20 Grand opera in Britain and the Americas

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Introduction

Britain and the Americas, lacking any significant and continuous native operatic traditions, depended upon foreign opera for much of the nineteenth century. Although Italian opera (and to a certain extent French opéra comique) often formed the basis of the repertory, German and serious French opera became increasingly popular in certain areas of Britain and the Americas in response to local circumstances: the nationality of immigrant populations, the tastes of a ruling élite, the experiences of local impresarios and the impact of political events.

In the 1830s the phenomenal popularity of grand opera – works such as Auber's *La Muette de Portici* (1828) and *Gustave III* (1833), Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable* (1831) and *Les Huguenots* (1836), Halévy's *La Juive* (1835) – spread quickly throughout Europe and across the Channel. In London such works were translated into Italian or English and performed in a variety of faithful productions and pirate adaptations. From Europe they were exported to the East coast of America, often by English impresarios. Travelling troupes in America incorporated occasional grand operas into their still largely Italian repertories, and took them across the continent from where they entered Central and South America and were absorbed – to a lesser extent – into the repertories of local companies. Celebrated singers who had performed these operas in Paris brought to new audiences the roles for which they had become known.

This chapter examines the way in which grand operas were adapted and received. It also attempts to determine the sort of influence grand opera had, and the degree to which new traditions developed in Britain and the Americas. Although one can point to characteristic elements of grand opera – the historical subjects and melodramatic plots, the grand scale (usually five acts) and large forces, the spectacular visual effects, the integration of private and public dimensions of the drama, the (usually) tragic ending – the overriding characteristic of the genre is its tendency to synthesise.[1] Tracing the specific influences of a fluid, eclectic and imprecise genre is problematic and arguably a pointless task. Yet the enormous popularity of French grand opera (and its legacy in the works of Wagner and Verdi and others) suggests that we should broaden the context in which we understand English-language and Latin American opera of the second half of the nineteenth century.

Given the enormous number of permanent and travelling opera companies in existence in Britain and the Americas during the nineteenth century, and the widely differing local circumstances, a comprehensive survey of grand opera in these areas is beyond the scope of this chapter. Moreover, there has been little research into the subject on which to draw. The focus, therefore, is on larger cities, on places where grand opera was particularly popular (notably London), and on locations where primary research has been carried out, with a view to examining interesting – rather than representative – examples. Conclusions about the influence of grand opera are necessarily tentative, and based on the brief examination of some of the (few) works for which scores and librettos are readily available. The enormous popularity of grand opera in the English-speaking world, however, suggests that this is an area ripe for further research.

Britain

Performances of French grand opera

In London productions of grand operas could be seen at three main theatres (see Table 20.1).[2] Performances at Her Majesty's Theatre (known as the King's Theatre before 1837) were in Italian, those at Covent Garden were in English in the 1830s and early 1840s, then in Italian from 1847, and those at Drury Lane were in English. English burlettas and parodies of operas were also staged at such popular theatres as the Adelphi.[3] The translation of operas was often a requirement written into a theatre's licence, but it was also linked to historical practices. Essentially, Italian was a language associated with cultivation, while English was more generally linked to the popular, less-educated classes. For much of the century French and German operas appeared in their original language only when performed by visiting foreign troupes.

In this system, then, grand operas were routinely translated into Italian or English and adapted for performance, and they became popular in these versions, with theatres vying to stage the first production. For example, the London première of Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable* (1831) was intended for the King's Theatre in 1832, where it was to be performed (in Italian) by the cast of the Paris Opéra production. But the great excitement awaiting the opera prompted a rush of adaptations in English which in fact preceded its 'authentic' performance at the King's Theatre.

Such intense rivalry for the same works inevitably had financial implications. When Alfred Bunn gained control of the two patent theatres in the

Table 20.1 *Repertory of London theatres*

Theatre (and company)	Repertory
Adelphi	In 1831 it housed the Lyceum's company. Its repertory consisted of spoken drama and burlettas and parodies of operas. It occasionally hosted seasons of the Carl Rosa Company (founded in 1875).
Covent Garden (patent theatre) Companies: the Playhouse at the Theatre Royal until 1846, then the Royal Italian Opera until 1892, then the Royal Opera.	Henry Bishop was musical director from 1810 to 1824; his English adaptations of opera (and those of Michael Lacy) were an important part of the repertory into the 1830s. Opera was performed in English translation under the management of Alfred Bunn, Charles Macready and others in the 1830s, with a growing focus on French repertory. In 1847 it reopened as the Royal Italian Opera, performing all works in Italian. Under the direction of Frederick Gye (1848–77) grand opera became an important feature of the repertory and continued to be so under the management of Augustus Harris (1887–96) and until World War I.
Drury Lane (patent theatre) Company: the Theatre Royal	Thomas Cooke was the principal director in the 1820s, adapting foreign operas in English, in the style of Bishop; Alfred Bunn became manager in the 1830s and 1840s. Between 1835 and 1847 the repertory was mainly English opera. Her Majesty's seasons transferred there in 1868–77 (following a fire). Under the management of Augustus Harris (1879–96) it was famed for its spectacular productions of foreign works, its performances of Wagner, and the annual (English) seasons of the Carl Rosa Company. Opera disappeared from the repertory after Harris's death.
Her Majesty's (King's Theatre until 1837)	Under the management of Pierre Laporte in the 1830s, Benjamin Lumley in the 1840s and 1850s and J. H. Mapleson (sporadically) in the 1860s, 1870s and 1880s, its repertory consisted chiefly of Italian opera and French operas of the post-grand opera generation (Bizet, Gounod). The theatre also hosted the visits of the Carl Rosa Company, Angelo Neumann's Wagner company and, in 1886, a French opera season.
Lyceum	Known as the English Opera House during the years 1816–30 and (following destruction and rebuilding after a fire) 1834–43, it then increasingly mounted spoken drama, and temporarily housed other companies and visiting troupes.

