

# 1 Opera, the state and society

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In a volume in the 'Cambridge Studies in Opera' series, Victoria Johnson has pointed to the 'blossoming of opera studies' that has occurred in recent decades in the wake of the cultural and historical 'turns' experienced by the social sciences and humanities since the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> Two new directions in opera research which Johnson has termed the 'material conditions' and 'systems of meaning' approaches<sup>2</sup> have reshaped in a fundamental way our thinking about the relationship between opera, the state and society, and in so doing have laid a firm foundation for further work in this area. While the 'systems of meaning' paradigm with its roots in the New Cultural History has reconstructed the time-bounded 'horizons of expectation' that opera's librettists, composers and audiences shared during different periods of the genre's four-century lifespan, the 'material conditions' approach, strongly influenced by social history, has delineated the ways in which political and legal – as well as social and economic – factors have shaped operatic production and reception.

This research has uncovered three paradigmatic systems of production and reception that one might call the impresarial, the statist and the impresarial-statist, each of which embodies a distinct pattern in the relationship between opera, the state and society. In the impresarial system, found in its purest form in Italy between the advent of public or commercial opera in 1637 and unification in 1861, in Britain until 1939 and in the United States right down to the present, central states and local governments create the framework conditions for opera production through the enforcement of contracts but provide only minimal financial assistance while leaving the organization of opera seasons in the hands of private businessmen (the impresarios) or associations aiming – but often failing – to turn a profit. Local urban-based social and economic elites choose the opera house as a locus of sociability and status differentiation while influencing the character and content of works through their expectations and tastes.

The statist model, pioneered during the late 1600s and 1700s in the principalities of central Europe but now prevalent across most of Europe, represents the greatest possible contrast to the impresarial paradigm. In this model, government officials directly organize opera seasons underwritten by generous princely or later public subsidies in state-owned theatres using

permanent artistic ensembles. While during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries these seasons served both to entertain a court-based elite and to project the power and magnificence of the state, since 1918 they have tended to serve rather as showcases for a national or international artistic heritage now rendered accessible to a wider public thanks to government financial support. Finally, France from the age of Louis XIV down to 1939 offers an example of a mixed model, with profit-oriented entrepreneurs often taking over the daily running of the Paris opera houses, but under the watchful eye of government officials who used the subsidies they provided as leverage to shape what appeared on the operatic stage. Increasingly their influence was matched by that of subscribers drawn from the Parisian elite, whose support was crucial to the financial success of the lessees of the Opéra and the Opéra-Comique. A variant of this impresarial-statist paradigm has reappeared more recently in Great Britain. Keeping these three models in mind will allow us to compare the different conditions under which opera has been produced and received across time and space as well as to understand more fully the role of the state in shaping those conditions.

## **Opera and the night watchman state: the impresarial model in Italy, Britain, Bohemia and the Americas**

### **Origins and spread of the impresarial model in seventeenth-century Italy**

The origins of laissez-faire, market-driven opera can be traced, according to the research of Ellen Rosand, and Beth and Jonathan Glixon, to an April 1636 production of the opera *Ermiona*, mounted by Pio Enea degli Obizzi for a public tournament in his home town of Padua, on the Venetian *terraferma*. The favourable reception of *Ermiona* seems to have been the catalyst that led the patrician Tron brothers less than a year later to transfer the music drama to their Venetian theatre, the San Cassiano, formerly used to house visiting *commedia dell'arte* players.<sup>3</sup> The great popular success of this work unleashed over the next several decades a veritable commercial opera boom in Venice that saw three new venues opened by 1641 and, according to the calculations of Ellen Rosand, a total of over 150 operas produced in nine different theatres between 1637 and 1678.<sup>4</sup> This opera boom was made possible, as both Lorenzo Bianconi and Rosand have pointed out, by a tripartite organizational system of theatre owners, collective or individual impresarios and contract artists first developed in the late sixteenth century to present *commedia dell'arte* in a city that already enjoyed an international reputation as an entertainment centre and favoured destination for visitors from Italy and abroad. Under this system, which with modifications later became the model for opera production throughout the Italian peninsula

and beyond, the wealthy families that owned Venice's theatres did not themselves mount opera performances, but rather rented their properties out for a fixed sum to artistic collectives or to businessmen who commissioned the works to be staged and hired all the personnel needed to produce them.<sup>5</sup>

In seventeenth-century Venice, the audience was a uniquely diverse and affluent one, consisting of the local patriciate, nobles from the *terraferma*, wealthy tourists, members of the diplomatic corps and well-to-citizens such as merchants, lawyers and public officials. At the same time, as Bianconi and Walker have argued, ticket prices were probably too high to permit the city's common people to attend.<sup>6</sup> Yet despite high ticket prices, the substantial cost of popular singers and elaborate sets often rendered it impossible for impresarios to turn a profit even if the works they presented were favourably received. In this case, it was the impresario's financial partners, often patrician, who were willing to absorb the loss either from a love of the art form or because of the prestige associated with supporting opera.<sup>7</sup> The state's role in this system was limited to the enforcement of contracts, the inspection of theatres for safety violations, and the vetting of opera libretti prior to publication.<sup>8</sup>

### **Impresarial opera in eighteenth-century Italy, Britain and Prague**

During the nearly 160 years between the arrival of impresarial or public opera in Venice and Napoleon's invasion of Italy in 1796, the art form spread throughout the peninsula (and beyond) as new theatres were built and older ones refurbished.<sup>9</sup> Lorenzo Bianconi has estimated that by 1700 about forty cities within Italy could already boast theatres that mounted regular opera seasons. By 1800 this number had more than doubled to about a hundred such theatres, with most large urban centres (Turin, Genoa, Milan, Padua, Bologna, Florence, Rome, Naples and of course Venice) possessing several venues operating in competition with one another. The geographic distribution of such theatres remained heavily weighted towards northern and central Italy (Lombardy, Veneto, Emilia-Romagna and the Marches), with relatively low density in the south.<sup>10</sup>

While the state could claim only limited responsibility for the emergence of public opera in Venice, it played a more active role in the spread and consolidation of the new art form around the peninsula over the next century and a half by providing operating subsidies, lending singers from princely establishments and underwriting theatre construction.<sup>11</sup> Piperno, Bianconi and Walker, and Reinhard Strohm have pointed to three reasons why Italian states in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries furnished such direct support to opera. Firstly, theatrical activities represented a significant service industry in pre-unification Italy, creating thousands of jobs and attracting visitors to centres of operatic production.<sup>12</sup> Secondly, opera, by

gathering the literate segment of the local population into an easily policed space on a nightly basis, offered an attractive means of social control, especially to conservative regimes. Such reasoning, according to Piperno, led the Neapolitan authorities to extend the operatic season into Lent beginning in 1785 through the licensing of *sacrodrammi*, or sacred operas.<sup>13</sup> Finally, and most importantly, governments looked favourably on opera – and above all the *dramma per musica* – from the mid-1600s onward because, in the words of Piperno, ‘it functioned as a vehicle for ideas expressing the dominant ideology’<sup>14</sup> to a core audience made up primarily of members of the local ruling elite.

