Preface

In the middle of the twentieth century, Joseph Kerman had no major qualms about giving the headline 'The Dark Ages' to one of the chapters of his book, *Opera and Drama*. By this, he meant the period between Monteverdi and Gluck. Granted, the expression may have been chosen *cum grano salis*, and Kerman then seemed to moderate his claim, stressing that this period was also 'the great age of opera'. Song, music, stage design, the 'enormous' amount of libretti – all of these testified to 'unbelievable development and unbelievable activity'. During the Baroque era, the ink of their scores barely dried, operas were staged in an overwhelming cadence, be it on Italian theatres or elsewhere in Europe. This led to the rise of a 'star-system' dominated by the cults of the castrato and the prima donna. The era also saw the advent of operatic spectacularity through the use of extravagant machineries. But in the end, once an opera had lived through a few performances, it was then 'thrown away'.[1] Here was, for Kerman, the crux of the problem. This dazzling operatic hyperproductivity was also its main stigma. However foundational these dark ages may have been, they had not yet entered opera into the hall of the canonic repertoire – that is, until Mozart appeared on stage.

Of course, we need to contextualize Kerman's tirade, originally published in 1956, then maintained in his revised edition of 1988. And we could reply that the 1950s were still the 'dark ages' for most operatic productions, especially for works that fell into the Baroque period before Mozart's *Idomeneo*. Only from the 1970s have we started to study the early fringes of the operatic repertoire through historically based recordings, and (more or less) historically based productions. Much has been done since the collaboration between Nikolaus Harnoncourt and Jean-Pierre Ponnelle in 1975 at the Zurich Opera House for the staging of Monteverdi's trilogy (*Orfeo*, *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria*, and *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, as well as the staged madrigal *Il Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda*), or Jean-Marie Villégier's 1987 landmark production of Lully's *Atys*, with William Christie and the Arts Florissants, at the Opéra-Comique in Paris. These productions are now considered historical landmarks in the twentieth-century revival of Baroque opera. Also, the renewed scholarly impulse in

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opera studies, theatre studies, and cultural history during these recent decades has pursued these efforts. Today, no one would deny that this operatic repertoire has become much more visible and accessible be it on stage or through recorded media. As a result, there is now an enthusiastic audience, within or outside the scholarly sphere, for whom this *Companion* is intended.

Our volume is on 'seventeenth-century opera' rather than 'early opera' or 'Baroque opera', and this is not simply to address more explicitly its chronological boundaries. When it comes to art forms, 'early' often implies the notions of archaism, imperfection, or unachievement, and of experimentalism. These can fuel a problematic teleological connotation, when considering that the history of opera unfolds as a cyclical history of crises, during which the respective priorities of music and words needed to be readressed and readjusted. By the 1680s, Italian opera was rife for its first important critical moment, the Metastasian reform in the early eighteenth century, in the wake of the ideals promulgated by the Arcadian academy. But in parallel, the new genre of the *tragédie en musique*, France's belated answer to Italian opera, offered a treatment of music and text that in many ways stood much closer to the ideals of the Camerata Bardi in the 1600s than to its contemporary Italian counterpart. Thus, the history of opera should be better understood not so much as a linear development aiming towards a supposed operatic perfection but rather as a series of constant 'returns to' the ideal of an original model.

Our volume offers fourteen essays by distinguished scholars in the fields of seventeenth-century opera and theatre studies. Its intention is to provide the readers – be they interested members of the public, students, or scholars – with a series of thorough yet accessible texts scrutinising opera during the entire seventeenth century, a period that provided the foundational pillars for the development of this genre. The volume is also justified by the specialisation of scholarship and the major renewal of opera studies in these recent decades. Independently from the period chosen, the study of opera has also become increasingly reliant on interdisciplinarity. Much of the recent literature on seventeenth-century opera has involved groundbreaking research highlighting opera's relationships with literature, Classical antecedents, theatrical practices, rhetoric, patronage, political functions, gender issues, and other sociological contexts, and our volume draws on such a multiplicity of approaches.