mid-1830s, he combined the companies in order to improve their financial positions and assigned distinct genres to each: ballet and spectacle at Covent Garden; tragedy, comedy, farce – including English opera – at Drury Lane. (Italian opera continued to be performed at Her Majesty's.) But in 1843 the patent monopoly was abolished and any theatre could apply for a licence to perform anything. The ensuing competition for Italian opera led to the disintegration of the Covent Garden playhouse within a year, although it continued to host concert series, and the visit in 1845 of a touring Belgian opera company which performed *Guillaume Tell*, *Les Huguenots* and *La Muette de Portici*.[4]

Following the closure of the playhouse, however, dissatisfied singers from Her Majesty's took the opportunity to turn the empty theatre into a dedicated opera house, and in 1847 the new Royal Italian Opera opened at Covent Garden. Although both houses initially staged a conservative repertory of ballet and contemporary Italian opera, the arrival of Frederick Gye at

Covent Garden in 1848 led to the emergence of a distinct, French-dominated repertory, and superior artistic standards at that theatre. Audience loyalties gradually shifted to the new company; the lesser aristocracy and liberals in particular were attracted, and a large section of the upper aristocracy followed Queen Victoria in her preference for German and French operas. The repertories were quite distinct: Covent Garden focused on French and some Italian repertory while Her Majesty's focused almost exclusively on contemporary Italian opera.[5]

Singers were fundamental to the repertory at each theatre.[6] At Covent Garden a core of fifteen to twenty singers returned annually through the 1850s and beyond, and Gye shaped the repertory around their individual talents.[7] This extended to the point that the French repertory suffered in 1852 when Pauline Viardot was unavailable, but benefited from the engagement of such singers as Marie Battu and Pauline Lucca in the 1860s.[8] While the usual star-system continued at Her Majesty's, at Covent Garden an ensemble of top-class performers was maintained, a particularly important requirement for grand operas, which featured large numbers of principal singers.

Drury Lane

During the first decades of the nineteenth century Henry Rowley Bishop (1786–1855) was the most important stage composer and arranger in London. His reworkings of operas for Drury Lane included two versions of Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* (1830, 1838) and one of Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable* (1832).[9]

In spite of the routine complaints of the critics, it appears that such adaptations often remained remarkably close to the original. Great success was anticipated for *Robert le Diable*, which was adapted for at least three different theatres in 1832.[10] Bishop's version for Drury Lane, *The Demon, or The Mystic Branch*, proves an interesting starting point for our consideration of the nature of adaptations of grand operas in London.

At Drury Lane in 1832 (English) spoken dialogue was required by the theatre's licence, replacing recitative. In the case of *The Demon* this appears to have been the main divergence from the authentic text premièred in Paris the previous year.[11] Bishop used the music of all but four of the twenty-four numbers in *Robert*, and the spoken dialogue followed the recitative closely. Some minor harmonic variants and other small changes were the only other differences from the published vocal score (1832). However, Bishop and his collaborators (Thomas Cooke, Richard Hughes and Montague Corri) only had a vocal score to work from, and had to orchestrate the opera themselves.[12]

In spite of this relative fidelity to Meyerbeer's score, many critics received Bishop's adaptation as a travesty of the original.[13] Ignaz Moscheles, for example, claimed: 'in that piece of patchwork, *The Demon*, Meyerbeer's best intentions [were] utterly destroyed; fine scenery and ignorant listeners could alone save this performance from complete failure . . . there was no Meyerbeer in it'.[14] In contrast, Bishop's adaptation of *Guillaume Tell* as *Hofer, the Tell of the Tyrol* (1830), in partnership with Planché, had been more radical. Not only had Tell been replaced by another popular, legendary revolutionary, Andreas Hofer (1767–1810), but the score was also substantially altered.[15] Intriguingly, scenes of melodrama frequently replaced sung numbers and recitative. The English love of pantomime, spectacle and instrumental music perhaps helps to account for an important aspect of the appeal of grand opera.[16] Remarkably, given the reaction to *The Demon*, few critics objected to the substantial alterations of *Hofer*, and a number thought the adaptation an improvement on Rossini's more usual fare. Yet it would seem that faithful adaptations were becoming increasingly popular – perhaps because audiences were becoming more familiar with foreign repertory. In 1838 Bishop made a second adaptation of *Tell* for Drury Lane that was much closer to the original. Although Alfred Bunn noted that 'four hours and a half, even of Rossini, are too much for your cockney', it achieved considerable success.[17]

It would seem, on the evidence of *The Demon* and *Guillaume Tell*, that the scale of grand operas and their often complicated plots were not necessarily viewed as a problem at Drury Lane – although replacing recitative with spoken dialogue would certainly have shortened a work, and there are examples of other works that were cut more severely.[18] This doubtless provoked the French review of *Le Lac des fées* at Drury Lane quoted in Chapter 10 (p. 187). Furthermore, it would seem that such adaptations were often more popular than performances of the 'original' work by visiting companies. For example, critical reaction to the production of *Robert* by the original Paris cast at the King's Theatre later in the season illustrates English disgust with the authentic *mise-en-scène*. The Earl of Mount Edgcumbe, famously prudish, was horrified: 'the sight of the resurrection of a whole convent of nuns, who rise from their graves, and begin dancing like so many bacchantes, is revolting'; another critic declared it 'the apotheosis of blasphemy, indecency, and absurdity'.[19] Meyerbeer realised immediately on arrival that 'the performances in Covent Garden and Drury Lane have discredited the music of *Robert* in such a way that no one has much hope for [our] production at the Italian Opera', and his performers were forced by the Lord Chamberlain to perform in Italian.[20] London taste dictated in 1835 that Drury Lane give *La Juive* a happy ending (see the closing section of Chapter 13, and n. 59). But *The Harmonicon* had noted that 'the English give their sanction to the verdict pronounced in favour of the work [*Robert le Diable*] by a great and very critical nation [France]'.[21] Indeed, in adaptations tailored for the English palate, grand operas came to be widely admired by London audiences.

