck's *La Rencontre imprévue* could be taken as a satire of Austrian monasticism.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, Flaubert's *Salammbô* has been read as an allegory of mid-nineteenth-century French society, in which anxieties about the unruly working classes are displaced onto Carthaginian society. Indeed, it may often be the case that orientalist narratives say as much about Europe's anxieties about its own others as about overseas domination. The most feared others in nineteenth-century Europe were the Jews, and the most infamous anti-semitic in nineteenth-century Europe was Richard Wagner. Some critics have suggested that all of Wagner's dangerous and destructive outsider figures – Alberich, Mime, Hagen, Beckmesser, Klingsor, even perhaps the Flying Dutchman and Kundry, both of whom are related to the legend of the Wandering Jew – must be read as representations of Jews.<sup>41</sup> But we might also ask whether gypsies, who were supposed to share many characteristics with Jews (they are racially other, nomadic and, as in Kant's unenlightened characterization of Jews, supposedly live by 'out-witting the people amongst whom they find shelter'<sup>42</sup>) might be metonyms for Jews in many operas, theatrically and musically more colourful than Jews themselves (although almost as virulently persecuted). In Rossini's *Il turco in Italia*, for instance, the picturesque opening chorus of gypsies sing that their homeland is the whole world, and that like Kant's Jews, the 'the gullible ignorance of others lets us live and wallow in the lap of plenty'. In many operas gypsies are also clearly orientalized: Ralph Locke, for instance, discerns fingerprints of the *alla turca* style in Verdi's representation of the gypsies' Anvil Chorus in *Il trovatore*.<sup>43</sup>

In time exotic musical fingerprints were often detached from exotic geographical locales to convey any kind of forbidden otherness (usually sexual): thus Wagner used the musical tropes of the exotic to characterize the Venusberg in *Tannhäuser*, and even more obviously Kundry and the perilously seductive Flower Maidens in *Parsifal*. By the twentieth century the waltz, which Wagner employs for the Flower Maidens, had itself come to signify a decadent sexuality that was often associated with exoticism: Strauss's Salome waltzes her way slinkily to death, and Schoenberg uses waltzes in the orgy scene in *Moses und Aron*, when the Israelites give themselves over to the pagan rites of Baal – a scene for which a nineteenth-century composer would inevitably have resorted to oriental-style music. But exotic references continue to be found in twentieth-century opera, albeit in more

varied guise. At the end of the nineteenth century one of the most impressive discoveries for advanced European composers like Debussy, who had himself condemned Delibes's *Lakmé* as 'sham, imitative oriental *bric-à-brac*',<sup>44</sup> was the Javanese gamelan. Benjamin Britten draws on the exoticism of gamelan-style music, and upon orientalizing vocal melisma, to convey the dangerous pleasures of homosexual desire in *The Turn of the Screw*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Death in Venice*.<sup>45</sup> In Britten's television opera *Owen Wingrave* (1970/71) Owen Wingrave's pacifism is similarly characterized by gamelan-style music, associating it with the pacifism of Buddhist cultures, but also characterizing Owen himself as feminized in contrast to the masculine militarism of his family (of which the female members are as 'masculine' in musical deportment as the male). Jazz may also be associated with the exotic in the minds of European composers, as in Krenek's so-called jazz opera *Jonny spielt auf* (1927), in which the 'primitive' energy of the black American jazz musician Jonny is described by Joseph Auner as offering a redemptive 'middle path between feminized mass culture and a modernist high art that was increasingly viewed as enervated and irrelevant'.<sup>46</sup> Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* has been labelled as a white American composer's exoticization of African Americans.<sup>47</sup>

### The exoticism of opera

The widespread adoption of non-Western cultural forms in twentieth-century theatre has recently elicited comment from non-Western critics who have seen theatrical interculturalism as a form of post-colonial cultural appropriation,<sup>48</sup> although this does not seem to inhibit contemporary composers from replaying such tropes fairly heedlessly. The Chinese-born American composer Tan Dun has written two operas for Western opera houses, *Marco Polo* (1996) and *The First Emperor* (2006), in which a highly conservative musico-dramatic language is spiced up with familiar theatrical and musical exoticisms that are legitimated by being offered to Western audiences by an authentically 'oriental' composer.

