

A BRIEF CONSUMERS' HISTORY OF OPERA

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It is easy enough to imagine doing a history of opera based on a succession of musical texts, or librettos, or, what is much more usual, a combination of these. A history of opera can also, as is frequently the case these days, consist of a history of performers and performing practices. But what about a history of how members of the audience engaged, or may have engaged, with what they heard and saw? As a preliminary sketch toward this sort of history, consider the following significant moments, each roughly a half century apart:

Monteverdi, *La favola d'Orfeo*, Mantua, Ducal Palace, 24 February
1607

What must they have thought, those noblemen of Mantua, as they witnessed the first performance of Monteverdi's *Orfeo*? Surely they were not aware that they were observing the birth of a new art form, one that would continue and evolve for at least four more centuries. Strictly speaking, however, this was not exactly the birth of opera, for several works - all of them attempts, in one way or another, to activate the theories about the rebirth of Greek drama enunciated by the Florentine Camerata - had been performed during the preceding decade. But Monteverdi's was something different from these earlier operas, whose continuous recitative strikes us as ultimately boring when we hear it revived today. For Monteverdi not only gave his recitative a dramatic intensity largely lacking in that of Caccini and Peri (who had both set to music this same ancient myth), but he also found a means of varying degrees of intensity with choruses and with lyrical

outbursts that looked forward to what would later come to be called operatic arias.

What frames of reference might this audience have had for what they were witnessing? If any had attended these earlier operas, would they have noted the difference in Monteverdi's use of this new medium? Would they, for instance, have heard the ways that the composer adapted the style of his madrigals - especially those of Books IV and V, published a few years before the opera - to create the lyrical interludes interrupting the recitative? And would they have seen the work primarily as a new embodiment - this one with continuous music instead of simply interspersed musical interludes - of that genre called pastoral drama, of which Tasso's *Aminta* and Guarini's *Il pastor fido* would have been most familiar? Or would they have seen it as similar to those myth-inspired musical spectacles called *intermedi* that characteristically were inserted between the acts of spoken plays during the preceding century? The day before the performance a Mantuan, Carlo Magno, in a letter to his brother in Rome, expressed the uniqueness of the occasion when he wrote, "It [*Orfeo*] should be most unusual, as all the actors are to sing their parts."¹ On that same day, in fact, a traditional play with *intermedi* had been performed as part of the carnival festivities.

It may well be that some in the all-male audience, composed of members of the local intellectual and social establishment, the Accademia degli Invaghiti, had attended one of the few earlier opera performances, perhaps the Rinuccini-Peri *Euridice*, which had been mounted in 1600 at the Pitti Palace in Florence to celebrate the wedding of Maria di Medici and King Henry IV of France. It is known that Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga of Mantua, the

¹ See Iain Fenlon, "Correspondence Relating to the Early Mantuan Performances," in John Whenham, ed., *Claudio Monteverdi: Orfeo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 170.

sponsor of Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, had been present on that occasion. Indeed, many early operas were commissioned to celebrate specific events such as weddings, as was Monteverdi's succeeding (and largely lost) opera, *Arianna*, composed for the wedding of Vincenzo's son Francesco and Margherita of Savoy a year after the *Orfeo* performance. Indeed, since many of the earliest operas were, like *Euridice* and *Arianna*, prepared for ceremonial occasions, *Orfeo* is exceptional for being planned simply as an entertainment for the local academy to celebrate the carnival season. To be sure, it received a second performance six days later so that it could be heard by the ladies of Mantua. And unlike most early operas, which were rarely repeated after their initial performances, *Orfeo* had a brief afterlife, including performances as far away as Salzburg - and with its original tenor, Francesco Rasi - a decade later. But soon after that it disappeared from the stage until the early twentieth century.

Yet much about those first *Orfeo* performances of 1607 remains uncertain. We happen to know a good bit about the difficulties of hiring a soprano castrato to sing some of the female roles because Duke Vincenzo's two sons happened to correspond with one another at the time - the younger son, Ferdinando, residing in Pisa at the time, while his older brother Francesco was in Mantua helping plan the performance. The cast was to be all male - not, to be sure, a requirement in Mantua as it was in Rome, nor was this a policy during the following year when an outstanding female singer, Virginia Andreini, created the title role in *Arianna*. Evidently the number of adequate castrati in the Mantuan choir was not sufficient for the new opera, and Francesco, as one learns from the correspondence, depended on his brother to arrange the loan of a castrato from the grand

duke of Florence, with whom the Gonzagas maintained close relations.² We know about this singer from the letters: he was named Giovanni Gualberto Magli; he sang La Musica and at least one other female character of whose identity we cannot be absolutely certain; and he initially was slow in learning his music, though ultimately he was praised for his performances.

Although the other singers were drawn from the ducal *concerto*, only one other can be identified with a particular role. This was Rasi, who, as a result of his success as Orfeo, might well count as the first opera star. Rasi was capable of doing quite elaborate ornamentation, as is evident from the ornaments indicated for Orfeo's third-act plea, "Possente spirito," in Monteverdi's published score; one might note, in fact, that the score also contains an unornamented vocal line for this aria on which singers less talented than Rasi could base their renditions. Otherwise, a number of the probable singers and instrumentalists can be identified, even if their particular roles remain in doubt. From a study of the voice ranges for individual parts, one can make reasonable guesses as to how these parts were doubled.³

Another mystery surrounding the *Orfeo* performance is where precisely it took place. When I visited the ducal palace in 1958, the guide took tourists up to the so-called Hall of Mirrors, which he identified as the site of this now-legendary event. I remember trying to imagine the first audience

² The correspondence between the brothers is reprinted, in both Italian and English, in *ibid.*, pp. 167-72.

³ For an exhaustive analysis of what parts were doubled and who likely sang which roles, see Tim Carter, "Singing *Orfeo*: on the Performers of Monteverdi's First Opera," *Ricerca* 11 (1999), 75-118. Carter also reproduces some enthusiastic accounts of Rasi's performances in various concerts and *intermedi* (pp. 83-85).

as it listened to passages familiar to me. But alas, recent excavations in the palace have unearthed another Hall of Mirrors that more accurately deserves that name, and, moreover, from other evidence it turns out that the *Orfeo* performance took place in still another part of the palace, though the exact room is not known with certainty.⁴

Yet the most teasing mystery surrounding the opera concerns the work's conclusion. The happy and thoroughly Christianized ending in which the hero's father Apollo leads him up to heaven to be reunited with his dead wife appears only in the score that Monteverdi published two years after the first performance. And since this score remains our only evidence for the music, it is this ending that must perforce be heard in the theater. Yet Alessandro Striggio's libretto, which had been published in time for the initial performance so that the audience, like people watching electronic supertitles today, could follow the words, ends tragically - with the Bacchantes, following Virgil's narration in the *Georgics*, cornering the hero in order to kill him in response to his condemnation of all women except for Euridice.⁵

How, one asks, did Monteverdi and his librettist come to change the ending as radically as they did? What must the violent initial ending have sounded like musically in comparison with the relatively tame conclusion that we know? Did generic considerations play a role? After all, the famed pastoral plays of Tasso and Guarini had counted as generically controversial

⁴ For a discussion of the evidence surrounding the Hall[s] of Mirrors and of the room in which the opera was likely performed, see Paola Besutti, "Spaces for Music in Late Renaissance Mantua," in John Whenham and Richard Wistreich, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Monteverdi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 76-94.

⁵ A translation of Striggio's libretto for Act Five can be found in *Claudio Monteverdi: Orfeo*, pp. 36-41.

since they occupied a middle ground between tragedy and comedy - indeed, the term *favola* used in the opera's title was sometimes applied to these works. Or was the ending changed between the two performances in Mantua to better suit the tastes of the ladies invited to the second one?⁶ Or, as has been speculated, was it changed for an intended third performance in 1607 to celebrate the visit (later canceled) of the Duke of Savoy - in which case the *deus ex machina* in the happy ending might have motivated an elaborate staging more appropriate for entertaining a distinguished visitor?⁷ Or might one see the Christianized ending, as Karol Berger has argued, as an allegory of music history, as a reassertion of the *prima prattica*, the sacred polyphonic mode that Monteverdi, in a famous controversy a few years earlier, had rejected in favor of his own, dissonant-rich, monodic "second practice"?⁸ In view of the musical power that this work still exerts on us, it keeps teasing us to fill in the uncertainties with speculations.