Covent Garden

Michael Lacy's rival adaptation of *Robert le Diable* as *The Fiend Father* helped to popularise opera at Covent Garden. Less faithful to the original, it was nevertheless well crafted and performed, and met with critical and public acclaim. The following year James Robinson Planché (the librettist of Weber's *Oberon*, 1826) reworked Auber's *Gustave III* (1833), and it enjoyed a lavish production just six months after its Paris première. Structural changes were made, as was to become usual in adaptations of grand operas at Covent Garden: it was reduced from five acts to three by omitting ensemble numbers and ballet music, and fundamental changes were made to the plot to satisfy the censor. Most significantly, the king's passion for Amélie, the wife of his close friend Ankastrœm – the pivot of the entire story – was seen as morally inappropriate. The role of lover was instead given to a new character, lieutenant-colonel Lillienhorn, and the role of the king was turned into a speaking part.[22] Moreover, Ankastrœm was recast as an ex-captain of the guards rather than as prime minister; the king is indeed assassinated, but the political thrust of the opera is thereby diffused.[23] Its combined effect of adultery, betrayal and regicide had to be tempered for London audiences, yet in spite of this dilution it was a huge success. The commentator J. E. Cox approved of Planché's 'anglicised' plot, and the critic for *The Athenæum* claimed that the staging 'surpassed not only in grandeur, but in chasteness and elegance, all that had ever been beheld either on our own or on the Parisian stage'.[24]

In spite of the popularity of *Gustavus the Third*, it was not until the arrival of Frederick Gye in 1848 that grand opera enjoyed consistent success at Covent Garden.[25] Partly in response to competition with Her Majesty's, and partly as a reaction to the precarious economic climate of opera production in the 1850s, Gye sought out successful Italian and French works on frequent visits to the Continent, and introduced them to the London stage.[26] Over a third of the new operas introduced in the first seven years of his directorship were French operas, performed in Italian; they included *Le Prophète* (1849), *La Juive* (1850) and *Benvenuto Cellini* (1853). During the early 1850s and again in the 1860s, performances of French opera at Covent Garden eclipsed those of Italian. Judging from his diary entries, it seems that Gye's interest in grand opera, and his reasons for establishing the genre at Covent Garden, were founded upon his belief that such operas embraced a particular aesthetic that appealed to London as much as Parisian audiences. *The Athenæum* described this: if Meyerbeer's melodies are sometimes thought to be 'trivial' or 'staccato' and his structures as 'ungainly', his colour and dramatic effects are highly praised by the English, and far more successful than Verdi's 'queer and harsh' music or Wagner's 'bizarre devices' that are appreciated only in Dresden. In sum 'grand opera is particularly congenial to the taste of the wide English public.'[27] They enjoyed the prevalence of melody and of dramatic tableaux, and Gye recognised the importance of good performers.

Yet in the moral climate of Victorian England certain subjects were still viewed controversially. For example, the 1847 production of *Roberto il diavolo* at Covent Garden reworked the ballet of debauched nuns that had so shocked Mount Edgcumbe. According to the printed libretto (though what happened in performance is unclear), the whole scene is condensed, the nuns are referred to simply as 'phantoms', and nowhere in the stage directions are they described as seducing Robert; rather, 'he finds himself surrounded by the Phantoms who impede his progress. They point out where lies the talisman, which he seizes, and breaking through the circle which they form round him, he departs.' This presumably satisfied religious decorum as far as the censor was concerned. The profound social divisions forming the mainspring of *Les Huguenots* could not originally be contemplated for public display in London. Planché claimed that he had visited Meyerbeer in Paris soon after the opera's première, and that the composer had agreed as follows: 'if you will . . . make such alterations in the catastrophe as may be necessary . . . to ensure its safety in London, I will recompose the last act for the English stage, direct the rehearsals, and conduct the opera for the first three nights'. But Planché apparently realised that no alteration would 'render the subject eligible for performance in England under the existing circumstances', and his plans to stage the work were abandoned.[28]

In addition to changes made in the interests of morality and politics, a structural affinity with Italian opera was apparently sought in the adaptation of grand operas.[29] In contrast to Bishop's relatively faithful adaptation of *Robert le Diable* for Drury Lane, versions staged under Gye's directorship of Covent Garden generally involved extensive reorganisation and abridgement, more in line with Planché's *Gustavus*. Although grand effects were retained, complicated ensembles and arias were simplified and rearranged (or omitted altogether) and minor characters were written out.

This is illustrated most strikingly in *Gli Ugonotti* (1848): Acts I and II were merged, Acts III and V were compressed, only Act IV remained intact; the performance time was reduced from four hours to three. The structure was simplified, and the focus fell on the principal soloists rather than the crowds.[30] For example, the Introduction – an expansive set-piece consisting of complex ensembles, choruses and solos – was reduced to a single, short ensemble, and the chorus was omitted from the Act I finale. In addition, the soprano role of the page Urbain was transposed for the contralto Marietta Alboni. These and other changes were based largely on (authorised) alterations made for the 1842 Berlin production, which illustrates how Meyerbeer actively recognised a need to adapt his works for their environment. He appears to have viewed such changes not as revisions, but simply as alternatives to be used when necessary.[31]

Contemporary perception of adaptations varied wildly, to the extent that apparently authentic versions were condemned while completely reworked operas were praised for their sympathetic alterations. For example, Charles Gruneisen was apparently outraged by the production of *Roberto il diavolo* at Her Majesty's in 1847, where he noticed Mendelssohn 'writhing in torture at the scandalous treatment of Meyerbeer's work', and he described its revival the following year as 'a base act of vandalism'.[32] Yet he admired the more heavily reworked staging of *Les Huguenots* for Covent Garden. It seems that Gruneisen (even taking into account his bias) and other commentators felt that the preservation of the spirit of a work was more important than its faithful reproduction.