It is as if opera cannot escape its own exoticism having been so closely associated with the exotic throughout its history. In 1685 the English poet John Dryden, trying to research the origins of opera, concluded that it was derived from the entertainments offered at Moorish feasts,<sup>49</sup> an association that may have derived from the fact that early operas (such as Monteverdi's *Orfeo*) concluded, conventionally, with a *moresca* dance – even though the relevance of the dance's exotic origins is often not clear. In the second part of this chapter I want to suggest that opera's place as a forum for the repeated staging of the West's confrontation with its others may in fact be related to

its own exotic status as an art form. For many people, devotees or detractors alike, opera is inherently exotic in the cultural as well as the literal sense. Hegel, who loved the Italian opera of his day, considered that the best operas should put us ‘in the mood we have reading one of the Arabian Nights’, implying that opera was exotic whether it dealt with exotic subjects or not.<sup>50</sup> Stendhal, visiting La Scala for the first time in 1816, found that the whole occasion was like a scene from *The Arabian Nights*, reporting breathlessly: ‘all of the fantasy that the most exotic intricacy of an oriental imagination may evolve . . . all this, and more have I seen tonight’.<sup>51</sup> As for detractors: everyone will remember the scenes in *Citizen Kane* in which Kane’s hapless wife is made to perform in an opera house built especially for her by Kane. Opera here is a signifier of hollow cultural pretension, and the opera in which she performs so direly is a kitsch exotic concoction, an adaptation of a scene from Flaubert’s thrillingly decadent *Salammbô*, lusciously parodied in Bernard Hermann’s score for the scene. When Tolstoy wanted to censure opera as representative of the decadence and waste of all modern art it was the example of an (unidentified) orientalist opera that he held up for his savage mockery.<sup>52</sup>

Moreover, I am going to suggest that through its exoticism opera stages Western culture’s even more fundamental ambivalence about music itself. Put very simply, opera came into being at a stage in the historical development of the secular modern consciousness when musicians needed to humanize music – to bring it down to earth. Opera was a means by which music could tell human stories about itself; through opera human narratives, meanings, emotions and metaphors could be attached to music. But music retained the power of its uncanny otherness in this equation,<sup>53</sup> and if we look at some of the most persistent subjects of operatic narratives – seduction, enchantment, intoxication, infection – we may observe that these are powers that have regularly been attributed to music itself, and which often give rise to anxiety about the effects of music. Martha Feldman notes that the word *cantare* (to sing) is embedded within the Italian for ‘to enchant’, *incantare*, a term that is often used to describe the effect of lyric singing.<sup>54</sup> Stendhal insisted on the ‘physical intoxication’ of Rossini’s music, often describing it as acting like a drug, and Wagner also described Rossini’s melody as ‘narcotic’.<sup>55</sup> Writing in 1820, an Italian critic called enthusiasm for Rossini’s music a kind of infection or plague,<sup>56</sup> whilst a disgusted Clara Schumann found *Tristan und Isolde* to be about disease itself.<sup>57</sup> Kierkegaard considered that Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* was the definitive opera since it was about a seducer, seduction being, for Kierkegaard, the defining attribute of music.<sup>58</sup> Nietzsche described Wagner as ‘the old Klingsor’, referring to Wagner’s evil enchanter in *Parsifal*, also noting the dangerous alliance of beauty and disease in that opera,<sup>59</sup> and the French Wagnerian

Paul Souriau noted how the inability to locate the source of the musical sounds at Bayreuth enhanced their hypnotic effect.<sup>60</sup> Brecht and Weill associated the soporific effects of ‘culinary’ opera with the malign enticements of capitalism in *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* (The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny). The oriental sorceresses of Purcell, Lully, Handel, Gluck, Haydn, Rossini, Glinka, Wagner and Dvořák; the seductions of Poppea, Count Almaviva, Venus, Dido, Carmen, Dalila, Kundry, Salome, Lulu and Peter Quint; the intoxications of Purcell’s Drunken Poet, Osmin, Don Giovanni, Nemorino in *L’elisir d’amore*, Tristan and Isolde, Siegfried, Eisenstein in *Die Fledermaus*, and Albert Herring; the narcotic lullabies of Zaide, in Mozart’s unfinished opera of that name, Méphistophélès in Gounod’s *Faust*, and Séluka in *L’Africaine* – all may perhaps be taken as representations of the alluring but dangerous powers of music itself, which has, throughout Western history from Plato and the Church Fathers to the modern-day conservative excoriators of popular music, been feared and despised in proportion to the amount it is enjoyed.