Cavalli, *La Calisto*, Venice, Teatro S. Aponal, 28 November 1651

Though among the most frequently performed seventeenth-century operas today, *La Calisto* failed badly in its first, brief run and, as far as is known, had no later performing history until well into the twentieth century. Since newspaper reviews did not yet exist, and since word of mouth rarely resulted in written records, one can only speculate about the opera's initial

⁶ See Carter, *Monteverdi's Musical Theatre* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 121.

⁷ Joachim Steinheuer, "Orfeo" (1607), in Whenham and Wistreich, eds., *Cambridge Companion*, p. 123, and Besutti, "Spaces for Music," *ibid.*, p. 86.

⁸ Karol Berger, *Bach's Cycle, Mozart's Arrow: An Essay on the Origins of Musical Modernity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), pp. 39-42.

failure. A recent book suggests that the absence of the lead alto castrato (who, in fact, died shortly after the premiere) discouraged attendance.⁹ A study of gender in Venetian opera of the period suggests that *La Calisto* “distorted” its audience’s “generic expectations,” for after teasing it “with a musical language that represents explicit female pleasure,” the opera is resolved in favor of “spiritual enlightenment,” while the spectators are left with “unfulfilled erotic yearnings.”¹⁰

There is, in fact, a good deal of guess-work necessary to understand that considerable body of work composed after the opening of the public operas houses in Venice beginning in 1637. Since the music (unlike the librettos) was not ordinarily published, the survival of Cavalli’s and other composers’ operas was dependent on the fact that certain patricians, most notably Marco Contarini, established collections of manuscript scores that have come down to us today.¹¹ Much of the knowledge we have of the circumstances surrounding the production of Cavalli’s operas, and of *La Calisto* in particular, comes from the discovery of the papers of Marco Faustini, the impresario of *La Calisto* and a number of his later operas.¹² Faustini was also the brother of Giovanni Faustini, the librettist of *La Calisto*

⁹ Beth L. Glixon and Jonathan E. Glixon, *Inventing the Business of Opera: The Impresario and His World in Seventeenth-Century Venice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 309.

¹⁰ Wendy Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence: Opera and Women’s Voices in Seventeenth-Century Venice* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), p. 219.

¹¹ On the Contarini collection of Cavalli’s scores, see Jane Glover, *Cavalli* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1978), pp. 66-72.

¹² Faustini’s notebook, as well as other archival sources, supplies much of the detail documented in Glixon and Glixon, *Inventing*.

and several of his earlier operas; as it turned out, this was the last work on which they collaborated, for Giovanni Faustini died of a fever at 36 just before the brief run of this opera concluded.

Although we have no evidence of how the early audiences reacted to *La Calisto*, Marco Faustini's papers, as well as other documents, provide considerable details about the performances. We know the names of the cast (including the castrato who canceled), the investors, the choreographer, and the designers of the scenery, machines, and costumes.¹³ We even have counts of audience attendance for this opera and other Cavalli works: whereas the few performances of *La Calisto* average barely a hundred out of a potential 450 each night,¹⁴ the other Cavalli operas did much better, many even getting performed in distant places such as Palermo and Naples, not to speak of various northern Italian cities;¹⁵ indeed, Cavalli's fame was so great that in 1660 he was invited to France by Cardinal Mazarin to compose the opera celebrating the marriage of Louis XIV and Maria Teresa of Spain.

Especially telling are the records discovered in Marco Faustini's account books on the expenses devoted to different aspects of his productions. Since *La Calisto* moves between heaven and earth, with gods ascending and descending frequently during the action, we find directions for objects such as "chariot of Diana, which goes up the mountain, that ascends and descends," or "descent of Jove and of Mercury, that should also have three different façades; to ascend with three persons, and should also serve for the descent of Iris."¹⁶ As in much Baroque theater throughout Europe, audiences craved the spectacles that stage machines could create, and the

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 326.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 353.

¹⁵ See the list venues in Glover, *Cavalli*, pp. 160-62.

¹⁶ Glixon and Glixon, *Inventing*, p. 264.

Calisto plot, with its various gods going back and forth between realms, offered especially fertile opportunities.

Just as expense was evidently not spared on the visual effects, impresarios during the period were able to keep their costs in line by maintaining small instrumental ensembles. (By contrast the sizable orchestra that a court opera such as Monteverdi's *Orfeo* boasted was not viable in a profit-oriented institution.) Thus, Marco Faustini's account book for the 1651-52 season, during which *La Calisto* was performed, reveals payments to the first keyboard player (the composer himself), a presumed second keyboard player, a theorbist, and three string players.¹⁷ Skimpy by later standards, surely, but with good singing and exciting staging, this must have sufficed for mid-seventeenth-century audiences - as it does again today for the authentic-music consumer and as exemplified by the William Kentridge production of Monteverdi's *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria* discussed in Essay Four.

Whatever the reasons that *La Calisto* was less appreciated than most of Cavalli's other operas, it speaks to our present-day taste in an uncommon way. Note, for example, how Giovanni Faustini has rewritten and eroticized Ovid's brief account of the title character's rape by Jupiter. In both accounts Jupiter disguises himself as Diana, to whose band Ovid's Callisto belongs, in order to get hold of his prey. Yet Ovid maintains a gentle irony throughout the tale: Callisto is embarrassed and rattled by the experience, and the real Diana, noticing that her nymph has been violated, throws her out of the group. Faustini and Cavalli, by contrast, exploit the situation's comic possibilities - even to the point of grossness: Jupiter in drag raises his baritone voice to the soprano register (it is unknown whether the original singer used falsetto or had the real Diana sing his part); Calisto thoroughly

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 350.

enjoys Jupiter's act, expressing her gratitude to the real Diana - quite graphically, in fact - for the sexual excitement that the latter has supposedly given her; and Diana, not understanding what has happened to her charge, rebuffs her for her forwardness. The jealous Juno's eventual entrance complicates the comic plot even further, while the Satyr who circulates among the various characters adds *commedia dell'arte* tricks to undercut whatever pretences they may voice.

But Faustini and Cavalli have added even more complications by introducing the romance between Diana and Endimione - and, as though that were not enough, by adding the god Pan as still another of Diana's suitors. Yet the farcical elements are counterbalanced throughout by the most high-flown lyricism. Endimione's music in particular has a ravishing effect on the listener even when the latter recognizes the absurdity of his pleas. The predictably serious Diana is counterbalanced in turn by her nymph Linfea - performed in drag by a low-voiced male - who expresses her sexual longings with comic frankness.

Throughout the opera the raunchy coexists with the serious in a way that communicates easily with audiences of our own time, as it likely would not have (even if the score had been known) during the intervening centuries. Yet the ideas on gender voiced in *La Calisto* and in many other mid-seventeenth-century operas can be found in Venetian discourses of the period, for instance, those of Giovanni Francesco Loredano, who at one point, as Wendy Heller puts it, "justifies rape (or at the very least vigorous seduction) as a male prerogative."¹⁸ The amoral stance often attributed to Busenello and Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea* finds parallels in the

¹⁸ Heller, *Emblems*, p. 54.

writings of the Accademia degli Incogniti, whose ideas permeate many librettos of the period.¹⁹

The balance of comic and serious characteristic of *La Calisto* is echoed as well by the balance of recitative and aria in this and other Cavalli operas of the early 1650s. By the end of his long career (he composed some forty operas) audiences had started to demand a higher proportion of vocal display, with the result that the aria came to dominate Italian opera, as it would for the following two centuries and more. But in *La Calisto* arias remain short, and, though their texts are different metrically from the intervening recitative, the latter does not sound as musically distinct from aria as it would later be in the form we call *opera seria*. In this opera the drama seems to flow in a seamless manner, with Cavalli's fertile musical imagination moving easily between the explanatory recitative and the lyrical effusions continually interrupting it.

But *La Calisto* represents still another kind of historical moment, for in the Venetian public opera of its time Italian theater most closely approximates the Elizabethan theater and that of the Spanish so-called Golden Age: all these legendary theatrical periods are characterized by an inclusiveness of various elements - of comic and serious, of class diversity

¹⁹ See the chapter entitled "*Bizzarrie femminile*," *ibid.*, pp. 48-81. Heller also shows how the nun Arcangela Tarabotti countered many of the antifeminist ideas emanating from the Accademia (pp. 57-68). On *Poppea* and the Accademia, see also Iain Fenlon and Peter N. Miller, *The Song of the Soul: Understanding 'Poppea'* (London: Royal Musical Association, 1992) and Ellen Rosand, *Monteverdi's Last Operas: A Venetian Trilogy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), pp. 333-37 and 373-75.

within the audience,²⁰ of an unselfconscious ease with which the supernatural world intersects with the mortal one. In Italy as well as in France, musical drama was exempt from the classical strictures that shaped spoken drama. It remained, to be sure, a brief moment, for opera was soon to adopt a new set of conventions in which, for better and worse, the comic and serious were to go their separate ways and in which audiences as well were to segregate themselves by money and class.

