

*Some Desiderata and Goals for the Study of
18th-Century Italian Opera*

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It is only within the past two decades that opera seems to have emerged from its former lowly status as a step-child of musicology. A few scholars—notably, Romain Rolland, Egon Wellesz, Hugo Goldschmidt, H. C. Wolff, and Edward Dent—produced valuable studies of 17th-century opera, and H. Abert in 1919 brought out the first comprehensive general history. But the 18th and 19th centuries remained—and still remain—an all-but-impenetrable jungle except for a few clearings around the names of the "masters," especially Handel, Gluck, Mozart, Verdi, and Wagner. Recently, however, there are encouraging signs of progress: the 17th-century composers are being re-studied with modern techniques, and a few brave souls have even begun to bring order out of the chaos of the 19th century. But the 18th century still remains obscure, even though here too some encouraging beginnings are being made.

I suspect that there have been several reasons for this long-standing neglect: one perhaps is the idea that opera, that "impure" form of music, is a less respectable subject than, say, the early history of the symphony or the sonata; also, many historians may be still unconsciously laboring under the old notion that 18th-century Italian opera before Gluck was a regrettable episode best forgotten unless to heave a few objurgations at its "abuses"—this of course being easier than to find out what it was that unaccountably made these works flourish in a society which, one may suppose, was not made up altogether of intellectual and musical morons. But the main cause of our present ignorance of 18th-century Italian opera is more objective: it is simply the almost total lack of modern critical editions of the scores. Until such editions are available for at least a few composers beyond Handel, Gluck, and Mozart, we shall be in the position that, whatever general statements we may make about the history of Italian opera in this period, it will be almost literally the case that we don't know what we are talking about. The production of editions of operas by such composers as the Bononcini's, A. Scarlatti, Vinci, Leo, and Hasse (to mention only a few names

from the earlier half of the century) is the first order of business if we ever expect to make any real progress in this area.

Unfortunately, such editions are both laborious to prepare and extremely expensive to publish. On the latter point I have nothing to say here, but I do want to enumerate a few things that would make the actual preparation of an edition somewhat less uncertain and less wasteful of time than it is at present. It may be said that these desiderata are so obvious that it is hardly worth while to set them down, and that in any event they are not likely to be realized. Nevertheless, I shall list them, in the hope that someone who wants to earn the everlasting gratitude of his contemporary and future colleagues in the field of opera history may be moved to undertake one or another, or part of one or another, of the following publications:

1. A collective catalogue of scores with locations. (We may have this when RISM completes its series of manuscript sources.) Short of a collective catalogue, special catalogues: holdings of particular libraries, or full lists and locations of opera scores of individual composers.

2. The same for the printed librettos: in brief, bringing the Library of Congress catalogue up to date and applying the same high standards to cataloguing librettos in other libraries. Dr. Claudio Sartori has already such a card catalogue, which it is to be hoped he will soon be able to complete and publish. Indexes: by author, composer (if named), date, city, and printer.

3. Lists identifying librettists, singers, impresarios, scene designers, and patrons. (These could be included in No. 2 as additional indexes.)

4. Lists of "personaggi," perhaps combined with a dictionary of dramatic subject-matter and motives in the manner of Riemann's *Opernhandbuch*.

5. (a) Catalogue of music incipits. This is an opportunity for collective enterprise: the incipits to be expressed by all collaborators according to a uniform system adaptable to use in computers.

(b) Similar catalogue of text incipits.

6. Search of miscellaneous aria collections ("arie scelte" and the like) by individual effort or preferably by computer, with the aim of identifying either additional sources or settings of aria texts from operas, the music of which is not otherwise preserved.

7. Catalogue of 18th-century scribes, with description and illustrations of characteristic features of their handwriting.

8. Catalogue of papers used in manuscripts, with reproductions of watermarks; index of the latter, with places and dates insofar as determinable.

That will do for the present. I rather imagine the Last Judgment will be upon us before the above program is realized, but every little step toward it would be helpful. In the meantime, we had better get along with our editions, making use of whatever bibliographical or other aids are available, abandoning any idea of final, unsurpassable perfection and doing the best we can as soon as we can with what we have.

By way of conclusion, here are a few questions that may be answerable when we have a sufficient number of editions of representative 18th-century Italian operas:

1. It should be possible eventually to study and compare the opera repertoires of particular Italian cities in the 18th century. Among other matters, this would probably settle the question—which despite a number of recent assertions and revocations still remains unanswered—was there, in fact, such a thing as “Neapolitan” opera and if so how did it differ from opera in Rome, Venice, Florence, Milan, or other Italian cities, and how (if at all) did it affect other contemporary styles?

2. Comparative style studies of the music should provide a more secure basis than we now have for periodization of 18th-century opera. Does the “classical” period of *opere serie* begin after 1760, or is it already there as early as 1730? How long and in what cities did the older opera style as represented by A. Scarlatti maintain itself? To what extent, where, and when did the new style (of which L. Vinci may have been the first important representative) begin to supersede the old?

3. We lack at present any comprehensive study of the 18th-century *opere serie* libretto. What earlier or contemporary literary influences does it reflect? What was its influence on contemporary Italian literature? What is the relation between changes in the libretto and changes in the musical style of opera in the course of the 18th century?

4. How do these operas, text and music, relate to or reflect the social structure, manners, and ideas of their time or place?

5. What connection is there between opera and the early

18th-century symphony? Are the style and structure of symphonic movements derived from the opera aria? Did instrumental idioms in turn penetrate the vocal lines of opera?

The above few suggestions and questions are offered not as new or startling discoveries but simply as reminders of some of the work that lies ahead for historians of 18th-century opera.