It has been argued that Purcell’s sorceress in *Dido and Aeneas*, and the sorceresses of Handel, represent the dangers of Catholic superstition and conspiracy in Protestant England,<sup>61</sup> just as Wagner’s outsiders later came to characterize another kind of perceived enemy within. But I want to suggest that if we re-musicalize these narratives, then they can also be seen as stories about those dangerous aspects of music that must be expunged from normative society. This is, in effect, how Susan McClary reads many of the narratives of opera in which the destruction of the female heroine is associated with the overcoming of those aspects of music that are perceived to be particularly subversive and debilitating: chromaticism, rhythmic syncopation, popular musical styles. McClary offers just such a reading of *Carmen* (whose name, of course, means ‘song’) in which Bizet must re-impose tonal order, associated with Germanic high-art music, after the slithery chromaticisms and irresistible café habaneras and segaduillas of *Carmen*.<sup>62</sup> Linda Phyllis Austern has shown that the terms of these oppositions are evident from the beginnings of the modern period in music, citing texts from the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in which anxieties about the ‘effeminic’ of music led to demands for chromaticism and ‘dishonest warbling’ to be expunged.<sup>63</sup> In an essay on the idea of the ‘monstrous’ in eighteenth-century opera Charles Dill has suggested that for Rameau too chromaticism may have been seen as ‘the irrational monster’ of his system.<sup>64</sup> In the seventeenth century French critics attempting to establish the rules for a neoclassical drama based on principles of Cartesian rationalism inveighed more specifically against the dangers of opera as an art form. Boilieu, the absolute monarch of French classicism, issued a stern warning to a young man about the dangers of taking his sweetheart to

hear the lascivious operas of Lully, and in 1693 the Sorbonne itself decreed that ‘opera is all the more dangerous since through music . . . the soul is much more susceptible to passion.’<sup>65</sup> In early eighteenth-century England opera was, as we have seen, equated with all things foreign, Catholic and irrational, qualities that were invariably associated with effeminacy and even homosexuality<sup>66</sup> which, as Wayne Koestenbaum has suggested in *The Queen’s Throat*, his study of the queerness of opera and the culture of the opera queen, is the open secret of operatic culture.<sup>67</sup>

### **Cultural distinction**

A number of critics have suggested that opera’s own generic transgressions can be equated with social and sexual transgressions.<sup>68</sup> Ellen Rosand notes that opera’s early association with carnival in Venice implied a social context of transgression for opera from its beginning,<sup>69</sup> whilst Avital Ronell describes opera as a couple (text and music) that ‘relentlessly transmits its otherness to itself’ through the practice of ‘sado-masochism and domination rituals’, ‘within an economy of internal alterity’.<sup>70</sup> Opera’s recurrent recourse to the exotic, and the unequivocal warnings its orientalist narratives give about succumbing to the lure of the exotic, seems to be a way of having one’s cake and eating it: allowing indulgence in the irrational and transgressive pleasures of luxuriant spectacle, expansive song and forbidden erotic display whilst ensuring that such pleasures are encoded in narratives that ultimately reaffirm the values of Western, rationalist heteronormative patriarchy.