Handel, *Rinaldo*, London, Queen's Theater, 24 February 1711

If generations of English majors have come to believe that opera is a ridiculous art, this may well result from their reading of those much-anthologized remarks by Addison in *The Spectator* following the first performance of *Rinaldo*. Addison's famous attack is aimed not at the music but, first, at the Italian text, which he finds "florid" and full of "tedious Circumlocutions" and, second, at the elaborate theatrical spectacle, which he labels "Childish and Absurd."²¹

Addison scores his most telling attack on the opera in an incident regarding the sparrows that were released on the stage. Seeing an "ordinary Fellow carrying a Cage full of little Birds upon his Shoulder" on the street, he asks "what Use he would put them to," only to learn "he had been buying Sparrows for the Opera." After the fellow's friend, "licking his Lips,"

²⁰ On the audience makeup in the Venetian public theaters, see Glixon and Glixon, *Inventing*, pp. 295-322. Although not as diverse as those in Elizabethan England or Golden Age Spain, Venetian audiences included the middle class as well as the nobles who rented the tiers of boxes.

²¹ Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), vol. I, pp. 26, 23. For Steele's quite similar take on *Rinaldo*, see *ibid.*, pp. 63-65.

asks if they “are to be roasted,” he is told “No, no, . . ., they are to enter towards the end of the first Act, and to fly about the Stage.”²² As it turns out, although the birds perform their stunt as scheduled, the audience, Addison tells us, is actually being tricked by the sounds supposedly emanating from them. These sounds are nothing more than a deception or, to use a contemporary term, they are the result of “special effects,” for they come from “a Consort of Flagellets and Bird-calls which was planted behind the Scenes.”²³

Despite Addison’s gleeful exposure of this illusion, the audiences who flocked to *Rinaldo* were wildly appreciative. Although this was Handel’s first of some forty operas composed for London, *Rinaldo* enjoyed more performances over the years than any other of his operas - with revivals each year for the following four years, productions in Naples and Hamburg, and a much-revised London version in 1731.²⁴ Indeed, the special effects around which Addison’s satire centered account for much of the work’s popularity. Spectacle was something that audiences in Italy had demanded - often at the expense of other elements, above all, of the orchestra - ever since the beginnings of public opera in Venice during the 1630s. But though Italian opera was still relatively new to England when *Rinaldo* was produced, spectacle had been central to English theater from the Jonsonian masque to Purcell’s so-called “semi-operas.”

²² *Ibid.*, p. 24.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ For a list of performances, see Reinhold Kubik, *Händels Rinaldo: Geschichte, Werk, Wirkung* (Neuhausen-Stuttgart: Hänssler-Verlag, 1982), pp. 18-21. After 1731 there is no record of any performances until 1946. Indeed, after Handel’s own time none of his operas was revived until about 1920.

The choice of text for this opera was motivated by the opportunities it offered for spectacle. Though named after its hero, it is centered equally around its major female character, Armida, whose magical powers allowed its producer, Aaron Hill, to conjure up a multitude of effects, both of a theatrical and vocal nature. The visual effects include an amazing variety of situations - characters suddenly disappearing into thin air or being transformed into other characters; the heroes being met by monsters with lit torches; flames, smoke and thunder rising from a chasm; Armida singing as she flies through the air in a chariot drawn by two dragons. Armida, whose music ranges from the seductiveness with which she entices Rinaldo to the rage she displays once that he has abandoned her, enjoyed almost a century and a half of popularity on the operatic stage in the hands, successively, of such major composers as Lully (1686), Gluck (1777), Haydn (1784), and Rossini (1817) - with Dvorak offering a belated footnote in his little-performed version of 1904. Some twenty-four years after *Rinaldo* Handel was able to resurrect Armida's magical properties, as well as her emotional range, in the figure of Alcina, the Ariosto character whom Tasso had imitated for his *Gerusalemme liberata*, from which Hill drew his scenario. Both Ariosto's and Tasso's epics counted for audiences as popular romance, much as science fiction movies do today. Addison, after mentioning the opera's "Thunder and Lightning, Illuminations, and Fireworks," displayed his highmindedness by citing "Monsieur Boileau, that one Verse in *Virgil*, is worth all the *Clingant* or Tinsel of *Tasso*."²⁵

Entertaining though Addison's attack on *Rinaldo* and, in effect, on Italian opera in general may be, readers of *The Spectator* were also likely aware of a certain special interest on the part of both Addison and Steele. Addison was still disappointed by the failure of his English opera *Rosamonde*

²⁵ *The Spectator*, vol. I, pp. 25-26.

in 1707, and Steele was known for having a financial interest in a rival theater and had rented a concert room to promoters who could only be hurt by Handel's success. Charles Burney, in his *General History of Music* of 1789, by which time Addison and Steele had come to count as classic writers, devotes more than half his discussion of *Rinaldo* to these conflicts of interest: "We should not forget," Burney admonishes his readers, "who were the authors of the *Tatlers* and *Spectators*, nor how they were circumstanced."²⁶

At the time *Rinaldo* was first produced, Italian opera - not to speak of Handel himself - was still a novelty in London. Although Italian singers had been performing there for half a decade, they usually sang in intermezzos between the acts of plays. The first full-length opera known to have been sung entirely in Italian, *Almahide*, dates from only a year before *Rinaldo*.²⁷ By the time *Rinaldo* was produced, the two London theaters had divided their missions to assign Italian opera to the Queen's Theater in the Haymarket and English drama at Drury Lane. Unlike most of Handel's later ventures, in which the composer served as entrepreneur and manager of his own productions, the *Rinaldo* project was wholly in the hands of Aaron Hill, who hired an Italian librettist, Giacomo Rossi, to turn his scenario into verse and organize it according to the conventions of *opera seria*. Handel, not yet the great cultural icon he was to become over the years in London, was still a hired hand - at this point known mainly for the fact that he had had some success working in Italy during the preceding years and had recently been appointed music director by the Elector of Hanover, who, as the London

²⁶ Charles Burney, *A General History of Music: From the Earliest Ages to the Present Period* (1789), ed. Frank Mercer, 2 vols. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, [1957]), vol. II, p. 675.

²⁷ See Kubik, *Händels Rinaldo*, p. 44.

public was quite aware, was waiting in the wings for the death of Queen Anne, whose successor he was scheduled to be.

Handel was still so little known to the public that Rossi, in his introduction to the libretto, which members of the audience, like our own contemporaries reading supertitles, customarily bought in order to follow the words (printed in both Italian and English), sought to bolster the composer's reputation by referring to him as the "Orpheus of our Age," a phrase that gave Addison the opportunity for another pot-shot when he dubbed the composer with the German moniker "Minheer *Hendel*" and then made fun of the librettist for claiming, "in the same Sublimity of Stile, that he [Handel] Composed this Opera in a Fortnight."²⁸

Although Addison had nothing to say about the music as such, the rapid composition of *Rinaldo* may well have been due to the fact that, since he was playing to an audience unacquainted with his work in Germany and Italy, he could draw from his large store of earlier music. As a result, a large proportion of the opera consisted of revisions of arias and instrumental movements from earlier operas, cantatas, oratorios, sonatas and the like. Although he continued to borrow from his German and Italian work throughout his career (as well as from other composers!), no Handel opera contains as much of his earlier work as *Rinaldo*.²⁹ One aria, for example, Almirena's "Bel piacere," is almost identical, in both words and music, to an aria for Poppea in Handel's preceding opera, *Agrippina*, composed for Venice little over a year before; most of the other arias and duets, to be sure, were

²⁸ *The Spectator*, p. 26.

²⁹ David R. B. Kimbell, introduction to Handel, *Rinaldo: opera seria in tre atti*, ed. Kimbell (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1993), p. XII. For a comprehensive list of Handel's borrowings in *Rinaldo*, see Kubik, *Händels Rinaldo*, pp. 103-105.

given substantial revisions. (One might note that originality did not emerge as a serious aesthetic criterion until a few decades later.)