By the end of the century, many of the same adaptations of Meyerbeer and others, made in the 1830s and 1840s, were still being performed with few changes. Shaw noted in 1891 that 'the present Covent Garden version of [*Les Huguenots*] is the result of a music-butchery perpetrated half a century ago . . . in accordance with the taste of that Rossinian period, the whistleable tunes were retained, and the dramatic music sacrificed'.[33] He suggested changes to bring the work into line with modern practices: first a few cuts, such as the 'silly ballet' of bathers in Act II, and then the restoration of certain elements such as the unaccompanied episode in the scene of the oath-taking. However, some fuller versions were already being performed before Shaw's time. The 1863 libretto of Manfredo Maggioni's adaptation of *Masaniello* for Covent Garden, for example, has five acts and is a near-complete version of Auber's opera.[34]

Towards a British grand opera

In 1834 Samuel James Arnold (re)opened the English Opera House at the Lyceum, for 'the presentation of English operas and the encouragement of indigenous musical talent'.[35] The theatre was leased to the flamboyant French conductor Louis Jullien in 1847–48 for the 'Royal Academy of Music, English Grand Opera', where foreign operas in English translation were performed, as well as new indigenous works. But the season was mismanaged and Jullien went bankrupt. His impetuosity and lack of practical expertise are described by Berlioz, who recorded in his *Mémoires* how Jullien proposed to produce *Robert le Diable* in just six days, without the necessary music, translation, costumes or scenery.[36] Although the venture as a whole failed, it was followed by a series of similarly short-lived enterprises.[37] The failure of such promising projects has been ascribed above all to the upper classes and their preference for – and patronage of – Italian opera.[38] Ultimately, artistic and financial rewards were to be gained from foreign rather than English opera.

Little attempt was made to create a distinctive English genre. Composers and authors tended to borrow the plots of foreign operas and to absorb aspects of the musical language of contemporary (mainly Italian) composers without developing an individual style. Such works consisted of spoken dialogue with melodically and harmonically straightforward music. However, during the 1830s the dramatic function of the music gradually began to evolve under the influence of Weber – whose *Der Freischütz* had achieved astonishing success in London – and French opera. Ensembles and arias became more extended and were used to propel the action forward, while the dramatic climax of an opera was frequently set partly or entirely to music.[39]

John Barnett (1802–90), who based *The Mountain Sylph* (1834) on the ballet *La Sylphide*, here produced the first opera to integrate music successfully into the drama in this way. Its use of melodramatic delivery and recurrent motifs in the Act I finale was indebted to the Wolf's Glen scene in *Der Freischütz*, and perhaps even to *Robert le Diable*.[40] The influence of grand opera is more evident in his later opera for Drury Lane, *Fair Rosamond* (1837). George Biddlecombe has noted specific similarities between the dramatic situation in the Act III finale and that of the Act I finale of *La Muette* (during a public ceremony the identity of the unwitting mistress's lover is revealed); the resulting musical correspondences include an anthem in *Fair Rosamond* that recalls Auber's prayer before the finale.[41] The use of ballet movements in Act IV and large choral tableaux in the finales is also clearly inspired by French models.

The Irishman Michael William Balfe (1808–70) is generally viewed as the only composer of English opera of any distinction in the 1830s and 1840s. His works, and those of his contemporaries, have been criticised for their lowbrow, popular appeal, use of popular song forms, frequent 'degeneration' into pantomime and Italianate melodies. Yet the same qualities can equally be found in grand opera, which so comprehensively combined such 'low' theatre techniques as *mélodrame* and vaudeville, with those from opera. Indeed, Balfe's light, Italianate style frequently recalls that of Auber, and his ballet movements and large choral scenes again suggest French inspiration.[42] Biddlecombe has identified stylistic examples of the influence of grand opera,[43] suggesting, for instance, that the choral scenes in *Joan of Arc* (1837) recall the imposing manner of Auber's and Meyerbeer's works. Furthermore, Balfe's most celebrated opera, *The Bohemian Girl* (1843), while clearly combining the traditions of English ballad opera and Italian opera, also draws on French models. Its use of an apparently authentic fifteenth-century Hussite melody was surely inspired by similar evocations of local colour in grand opera, such as Meyerbeer's use of 'Ein' feste Burg' in *Les Huguenots*. Furthermore, Auber's use of the *galop* in *Gustave III* presumably inspired Balfe's use of the dance as a ballet movement in Act I of his opera.

In the 1840s Balfe had more direct experience with French opera. He wrote a *grand opéra* for the Paris Opéra, *L'Etoile de Séville* (1845), and a new grand opera for London: for this, Alfred Bunn adapted Saint-Georges's libretto for Halévy's *La Reine de Chypre* as *The Daughter of St Mark* (a 'grand opera seria') which had a spectacular production at Drury Lane in 1844. Although in only three acts (and with a more positive ending), it retains many key elements of the original work: the interrupted wedding ceremony, barcarole, melodramatic music accompanying action, processions and divertissements, a patriotic duet, prominent use of the chorus and the simple juxtaposition of contrasting moods. Moreover, Biddlecombe has demonstrated that Balfe followed Halévy's setting of the text in specific ways: the duets in Act I (Adolphe and Catarina) and Act III (Adolphe and Lusignano) were originally identical in design to their French equivalents, although some material was later omitted.[44]

Balfe's contemporary Edward Loder (1813–65), who studied with Ferdinand Ries in Frankfurt in 1826–28, shows similar influences in his operas written for the English Opera House. And his *Raymond and Agnes* (1855, Royal Theatre, Manchester), based on an episode from Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, makes use of thematic recurrence and melodrama and involves a mute woman reminiscent of Auber's *La Muette*, albeit Weber was probably a more direct influence on him than Auber.[45]

Other composers active in London in the 1830s included Mendelssohn, who was keenly interested in dramatic music from an early age and was involved in two projected operas for London – neither of which was completed.[46] Mendelssohn's appreciation of the requirements of serious opera in London in the mid-1830s is shown in a letter to Planché:

> [I aim to compose] a kind of historical opera; serious but not *tragical* – at least, not with a tragic end: but as for dangers, fears, and all sorts of passions, I cannot have too much of them. I should also like it to have some persons, if not comical, yet of *a gay and lively* character in it; and last, not least, I wish for as *many choruses*, and as active ones, as you may possibly bring in. I should like to have a whole people, or the most different classes of society and of feelings, to express in my choruses, and to have them as a kind of model, I should say a subject between *Fidelio* and *Les Deux journées* of Cherubini would suit me most.[47]

In particular, Mendelssohn had a view of the kind of history he wanted; not only should it 'provide a lively background to the whole', but it should also 'in reminding us of history . . . [at] the same time *remind us of our present time*'; furthermore, 'every act of the opera [should have] its own effects, its own poetical point which comes to issue in the finale'.[48] This particular blend, familiar from Scribe's grand opera librettos, characterised most English operas written before the 1880s, and even later.