In a famous essay on the ‘utopian’ aspects of the American film musical, Richard Dyer suggested that such musicals play with fire in arousing desires that they may not be able to control.<sup>71</sup> It is surely the presence of such dangerous elements in opera too that has in part fuelled the modern ideology of opera as ‘high’ art. As theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu and Terry Eagleton have shown, the discourses of both high art and the aesthetic have routinely been predicated upon the denial of sensual pleasure as a legitimate aspect of artistic appreciation.<sup>72</sup> Although the ideology of opera as high art is primarily derived from its association with the ruling classes, whether monarchic, aristocratic, bourgeois or corporate, Bourdieu has argued that cultural ‘distinction’ continues to be a crucial marker of class and social distinction in even supposedly more egalitarian societies, and that the discourses of high art and of the aesthetic serve the purpose of distinguishing between superior ‘aesthetic’ appreciation and supposedly lower forms of pleasure. It is therefore essential to the possessors of what Bourdieu calls ‘cultural capital’ that the value of their capital be defended

against any imputation that the pleasures of a 'high' art form such as opera might be similar to those of popular or commercial culture. The literary critic John Carey quotes a British cultural mandarin who declares that 'The fact is that opera is not like dipping into a box of chocolates. It is demanding and difficult.' Carey responds tartly: 'What is difficult about sitting on plush seats and listening to music and singing? . . . The well-fed, well-swaddled beneficiaries of corporate entertainment leaving Covent Garden after a performance and hailing their chauffeurs do not look as if they have been subjected to arduous exercise, mental or physical.'<sup>73</sup> Many people suspect that for the well-swaddled beneficiaries of corporate entertainment the appeal of opera is precisely that it offers a sumptuously gift-wrapped array of delectable bonbons (often substantially subsidized by the rest of us).

Opera is vulnerable, and its supporters are defensive, not only because of opera's class associations but because, exotic and irrational entertainment that it is, it is such a wobbly pinnacle upon which to rest the values of high art. Indeed, Joseph Kerman famously complained that 'In our opera houses, art and *Kitsch* alternate night after night.'<sup>74</sup> *Kitsch* has been defined as 'ersatz art for a culture whose value system ascribes supreme importance to art',<sup>75</sup> and for Kerman the operas of Puccini and Richard Strauss are the acme of ersatz art, whilst exoticism is only the most obvious manifestation of the kitsch that has to be expunged from opera if it is to retain its cultural status, evident in Kerman's complaint about the 'careless application of local colour' in operas such as *L'Africaine* and *Aida*.<sup>76</sup> But Strauss himself recognized his own limitations when he looked back on his career, ruefully writing to his librettist Stefan Zweig, 'Must one become seventy years old to recognize that one's greatest strength lies in creating *Kitsch*?'<sup>77</sup>

And moreover, despite its courtly origins, opera has from its first public success in Venice in the seventeenth century always been associated with aspects of the commercial and popular. Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* combines esoteric spirituality with the rough-and-tumble of popular pantomime, and within a few years of its premiere its popularity in Germany was such that it was described in a newspaper of 1794 as 'a veritable goldmine' for what we would now call merchandizing: 'it has given lads, large and small, Papageno-pipes, and our lovely lasses new fashions, hairstyles and headbands, muffs and work-bags à la *Papageno*'.<sup>78</sup> Today's PR agents employ methods that were first demonstrated to their full potential in the shamelessly commercial promotion of the Swedish opera singer Jenny Lind by American circus impresario P. T. Barnum in the 1850s.<sup>79</sup> In his book *HighBrow/LowBrow* on the creation of cultural hierarchies in the USA in the later nineteenth century, Lawrence Levine has shown that Shakespearean drama and Italian opera were both part of an economy of popular entertainment in early nineteenth-century America. Indeed, the popularity of opera in America



was seen as a sign of the democratization of taste in the new world. But by the mid-nineteenth century a growing American plutocracy was laying claim to the markers of cultural distinction, excluding the broader public from cultural activities such as opera that it wanted to reserve for itself. Ticket prices were raised, and new rules of social and dress etiquette for the theatre were imposed.<sup>80</sup> Other distinctions were introduced: between opera in foreign languages and opera in English, which is still a crucial basis for distinction at the Royal Opera in London and the Metropolitan Opera, original-language performance being as deliberately exclusive of the uninitiated as the Catholic Mass in Latin used to be; between Italian opera (increasingly seen as low taste) and German opera (with the accession of Wagner seen as high art; for a period, after the dethronement of Italian, all operas were performed in German at the Met). In the first decade of the twentieth century it was decreed that henceforth the Metropolitan Opera, founded in 1880 by those members of the new plutocracy who had been excluded from the Academy of Music controlled by the older 'aristocratic' New York families, would be run as an 'artistic' rather than 'commercial' institution.<sup>81</sup> This was a response to a rival operatic venture by Oscar Hammerstein, who believed that opera was 'the most elevating influence upon modern society after religion.'<sup>82</sup> At exactly the moment when opera was losing its currency as a living art form it had been 'sacralized' as ersatz religion. More recent gestures of popularization (such as the Metropolitan Opera's flirtation with Muppet diva Miss Piggy) are supposedly not a lowering of values but, rather, the marketing of opera as 'high-class art for the masses'.<sup>83</sup>