Yet even if the audience had been aware of these borrowings, this fact would surely not have diminished the opera's success, for people had attended *Rinaldo* for largely two reasons, the spectacle and the virtuoso singers, above all, the great castrato Nicolini in the title role. And Handel's role as composer may have been less in the minds of this audience than his improvisations at the harpsichord, especially, as Burney tells us, at the end of the second act when Handel, according to Burney, "must have captivated by the lightness and elasticity of his finger."³⁰ And this audience must also have applauded the thoroughly happy ending that Hill arranged when the evil sorceress Armida and her lover, the Muslim king of Jerusalem, Argante, not only get married but also convert to Christianity - a resolution that even the pious Tasso chose not to pursue in his poem. But then, as Addison reminds us at the start of his attack on *Rinaldo* (and as recent experiments in neuroscience, as I point out in Essay Five, suggest of music in general), an opera's "only Design is to gratify the Senses, and keep up an indolent Attention in the Audience."³¹

Rousseau, *Le Devin du village*, Fontainebleau, 18 October 1752

What we know about *Le Devin du village* comes mainly from the composer's mouth. Rousseau was above all a verbal being, familiar to us today in his diverse roles as political theorist, philosopher, polemicist, memoirist, and novelist. Throughout his life, however, he considered his official profession that of a musician, in particular, of a music copyist. And for a few years during the 1750s he was best known for his brief opera *Le*

³⁰ Burney, *General History*, vol. II, p. 674.

³¹ *The Spectator*, vol. I, pp. 22-23.

Devin du village, which, though regularly performed in Paris until well into the nineteenth century, is familiar today not through its music but from its composer's detailed description of its genesis and first performance in his *Confessions*.³² Up to then the only literary work that had brought him attention was the so-called First Discourse, which, published less than two years before the opera's premiere, startled his contemporaries by contending that the development of the arts and sciences had proved detrimental to humanity.

The premiere of *Le Devin du village* took place at the royal castle of Fontainebleau in the presence of the king and queen and their entourage. The composer makes a point of his awkwardness, his inappropriate dress, and his general lack of ease in this company; as always throughout his life, he was the outsider who had managed to charm his way into circles far beyond his assigned place in a closed social world. And yet the opera in both its text and music, like the discourse he had published earlier, argues against artifice and social hierarchies in favor of simplicity and naturalness. With its village characters it belongs to the tradition of pastoral drama - yet these are supposedly "real" country folk in contrast to the mythical characters peopling such earlier works as Tasso's *Aminta* and Monteverdi's *Orfeo*. Rousseau's plot revolves around the conflict of love and social class, for the heroine, Colette, seeks out the local soothsayer, to help her win back her suitor, Colin, who has been tempted by a woman of a higher social order.

Simplicity in all forms - a simple story about simple people singing simple tunes set against simple harmonies - dominates *Le Devin du village* throughout. Despite its popularity, it has invited little but disparagement from musical scholars. As a recent study of Rousseau's music puts it, "The

³² See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*, trans. J. M. Cohen (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953), p. 344-61 (Book Eight).

harmonic construction is rather banal, the keys employed are few."³³ And certainly if one compares this opera to Mozart's *Bastien et Bastienne*, composed to a text that parodied *Le Devin du village*, one quickly recognizes that Mozart's musical sophistication, even at twelve, the age in which he wrote his version of this pastoral tale, went considerably beyond Rousseau's. But it is easy enough to disparage philosophers who also try to compose music: the compositions of Rousseau, Nietzsche, and Adorno, however modest their place within the history of music, remain eminently listenable - indeed, Gustav Mahler once felt the need to call Nietzsche "a far better composer than was generally acknowledged."³⁴

Whatever the limitations of Rousseau's harmonic palette, his melodies have proved infectious. Louis XV is known to have hummed tunes from the opera in a croaky voice the day after the performance - he even invited the composer for an audience, though Rousseau refused, partly because he feared being embarrassed by his chronically irritable bladder, also because he dreaded becoming obligated to the monarch if the latter, as he expected, offered him a pension.

The infectiousness that the opera's first listeners at Fontainebleau experienced was felt throughout the musical world of Paris once it opened at the Opéra the following March 1. (I myself can testify to this phenomenon: ever since I heard a recording of *Le Devin de village* over fifty years ago, two melodies - Colette's plangent entrance aria and Colin's rousing "Quand on sait aimer et plaire" - have continued to pester my brain.) The insidiousness of Rousseau's tunes can be attributed partly to the style that he had adopted for this opera, for he was imitating the manner of Italian

³³ Amalia Collisani, *La musica di Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Palermo: L'Epos, 2007), p. 112.

³⁴ See Henri-Louis de La Grange, *Gustav Mahler*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press) vol. III (1999), p. 399n.

comic opera, whose tunefulness was still foreign to French ears, accustomed as they were to the harmonic complexities of Lully and Rameau.

Rousseau had first experienced Italian music while serving as secretary to the French ambassador to Venice some nine years before, when he quickly overcame what he called his "national prejudice against Italian music."³⁵ And it is also possible that he attended a performance of Pergolesi's *La serva padrona* when this opera was brought to Paris by an Italian troupe in 1746. Soon after *Le Devin du village* he wrote his "Letter on French Music," which, besides arguing that the Italian language is more suitable for musical setting than French, insists on the primacy of melody over harmony.³⁶ This letter, together with *Le Devin du village*, became a central text in the so-called Guerre des Bouffons, which followed the controversial visit of an Italian troupe from 1752 to 1754 that performed a series of Italian comic operas, among them *La serva padrona*, which excited the public far more than during its earlier run.

"All Paris divided into two camps," Rousseau writes, with the advocates of French music "made up of the great, the rich and the ladies," while those in the Italian camp, to which Rousseau and his opera belonged, included "true music lovers, talented people, and men of genius."³⁷ Rousseau tells us that they even had party names, the "King's corner" (for the French advocates) and the "Queen's corner" (for those who sided with Italian opera) that derived from the fact that each party sat under either the king's or the queen's box at the Opéra. The Guerre des Bouffons is an early example of those operatic wars which, like that between the advocates of Gluck and Piccinni during the late 1770s, and between Wagner and Verdi a

³⁵ See Rousseau, *Confessions*, p. 294.

³⁶ See Michael O'Dea, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Music, Illusion and Desire* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), pp. 26-33.

³⁷ Rousseau, *Confessions*, p. 358.

century after that, allowed national and personal biases to play out in bloodless verbal battles over musical and dramatic style.

However shrill Rousseau may have sounded in his advocacy of Italian over French music, *Le Devin du village* remains a recognizably French opera. After all, despite his rejection of French as a language for musical setting, he chose to write his text in his native language. And although nobody would mistake it for, say, the music of Rameau, Rousseau's manner at times sounds more French than Italian. The overture is distinctly in the French style, and after the Fontainebleau performance Rousseau added a typically French divertissement at the end for the performances at the Opéra. Moreover, this divertissement, with its celebration of villagers coming together communally, anticipates some of the great and characteristic scenes in Rousseau's later writing, for example, the country festivities in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and the vision of celebrating free citizens in which the *Letter to d'Alembert* culminates.³⁸

The ease with which *Le Devin du village* communicated musically with its early listeners can be related to the way the characters are made to communicate with one another. The soothsayer, by dint of his ability to look into the hearts of the two lovers, illustrates a key tenet of Rousseau's - that sympathy allows us to look into the psyche of others and to identify with their plight.³⁹ Through the infectiousness of the music, one might add, the audience quickly becomes involved in the world of the characters, to whom it grants its sympathy.

In retrospect, however, the pastoralism of *Le Devin du village* may not seem quite as natural as it once did. In its time it helped establish Rousseau

³⁸ See Collasini, *La musica*, pp. 106-9.

³⁹ Downing A. Thomas applies Rousseau's notion of sympathy to *Le Devin du village* in *Aesthetics of Opera in the Ancien Régime, 1647-1785* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 206-14.

as the great prophet of nature, whose later writings, together with his real-life "back-to-nature" sojourns, have nourished a long series of revolts against civilization such as the utopian movements of the nineteenth century and the hippiedom of the 1960s.

From a later vantage point the simple shepherd's life that Colin and Colette lead has less in common with what we today see as natural than it has with that more theatrical form of shepherding that Marie Antoinette and her court pursued in the *hameau* that the queen constructed at Versailles. With their country costumes and buildings imitating those of real villages, these last representatives of the *ancien régime* could play-act what they had witnessed in paintings and in Rousseau's little opera.

Just as the operas of Lully long outlived the court of Louis XIV for which they were created, so *Le Devin du village* maintained its place in the repertory of the Opéra long after the world that first cheered it had been replaced by a succession of new political orders. The end came suddenly when, in 1829, after well over 500 performances and just a year before the Restoration came to a close, somebody tossed a powdered wig onto the stage.⁴⁰ This *coup de grâce* was a reminder that this opera now appeared to be just another artifact of the *ancien régime* - a neat irony in view of the key role that Rousseau had played in undermining that very regime.