Some advances had been made by the 1860s. William Wallace's three-act *Lurline* (1860) is representative, and also illustrates Weber's continuing influence: it is based on the German legend of Undine, and includes spirits, naiads and a gnome in the cast, and spells and drinking-songs in the score. It also features large scene-complexes (particularly at the end of Act II), expansive orchestral effects, a fluid movement between duets, ensembles and choral passages and presents opposing choruses as well as ballets and a choral prayer. In some ways it recalls Auber's quasi-grand opera *Le Lac des fées* (1839) (see Chapter 10), which had been successful in London.

It was not, however, until the 1880s that anything resembling Meyerbeerian grand opera was created. Charles Villiers Stanford's three-act *The Veiled Prophet of Khorassan* (1877–79), first performed in Hanover in 1881 (as *Der verschleierte Prophet*), comes close to the spectacular and political works of the July Monarchy.[49] Adapted from a Persian tale from Thomas Moore's *Lalla Rookh* (1817), the opera opens with a procession that is interrupted by a report of the outbreak of war. A private love story is set against the public dimension of the fighting (though the two elements are not fully integrated), and various other ingredients common to grand opera are prominent: local colour, ballet and a dream sequence in a divertissement, prominent choruses, sometimes in opposition, and the stark juxtaposition of good and evil. The harmonic language is more advanced than the Rossini–Weber-derived language of Balfe and Wallace, but there are still many (closed) solo airs and duets.

After a command performance of his cantata *The Golden Legend*, Arthur Sullivan noted in his diary that Queen Victoria had said to him 'You ought to write a grand opera, you would do it so well!' Indeed in *Ivanhoe* (1891, Royal English Opera House), remembered as the 'only' English grand opera, Sullivan was apparently aiming, 'in the tradition of Gluck and Wagner' (and therefore of French grand opera too) at 'opera as drama'.[50] Yet, the work foundered on its grandness. Expense was spared neither for the complex staging nor for the performance (with an orchestra of sixty-three, a chorus of seventy-two and two hundred people on stage for the tournament scene). Its generally favourable critical reception was arguably disingenuous: Shaw described it as 'a good novel turned into the very silliest sort of sham "grand opera" ', and financial problems caused the theatre to close soon after.[51] *Ivanhoe* has been criticised for lack of unity in its panorama of events, and generally forgotten.

Perhaps the largest issue with which British opera was faced at the end of the century was the legacy of Wagner. The advance of Wagnerism undermined the status of Balfe and his contemporaries, as public demand turned away from melodic charm in favour of dramatic effectiveness and cohesion.[52] Finding a means of reconciling elements of Italian, German and French styles proved to be a recurring difficulty. A number of composers attempted to combine Wagnerian (or at least German symphonic) syntax with the eclectic approach of grand opera, and their works often had their premières (and success) in Germany rather than Britain. But the grand and ancient mythological plots of many operas tended to be let down, in the opinion of critics, by their musical execution. Frederick Corder's first opera, *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1879, Brighton), in four acts, had little success. Frederick Cowen's *Harold, or The Norman Conquest* (1895, Covent Garden) was apparently an unsatisfactory combination of lyrical number opera and quasi-Wagnerian synthesis.

Some composers were influenced by late nineteenth-century French composers. Shaw mentions George Fox, whose *Nydia* (1892) was based on E. G. Bulwer-Lytton's *Last Days of Pompeii*.[53] Although the music reminded Shaw of *Carmen*, many aspects of the opera recall the enduring influence of *La Muette*.[54] *Nydia* appears to illustrate particularly clearly the combined inspiration of grand opera and more modern musical influences that characterised most serious English opera of the time. Judging from Shaw's criticism it would also seem to exemplify the common failure to combine 'grand' subjects with suitable music. In his survey of English operas of the period, Nigel Burton notes a similar mismatch of styles, suggesting that Cowen's *Thogrim* (1890, Drury Lane) 'is neither a romantic, nor a lyric, nor a grand opera; there are elements of all three about it, but they are at war with each other'; in harmonic terms the opera 'does not advance beyond the Wagner of 1848'.[55] Stephen Banfield makes a similar point about Alexander Mackenzie's *Guillem the Troubadour* (1886, Drury Lane): the composer has failed to 'seize musico-dramatic opportunities', and the music is accordingly too slight for the drama and the conception.[56]

North America

Performances of French grand opera

From 1835 to mid-century, English opera was at the centre of theatrical life in the larger cities of America such as New York, Philadelphia and Boston, performed by visiting English singers and American troupes.[57] Indeed, until well into the 1840s American theatres operated as minor outposts of the London cultural sphere.[58] French and Italian operas were occasionally