Wagner once commented on the Victorian bourgeoisie's smug love of oratorio, which permitted them to enjoy the profane pleasures of opera under the guise of religious devotion.<sup>84</sup> Since art became the equivalent of religion as the sign of superior spirituality for the twentieth- and twenty-first-century bourgeoisie, art forms like opera have come to serve the same function as oratorio, offering 'low' pleasures that are enhanced by the social capital bestowed by 'high' art. But the encroachments of mass culture cannot be deferred for ever. 'High Art', John Frow writes in a book on the phenomenon of what he calls High Pop, 'has become entirely a component of large-scale industrial production; no longer a craft, it finds its place as a niche market amongst others in the world of mass production . . . It is no longer possible in good faith to oppose an "authentic" aesthetics of the signature to a "commercialized" aesthetics of the brand.'<sup>85</sup> In an article on the dissemination of opera through popular culture in the same book John Storey lists some thirty-five recent examples of opera being used as soundtracks for TV commercials, Delibes's *Lakmé* having served to advertise British Airways, Kleenex tissues, IBM Computers, Basmati rice and Ryvita, and Gluck's *Orfeo* to advertise Comfort Fabric Softener. (He

also notes some fifty examples of operatic music serving as soundtracks for commercial films; in a book on *Wagner and Cinema* Jeongwon Joe lists two hundred and fifty films with soundtracks that employ Wagner alone.<sup>86</sup>)

Conservative critics often inveigh against attempts to popularize opera, dismissing it as ‘dumbing down’, and attempting to reassert the authentic values of high art. ‘We mustn’t smear the line between art and entertainment’, the Canadian tenor Jon Vickers asserted in 1987. ‘You cannot bring art to the masses.’<sup>87</sup> Responses to the 2010 reality TV show *Pop Star to Opera Star* were very revealing in this respect. The show was the latest contribution to a now well-worn genre in which people are challenged to undertake a professional activity in which they have no prior skill (such as show jumping or orchestral conducting). Such programmes cheekily devalue professional skills whilst also reflecting the wider concealment of labour in post-industrial societies. In advance of the programme, the opera critic of the right-wing *Daily Telegraph* newspaper Rupert Christiansen wrote a preview entitled ‘TV won’t make any pig’s ear the next Domingo’. In this he explained that ‘Pop performers like Kym Marsh, Darius Campbell and Alex James will be trained and “mentored” to sing opera arias’, adding the pious hope ‘without, I trust, the benefit of microphones’.<sup>88</sup> Christiansen has been issuing invectives against the adulteration of opera in this fashion for many years. In a review of a 2002 Wembley Stadium concert by popera tenor Russell Watson, he complained that ‘what must be firmly objected to is the way that the word “opera” is dragged into the equation’.<sup>89</sup> But such attacks, typically clinging on to notions of technology-free performance as the guarantee of exclusivity and authenticity, are belated rearguard actions in a doomed effort to shore up the barriers of cultural distinction against the rising tide of a mass culture that is quick to appropriate the more accessible pleasures of opera for itself. And, of course, Christiansen’s complaint that ‘There is no attempt to present anything in dramatic context, and the arias are cut and transposed’<sup>90</sup> would have applied to most forms of operatic performance and dissemination in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