Rossini, *Tancredi*, Venice, Teatro La Fenice, 6 February 1813

It contains what is likely the most insidiously obsessive tune in all opera, the "Di tanti palpiti" with which the *en travesti* hero brings his/her entrance aria to its rousing conclusion. Now that *Tancredi* gets but rarely performed, other operatic tunes are doubtless more familiar, *Rigoletto's* "La

⁴⁰ See J. G. Prod'homme, "Les dernières représentations du "Devin de Village" (Mai-Juin 1829)," *La Revue Musicale* 7 (August, 1926), 118-125.

donna è mobile," for example, or the *Carmen* habañera, which made its way into children's TV programs, or the two-women duet from Delibes' otherwise little-performed *Lakmé*, whose cunningly orientalist tune was used in British Airways commercials to lure listeners into making exotic travel arrangements. But for the few decades during which *Tancredi* held the stage "Di tanti palpiti" had become the stuff of legend, with gondoliers supposedly using it to serenade their tourists through Venetian canals, or with courtroom trials interrupted by humming spectators, while in subsequent years it continued in instrumental arrangements by various composers⁴¹ - until a new opera aesthetic represented, in their differing ways, by Verdi and Wagner, brought Rossini into eclipse, with the *coup de grâce* administered by the wicked parody in the tailors' chorus during the final scene of *Die Meistersinger*. Yet once this persistent tune enters the mind it assumes the characteristics of what Oliver Sachs, writing as a neurologist, calls a "brainworm,"⁴² as I myself can testify, for it has plagued me day and night throughout the time I have been preparing this section.

Yet *Tancredi* is notable for much more than this lilting cabaletta, for the opera was Rossini's first major success. Though the tenth of his operatic works (some, to be sure, were less than a full evening's fare), it quickly made its way from one opera house to another and imprinted the Rossini style, with its high volume and its brash rhythms, in the minds of the international opera public. The famous opening lines from Stendhal's *Life of Rossini*, "Napoleon is dead, but a new conqueror has already shown himself to the world; and from Moscow to Naples, from London to Vienna, from Paris

⁴¹ See Heather Hadlock, "Tancredi and Semiramide," *The Cambridge Companion to Rossini*, ed. Emanuele Senici (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 157.

⁴² Sachs, *Musicophilia*, pp. 41-48 (see Essay One for another example).

to Calcutta, his name is constantly on every tongue,"⁴³ not only indicates the hold he exerted on his listeners but also presents him in the guise of a military conqueror - scarcely an accident, for *Tancredi* was Stendhal's favorite among Rossini's many operas, and Tancredi himself is a conquering hero.

In eighteenth-century *opera seria* a heroic figure such as Tancredi would have been performed by a castrato, but by Rossini's time the castrato had become a dying breed. Later, during the same year as *Tancredi* the composer actually wrote a part for a castrato, namely, the Arsace in *Aureliano in Palmira*, performed by Giambattista Velluti, who is now seen as the last of the major castrato opera singers. The memory of these singers lingered in Rossini's mind, as it did for most members of his audience. Though written for the low female voice, the role of Tancredi, like that of many later *en travesti* roles, was surely meant to awaken these memories for its listeners. Indeed, when, many years back, I saw Marilyn Horne come onstage - sword in hand and clothed in full battle regalia - for Tancredi's entrance aria, I told myself that this was the closest I should ever get to experiencing what I fancied must be the castrato voice. As Tancredi declared his love for Amenaide and built toward the irresistible "Di tanti palpiti" in which the aria culminates, Horne sang with the vocal power, and also with the unbelievable agility, that called to mind what I had read about the famed castrati.

When Stendhal wrote his book on the composer a decade after the *Tancredi* premiere, Rossini had just finished his last Italian opera, *Semiramide*, before launching into his brief career as a composer of French opera. For Stendhal none of the works after *Tancredi* exudes the special charm of this early opera, which he characterizes with terms such as

⁴³ Stendhal, *Life of Rossini*, trans. Richard N. Coe (New York: Orion Press, 1970), p. 3.

“entrancing,” “refreshing,” “lilting,” “delightful,” and “youthful.”⁴⁴ The later operas, though full of things he finds praise for, also are problematic for him. The differences he notes between *Tancredi* and its successors are reminiscent of the distinction that Friedrich Schiller had made some three decades before Stendhal’s book between “naïve” and “sentimental” art, between that which is created with unselfconscious ease and that which is more labored.⁴⁵ Stendhal, moreover, associates the problematic quality of the later Rossini operas with the composer’s supposedly growing dependence on German harmony, which he contrasts with the happy simplicity of Italian melody.⁴⁶ Needless to say, our own tastes today would scarcely make this distinction in Rossini’s work, since the great comic operas we have come to prize, as well as the *opere serie* that have enjoyed a major revival in recent years, all came after *Tancredi*. Staunch liberal that he was, Stendhal, one might add, had also sought to link the military heroics of *Tancredi* with the composer’s early-childhood memory of French republican troops liberating his home territory in 1796.⁴⁷ Moreover, Stendhal’s experience of this opera was mediated through the singing of the great Giuditta Pasta, whom he heard in the title role on numerous occasions and about whom - especially in the entrance aria - he waxed eloquent.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 62, 55, 52, 68.

⁴⁵ Note Isaiah Berlin’s use of Schiller’s distinction to characterize Verdi as a “naïve” artist (in Essay One, section entitled “Quoting”).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 63, 68.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 65. For a detailed analysis of Stendhal’s *Life* and its relation to the world of the Restoration, see Benjamin Walton, *Rossini in Restoration Paris: The Sound of Modern Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 24-67.

⁴⁸ Stendhal, *Life of Rossini*, pp. 52, 56, 58.

Despite the popularity of *Tancredi*, the first impersonator of the title role, Adelaide Malanotte, spurned "Di tanti palpiti," with the result that Rossini composed an alternate aria, "Dolci d'amor parole," considerably more elaborate vocally than the original, which she apparently had not found substantial enough.⁴⁹ Yet once she became aware of how much the public demanded "Di tanti palpiti," she was willing to alternate the original with the alternate one in her performances. Malanotte also participated in another alternate - this one not an aria but a whole new ending to the opera that did not come to light until the 1970s. Her lover, Count Luigi Lechi of Brescia, prepared the text for a conclusion that, closely following Voltaire's tragedy *Tanocrède*, allowed the hero to die as a result of a battle wound, but not before discovering that his beloved Amenaide had not been disloyal to him after all. The opera's original libretto, by Gaetano Rossi, had faithfully followed the long-standing operatic convention demanding a happy end, in which hero and heroine are reunited after all misunderstandings have been cleared up.

But the new tragic version, performed in Ferrara soon after the Venice premiere of the original version, was a failure and remained in manuscript until Count Giacomo Lechi, a descendant of Luigi Lechi, made it available for the critical edition of Rossini's works.⁵⁰ As a journalist at the time had remarked, "The death of *Tancredi*, which was introduced here [Ferrara] and

⁴⁹ This alternate aria, written for different words but also including the phrase "tanti palpiti" (though to new and less catchy music) is included in the critical edition. See *Tancredi*, ed. Philip Gossett, 2 vols. (Pesaro: Fondazione Rossini, 1984), vol. II, p. 610-47. It has also been recorded by Marilyn Horne together with alternate arias for other Rossini operas.

⁵⁰ For the music and text of the tragic ending, see *ibid.*, vol. II, pp. 648-716.

which did not care to adapt itself to the public, did not please."⁵¹ Scarcely surprising, for tragic endings were extremely rare during the first two centuries of opera. It is as though audiences assumed different mind-sets for opera and for spoken drama. If you were attending Voltaire's *Tancredi*, you were prepared from the start to feel moved by the sad fate of the tragic hero. But at the opera (assuming that the same patrons attended musical and spoken drama) you sought above all to be sensuously diverted by the virtuoso singing and the spectacle. In opera an ending in which all the characters rejoice seems to follow naturally - even if, when one knows the *Tancredi* libretto alone, the conclusion seems merely tacked on. A few years later Rossini broke with convention to create a tragic ending for *Otello*, but for Rome, whose audiences were thought incapable of stomaching a catastrophe in the opera house, he provided an alternate happy end, which, as it turned out, never caught on (though Shakespeare was still little known in Italy, it is hard to imagine anybody approving of *Otello* and Desdemona reconciled).⁵²

Soon after the Ferrara ending was published, I heard the tragic finale in the single live performance of *Tancredi* I have attended. As someone obviously long accustomed to operas culminating in their chief characters' deaths, it seemed to follow as naturally for me as the *lieto fine* had for Rossini's audiences. Indeed, it turned out to be moving in a way that one does not ordinarily expect from Rossini. The hero's final cavatina eschews all vocal fireworks and instead cultivates a manner closer to that of Gluck

⁵¹ Quoted in Philip Gossett, *The Tragic Finale of Rossini's Tancredi* (Pesaro: Fondazione Rossini, 1977), p. 30.