Venetian-style opera, and with it the impresarial model, spread beyond the confines of the Italian peninsula as well, most notably to London and to central Europe. Beginning in 1708, as the painstaking archival research of Judith Milhous, Curtis Price and Robert Hume has shown, a long series of impresarios began organizing Italian opera seasons featuring star singers in the Queen’s (later King’s) Theatre Haymarket, built by Sir John Vanbrugh and opened in 1705. Despite the theatre’s name, and exactly as in seventeenth-century Venice, these ventures received no government financial support of any kind other than the £1,000 per annum (no more than one-tenth of the total budget) that George I and George II of the opera-loving House of Hanover appear to have contributed to Handel’s two Royal Academy companies between 1720 and 1738. Rather, again as in Venice, the state’s role throughout the eighteenth century was limited to providing the regulatory (licensing) and legal framework within which company managers operated and the courts in which the many disputes involving contracts could be settled.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, managers’ sole dependence on the box office for revenue led them to charge very steep admission prices at the Queen’s/King’s Theatre – one half guinea for the better places and five shillings for the worst at a time when the most expensive seats at English-language theatre productions cost only four shillings – thereby ensuring that the core audience would be composed of the British equivalent of the Venetian patriciate, namely the Whig aristocracy. While, as Ian Woodfield has shown, the most talented impresarios such as the manageress Frances Brookes (1773–78) were able to break even or better thanks to popular programming and strict cost controls, most – like their Italian and French counterparts – lost substantial sums and often faced financial ruin.<sup>16</sup>

In central Europe as well, as Reinhard Strohm and Juliane Riepe have emphasized, Italian impresarios organized travelling companies that offered *opera seria* and, from the 1750s, *opera buffa* productions in many cities throughout the Holy Roman Empire at little or no cost to the state when compared to the permanent court opera establishments discussed below.<sup>17</sup> Of special historical significance is the centrality of Italian impresarial opera

in eighteenth-century Prague that Daniel Freeman, John Tyrrell and Angela Romagnoli have highlighted. Thus Antonio Denzio offered regular public seasons between 1724 and 1734 at a theatre provided (rent free) by Count Sporck, and Giovanni Battista Locatelli presented several new works by Gluck (*Ezio* 1750, *Issipile* 1752) at the Kotzen Theatre. Finally, and most famously, it was the impresarios Pasquale Bondini and Domenico Guardasoni who first arranged for the Prague premiere of *Le nozze di Figaro* (December 1786) at the Nostitz (later Estates') Theatre, and then commissioned *Don Giovanni* (October 1787) and *La clemenza di Tito* (6 September 1791) for the same venue.<sup>18</sup>

### **The 'golden age' of impresarial opera in nineteenth-century Italy, Britain and the Americas**

The literature on opera, state and society in Italy during the genre's 'golden age' between the French invasion (1796) and unification (1861) is dominated by the writings of John Rosselli and by Carlotta Sorba's comprehensive monograph *Teatri*.<sup>19</sup> These and other works have pointed to three fundamental changes to the impresarial model during the first half of the nineteenth century. Firstly, the decade and a half of French domination and the Risorgimento that followed witnessed a tremendous expansion of operatic activity throughout the peninsula. Drawing on a census of theatrical venues taken in 1868, Sorba has concluded that at least 613 of the 942 theatres found within the borders of the newly unified Italy had been built since 1815.<sup>20</sup> Secondly, the vast expansion in theatrical venues naturally widened the audience for opera in Italy.<sup>21</sup> This effect was reinforced by the fact that, as Rosselli has established, admission prices in Italy were very low by European standards during this period and remained so thanks to government controls right up until unification.<sup>22</sup> Finally, in keeping with the politically repressive atmosphere of the restoration, central and local governments exercised a far greater degree of supervision over and interference in operatic activity after 1814 than in the two preceding centuries, especially by means of pre-performance censorship.<sup>23</sup>

At the heart of this tremendous expansion of both operatic production and reception during the Napoleonic and Risorgimento decades stood, as Rosselli has demonstrated, the figure of the impresario, whose relative standing had risen compared to that of his eighteenth-century predecessor. In an atmosphere of intense competition for singers, orchestral musicians, successful scores and even costumes, theatre owners of all types turned over the arduous task of mounting opera seasons to professionals seeking to turn a profit or at least to break even. In order to render this possible, theatre proprietors were forced to provide the impresario with a *dote* (capital

endowment or subsidy) in cash or in the form of boxes that could be rented out.<sup>24</sup> In the absence of permanent companies anywhere in Italy, impresarios put together two to three seasons (autumn, carnival, spring) per year by drawing on the peninsula-wide free labour market in artists, all hired to perform two operas over a period of several months before moving on to engagements elsewhere.<sup>25</sup> This impresarial system was built upon the sanctity of the contract, and could only function as well as it did because of the willingness of the law courts to uphold such contracts.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, as Michael Walter has outlined, individual governments came one by one to offer copyright protection to composers during this period, a development that culminated in the new copyright laws for the unified Italian kingdom passed between 1865 and 1882.<sup>27</sup>

The advent of effective copyright protection is one of two structural changes wrought by Italian unification in 1861 that – according to Rosselli, Fiamma Nicolodi and, most recently, Jutta Toelle and Alan Mallach – inaugurated the slow decline of the impresarial model of opera–state–society relations dominant in that country since the 1630s. Copyright shifted control of the production process from the impresario, who had previously commissioned new works and then often kept the manuscript for future use, to publishers like Ricordi, Lucca and Sanzogno, who obtained copyright from composers in return for their willingness to print scores and piano reductions.<sup>28</sup> The second structural change was the disappearance of the old polities that had provided modest though crucial annual subsidies to the opera houses of their capitals and sometimes to those of key provincial cities as well. During the first few years after unification the national government, as legal successor to the defunct principalities, continued such payments. In late 1866, however, the Italian Parliament, faced with the immense costs of two wars against Austria and public criticism over subsidies for the theatres, voted to end all central government support for the opera houses beginning in 1868 and instead to turn responsibility for such support over to the municipalities, now governed by popularly elected local councils. The latter in turn reduced theatre subsidies, often the object of resentment in the past because they had been financed through taxes on food.<sup>29</sup> Finally, as Alan Mallach has underlined, unification brought with it a change in the core audience for opera as a new elite emerged that included professionals, bureaucrats and successful businessmen as well as members of the nobility.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, an increase in the number of low-price performances meant that the art form could now be seen live even by Italians of modest means.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, in his *Prison Notebooks*, the Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci, while underlining the democratic character of Italian opera and comparing it in this respect to the plays of Shakespeare and the Greek tragedians, nevertheless argued that the works of Verdi especially

had implanted an artificial, melodramatic attitude towards life among the popular classes.<sup>32</sup>

The nineteenth century represented the apogee of impresarial opera in Britain as well. As Jennifer Hall-Witt has argued, London's impresarios, not benefiting from any form of state financial support, engaged beginning in the late eighteenth century in what she has termed a 'commercialization of the opera', employing a variety of means including the expansion of the King's Theatre auditorium, the installation of fixed seating in the orchestra and gallery, the marketing of tickets through booksellers, and an increase in the number of performances in an effort to boost revenue. When, in 1843, the government finally decided, in keeping with the liberal policies of the era, to end the Italian opera monopoly enjoyed by the troupe resident at the Queen's/King's Theatre since 1737, a rival company, the Royal Italian Opera, opened at Covent Garden. While opera at both venues became less exclusive after mid-century in the sense that the volume of individual ticket sales rose relative to expensive season-long subscriptions, their audiences remained dominated, as Hall-Witt has shown, by an elite now composed, as in other areas of English society, by an aristocracy of wealth as well as of birth.<sup>33</sup>