### **Cultural representations of opera as other**

It is instructive to examine how opera has been represented throughout its history to gain a better understanding of its fluctuating cultural status. Herbert Lindenberger has analysed the representation of opera in novels, showing how opera often works to offset the realist narrative of the everyday world of the characters in a novel (the ‘lower narrative’) with alternative values. These may vary from Rousseau’s portrayal of opera as urban and artificial in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* in contrast to the natural values that Rousseau

wishes to endorse, via Tolstoy's condemnation of Natasha in *War and Peace* and Anna in *Anna Karenina* for succumbing to the shoddy histrionic values of the operatic, to Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, in which Emma Bovary is awakened (fatefully) from her provincial slumber after a visit to a performance of *Lucia di Lammermoor*. *Lucia* is also the opera that figures in *Where Angels Fear to Tread* by E. M. Forster, a writer who consistently presented encounters between the repressed mundanity of the English middle classes and the mystery (often sexual) of the exotic other, whether that is represented by India, Italy or indeed opera. But, as Lindenberger notes, even where opera offers a 'higher narrative' of emotional authenticity (as in *Madame Bovary* and *Where Angels Fear to Tread*) or of spiritual aspiration, this is hardly ever presented without an element of irony, whether tragic or comic, since no author writing in the essentially realist mode of the novel can fail to see through opera's pasteboard flummery and pretensions.<sup>91</sup>

Two novels in more popular genres that Lindenberger doesn't discuss are Gaston Leroux's *The Phantom of the Opera* (1909/10), and the American pulp-fiction writer James M. Cain's *Serenade* of 1937, both of which are set in or around the world of opera itself. In *The Phantom of the Opera*, the disfigured phantom Erik, who lurks in the underground vaults of the Paris Opéra, represents precisely those abject aspects of class, race and sexuality that bourgeois society and its high-art apparatus seeks to repress but that will always return to haunt it.<sup>92</sup> In *Serenade* the novel's protagonist is an opera singer, John Henry Sharp, who has to choose between a career at the Metropolitan Opera and a career in Hollywood. Although the dichotomy is clearly framed as high art versus low commerce, Sharp's operatic career is built upon a concealed homosexual relationship that leads to his destruction. In addition to its telling sexual subtext, the novel also encapsulates many of the recurrent issues of opera's relationship to film. Critics such as Adorno and Stanley Cavell consider that film, with its quasi-operatic deployment of music and spectacle, essentially appropriated the cultural function of opera in the twentieth century altogether,<sup>93</sup> and indeed several popular film directors (inevitably of Italian origin) such as Coppola and Cimino have earned the epithet of 'operatic' for their films.<sup>94</sup> In the first decade of the twentieth century many film-makers were attempting to dissociate film from its origins as a form of low entertainment, and they did so by appropriating 'high' art forms such as opera. In France the Film d'Art company (note the name) offered some of the first (silent) versions of opera, starting with *Carmen* in 1910, an opera that has undergone many subsequent screen adaptations.<sup>95</sup> As Michal Grover-Friedlander has suggested, the paradox of silent opera is not so absurd when one remembers that silent films were generally accompanied by music, and that in opera language is also, in effect, erased by music.<sup>96</sup> The melodramatic plots and gestural

acting styles of silent film actors would also have seemed to contemporary audiences to be inherently 'operatic'.

In the USA, where there are fewer anxieties about film as popular culture, opera often serves the same function as in the novel, offering a contrast to the realist 'lower narrative' of the film. As with Rousseau and Tolstoy, opera may serve as a metaphor for the social pretensions of a Charles Foster Kane. As in *Madame Bovary*, it may awaken real emotions in someone who has suppressed her emotional life; in the 1990 film *Pretty Woman* a hardened low-class hooker played by Julia Roberts rediscovers her feelings when she is taken to a performance of *La traviata* (an opera about a nineteenth-century hooker) that also serves as a step in her social grooming. And of course opera may be present by other means in film, as diegetic music within the narrative, or as non-diegetic music on the soundtrack. In such cases operatic music often serves as a kind of generalized signifier of transcendence, as, famously, in *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) in which the wrongly imprisoned banker plays a recording of the Letter Duet from *Le nozze di Figaro* over the prison tannoy, betokening the freedom and redemptive reconciliation of class differences that is to come.<sup>97</sup>