⁵² For a description of the changes made for Rome, see Rossini, *Otello ossia il more di Venezia*, ed. Michael Collins, 2 vols. (Pesaro: Fondazione Rossini, 1994), vol. I, p. xxxvii.

than to its actual composer.⁵³ Indeed, living in an age in which, far more than in Rossini's time, one expects one's expectations to be challenged, it was surely a treat to move (and with Marilyn Horne to boot!) from the rollicking "Di tanti palpiti" to the simple pathos of the conclusion.

Wagner, *Tannhäuser*, Paris, Opéra, 13 March 1861

The usual explanation for the *Tannhäuser* riots is that the composer broke the rules about where the mandatory ballet was to be inserted. By long-standing Parisian convention the ballet was staged during a middle act - about the hour, ten p.m., that the Jockey Club members were ready to arrive and ogle the female dancers - after which they felt free to go backstage and arrange to meet them privately. The proper moment for the *Tannhäuser* ballet was the second act, precisely when the song contest on the Wartburg was to be held. But how could Wagner have accommodated dancers in this setting - above all, in the presence of the pious Elisabeth (and what self-respecting male would want to ogle a Wagnerian soprano?). The only logical place for dancing was the Venusberg scene, which, though it allowed ample opportunity for sensual display, had to come at the start of the opera when the prospective oglers were still at dinner. (Had Wagner lived in our own, less chronologically rigid age, he could easily have reversed the events, with the Venusberg appearing in mid-evening as a flashback right after Tannhäuser's paean to Venus in the song contest.)

Rioting over the violation of convention was itself a convention in Parisian aesthetic politics: witness the fuss made in 1830 at the opening of Hugo's *Hernani* when the author provoked his audience by moving the alexandrine's caesura two syllables in each direction and, perhaps even

⁵³ For descriptions of the music for this ending, see *ibid.*, p. 32, and Gossett, *Divas and Scholars*, p. 152.

worse, when he allowed a royal personage to violate decorum by asking so mundane a question as to what time it is. But the flouting of convention on such seemingly technical matters as the vocabulary of poetry or the order of scenes in an opera is actually a ruse for larger political and social matters. Standing behind the eruptions at the *Hernani* opening were conflicts between the self-proclaimed adherents of the new Romanticism and those who held on to classicist views; between republicans and monarchists; between the young and those who, whatever their actual age, counted as old. Baudelaire, in his defense of *Tannhäuser* written only a few days after the first Paris performance, made a connection between these events when he compares the violent reaction to Wagner's opera with the initial resistance to Hugo's dramas and Delacroix's paintings.⁵⁴

Certainly the absence of a ballet at the right moment played a central role in the opera's failure in Paris. Although Wagner had been warned by the management many months before the premiere that the ballet was crucial to ensuring a successful run, he remained defiant, insisting instead that the bacchanal he was adding to the first scene would have to suffice. Even Berlioz, who rarely hesitated to challenge the conventions of French musical life, inserted the expected dances smack in the middle of each of the two parts of *Les Troyens*. (Even this conciliatory gesture did not succeed in getting him a production at the Opéra, and he had to rest content with the less prestigious Théâtre Lyrique, which, two years after the *Tannhäuser* premiere, was able to put on only the second of the two parts.) Wagner himself, in his two accounts of the *Tannhäuser* affair - the first a newspaper

⁵⁴ Baudelaire, "Richard Wagner et *Tannhäuser* a Paris," *Oeuvres*, p. 1065.

article written right after the incident, the second his autobiography many years later - stressed the role of the Jockey Club in setting off the incident.⁵⁵

What, beyond the absence of a ten o'clock ballet, stood behind the *Tannhäuser* squabble? For one thing, both in his theory and his practise, Wagner violated the principles to which the French musical establishment and, above all, the newspaper critics, adhered. As one hostile reviewer, Oscar Comettant, put it, "What one wants to find in the theater is a gripping drama, with a lucid exposition, a well-managed plot, a forceful denouement, one that allows the musician to take wing freely - not to indulge idiosyncratic reveries that can affect no one but himself, but to express genuine, well-characterized emotions."⁵⁶ What the reviewers obviously demanded of an opera was a continuation of the tradition of *grand opéra* à la Meyerbeer, Halévy, and Auber.

Let us look at what actually took place at the Opéra when Wagner, hoping and expecting to enjoy a major international triumph - one that would pave the way for a Paris production of the still unproduced *Tristan und Isolde* - experienced the worst fiasco of his career. At the first of the three performances the opening scene seemed to go well - at least there were no interruptions. Laughter erupted with the shepherd's song (apparently not well performed) that served as transition between the first two scenes. And the second scene was ruined not because of the audience but because the

⁵⁵ See "Bericht über die Aufführung des 'Tannhäuser' in Paris," reprinted in *Tannhäuser: Texte, Materialien, Kommentare*, ed. Attila Csampai and Dietmar Holland (Hamburg: Roswohlt, 1986), pp. 199-209, and *Mein Leben*, vol II, pp. 190-223.

⁵⁶ Reprinted, together with another hostile review by Paul Scudo, in *Richard Wagner and His World*, ed. Thomas S. Grey (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 347-71. The above quotation is on p. 356.

Landgraf's hunting dogs drowned out the music with their howling and barking.

The worst trouble at the premiere came near the end of the second act when Tannhäuser decides to go to Rome as a penitent. This was precisely the time that the ballet should have taken place, and the Jockeys expressed their dismay by blowing their whistles to the accompaniment of a screaming and hissing crowd. At this point, as Paul Lindau (who obtained a ticket by joining the house clique) described the performance in his memoir, "The battle was lost beyond saving."⁵⁷ The second intermission witnessed both verbal and physical abuse in the corridors. And the final act, as Lindau put it, "resembled nothing so much as the uninterrupted desecration of a corpse," which the spectators "dismembered and mutilated to the sounds of their braying and howling."⁵⁸

The two succeeding performances, on March 18 and March 24, fared even worse. Wagner was forced to accept cuts in the second performance because of the administration's vain hope that a shorter opera might better please the public. At this second performance the whistles and hisses emanating from the Jockeys did not get going until the middle of the second act, but, together with the noise from the audience as a whole, the disruption was evidently even worse than at the premiere. The third performance fared no better. Wagner had asked for a Sunday, which, since it was not a subscription night, would, he hoped, allow more seats to become available for his supporters; but it hardly mattered. This time the Jockeys started whistling from the start of the opera, and confusion reigned

⁵⁷ Lindau, "The 'Tannhäuser' Scandal in March 1861," trans. Daphne Ellis, *Wagner*, 24 (September, 2003), p. 17. The preceding details are drawn from Lindau's account (pp. 3-22).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

throughout. The music often stopped for a quarter hour at a time before a calm moment could be found for the singers to resume. Wagner, who refused to attend this performance, demanded that further performances be canceled - with the result that he had to forego the profits he had counted on to pay his ongoing debts, not to speak of the prestige he had sought from being performed in what then counted as the world's opera capital.

But the aggressiveness of the Jockeys was only one factor in the opera's failure in Paris. Through the many months of negotiations and rehearsals for the *Tannhäuser* premiere everything that was going on was reported - often in the most negative light - in the press and by word of mouth. The circumstances under which the work was chosen to be performed were themselves controversial: Princess Pauline Metternich, the young wife of the Austrian ambassador and herself a fervent Wagner fan, had so successfully worked her charms on Napoleon III at a social gathering that he authorized the production by imperial decree. As a result, a number of operas that were waiting in line for productions were postponed. These included *Les Troyens*, which as mentioned above, never even made it to the Opéra. Berlioz, who, as a fellow musical renegade, should have been Wagner's ally and who is known to have admired much of Wagner's music, chose not to come to his aid at a time that his voice might have made a difference. When asked to review *Tannhäuser* for the influential *Journal des Débats*, Berlioz simply declined. After the premiere he wrote to an anti-Wagnerian friend, "As for the horrors, they were hissed splendidly," and after the second performance, he expressed his *Schadenfreude* to his son with the words, "The press is unanimous in wiping him out. As for me, I am cruelly avenged."⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Quoted in David Cairns, *Berlioz*, 2 vols. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), vol. II, p. 662. For a searching review of the often

If Berlioz had turned into an enemy, it goes without saying that the established opera composers and their adherents were scarcely ready to accept the new aesthetic that Wagner exemplified as blatantly as he did. Wagner had excoriated his one-time benefactor Meyerbeer, who still commanded a loyal public, in *Das Judentum in der Musik*. Even the relatively unvengeful Rossini, always prepared to speak of food, supposedly described Wagner's music as "lacking melody like a roast without sauce."⁶⁰ Anecdotes such as this one floated around Paris throughout the rehearsals and performances. A new verb, *tannhauser*, playing on the participle *tannant* (fatiguing, wearisome), made the rounds. It goes without saying that the climate for a successful production was scarcely favorable.