The four chapters in Part I, 'The Italian Foundations', reflect on the origins of opera in the context of Florentine humanism, and how literary ideals and those of Classical literature led to a recreation of a modern

equivalent of ancient Greek theatre. Readers are also introduced to the musical characteristics and dramatic functions of the *recitar cantando*, *stile rappresentativo*, aria, and chorus, and their relation to poetry. The rise of opera-as-drama is discussed up to its Roman period and along its political dimension as a vehicle for displays of power as well as entertainment for its courtly and aristocratic audiences.

The five chapters of Part II, 'Society, Institutions, and Production', focus on various aspects related to operatic production, the development of stage scenery, and the incorporation of ballet. It also assesses opera as a socio-economic institution, which started with the multiplication of opera houses for a paying public (from 1637 in Venice). Part II scrutinizes the increasing professionalisation of the operatic sphere and its impact on composers, librettists, and stage designers, and the strengthening of Venice as a main model for opera throughout Italy, but it also considers how other Italian centres differed from the Venetian model. Emphasis is given to the singers: the rise of the castrato, the primo uomo and prima donna, and the important yet problematic place occupied by female musicians – from composers to singers – and the social constraints they faced.

Part III, 'National Traditions (outside Italy)', addresses the cultivation of opera, by birth an Italian affair, and its expansion outside the limits of the Italian territories, reaching the rest of Europe and the Americas. Its geographical dissemination and assimilation was not always a smooth process: France, England, and Spain had already strong traditions of theatrical spectacles in which music was prominently featured. All these various strands formed different trajectories in which the primeval Italian model had to be reimagined along specific geographical and cultural traditions that had started to consolidate by the end of the seventeenth century. By then, the rise of the Neapolitan school, while preparing the ground for *opera seria*, also contributed to the dissemination of opera in Spain and the Spanish dominions in Italy and the Americas. In parallel, the German countries saw the rise of operatic centres in cities such as Leipzig and Hamburg; in England, the end of the seventeenth century culminated with the first Golden Age of English opera until Purcell's death in 1695. In France, the period between Lully's death in 1687 and the advent of opéra-comique in the 1710s marked the culmination of the Lullian model before Rameau's first operas in the 1730s.

By generating idiosyncratic musical styles and techniques, these traditions also departed from the Italian norm, preparing the ground for national traditions that would lead in the next century to the Gluckian reform. In that respect, the present volume also invites a broader

understanding of the origins and development of seventeenth-century opera and its numerous legacies in the next century.

As anyone would expect, the chronological ambitus of our volume starts with opera's Italian origins, c. 1590s–1600s. It extends up to the 1710s, meaning that we do not include what would still be considered 'Baroque opera', that is, Handel's operas, Metastasio and the rise of *opera seria*, and opera in France following the death of Louis XIV. These topics are covered by the *Cambridge Companion to Eighteenth-Century Opera*, thus avoiding any excessive overlapping.

The music examples as well as the orthography of the libretti have all been modernised. Our chronology encompasses the major works mentioned in the volume and provides specific historical events for their contextualisation. The final bibliography is not redundant with the endnotes, and is mainly intended to guide the reader towards essential publications. However, most of the primary sources (scores, libretti, archival texts including manuscripts) are only mentioned in the chapters' endnotes.

I am most grateful to all the contributors of this volume, who embraced with so much dedication the task of writing for this *Companion* and who accepted the challenge of its long overdue genesis. I am indebted to Kate Brett and Nigel Graves, who both provided invaluable help; to Maximiliano Amici, who realized all the music examples and adapted them to modern notation; to Kirsten Rutschman, who translated Michael Maul's text; and to Laura Williams and Celia Abele, both of whom lightened my task of translating and revising the texts by the three French-speaking contributors of this volume.

Special thanks go to Christine Jeanneret, Laura Naudeix, and Colleen Reardon, who, at various stages of this volume's preparation, helped me and encouraged me to persevere with it, and to Tim Carter for always providing wise and erudite advice.

Notes

1 Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama* (New York: Knopf, 1956; rev. edn. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), ch. 3, 39.