In many American films opera serves as a foil to affirm the value of film itself. Stanley Cavell, Michal Grover-Friedlander and Lawrence Kramer have all discussed how the Marx Brothers' 1935 film *A Night at the Opera*, in which Verdi's *Il trovatore* acts as backdrop to the comic anarchy of the brothers, lays out some complex relationships between film and opera in this respect. Grover-Friedlander points out that the structure of the film itself, with its integration of extended comic solo turns within a plot, is analogous to the structural concerns of number opera, and the narratives of both film and opera (in particular in the theme of brotherhood) mirror each other. Despite its portrayal of those in the opera world as ambitious, snobbish and mercenary, the film also implies a belief in the emotional values of opera, suggesting, in Grover-Friedlander's words, that 'the tragic fate of the opera can be subverted';<sup>98</sup> that the integrity and comic energy of the brothers may be able to redeem *Il trovatore* and, as Cavell puts it, 'use the power of the film to achieve the happy ending in which the right tenor gets the part'.<sup>99</sup> Kramer sees this as a process by which the operatic voice is 'wrested away from plutocratic control and reconnected to its repressed origin in the energies of popular culture'.<sup>100</sup>

In an essay entitled 'Why Does Hollywood Like Opera?', Marc A. Weiner suggests that opera serves a dual purpose in more recent Hollywood films both as a signifier of universality but also as a signifier of otherness. Writing about a scene in the film *Philadelphia* (1993) in which the gay protagonist suffering from AIDS plays an operatic torch song from *Andrea Chénier* to his homophobic lawyer, Weiner suggests that here 'opera is associated with a

specific set of motifs that serve to underscore the artwork's status as esoteric and exotic. The scene represents a connection between opera, the diseased body of the protagonist, homosexuality, and elevated social status, all of which make opera an emblem of everything deemed outside the norm of middle-class society.<sup>101</sup> If opera is customarily exoticized and queered in film, it has also consistently been feminized, being associated in particular with the 'feminine' attributes of emotionality. Andreas Huyssen has noted that mass culture is also often similarly feminized in critical discourse,<sup>102</sup> and in an essay on the feminization of opera in film Michelle Lekas suggests that opera and cinema serve as each other's 'feminized other', and that cinema, 'opera's feminized, mass-cultural other', draws upon opera to amplify its emotional power, and then in turn displaces its own feminization back on opera.<sup>103</sup> (We might consider a similar process occurring in the relationship between singing and dance in opera, in which feminized operatic singing displaces its femininity onto dance, thus divesting itself of the taint of the sexualized body and ensuring that the operatic voice retains its purity as the expression of spirituality and transcendence). Lekas also notes that opera is often employed in Hollywood films to reveal a buried weakness or excess in a character, citing examples of alcoholism (*Lost Weekend/La traviata*), lesbian seduction (*The Hunger/Lakmé*), schizophrenia (*Angie/Thais*) and sexual obsession (*Fatal Attraction/Madama Butterfly*).<sup>104</sup> Note the recurrence of exotic operas in these examples. In *Fatal Attraction* (as, indeed, in *Shawshank Redemption* and *Pretty Woman*) the thematic parallels between the film narrative and the operatic narrative are left unstated; only operatic cognoscenti amongst the viewers will recognize the relationship between the self-deluding obsession of Alex and the similar delusions of Cio-Cio-San in *Madama Butterfly*. This may be reluctance to allow too much weight to rest on the operatic link as a 'key' – a concern at being seen as overly highbrow – but it also ensures that the cultural superiority of the cognoscenti is ratified.

European film directors have a more complex relationship to opera as an indigenous art form that has often been closely associated with the political history of European nations, although opera again invariably stands for some sort of otherness, whether positive or negative. The Italian Marxist critic Gramsci believed that during the nineteenth century Italian politics had been contaminated by the melodramatic attitudes of opera, preparing the ground for fascism,<sup>105</sup> and in Bertolucci's *The Spider's Stratagem* (1970) Verdian opera indeed serves as background to a story in which political events during the fascist era are fatally confused with operatic conspiracy, culminating in a staged assassination in an opera house.<sup>106</sup> Visconti's *Senso* (1954), set in the era of the Risorgimento, another crucial period of modern Italian history, opens at a performance of *Il trovatore* during which a moment of heroic defiance on stage prompts an act of defiance from

the Italian theatre audience against the Austrian occupiers of northern Italy. But as the film progresses operatic heroism proves unsustainable, giving way to shabbier betrayals of marriage, class and nation which hint at the similar political compromises and betrayals of post-war Italy.