In Prague, as John Tyrrell relates, impresario-organized Italian-language opera ended in 1807, but the impresarial model lived on in modified form in the Czech-language Provisional (1862–83) and National (1883–) Theatres. In both cases, the Provincial Council of Bohemia conferred the right to mount opera seasons in Czech to a consortium for a six-year period and provided it with a small subsidy not unlike the Italian *dote* that nevertheless left that consortium's management largely dependent on box-office revenues to cover expenses. This system finally came to an end in 1920 with the direct takeover of the National Theatre by the new Czechoslovak state.<sup>34</sup>

During the nineteenth century, the impresarial model also spread beyond Europe to the younger, generally weaker states of the Americas. As John Rosselli has shown, from the 1820s onward three touring circuits emerged – one centred on the Pacific coast from San Francisco to Chile, a second around the Caribbean, the southern United States, Mexico and Central America, and a third from the Atlantic coast of Brazil to the estuary of the Río de la Plata – along which troupes assembled by Italian impresarios regularly travelled. By mid-century, the most significant opera venue in the southern hemisphere was Buenos Aires. Here such impresarios took advantage of the reversal of the seasons to import top-flight singers during the European summer (when most houses there were dark) to one of the city's large, private theatres. In 1908, the magnificent new Colón finally opened after a period of planning and construction lasting two decades. While the municipality of Buenos Aires was in the end forced to shoulder

most of the building costs, it turned the theatre over to the impresario Cesare Ciacchi once the project was completed. The core audience for this house, as Rosselli and Claudio Benzecry have demonstrated, was made up not of the capital's huge immigrant population (better represented in the upper galleries), but rather of the leading families of the country's Hispano-Argentine oligarchy who, as in Italy and Britain, transformed the house into an exclusive gathering place.<sup>35</sup>

The United States, with its tradition of opposition to state support for the arts, was also a centre for commercially oriented opera organized by impresarios throughout the nineteenth century and beyond. As John Dizikes and Karen Ahlquist have recounted, the famed Spanish tenor Manuel García and his troupe were the first to bring Italian opera in the original language to New York in 1825 and 1826. As Ahlquist has further shown, the next three decades saw the construction and failure of three patron-financed opera houses in that city before the managers of the Academy of Music (1854–84) hit on a viable business model in the absence of city or state aid that combined expensive places for the New York elite with large numbers of inexpensive seats (the Academy could hold 4,600) for a mass audience.<sup>36</sup> The Academy nonetheless succumbed to competition from the newly founded Metropolitan Opera (1883), built by nouveau-riche backers who felt slighted by older money at the Academy, but run from the beginning by a series of impresarios. These impresarios adopted the successful business model of their erstwhile rivals at the Academy and it has served the Metropolitan well right down to the present. By the eve of World War I touring companies also regularly brought opera to San Francisco and Philadelphia as well as many smaller cities, and permanent companies existed in Chicago and Boston in addition to New York.<sup>37</sup>

### **The end of impresarial opera in twentieth-century Italy, Britain and Argentina, and its survival in the United States**

Harvey Sachs and above all Fiamma Nicolodi have chronicled how Italy's participation in World War I and the subsequent fascist takeover of power in 1922 marked a decisive break with a decentralized, laissez-faire pattern of state–opera–society relations and instead ushered in a state-dominated model of the kind pioneered in the German-speaking lands (see p. 41).<sup>38</sup> A first step in this direction occurred in November 1920 when La Scala, already outfitted since 1898 with a permanent, though seasonal, orchestra and chorus, was reorganized as a non-profit corporation or *ente autonomo* supported financially not only by wealthy contributors and the city of Milan, but also, beginning in the 1921–22 season, by the central state. In 1928–29, the fascist government took over Rome's privately owned Teatro Costanzi and re-launched it as the capital's publicly supported Royal Opera



House (Teatro Reale dell'Opera). Finally, between 1931 and 1936, the regime moved aggressively to bring both the eleven first-rank opera houses (now all constituted as *enti autonomi*) and their provincial counterparts under direct state control by appointing political figures to their boards, intervening directly in programming and scheduling decisions, allocating singers through a central placement office and creating the Theatre Inspectorate (*Inspettorato del Teatro*) to enforce its will. The fascists employed these tools not only to keep undesirable works and artists from the Italian stages but also, following the promulgation of the 1938 racial laws, to remove Jews from the opera world.<sup>39</sup>

While in the political sphere the fall of fascism and the end of World War II brought a democratic republic to Italy, in the realm of opera–state relations the break with the past was far less marked, according to Fiamma Nicolodi. Thus the Scoccimarro Law of 1946 reaffirmed the fundamental role of the central government in supporting opera and left much of the 1936 framework legislation in place. A fateful change, however, was that the trade unions were able to push through permanent, year-round (as opposed to the traditional seasonal) contracts for the orchestra, chorus and technical staff of many houses, thereby contributing to a situation whereby personnel costs (*excluding* fees for singers, conductors and stage directors) absorbed nearly 60 per cent of the budgets of the *enti autonomi* by the 1970s.<sup>40</sup> These high fixed costs, combined with the irregular or much-delayed transfer of promised government funds, led to a vicious cycle of shortened seasons and falling ticket sales. While the Corona Act of 1967 increased government funding and even permitted a doubling of opera and ballet performances between 1970 and 1984, opera attendance declined further and the financial problems caused by bloated staff payrolls and inadequate state support (0.12 per cent of the Italian budget in the mid-1980s compared to 1 per cent or higher in France and Germany) soon returned.<sup>41</sup> More recently, between 1996 and 2000 fourteen opera houses were reconstituted as charitable foundations in order to permit them to gather more easily contributions from corporations and private individuals on the British or American model, but the overall fiscal crisis continues.<sup>42</sup> At the beginning of the twenty-first century, then, Italy remains the traditional opera nation where the condition of the art form remains the most precarious.