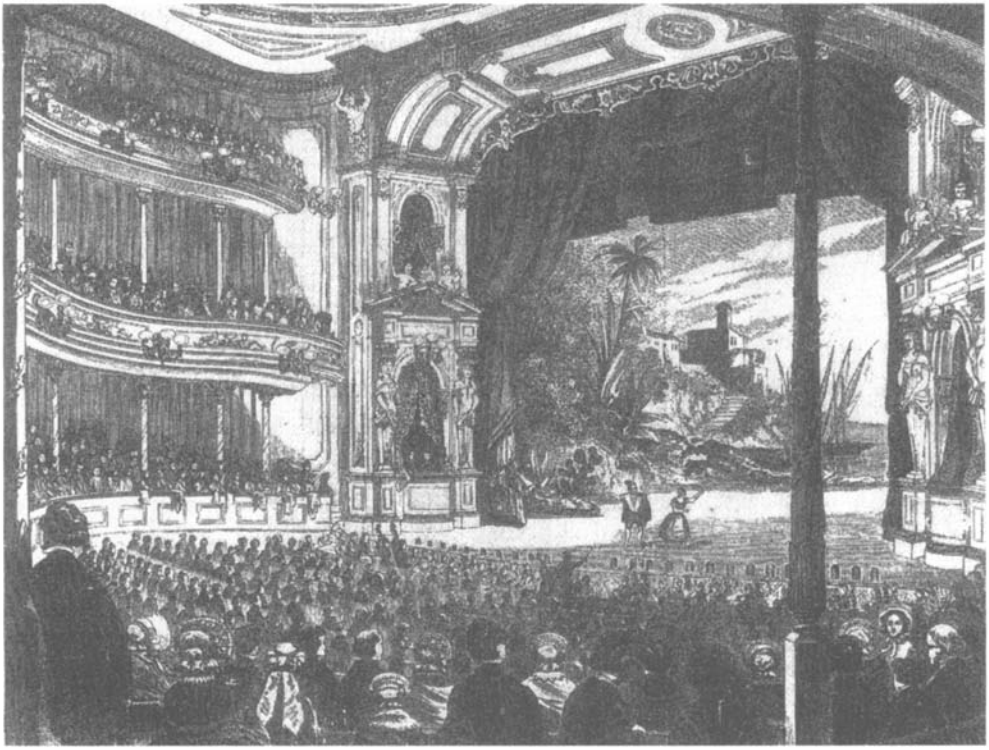

Figure 29 The rebuilt theatre at Niblo's Garden, New York, shown on 24 February 1855 in *Ballou's Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion.* Act II scene 4 of *La Muette de Portici* is in progress, Fenella explaining in mime to Masaniello (with iconic Phrygian cap) the tale of her ill-fated love affair. William Niblo of Ireland (1789–1875) first built his fashionable public garden and theatre in 1829, putting on all manner of good quality entertainments, opera (including some Meyerbeer) and concerts at reasonable prices. New Yorkers could also have seen opera at the Italian Opera House (1833–35), Palmo's Opera House (1844–48), the Astor Place Opera House (1847–52) and the Academy of Music (from 1854).

performed, frequently in English, with actors speaking some of the roles. Although these works were generally cut and modified, partly to suit local taste, partly because of the limitations of the theatre companies, this did not prevent more difficult and demanding works (including *Robert le Diable*, *Guillaume Tell* and *La Juive*) from being performed.

Gradually, non-English influences began to be felt more keenly on the East coast. First, Italian companies became increasingly popular. Then, in 1843, the Théâtre d'Orléans from New Orleans brought comic French opera and Donizetti to Niblo's theatre in New York. Two years later the company returned and established grand opera at the heart of its repertory: *Guillaume Tell*, *Robert le Diable*, *La Juive*, *La Muette de Portici* and *Les Huguenots*. The performances were apparently far superior to those of the visiting English companies that New York was used to, the seats were cheap, and the visit was an enormous success. The arrival of large numbers of European emigrants further influenced the cultural growth. Following the 1848 Revolutions in Europe an influx of German refugees settled first on the East coast and later in the Midwest.[59] After about 1855, other Europeans came to America in increasing numbers. Large opera houses were built, Italian (and later German) opera gradually replaced English-language opera, and numerous European singers toured the country.[60] All serious opera was known as 'grand opera' – whether by Auber or Meyerbeer, or by Verdi or Wagner – and it became popular with permanent and travelling companies who tailored their repertories to the available singers.[61] But it was only towards the end of the nineteenth century that American composers attempted to establish a national genre of serious opera, by which time the influence of grand opera had been filtered through more popular German, French and Italian models. Nevertheless, a fascination with grand themes emerged, with spectacular stagings reminiscent of July Monarchy opera.

New York

In New York and other cities on the East coast operas tended to be performed in Italian translation; as an imported British tradition this affirmed the perceived cultural superiority of opera in Italian. As Edith Wharton noted memorably in *The Age of Innocence*, with regard to a performance of Gounod's *Faust* at the Academy of Music: 'She [Marguerite] sang, of course, "*M'ama*!" and not "*he loves me*", since an unalterable law of the musical world required that the German text of French operas sung by Swedish artists should be translated into Italian for the clearer understanding of English-speaking audiences'.[62]

Although there was no permanent troupe until the 1880s, there were several important impresarios active in the city, and travelling companies and local troupes regularly performed. Italian opera dominated the repertory at the Academy of Music (the only venue dedicated to concerts and operas between 1854 and 1883) until the 1870s, but rivalry between two German-born conductors, Theodore Thomas and Leopold Damrosch, led to the active promotion of Wagner and other non-Italian composers. This culminated in 1884 with Damrosch's appointment as director of the Metropolitan Opera (which had opened the previous year) and a season of German-language opera.[63] He recruited singers and players from Europe, and so as not to alienate large sections of the opera-going public he included Italian and French operas (sung in German) alongside those of Wagner. Damrosch died just before the end of the season, but under the musical directorship of Anton Seidl the Metropolitan Opera continued with its programme of German-language opera. French grand operas, perceived as being closer to the Wagnerian aesthetic than Italian works, were frequently performed with success at this time. *Les Huguenots*, *Guillaume Tell*, *La Muette* and

La Juive, as well as Goldmark's grand opera *Die Königin von Saba* – all sung in German – were particularly popular throughout the 1880s and 1890s.[64]