The film historian Thomas Elsaesser has noted that in both post-war Italy and Germany, when film directors came to deal with fascism they broke with the dominant mode of realism for 'a subjectively slanted, melodramatically or operatically spectacular representation of history'.<sup>107</sup> In Germany where, as in Italy, opera has been closely identified with the catastrophic denouement of nineteenth-century nationalism in fascism, directors of the 1970s such as Werner Schroeter and Hans-Jürgen Syberberg presented opera as a melancholic memory of aspects of emotional life and cultural history that had been suppressed in a squeaky-clean post-war German society determined to erase its past. Syberberg's epic *Hitler: A Film from Germany* (1977) has been described by Anton Kaes, with a nod to Nietzsche, as 'the rebirth of... film from the spirit of music and theater'.<sup>108</sup> More Marxist in his approach, Alexander Kluge presents the nineteenth-century opera house as a 'powerhouse of the emotions', the nineteenth-century version of the fantasy factory of Hollywood, purveying standardized and inflated emotions as commodities that devalue the everyday experience of his characters and inculcate a fatalistic attitude to life (*The Power of Emotion*, 1983). In Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), opera stands for a heroic/hubristic aspiration that must be simultaneously admired and feared, Herzog pitting opera's own fantasy exoticism against the harsh reality of an actual tropical location. The film is about the dream of a megalomaniac rubber prospector to build an opera house in the Amazon at which Caruso may perform. Fitzcarraldo's project is that of a modern conquistador bringing European culture to primeval Amazonia, and the film often replays the colonial echoes of the Orpheus myth: the operatic voices resounding from the gramophone on Fitzcarraldo's paddle steamer calm the hostile natives and tame the tumultuous rapids. But Fitzcarraldo's dream is not so absurd: the film opens in the pink and white *belle-époque* confection of the opera house that was actually built in the Brazilian rubber-boom city of Manaus, deep in the Amazon, in 1896; a symbol of the way in which European high culture, exemplified by opera, served to legitimate the exploitations that financed such projects.

In all of these representations, literary and filmic, opera is revealed to be an art form whose status, meanings and value may fluctuate widely within a culture, from sacralized high art to exotic kitsch – often both at the same time. The film historian Caryl Flinn notes that the same fluctuations are evident in the concept of kitsch itself, which incorporates 'low-end' objects like velvet Elvis paintings and plastic cuckoo clocks as

well as those of ‘purportedly refined, upscale “tastes” and socio-economic prestige, like opera, baroque architecture, and big fountains’.<sup>109</sup> Critics like Joseph Kerman would like us to believe that authentic opera as art can be distinguished from inauthentic operatic kitsch. But kitsch must be understood as a relational concept rather than something that is inherent in the aesthetic properties of the work itself. Thus Celeste Olalquiaga describes kitsch as ‘a failed commodity that continually speaks of all it has ceased to be’, offering ‘an illusion of completeness, a universe devoid of past and future’.<sup>110</sup> By this reckoning all opera might today be evaluated as kitsch, and not merely for its exoticism. Yet as queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz argues, ‘tacky oriental fantasies can become rich anti-normative treasure troves of queer possibilities’,<sup>111</sup> and Flinn observes that debased cultural categories such as melodrama, camp and kitsch may also be recuperated to engage with ‘undesirable pasts and alterities’ (as occurred in the New German Cinema of the 1970s and 1980s). The properties of high and low, normal and other, good art or bad art, are never fixed.<sup>112</sup> Adorno, dialectical as always, recognized that popular culture expresses real longings and desires, suggesting that the deployment of kitsch in Mahler’s music ‘unties the tongue of kitsch, unfetters the longing that is merely exploited by the commerce that kitsch serves’.<sup>113</sup> If opera itself may have ceased to be a vital art form, it clearly continues to play an important role in the cultural imagination as a necessary representative of ‘exotic and irrational’ impulses and desires in an otherwise disenchanting and instrumentalized world.

## Notes

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