In Argentina as well, the economic and political dislocations of the period following World War I spelled the end of the impresarial model, as Benzecry and Rosselli have documented. In 1925, following a sharp fall in subscription income as a result of the post-war economic slump, no impresario was willing to organize an entire company for the Colón, thereby forcing the capital's government to step in and create a permanent,

city-financed orchestra and chorus. During the next four seasons impresarios, aided by state subsidies, provided singers and overall artistic direction, but in 1930, in the wake of the Great Depression, the house was taken over fully and irrevocably by the municipality, in whose hands it still remains.<sup>43</sup>

In Britain, the impresarial system now centred on Covent Garden survived the economic turmoil of the 1930s, as Frances Donaldson has chronicled, thanks only to the efforts of the conductor Sir Thomas Beecham, who organized international seasons there between 1934 and 1939 with the financial backing of a syndicate of wealthy, aristocratic patrons headed by Lady Cunard. At the end of the war, during which Covent Garden had been used as a dance hall, the newly created Arts Council, led by its chairman Lord Keynes, decided to provide public funds to underwrite the creation of a permanent company based at that theatre (the direct ownership of which was taken over by the Ministry of Works in 1949) that would present opera in English at affordable prices using British and Commonwealth artists. This enterprise was on balance a success, though by the early 1960s the practice of performances in English had been largely abandoned to the (also subsidized) Sadler's Wells Opera Company (after 1968 the English National Opera), thereby encouraging ever more international stars, previously put off by the English-only policy, regularly to visit the house. While state aid to Covent Garden (through the Arts Council) had initially been modest, it represented nearly 25 per cent of the budget in the early 1950s and was approaching 50 per cent by the early 1960s. Here as well, the impresarial model had finally given way to statism thanks to a new, more positive attitude towards public support for opera resulting from the successful efforts of successive post-war governments to expand access.<sup>44</sup>

Indeed, the only place that model still thrives is in the United States. In 1932, in a hard-headed and ultimately successful response to the losses caused by the Great Depression, the Met cancelled all existing contracts and reorganized itself as the Metropolitan Opera Association. After acquiring the theatre building from its boxholder-owners in 1940, the Association finally received some indirect assistance in the form of exemption from real estate taxes voted by the New York State legislature in 1943. Further help came in the early 1960s when city, state and federal government grants would provide \$40 million towards the \$184 million cost of Lincoln Center, where both the Met and the New York City Opera would find their new homes. Such assistance was the exception rather than the rule, however, and both companies, as well as their counterparts in other American cities like San Francisco, Chicago, Seattle, Houston and St Louis, remain the only non-festival opera organizations to have survived largely unsubsidized – in 2006, the Met received \$655,800 from the state towards total expenses of \$253,402,128 – into the twenty-first century thanks to a combination of consistently high

attendance, generous tax laws on charitable givers, and a tradition of cultivating wealthy donors stretching back more than a hundred years.<sup>45</sup>

## **Opera and the weak state: the mixed impresarial-statist model in France**

### **Louis XIV, Lully and the mixed model of the *ancien régime***

In the popular imagination, France is often considered the example of state-centred opera par excellence. This is understandable, given the inordinate role played by Louis XIV in the establishment of the genre there and, more recently, the large sums spent by the French state in both the late nineteenth and late twentieth centuries to build imposing opera houses (the Garnier and Bastille) in the heart of that nation's capital. Yet research on opera and the state in France reveals that this image is based in part on a misconception. While it is true that many works beginning with those of Lully and continuing, it has been argued, through those of Meyerbeer, affirmed existing power relations, and that the Opéra as an institution has been closely identified with the French state, that state in fact rarely administered its principal opera house directly between its founding in 1669 and the end of the Third Republic in 1940. Rather, a long succession of businessmen sought to run the Opéra (or more properly the Académie Royale de la Musique) at a profit just as Lully had done, tolerating a high degree of state oversight as the price that had to be paid for this privilege. France thus represents a mixed model of the relations between opera, the state and society that I have termed 'impresarial-statist'.

It was a powerful music lover, Cardinal Mazarin, who at the end of 1642 invited leading Italian composers, librettists, singers and set designers to the French court of the boy-king Louis XIV and his Regent mother Anne of Austria.<sup>46</sup> Yet, despite Mazarin's best efforts, Venetian-style opera, previously triumphant across the Italian peninsula and soon to be so in London, could not establish a foothold at the French court, and in 1666 Louis XIV dismissed his Italian musicians. The failure of Venetian opera in France did not mean the failure of opera *tout court*, however. Within a few years of the departure of Louis's Italian musicians, Paris possessed a flourishing royal opera that despite the vicissitudes of war, revolution and regime change has survived without interruption down to the present. In an important monograph, Victoria Johnson has reconstructed the story of this institution's founding and re-founding between 1669 and 1672 and survival during the French Revolution. As Johnson has emphasized, the driving force behind the establishment of a permanent opera was the poet Pierre Perrin (1620–75), who was convinced that, contrary to prevailing

belief, French was as suitable a language for musical theatre as Italian and that it was possible for the French to challenge the supremacy of their southern neighbours in this field, a view clearly shared by Louis XIV and his chief minister Colbert. On 28 June 1669 Louis granted him the exclusive right or *privilège* to create a French-language, public opera theatre, to be called the Académie d'Opéra.<sup>47</sup>

The charter of 1669 in effect created a 'hybrid' organization. On the one hand, the ruler would be directly associated with the new enterprise as patron and, it was assumed, as the allegorical subject of many compositions. On the other hand, it would be the *privilège*-holder's responsibility to rent a performance space and to hire musicians, singers, set designers and a composer, as would a Venetian impresario, and to pay them from box-office receipts.<sup>48</sup> In March of 1672, financial difficulties forced Perrin to sell his *privilège* to Louis's principal musician and favourite Jean-Baptiste Lully (born Giovanni Battista Lulli in Florence). For the next fifteen years, until his death in 1687, Lully would run the Opéra at a considerable personal profit, thanks to his business acumen and the unbroken popularity at the box office of his *tragédies lyriques*.<sup>49</sup> As Catherine Kintzler has argued, the breakthrough of this new French form of lyric theatre, in contrast to the initial failure in that country of Italian opera, was due to the ability of Lully and his most frequent librettist Quinault to create works that were both analogous to, yet clearly distinct from, French spoken tragedy thanks to the presence not only of music, but also of dance and of magical elements and the associated stage effects.<sup>50</sup>

From the start, as William Weber and others have underlined, Lully shaped the Opéra in ways that were to survive down to the Revolution and, in many respects, beyond. In order to maximize his own investment in a hand-picked troupe of over one hundred artists (musicians, singers and dancers) and expensive sets, he mounted performances in his theatre at the Palais Royal three days per week throughout the entire year with only a short break at Easter. Each season was built around a new opera or *opéra-ballet* and one or two revivals of works from previous seasons. The price of admission to the lower and upper amphitheatres seems to have been relatively low and the house crowded, at least during Lully's lifetime. After his death in 1687, new operas and *opéra-ballets* were commissioned from Destouches, Desmarests, Campra and other composers, but the uneven success of these works led the Opéra's directors to fall back on the *oeuvre* of the departed master that, as Weber has shown, continued to dominate the repertory until the 1730s, at which point they began to share this honour with the compositions of Lully's true artistic heir, Jean-Philippe Rameau. When compared to its sister institutions in Italy, then, France's privately run royal opera of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was unique

not only in its hybrid organizational form, but also for mounting some 120 to 200 performances per year, many of works written decades earlier, thus rendering it the first repertory opera theatre.<sup>51</sup> It was also unusual in that French rulers ceased to attend the Académie regularly from the 1690s until the arrival in the capital of the opera-loving Habsburg princess Marie-Antoinette in 1773. It was during this time as well, as James Johnson has shown, that the traditionally hierarchical seating pattern at the Opéra began to break down, thereby leading to more social mixing between aristocracy and bourgeoisie in the theatre.<sup>52</sup>

### **The survival of the Opéra during the Revolution and the resurrection of the mixed model under the director-entrepreneurs**