San Francisco and New Orleans

In other parts of America grand opera's fortunes were similarly mixed. In general, Italian and English opera formed the core of most repertories. But the diversity of San Francisco's population (owing largely to the influx of immigrants following the 1849 gold rush in the neighbouring foothills of Sierra Nevada) inspired more adventurous programming.[65] Grand opera arrived in the city in the 1850s, but was not particularly popular, in spite of a certain amount of public curiosity. The travelling Bishop and Bochsa Company's productions in English of *La Muette* (1854) and *Robert le Diable* (1855), for example, had only modest success. A performance of *La Muette* in French, with Anna Bishop as Elvire, attracted a better house and was favourably received, but it was not repeated, perhaps because of the illness of another cast member. Similarly, although the first-night performance of *Robert le Diable* sold out and people were turned away from the doors, by the fourth performance the house was only half full.[66] It seems likely that the special effects created in the Paris productions of these works were well beyond the resources of the troupe, and there were no reports in San Francisco of the sorts of imaginative use of lighting that took place in Paris. This must surely have contributed to the lack of enduring success of these early grand operas.

The city in which the genre had a most sustained presence in the nineteenth century was New Orleans, owing in large part to its historical links with France.[67] A remarkable number of grand operas received their American premières in New Orleans, and many foreign singers performed there and returned home without visiting any other part of the country.

Robert le Diable was performed as early as 1834, and was the focus of rivalry between the American and French theatres in the city. James Caldwell secured the première, in English, at his Camp Street theatre with an orchestra of only fifteen players. It featured marvellous scenery and, to ensure good audiences, numbers were inserted into the opera performed by the minstrel 'Daddy' Rice, then at the height of his fame.[68] Six weeks later John Davis presented *Robert* in French at the Théâtre d'Orléans. Although the orchestra was larger and the production featured a greater number of dancers and chorus members, the singing, scenery and costumes were judged inferior by some critics. The opera was performed fifteen times in three months at the two theatres.

The Théâtre d'Orléans expanded and Davis took his company on important and influential tours of the North East of America (mentioned above). The company – which depended on the support of the Creole French population – introduced grand opera into the heart of its repertory, while Caldwell focused on Italian repertory. *La Muette* and *Robert* continued to be popular, and in 1839 Davis's company staged the American première of *Les Huguenots.* The first night audience was apparently not prepared for what seemed 'strange melodies' and 'lush instrumentation'. Nor were they used to giving sustained attention for what turned out to be five hours. Indeed a 'numbed bewilderment' rather than enthusiasm was apparently most in evidence at the first two performances.[69] Yet the demand for extra instruments and spectacular scenery meant that the production of such an opera was an impressive achievement, and the financial investment was presumably rewarded, as grand operas were staged with increasing success at the Théâtre d'Orléans and (from 1859) at its successor the French Opera House.

Towards an American grand opera

It was not until mid-century that American composers began to emerge, notably in and around New England. Even then, the Civil War disrupted much established musical culture and many composers went to Europe (usually Germany) to study. Inevitably, the few American operas written in the nineteenth century were based on European – usually Italian and German – models.

William Fry's *Leonora* (1845, Arthur Seguin's troupe, Philadelphia) is often described as the first American grand opera. In fact it drew on Italian models, and some of his other operas reveal more clearly the themes of French grand opera. *Aurelia the Vestal* (1841), for example, deals with the rise of Christianity and the clash of rival religions in the time of Constantine the Great, and features a large-scale ballet, although its musical syntax is still largely Italian.[70] In New Orleans, it has been argued, the programming of French operas acted as a disincentive for local composers to write new operas at all.[71] Although some new works were produced, they were usually in the French (mostly comic) tradition, written by Frenchmen. Eugène Prévost, for example, whose *La Esmeralda* (1840) was a favourite in the city, wrote mainly opéras comiques. The determined effort to keep opera as a cultural tie to France, and a tendency to import talent, surely contributed to this reluctance to write distinctive indigenous operas.

By the time American opera gained its own momentum towards the end of the century, grand opera's moment had passed; more obvious influences were Wagner, Realism and early modernism. For example, Walter Damrosch's first opera, *The Scarlet Letter* (1896, Boston), combined a score strongly influenced by Wagner with a naturalist plot (after Nathaniel Hawthorne) which focused on intense personal emotion. Following its

Boston première one critic noted that its score was 'heavy enough to suit the gods of Valhalla', and the incongruity of German music with an American plot was defined as its main fault.[72]

A more convincing example of an American grand opera – though its score demonstrated further obvious Wagnerian influences – was John Knowles Paine's *Azara* (1883–98; never performed). The plot centres on a classic conflict between Christians and Muslims, with the requisite opposing choruses, and a private story is set against the political background (although the two spheres are never truly integrated). It has a number of features characteristic of French grand opera, including a divertissement in which three Moorish dances provide local colour, a tragic finale with concluding choral prayer and recurring musical themes (rather than leitmotifs). Moreover, the use of pantomime and melodrama, and passages of orchestral music to accompany gestures, are reminiscent of *La Muette*.

One of the most highly publicised American operas was Victor Herbert's *Natoma* (1911, Philadelphia), set in 1820s California.[73] Herbert had ridiculed the pretensions of (French) grand opera – 'a bastard art which appalled the intelligence of all thinking people' – but he also admired its expressive power, 'its incredible eloquence in presenting human conflict'. His own modernistic opera, he claimed, would be 'a continuous logical and well knit stream of orchestral development of the dramatic action, but not [employing] the modernist methods of Strauss and Debussy'.[74] This blend of national history and a European style of music continued to characterise most American operas until World War I.

It was only in the last decades of the century, when Wagner became popular, that French grand opera was performed regularly in New York. But the enormous popularity of Wagner, linked to the fact that the major American opera composers were of German extraction, or had studied in Germany, ensured that grand opera had a mainly indirect influence on native opera.

Latin America

During the nineteenth century Italian opera dominated the repertories of Latin American opera companies and visiting troupes. Grand opera was rarely seen. The emergent tradition of native serious opera, closely linked to the expression of national independence, was consequently derived largely from Italian models, and only indirectly from French grand opera – and Wagner.[75] A number of composers travelled to Europe and experienced Wagner's music at first hand.