Moreover, the composer's own observed demeanor did not ingratiate him to potential adherents. His intransigence about the placement of the ballet typified his attitude toward everybody connected with the production. After all, foreign composers such as Donizetti and Verdi readily complied when they wrote for the Opéra - but then Wagner would scarcely have cared to compare himself to them. Throughout the rehearsals, for example, he waged an ongoing public battle with the assigned (and also admittedly incompetent) conductor, Pierre Louis Philippe Dietsch. As one of Wagner's most level-headed biographers, Martin Gregor-Dellin, put it, "Wagner

tortured relationship between these two leaders of the new music of the mid-nineteenth century, see Katherine Kolb, "Flying Leaves: Between Berlioz and Wagner," *19th Century Music* 23 (2009), 25-61.

⁶⁰ Martin Gregor-Dellin, *Richard Wagner: Sein Leben, Sein Werk, Sein Jahrhundert*, 2nd ed. (Munich: Piper, 1991), p. 465.

committed the worst mistake one can make in a closed society: he conducted himself arrogantly."⁶¹

But out of a debacle there can also emerge martyrdom and subsequent sanctification. It remained for Baudelaire, who had no stake in the outmoded aesthetic to which the almost universally hostile reviewers were tied, to lay the groundwork for these developments in his influential pamphlet. He flatly declares it "intolerable" that the Jockey Club should sacrifice a serious work of art in order "to enjoy the luxury of finding mistresses among the dancers at the Opéra."⁶² To make his case, Baudelaire reviews Wagner's whole oeuvre, both the musical and the theoretical works, to portray him as a revolutionary who is challenging the foundations of earlier drama and music, indeed, of the arts as a whole. Significantly, Baudelaire in this essay quotes the octave of his programmatic sonnet "Correspondances," whose celebration of synaesthetic experience illustrates his own responses to Wagner's music, in which, referring specifically here to the overture to *Lohengrin*, he professes to feel "a *large diffuse light . . . the intensity of light* crossing with such rapidity that the nuances supplied by the dictionary would not suffice to express *this excess constantly being reborn of ardor and whiteness* [italics Baudelaire's]."⁶³ The Wagner who emerges in these pages is the guiding spirit of what came to be known as *Wagnérisme* in France, the inspiration for Symbolist poetry, indeed, if we note Baudelaire's stress on the composer's aesthetic theories, the father of the modernist arts.

A final note: in 1895, a long generation after its Paris premiere, *Tannhäuser* enjoyed a belated triumph at the Opéra. That same year H.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 464-65.

⁶² Baudelaire, "Richard Wagner et *Tannhäuser* a Paris," p. 1069.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 1043.

Fiérens-Gevaert published a series of interviews in successive issues of the *Journal des Débats* with surviving singers and other participants connected with the original production. Among his subjects was the Prince de Sagan, a Jockey-Club member who had found the noise to which he had contributed so deafening that he remembered nothing of the music. The prince now professed a love for Wagner, whose music "causes [him] to experience new sensations" similar to those he feels when he "contemplates a pretty woman."⁶⁴ Wagner by now was safely canonized, and the prince may well have reached an age in which music provided a satisfactory substitute for actual assignations.

Strauss, *Salome*, Graz, Stadt-Theater, 16 May 1906

If we look at who attended and what effects the performance had on them, the Graz *Salome* was considerably more important than the opera's actual premiere in Dresden the preceding December. This was in fact the fourth production of an opera that was fast circulating among the German opera houses and, soon after, among major foreign ones as well. But this was the first Austrian production, and Graz became at best a provincial substitute for the Vienna Court Opera, which, despite the pleas of its director, Gustav Mahler, was prevented from producing it by the official Hapsburg censor, who found the subject matter inappropriate for a house sponsored by a Christian emperor.

Yet the Graz premiere drew a large proportion of what we today see as the greatest living composers. To be sure, Debussy and Ravel were not there, nor was the young Stravinsky, still ensconced in Russia, but Puccini made a special trip from Italy - though not to the premiere itself but to the

⁶⁴ Quoted by H. Fiérens-Gevaert in *Journal des Débats*, May 3, 1895.

next day's performance. "The most extraordinary thing, terrible cacophony," he wrote to a composer friend, Ervin Lendvai; "there are some very beautiful feelings in the orchestra, but in the end it wears you out."⁶⁵ Puccini was not the only person to complain of being worn out: so did the composer himself, who was conducting the work for the first time and, in a letter to his wife, besides expressing his general satisfaction with the orchestra and the singers, explained that he had not expected the job of keeping the orchestra together to be as taxing as it was.⁶⁶

The other composers present at the Graz premiere included Mahler and his wife Alma, whose promising composition career had ended at her husband's insistence at the time of their marriage; Arnold Schoenberg, together with his brother-in-law Alexander von Zemlinsky (one-time teacher not only of Schoenberg but also of Alma Mahler, whom he had once courted); Schoenberg's student Alban Berg, though his other talented student, Anton von Webern, did not come along. Another Strauss was present as well, namely, the widow of Johann Strauss (no relation, as music dictionaries customarily remind us).

The performance left significant effects on all the composers who had congregated in Graz - some of these effects artistic, others of a more personal nature. It is hard, to be sure, to pin down any direct influence of *Salome* on Puccini's subsequent work: cacophony was surely not his thing, and violence had already been present in *Tosca*, though one wonders if *Salome* might have helped motivate his choice of the story of Turandot, a similarly cold woman with a penchant for head-chopping.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Mary Jane Phillips-Matz, *Puccini: A Biography* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 2002), p. 160.

⁶⁶ Franz Grasberger, ed., *Der Strom der Töne trug mich fort: Die Welt um Richard Strauss in Briefen* (Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 1967), p. 168.

The effect of the performance on Mahler was profound. Still reeling from his defeat at the hands of the Vienna censor, Mahler, on the train back to Vienna from Graz, used the occasion for a remark about the nature of fame. In conversation with the popular writer Peter Rosegger, the composer expressed his astonishment at the Graz audience's enthusiasm when, as Alma put it in her memoirs, "we were convinced that not one in a hundred really understood the music." Rosegger replied that "the voice of the people was the voice of God," after which the Mahlers asked "whether he meant the people here and now or the people as posterity."⁶⁷ Soon after, in an interview, Mahler compared himself with Strauss, whom he called a man of his time ("Zeitgemässer"), whereas he himself was not of his time ("Unzeitgemässer") - this being an allusion to the title of one of Nietzsche's books.⁶⁸ As it turned out, Mahler was correct: by the late twentieth century he had reached a higher place in the pantheon of composers than his more consumer-oriented colleague.

As for the opera itself, both Mahlers, though Alma less so than her husband, were generally admiring. As one can infer from a letter by Mahler to her, they both objected to the unevenness of the score, and both came down hard on the music of Salome's dance. Although Mahler refers to the opera as "a work of 'virtuosity' in a bad sense," he also chides Alma for "under-valuing what is, after all, a very significant work."⁶⁹

The effect of *Salome* on the other composers present in Graz was something less complex than that on the Mahlers. Zemlinsky went on to conduct the opera on innumerable occasions, both as director of the German

⁶⁷ Alma Mahler, *Gustav Mahler: Memories and Letters* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1969), p. 98.

⁶⁸ Henri-Louis de la Grange, *Gustav Mahler*, vol. III, p. 399.

⁶⁹ Alma Mahler, *Gustav Mahler*, p. 275. See also Mahler's remark about "uneven" artists such as Titian and Sir Francis Bacon, p. 287.

opera in Prague and at other houses. As one of the great derivative composers of the early twentieth century, Zemlinsky displays the traces of both Strauss and Mahler. Moreover, his one-act shocker, *Eine florentinische Tragödie*, is an obvious attempt to reproduce something of *Salome's* effect.