That the Opéra, one of the most prominent institutions of absolutist France, was able to survive the French Revolution is deeply ironic – and something of a miracle. As Victoria Johnson has maintained, this can be explained by the fact that by the 1790s the claim first put forward by Perrin and later Lully – that the Académie, through its uniquely lavish productions, would add to the cultural glory of France – had come to be widely accepted even among the revolutionaries. This claim was strengthened by the assertion that the Opéra contributed greatly to the economic health of Paris both by providing work for hundreds of employees and suppliers and by attracting free-spending tourists to the capital. Both of these arguments were echoed in the report delivered to the municipal government on 17 August 1791 by the city official and deputy Jean-Jacques Leroux, who recommended that the Académie not only be saved, but also be provided with a direct subsidy to cover its chronic operating deficits.<sup>53</sup>

After a period of direct state administration of the Opéra under Napoleon – illuminated by David Chaillou – and during the restoration,<sup>54</sup> the liberal monarchy of Louis Philippe attempted to save money by returning to the mixed impresarial-statist pattern of relations among opera, the state and society traditionally associated with France. Thus, on 28 February 1831, a contract was signed with the patent medicine producer Louis Véron, backed by the immensely wealthy Spanish banker Alexandre Aguado, permitting him to run the Opéra at his own profit and risk for the next six years as director-entrepreneur (*directeur-entrepreneur*) and providing him with an annual subsidy of between 44 and 50 per cent of total expenditure. With the exception of a brief return to direct state administration between 1854 and 1866 in the wake of the massive bankruptcy of the director Nestor Roqueplan (a deficit of around 900,000 francs) and to municipal control during the Commune (1870–71), such director-entrepreneurs ran the Opéra – and the Opéra-Comique as well – until 1939.<sup>55</sup>

The essential features of this mature impresarial-statist system can be traced back to the days of Perrin, Lully and their successors. Once again, the state conferred a *privilège* allowing a person or persons to run the Opéra for private gain. However, this new practice of handing the Académie over to director-entrepreneurs differed in two crucial respects from the similar, but ultimately unstable production system of the *ancien régime*. Firstly, the government would now pay an annual subsidy to the *privilège*-holder. The increased expenditures of the Opéra during this period meant, however, that the level of subsidization dropped from about 60 per cent of total outlays in 1830 to about 40 per cent in the 1850s and about 20 per cent in 1875, after which it remained stable until World War I. As comparative figures collected by Michael Walter show, this level of state support at mid-century was probably higher than that found in purely impresarial Italy (for example San Carlo, Naples, 20 per cent in 1848), but much lower than the 50–70 per cent found in many German court theatres.<sup>56</sup> Secondly, the return to private management was accompanied by a high level of state supervision that operated in four ways:<sup>57</sup> through a detailed contract (*cahier des charges* – literally ‘book of obligations’) signed by the director-entrepreneur and monitored and enforced by the ministry responsible for the arts; through legislative oversight; through the preventive censorship that was in place between 1835 and 1906 and that required the texts of libretti to be submitted for approval before a new work could reach the stage;<sup>58</sup> and, finally, between 1831 and 1870, by a special Commission of Surveillance appointed by the government. In the view of Jane Fulcher, this body played a crucial role, especially between 1831 and 1847, in rendering the Opéra a ‘subtly used tool of the state’.<sup>59</sup> Anselm Gerhard and Michael Walter have contested this interpretation, however, arguing based on their own readings of the documents that she has overstated the extent to which successive regimes were either willing or able to influence libretto and repertory choices for clear political ends.<sup>60</sup>

Who made up the audiences that successive directors of the Opéra, Opéra-Comique and Théâtre-Italien needed to attract in order to remain solvent? Research by Steven Huebner and Frédérique Patureau has cast new light on this subject. Huebner argues that, as far as subscribers are concerned, social differences between the three subsidized opera theatres have been exaggerated: between 1830 and 1870 most were drawn in all three cases from what he characterizes as, echoing René Rémond, ‘the aristocracies of birth, fortune and education’.<sup>61</sup> Patureau has also shown that, as late as 1892–93, the social composition of the traditional Monday–Wednesday–Friday subscriber group at the Opéra remained as elite as it had been prior to the advent of the Third Republic in 1871. However, already during the 1880s the leadership of all of the so-called national (i.e. state subsidized)

theatres – Opéra, Opéra-Comique, Comédie-Française and Odéon (the Théâtre-Italien had closed in 1878) – had come under pressure from a National Assembly elected by universal manhood suffrage and a more populist public sphere to open their doors to a wider audience, and the Opéra responded by adding an additional Saturday subscription option in 1892 and increased the number of matinee, reduced-priced ('family') and even free performances.<sup>62</sup> This case from the democratic Third Republic was one of the first instances in which a government was required to make promises of greater accessibility in order to gain support for generous state subsidies for the arts – a situation that was to become the norm in many European countries beginning in the 1980s.

As we have seen, in Italy World War I and the immediate post-war period marked a time in which direct state involvement in opera increased substantially. In France this was not the case. There the long-standing impresarial-statist system remained in place at both the Opéra and the Opéra-Comique. Indeed, after 1914 the fortunes of the Académie lay firmly in the hands of a businessman, Jacques Rouché, who would prove to be the longest serving and, in many respects, the most remarkable of all director-entrepreneurs. In September 1914 Rouché took up the reins of the Opéra and guided it through the war, post-war economic instability and then the Great Depression without any increase in the annual 800,000 francs subsidy until 1929. All in all, Jean Gourret has estimated that Rouché and his business partners *lost* 18.4 million francs between 1915 and 1931, with Rouché covering 73 per cent of this or 13.4 million francs from his personal fortune, a sum nearly equal to the entire budget of the Opéra in 1931.<sup>63</sup> As one parliamentarian succinctly put it in 1924, 'M. Rouché is subsidizing the state for the honour of directing the Opéra.'<sup>64</sup>

### **The end of the mixed model in France in the wake of the Great Depression and its resurrection in contemporary Britain**

In view of the continuing economic crisis and the huge losses he had already sustained, Rouché's patience with the government was exhausted by 1933 and he only agreed to continue in his position if the state covered all future operating deficits. Successive governments of both the moderate right and (after 1936) left honoured this promise, and by 1937 the degree of subsidization had reached German levels of 60 per cent (as opposed to between 4.4 and 12 per cent during the 1920s). Meanwhile, the strike-plagued Opéra-Comique, whose director-entrepreneur Pierre Gheusi enjoyed neither the financial resources nor the political clout of his Opéra counterpart, went bankrupt in 1936 and was placed by the new Popular Front government under Rouché's authority as well. In effect, the impresarial-statist model that Perrin and Lully had first inaugurated and Véron and Rouché had carried

forward was now exhausted, in part because the higher salaries for artists and technical staff backed by the new government were not compatible with even a subsidized for-profit model. On 14 January 1939 the government nationalized the Opéra and the Opéra-Comique and placed them under a single umbrella organization, the Réunion des théâtres lyriques nationaux, whose first director was . . . Jacques Rouché. Once again the latter, now 76 years old, was called upon to guide the Opéra through a world war, and he would later claim that he had preserved many employees from deportation and certain death during the German occupation. Nevertheless, he was dismissed in 1945 as a collaborator and only rehabilitated in 1951.<sup>65</sup>