The 1870s in Italy saw the popularity of *opera-ballo*, the Italian equivalent of grand opera (see Chapter 19).[76] The emphasis in these works was on spectacle and history, though they did not tackle the historico-political confrontation favoured in grand opera. Wagner's dramas were increasingly seen as an intensification of the Meyerbeerian aesthetic and *Lohengrin* in particular helped to point the way forward for Italian opera in a post-fioritura period of development.[77] The influences of such Italian operas by Franchetti, Leoncavallo and others were seen in the compositions of Latin American musicians at the end of the century.

Brazil

When Pedro II became emperor of Brazil (1831–89) and political stability was established, Rio de Janeiro emerged as an important centre in Latin America for opera. Pedro was the grandson of Franz I of Austria, and he emulated the European courts, even protecting Italian opera between 1844 and 1856. Unsurprisingly, the repertory was dominated by Italian works. But those of Meyerbeer were occasionally performed, for example at the Teatro Dom Pedro II where Toscanini made his world début as a conductor with *Aida* in 1886; during the rest of the season he conducted occasional performances of *Les Huguenots* and *La Favorite* in a repertory dominated by the works of Verdi and Wagner.[78]

Native Brazilian opera began to emerge around the middle of the century. One of its most important figures was Antônio Carlos Gomes (1836–96); however, although his works were staged with success in Brazil, the majority received their premières in Italy, where Gomes lived from the mid-1860s. Though his operas often deal with national subjects their musical language is clearly derived from Donizetti and Verdi, and they are generally considered within the history of Italian rather than Brazilian opera (see Chapter 19 for a contextual discussion of five of his operas). *Il Guarany* (1870, Milan), an *opera-ballo* with emphasis on spectacle, includes the stylised music and dancing of Aimoré Indians: see Ex. 19.2 (p. 399).

Other Brazilian composers, many of whom had studied in Europe, modelled their serious works on Italian and German operas. For example, Leopoldo Miguéz (1850–1902) studied with Franchetti in Oporto, and visited Brussels in the early 1880s where he became acquainted with the music of Wagner, whose influence can be seen in *Os saldunes* (1901, Rio de Janeiro, in Italian), set during Caesar's campaign in Gaul. Similarly, Francisco Braga (1868–1945) studied at the Paris Conservatoire under Massenet and visited Bayreuth; these influences are apparent in his one-act opera, *Jupira* (1900, Rio de Janeiro, in Italian).

Argentina and elsewhere

In 1852–54 Prosper Fleuriet's company of French singers and orchestra went back and forth from Montevideo to Buenos Aires bringing to Uruguay and Argentina the first performances of a range of French operas, including *La Favorite* and *Guillaume Tell.*[79] Grand operas continued to be heard at the Teatro de la Victoria in Buenos Aires in the 1850s, and the Teatro Colón, Argentina's major theatre until 1888, also included grand opera in its repertory.

Native Argentinian operas tended to combine Italianate musical style with national history. Arturo Berutti (1858–1938), for example, acknowledged as the first nationalist Argentinian composer, studied in Leipzig and lived for a short time in Italy; his lyric dramas *Pampa* (1897) and *Yupanki* (1899), dealing with gauchos and Incas respectively, are essentially Italianate works (bearing the influence of Wagner via Italy) that draw on South American history.

In other parts of Latin America, the dominance of Italian opera was also seen and native works tended to develop models from Donizetti, Verdi, Leoncavallo and others. For example, the Mexican composer Cenobio Paniagua y Vasques (1821–82) set a libretto on a Huguenot theme by Felice Romani, *Catalina di Guisa* (1859), combining Italianate musical style with the epic quality of grand opera.

Conclusion

It is evident that French grand opera, adapted variously, was performed and enjoyed in Britain and the Americas during the major part of the nineteenth century. Grand opera's reliance on spectacular effects and large numbers of talented performers meant that it necessarily fared better in the repertories of permanent professional companies (notably at Covent Garden in London, at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, and at the Colón in Buenos Aires), but was also given in those of smaller troupes. It seems that the genre was admired for some of the reasons it was admired in Paris: the importance to the drama of visual effects, its Italianate lyricism, eclectic influences and epic qualities.

The genre's immediate success in London, as witnessed by the competing productions of *Robert le Diable* only months after the opera's première in Paris, and its continuing popularity throughout the century, are striking. But its radical political and sexual themes were often eliminated, and the resulting adaptations remain to be researched further. By the time that English serious opera was emerging in the 1880s there was still a fascination with grand themes, occasionally drawn from national history, but native composers tended to model their scores on early Wagner or on such later nineteenth-century French composers as Bizet and Saint-Saëns.

Contemporary and modern critics alike have been disappointed by the failure of British composers to develop the musico-dramatic possibilities of the librettos in the manner of grand opera.

In America grand opera was performed less frequently than it was in London. An important pocket of enthusiasm for the genre was New Orleans, where it was performed more consistently than anywhere else in North America. At the end of the century, following the opening of the Metropolitan Opera in New York, French grand opera (sung in German) became an important part of a repertory dominated by Wagner. In this context it is not surprising to find that serious American operas tended to deal with large themes – frequently drawn from national legends – in a musical style modelled on Wagner.

In Latin America, purely French grand opera was seen less often: Italian and Spanish opera dominated the repertories of most companies. Thus, native attempts at opera tended to be modelled on Italian works, emulating the eclectic nature of *opera-ballo*.

By the end of the nineteenth century, when examples of native grand opera were emerging in Britain and the Americas, it is difficult to distinguish the influence of Meyerbeer from that of later composers (not to mention the continuing sway of Weber and Rossini). However, the legacy of grand opera – its scale and spectacle, historical subjects and musical eclecticism – which more immediately influenced Verdi and Wagner, consequently served as the foundation for a host of national operas such as Stanford's *The Veiled Prophet*, Paine's *Azara* and Berutti's *Pampa*.