Paris's opera houses were now the sole responsibility of the state, but France's post-war situation, characterized by expensive colonial wars and political instability, was not conducive to sustained support for the arts. As a result, both the Opéra-Comique and the Opéra suffered, as Gourret has pointed out, from two decades of inadequate funding and labour unrest that culminated in the dramatic events of 1969–72 when the former was permanently shut down and the latter temporarily closed, its entire ensemble dismissed and the director responsible (René Nicoly) felled by a heart attack. While the experienced Swiss opera administrator and composer Rolf Liebermann was able to reconstruct the company and restore the Garnier to international respectability between 1973 and 1980, during the subsequent decade the socialist government under François Mitterrand devoted most of its energy and financial resources to the controversial project of building a new theatre, the Opéra Bastille (inaugurated in 1989) and to reopening the Opéra-Comique in 1990. Since that time, however, the successful administrations of the Swiss Hugues Gall (1995–2004) and the Belgian Gerard Mortier (2004–09) combined – as in Germany – with a high level of financial commitment from the state (average subsidy 56–58 per cent of expenditure between 2003 and 2008) have returned the Opéra, now occupying both the Garnier and the Bastille, to its traditional place among the elite of world opera houses.<sup>66</sup>

While in 1939 France may have forsaken the impresarial-statist model which it pioneered for pure statism, that model, it could be argued, has resurfaced more recently across the Channel, in London. If during the 1960s the British government had begun to emulate its continental neighbours by subsidizing over half of the annual expenditures of the Royal Opera House (ROH), by the mid-1980s that figure had fallen to about 45 per cent and in 2008 stood at only 29 per cent, much closer to the average 20 per cent subsidy in pre-1914 France than the 80 per cent support provided by German states and municipalities to their opera houses today (see p. 46). In addition, as the candid memoirs of former chief executives Jeremy Isaacs and Mary Allen show, political pressure (exercised through the Arts



Council) to meet certain standards of ‘access’ and ‘outreach’ has increased, not decreased, with the decline in state aid. In the face of this decline, successive ROH managers have resorted not only to aggressive fund raising from individuals and corporations (16.9 per cent of revenue), but also to profit-making business ventures (12.8 per cent) in order to supplement box-office receipts (39.4 per cent). This combination of limited state aid, close government oversight and a commercial orientation was, it will be recalled, the hallmark of the old French system of director-entrepreneurs.<sup>67</sup>

## **Opera and the strong state: the statist model in German-speaking central Europe and Russia**

### **Court opera in the Holy Roman Empire and Sweden in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries**

If the writings of Bianconi, Piperno, Rosselli and Sorba point to pre-unification Italy as the homeland of impresarial opera, then those of Ute Daniel, Franz Hadamowsky, Michael Walter and others identify the German-speaking territories of the Holy Roman Empire and its successors the German Confederation and (after 1871) imperial Germany and Austria-Hungary as pioneers of a state-centred pattern of operatic production and reception that has shaped the art form’s fate in those lands right down to the present. Under this statist model, permanent companies receiving generous government support perform nearly year round to an audience dominated by those with ties to the state. As several pieces in the recent European Science Foundation-supported volume *Italian Opera in Central Europe* stress, the new form of musical theatre developed in Italy first appeared and then consolidated itself within the Holy Roman Empire in the guise of what Lorenzo Bianconi has termed ‘court opera’, a forerunner to the statist paradigm characterized by single, lavish presentations of works performed by court musicians for invited, non-paying audiences, as was the case in Florence and Mantua in the early 1600s and Rome in the 1630s.

Thus, according to Herbert Seifert, the first opera staged north of the Alps was in all likelihood Monteverdi’s *Orfeo*, mounted in 1614 for the prince-bishop of Salzburg Marcus Sitticus and his court by Italian musicians (including the originator of the lead role, Francesco Rasi) whom the music-loving churchman had recruited.<sup>68</sup> Over the course of the next century, ambitious rulers one by one followed Sitticus’s lead and introduced occasional performances of Italian opera to the courts of Vienna (1620s), Munich (1653), Innsbruck (1654), Dresden (1662), Hanover (1678), Stuttgart (1698), Bonn (1699) and many smaller capitals.<sup>69</sup> Opera

was then able to put down permanent roots in the Holy Roman Empire in the late eighteenth century thanks to two key innovations introduced in the wake of the bloody and costly Seven Years War (1756–63).

Firstly, the fiscal burden associated with the war and its aftermath led many rulers to open the doors of their court theatres to a paying audience, an innovation that had spread throughout Germany by the early 1800s.<sup>70</sup> Secondly, this fiscally motivated reform took place at a time when Enlightenment thinkers like Johann Christoph Gottsched were arguing that German-language theatre would contribute to the moral and cultural education of the public.<sup>71</sup> In this spirit, Emperor Joseph II ordered in 1777 that a ‘German National *Singspiel*’ performing opera in the local language should occupy the Burgtheater.<sup>72</sup> Before Joseph ended this experiment in 1783, his initiative in favour of opera in the vernacular performed by native central European artists had unleashed a wave of imitation among many neighbouring princes.<sup>73</sup>

Yet, as Greger Andersson has indicated, another northern European ruler seems to have launched a ‘national opera’ project even earlier than Joseph: Gustav III of Sweden (reigned 1771–92). Since 1699, the Swedish court had periodically hosted French companies performing plays and both serious and comic operas, and the music-loving queen Lovisa Ulrika (Frederick the Great of Prussia’s sister) also inaugurated a new royal theatre (the *Confidencen*) and invited an Italian troupe to court the following year. Her son Gustav, after succeeding to the throne, founded the Royal Swedish Opera in 1773, a permanent company that performed newly commissioned heroic and comic works as well as contemporary French and Italian operas, all in Swedish. In 1782 he built the new opera house for his artists in which he himself was assassinated during a masked ball on 29 March 1792, thereby gaining immortality as a character in Verdi’s *Un ballo in maschera* (and in Auber’s setting of the same libretto).<sup>74</sup>

### **The maturation of court opera in nineteenth-century central Europe and Russia**

In his path-breaking comparative social history of opera, Michael Walter has argued that the fact that from the early nineteenth century onward (1848 in Vienna) the administrators of Germany’s reformed court theatres mounted performances directly using local artists, rather than relying on short-term contracts with impresarios as in Italy, had far-reaching structural consequences for the conditions of production and reception in that region. In the first instance, it meant that court theatres built up libraries of opera scores that could be used for future revivals of successful works, whereas in Italy scores remained the property of the impresarios who had commissioned or otherwise acquired them. This in turn permitted the

introduction and spread of a repertory system in the German-speaking lands under which upwards of twenty or more works might alternate with one another over the course of a season. Since court theatres traditionally offered spoken dramas, comedies and ballet evenings as well as opera, such theatres could remain open year round with only a short break during the summer months, mounting some 230 or more performances of pieces drawn from all of these genres per season.<sup>75</sup> Once the court theatres had begun performing operas and theatre pieces exclusively in German, it made good financial sense, as Ute Daniel has emphasized, to engage a standing ensemble of local artists. The result was the creation during the first half of the nineteenth century of a single labour market in singers and actors within the German Confederation.<sup>76</sup>

The reforms introduced into the court theatres of the German-speaking lands during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries naturally brought with them a transformation in the make-up, seating arrangements and behaviour of their audiences. As mentioned above, Bianconi and others have stressed that a defining feature of the earliest forms of court opera in both Italy and Germany was that productions were mounted for an invited, non-paying audience of court members and distinguished guests, seated in hierarchical fashion and abstaining from spontaneous reactions to what they saw and heard so as not to offend the presiding prince. As the studies of Böhmer and Henzel have shown, these features continued to define Italian *opera seria* performances in Munich in the 1770s and in Berlin as late as 1800.<sup>77</sup> After the introduction of paid admission, however, the core audience of aristocrats, government officials and army officers was now forced to attend performances with many more spectators from the world of commerce, finance, industry and the free professions.<sup>78</sup>

In addition to the German territories, Austria and Scandinavia, the other great home of the statist model during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the Russian Empire. As Murray Frame has recounted, the Empress Elizabeth created a directly administered court theatre open to the public in 1756, and between 1824 and 1860 the tsarist state constructed five new buildings, three in St Petersburg and two in Moscow, to house the imperial opera, ballet and theatre troupes. From 1843 to the early 1880s – as Julie Buckler has explained in her study of opera attendance in nineteenth-century Russia, which makes innovative use of literary sources as well as official documents – the government supported rival Russian and an Italian opera company in St Petersburg, with the latter the more socially prestigious. As both she and Murray Frame stress, while the core opera audience up until the end of 1914 was closely associated with the imperial state, a wider cross section of the city's population was also present, though high prices and the subscription system largely excluded the working class.<sup>79</sup>

### The vicissitudes of the statist model in post-1918 Europe

In his authoritative survey of opera during the Weimar Republic, Michael Walter has called the end of World War I ‘the most striking date in the institutional and social history of opera in Germany.’<sup>80</sup> This was so because the end of the Empire also meant the end of the court theatres. The new, democratically constituted German states – and above all the largest, Prussia – assumed immediate financial and administrative responsibility for these theatres and renamed them Staats- or Landestheater (hence the Berlin Hofoper was rechristened the Staatsoper). In addition, during the Weimar years difficult economic conditions forced city governments to take over more formerly private local theatres so that the number of Stadttheater (public municipal theatres) rose significantly from ten in 1914 to sixty-six in 1931–32. In 1919 there was a widespread consensus among the new political masters of Germany’s state-run theatres – echoing that of French Third Republic parliamentarians mentioned above – that a ‘democratization’ of the opera was necessary if substantial public subsidies were to be justified, and they sought to realize this goal by greatly expanding the number of low-price and free tickets in an effort to open the doors of the opera house to those who had previously been excluded from it.<sup>81</sup>

As Walter has argued, however, this attempt to increase what today is called ‘accessibility’ largely failed. While the core opera audience did indeed change fundamentally during the Weimar Republic, it did not do so in the way hoped for by many politicians on the left (and some on the right). The places vacated by the court aristocracy and those among the educated upper middle class (*Bildungsbürgertum*) ruined by the great inflation of 1920–23 were taken not by workers, but rather by the nouveaux riches who had profited from war and economic dislocation and by the upper echelons of the ‘new middle class’ of white-collar employees. This new audience – and especially its younger members – were less deeply committed to opera than the former court theatre elites, and the directors of public theatres sought to attract it to the opera house both through frequent world premieres and a very conservative repertory policy dominated by the warhorses of the pre-war era (the operas of Wagner, Verdi, Lortzing and Mozart) now supplemented by those of Puccini.<sup>82</sup>

In Russia as well, as Murray Frame has chronicled, World War I and its aftermath brought an end to the court theatres. On 6 March 1917, the Kerensky government transformed the court theatres into state theatres, and on 26 August 1919 the Bolsheviks nationalized all of the country’s theatrical property. Yet, as in France, the imperial opera and ballet companies in St Petersburg and Moscow miraculously survived this revolutionary upheaval largely intact, despite their close association with the old regime. Frame explains this by the fact that while many radical intellectuals like Meyerhold advocated the complete destruction of the old artistic landscape,

both Lenin and the first People's Commissar of Enlightenment, Anatoly Lunacharsky, favoured preserving the best of the tsarist cultural legacy, which they believed valuable in itself, while at the same time making it accessible to the people.<sup>83</sup>

A now vast literature, beginning with the pioneering works of Joseph Wulf and Fred Prieberg, has analysed the changes to German musical life introduced by the Nazis after their seizure of power in 1933.<sup>84</sup> Foremost among these was the creation of a powerful instrument of centralization and control in Goebbels's Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda (Reich Ministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda; RMVP) and the Reichsmusikkammer (Reich Musicians' Chamber; RMK), the official state organization of musicians.<sup>85</sup> As far as opera is concerned, Michael Walter has demonstrated that neither the leaders of the Goebbels-influenced RMK nor their rivals in the Amt Rosenberg had any clear plan of action for this sphere other than to remove all traces of Jewish and 'cultural bolshevist' (radical modernist) influence from German operatic life, something upon which both factions could agree.<sup>86</sup> As the recent exhibition *Verstummte Stimmen* ('Silenced Voices') has documented, this policy was carried out with great thoroughness. At the Staatsoper in Berlin, for example, twenty-one artists and employees were summarily fired in 1933 after discussions between administrative director Heinz Tietjens, music director Wilhelm Furtwängler and Hermann Göring based on a list of Jewish ensemble members drawn up in 1932 by the house's Nazi party cell. In addition to the hundreds, if not thousands, of employees and artists associated with German-speaking opera houses dismissed and/or driven into exile by the Nazis, the curators of *Verstummte Stimmen* have identified over thirty-five composers (including Viktor Ullmann and Pavel Haas), singers (including Magda Spiegel and Henriette Gottlieb) and directors murdered in Nazi death camps. Similarly, the works of all Jewish composers (such as Offenbach, Meyerbeer and Schreker) were removed from the repertory. Interestingly, this fate did not befall the immensely popular *Carmen*, whose libretto was written in part by the Jewish Ludovic Halévy.<sup>87</sup>

By the end of World War II, 98 of Germany's 300 theatres lay in ruins, according to Ferdinand Kösters's extremely comprehensive history of the resurrection of opera in that country between 1945 and 1955. What is striking is the speed with which often homeless companies organized full-scale productions following the capitulation of the Third Reich on 7 May 1945: by 4 September the Deutsche Oper could mount *Fidelio* in Berlin, and throughout 1945–46 performances occurred in often makeshift quarters across the ruined land.<sup>88</sup> The tremendous energy and resources devoted during a time of great hardship and scarcity to the revival of opera and the rebuilding of the public theatres, above all with the support of municipal

and later state governments, are remarkable and were characteristic of both halves of the increasingly divided country, as witnessed by the rapid reconstruction of the old Staatsoper in East Berlin at extraordinary expense while most other historical buildings in the capital remained in ruins. In a parallel to the Weimar Republic, 144 new operas received their premieres in both Germanys between 1945 and 1955, and the post-1918 policy of substantial state aid to public theatres in order to reduce admission prices has continued down to the present.<sup>89</sup> Thus, according to the Deutsche Bühnenverein's most recent statistical handbook, the Federal Republic in 2006–07 contained 143 public theatres offering over 6,500 opera performances seen by nearly 4.4 million audience members and underwritten by government subsidies of 2.075 *billion* Euros, or 81 per cent of operating costs.<sup>90</sup> Despite, then, the vicissitudes of the twentieth century, Germany continues to possess the world's most dense opera landscape, an achievement rendered possible by a statist model of production and reception with roots stretching back to the very first decades of the art form itself.

### **Theoretical conclusion: opera, the state and society in comparative-historical perspective**

Opera history would seem to lend itself naturally to a comparative approach. By the early eighteenth century at the latest the art form had spread across Europe and yet, as the discussion above has illustrated, the way in which performances were organized and financed, the audience they attracted and the exact role of the state in this process varied, despite certain commonalities, from one part of the continent to the next. How can we account for these differences, as well as for similarities in the pattern of production and reception across regions or, later, nations? Surprisingly, this is a question rarely asked in a systematic way in the literature surveyed in this chapter. If we look to neighbouring fields like social theory, the sociology of music and historical sociology, however, we can discover a number of hypotheses and methodological approaches that could introduce a new dynamism into the study of the relations among the state, opera and society.

A potentially fruitful starting point for exploring similarities across different opera worlds is the famous essay of Theodor Adorno, 'Bourgeois Opera'.<sup>91</sup> The puzzle to which Adorno provides one possible answer might be formulated in this way: given all of the variations in production systems and in cultural traditions among, for example, Italy, Germany and France, why do operas from a certain period exhibit common themes regardless of setting or country of origin? Adorno's answer, simply put, is that opera is a bourgeois art form, the essence of which is defined by the 'crossing of

myth and of enlightenment, of captivity within a blind system with no consciousness of itself and of the idea of freedom which rises up in its midst.<sup>92</sup> This new art form first came to full bloom, he points out, in the Venetian Republic under bourgeois social conditions and triumphed at the courts of the eighteenth century only after the social emancipation of the bourgeoisie was well advanced. The situation of opera then became 'precarious . . . when the bourgeois high society that had carried [it] in its fully developed form no longer existed'.<sup>93</sup>

Jane Fulcher has pointed to an alternative to this position of Adorno's. It is derived from the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'symbolic domination', or the struggle to define what is legitimate.<sup>94</sup> In her detailed study of music and politics in interwar France, Fulcher has shown that it makes little sense to link a given style, in this case neoclassicism, to a particular class or even political interest, as Adorno tends to do when discussing Stravinsky. Rather, both left- and right-wing composers employed this style, but interpreted its meaning in different ways and sought to impose their 'reading' through a struggle that extended from the concert hall through the opera house to the print media.<sup>95</sup> This idea of a struggle for symbolic legitimacy that can involve aesthetic choices, journalistic campaigns and subtle or not-so-subtle interventions by state authorities opens up a new way of viewing opera during the 1920s and 1930s that can be applied productively to other periods as well.

Can the social sciences also help us to explain the differences in the systems of production and reception found in Italy, France and Germany outlined above? Over the past several decades a literature has emerged within political science and sociology which highlights the systematic differences in the pattern of statebuilding found across the early modern and modern West. This literature points to the emergence after 1500 within the German and Scandinavia states of proto-modern bureaucracies of the kind thematized by Max Weber, in contrast to the continuing predominance during the same period in western and southern Europe of less effective administrative and financial methods built around venal office and tax farming.<sup>96</sup> It seems reasonable to hypothesize that it is these variations in statebuilding trajectory that account for the fact that prior to the interwar period it was mainly private entrepreneurs, rather than civil servants, who organized opera productions in Italy, France, Britain and the Americas, whereas the latter were responsible for opera seasons from an early date in central and northern Europe as well as in Russia. The spread of bureaucratic methods and structures across the West over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in turn can help explain the almost universal triumph after 1945 of the statist model of opera production and reception pioneered in Germany. While these parallels require further investigation, they suggest

that a closer engagement with research on the state might be a fruitful next step in developing a truly comparative history of opera production and reception.

## Notes

- 1 Victoria Johnson, 'Introduction: Opera and the Academic Turns', in Victoria Johnson, Jane F. Fulcher and Thomas Ertman (eds.), *Opera and Society in Italy and France from Monteverdi to Bourdieu* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 1–26; 1–2.
- 2 *Ibid.*, pp. 13–18.
- 3 Ellen Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice: The Creation of Genre* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 67–72; Beth Glixon and Jonathan Glixon, *Inventing the Business of Opera: The Impresario and His World in Seventeenth-Century Venice* (Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 18–19, 67–9.
- 4 Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice*, p. 3; David Kimbell, *Italian Opera* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 113–15.
- 5 Lorenzo Bianconi, *Music in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 182–5; Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice*, p. 79; Glixon and Glixon, *Business of Opera*, pp. 3–10.
- 6 Lorenzo Bianconi and Thomas Walker, 'Production, Consumption and the Political Function of Seventeenth Century Opera', *Early Music History*, 4 (1984), pp. 209–96; 227; Glixon and Glixon, *Business of Opera*, pp. 295–305; Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice*, p. 14.
- 7 Glixon and Glixon, *Business of Opera*, p. 105.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp. 123–4, 302–5, 313–14; Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice*, p. 15.
- 9 Lorenzo Bianconi and Thomas Walker, 'Dalla Finta pazza alla Veremonda: storie di Febiarmonici', *Rivista italiana di musicologia*, 10 (1975), pp. 379–454; Bianconi, *Music*, pp. 193–4; Franco Piperno, 'Opera Production to 1780', in Lorenzo Bianconi and Giorgio Pestelli (eds.), *The History of Italian Opera*, Part II, Vol. IV: *Opera Production and its Resources*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 1–79; 15–16; Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice*, p. 186.
- 10 Lorenzo Bianconi, *Il teatro d'opera in Italia: geografia, caratteri, storia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1993), pp. 11–13.
- 11 John Rosselli, *Singers of Italian Opera: The History of a Profession* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 7–24; Robert Lamar Weaver and Norma Wright Weaver, *A Chronology of Music in the Florentine Theater 1590–1750* (Detroit: Information Coordinators, 1978), pp. 62–71; Piperno, 'Opera Production', pp. 36–9.
- 12 Franco Piperno, 'State and Market, Production and Style: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Eighteenth-Century Italian Opera History', in Johnson, Fulcher and Ertman (eds.), *Opera and Society*, pp. 138–59; 139–43; Piperno, 'Opera Production', pp. 17, 37, 41–2.
- 13 Piperno, 'State and Market', pp. 140, 144–8; John Rosselli, 'Opera Production, 1780–1880', in Bianconi and Pestelli (eds.), *Opera Production*, pp. 81–164; 100.
- 14 Piperno, 'Opera Production', p. 16. See also Bianconi and Walker, 'Production, Consumption', p. 260: 'opera theatre, once established . . . functions as an *instrumentum regni*, a public demonstration and representation of authority'; and Reinhold Strohm, *Dramma per Musica: Italian Opera in the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 6: 'there had always been a solid alliance between opera and political absolutism'.
- 15 Judith Milhous, 'Opera Finances in London, 1674–1738', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 37/3 (Autumn, 1984), pp. 567–92; Curtis Price, Judith Milhous and Robert D. Hume, *Italian Opera in Late Eighteenth Century London*. Vol. I: *The King's Theatre, Haymarket 1778–1791* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), pp. 2–8.
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