Alban Berg, 21 years old at the time and already an active composer, displayed his enthusiasm for *Salome* by attending it repeatedly soon after the Graz performance. After traveling to Dresden to hear it at a music festival, he heard six performances given by a Breslau traveling company at the Vienna Volksoper, which was not subject to the censorship that had been exercised at the Court Opera. The affinity that Berg felt for the opera is evident, for instance, in the grotesque elements prominent in both of his own operas, *Wozzeck* and *Lulu*. And it goes without saying that his character Lulu is clearly a sister of Salome. (Had Debussy chosen to come to Graz, might he have recognized Strauss's heroine as a sister of his Mélisande?) Still, ten years later, well after he had ceased being a tonal composer and well after Strauss had left cacophony behind, Berg decided he no longer found either *Salome* or *Elektra* of interest.⁷⁰

Since Webern did not join his teacher and fellow student in Graz, one can at best guess what his reaction might have been. One of Webern's own students reported that he "had no good words for Strauss," but another quoted him as saying "Die 'Salome' bleibt [*Salome* will survive]."⁷¹ Among twentieth-century composers the austere Webern appears at the furthest possible remove from the sumptuous Strauss.

⁷⁰ See Mosco Carner, *Alban Berg: The Man and the Work* (London: Duckworth, 1975), p. 6.

⁷¹ See Hans and Rosaleen Moldenhauer, *Anton von Webern: A Chronicle of His Life and Work* (New York, NY: Knopf, 1979), pp. 505 and 685n respectively.

Although Schoenberg admired *Salome* for its musical adventurousness and continued to express this admiration for some years, by 1914 Schoenberg, like Berg, was expressing nothing but disdain for the earlier composer. "From an artistic point of view he [Strauss] no longer interests me," Schoenberg wrote in a letter; "what I once seem to have learned from him, I luckily misunderstood."⁷² Moreover, his attitude toward Strauss was motivated at least as much by the way the elder composer treated him as by the music that the latter produced. Strauss, impressed by Schoenberg's early work, had opened doors for him in Berlin well before the *Salome* performance. But Schoenberg's abandonment of tonality two years after the premiere alienated Strauss to the point that he refused Schoenberg's request for help in arranging a performance of the latter's "Five Pieces for Orchestra." And doubtless Strauss would not have recognized Schoenberg's *Erwartung* as an intensification of at once the musical language and the hysteria of *Salome*. As Schoenberg, in his still imperfect English, put it near the end of both their lives, "Though he [Strauss] was helpful to me in my youth, he has later changed his attitude toward myself. I am sure that he does not like my music and in this respect I know no mercy: I consider such people as enemies."⁷³

There was still another major composer at the Graz performance, though no record of his presence can be found in the sources that I consulted. His later works *Doktor Fausti Weheklag* and *Apokalipsis cum figuris* may well be the greatest music that was never either composed or performed. I refer to Adrian Leverkühn, the central character of Thomas Mann's novel *Doktor Faustus*, whom his creator sent to Graz to attend

⁷² Schoenberg, *Briefe*, ed. Erwin Stein (Mainz: B. Schott's Söhne, 1958), p. 48.

⁷³ Joseph Auner, *A Schoenberg Reader: Documents of a Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 317.

Salome. As a figure of the representative avant-garde composer of the early twentieth century, Leverkühn displayed a distinctly mixed reaction to *Salome*, calling it an "auspiciously revolutionary work," yet one "whose aesthetic sphere in no way attracted him."⁷⁴ This reaction may well be what Mann took to be Schoenberg's response to the opera - or at least what Mann's musical mentor Theodor Adorno thought to be Schoenberg's response. But the performance plays a major role in the development of the novel, for Leverkühn, directly after attending *Salome*, travels to Pressburg (now Bratislava) to seek out the prostitute Esmeralda, from whom he had shied away when he first met her in a Leipzig brothel some time before.⁷⁵ He now knowingly allows himself to be infected with venereal disease, which in the logic of the narrative leads to his pact with the devil, who grants him twenty-four years of intense creativity.⁷⁶

In closing I cite still another visitor, this one a real-life person - a true enthusiast of music though not by any means a composer. Yet he was also

⁷⁴ Thomas Mann, *Doktor Faustus* (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1971), pp. 153-54 (Chapter 19).

⁷⁵ Serenus Zeitblom, the narrator of the novel, remains ambiguous about whether the visit to Pressburg actually took place before or after the performance, or if the composer actually went to Graz after all (p. 154). What is central to the story is the narrative link that Mann establishes between the opera and the visit to Esmeralda.

⁷⁶ See the discussions of this closely connected series of events in two essays by Hans-Rudolf Vaget, "Thomas Mann und Richard Strauss: Zeitgenossenschaft ohne Brüderlichkeit," *Thomas Mann Jahrbuch 3* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1990), pp. 78-79, and "The Spell of *Salome*: Thomas Mann and Richard Strauss," in *German Literature and Music: An Aesthetic Fusion - 1890-1989*, ed. Claus Reschke and Howard Pollack (Munich: Fink, 1992), pp. 50-52.

destined to become a performer, not, to be sure, on the operatic but on the world stage. The seventeen-year-old Adolf Hitler had begged money from relatives to make the pilgrimage to Graz - or so we know from his having told Strauss's son Franz of the trip many years later while both were attending the Bayreuth Festival.⁷⁷ In retrospect, one wonders what seeds might have been planted in the adolescent's mind as he heard Strauss's musical translation of the five Jews' Yiddish-sounding speech patterns - patterns totally unrelated to the way that the Jews of Herod's time spoke.⁷⁸ Could the future Führer have felt that people of that sort deserve to be obliterated? And might he have fantasized a more efficient way of accomplishing this than cutting people's heads off one at a time?

Berg, *Wozzeck*, Vienna, Theater an der Wien, 16 June 1953

Modernism was never much liked by the Viennese public - and this despite the fact that their city, together with Paris, was the center from which much of the modernist energy in all art forms emanated. The Viennese modernist past remained ignored - indeed, often suppressed - not only after the Nazis took over but for a goodly number of years after the Second World War. Vienna just after the war was an impoverished city, its Jewish cultural elite either in exile or obliterated, its remaining population

⁷⁷ See Strauss's letter to his nephew, the conductor Rudolf Moralt, in Kurt Wilhelm, *Richard Strauss persönlich: Eine Bibliographie* (Berlin: Henschel, 1999), p. 124. The occasion for the letter was the fact that in 1939 Nazi cultural officials in Graz forbade further performances of *Salome* at the site of its Austrian premiere - their grounds being, according to the composer, that it was a "Jewish ballad."

⁷⁸ On Strauss's imitation of the so-called *Mauscheln* of Eastern European Jews, see Sander Gilman, "Strauss and the Pervert," in *Reading Opera*, pp. 320-22.

battered down since the early 30s by one ideological construct after another. What had once counted as an international cultural capital was now reduced to a provincial town.

When I spent a student year there in 1952-53 preparing my dissertation on the great Austrian modernist poet Georg Trakl, my desire to experience modernist music at the site of its creation could not be realized - neither in chamber-music or symphony concerts nor at the opera. No Webern, no Schoenberg, and very little Berg, except for a couple of *Wozzeck* performances in the course of the year. (Webern, in fact, had set to music a number of my dissertation subject's poems.) It seemed ironic that the so-called "Second Viennese School" (the first, of course, consisting of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven) was little known even to this supposedly music-minded public. To be sure, Strauss's two great modernist operas, *Salome* and *Elektra*, were immensely popular and much performed. But the many modernist operas that had once circulated among the germanophone opera houses were as good as lost. No *Mahagonny* or *Three-Penny Opera*; no Busoni, Hindemith or Krenek or even the once-beloved though scarcely modernist Korngold. Similarly, the great visual art that had been produced in Vienna early in the century was little displayed or talked about - neither the decorative work of the Wiener Werkstätte nor the paintings of Klimt and Schiele. Even Mahler had been forgotten: I do not remember a single symphony of his being done by either of the two major orchestras that season - though Wilhelm Furtwängler conducted the "Songs of a Wayfarer" cycle on one occasion with what had once been the composer's own orchestra, the Vienna Philharmonic.

The Viennese opera repertory, much like that in other countries during the mid-twentieth century, remained stale - a collection of warhorses in conventional productions that could upset nobody except for those few who sought adventure. As elsewhere, singers were contracted to the local

company and rarely sang in other houses. They were, in fact, so accustomed to one another that they could create a beautifully integrated ensemble, something evident in the often sublime performances of the Mozart and Strauss operas, occasionally of *Fidelio*, rarely of Wagner (never a favorite in Vienna), while the Italian, French, and Russian repertory, always sung in German, as was still the custom before the emergence of international, jet-traveling stars, was usually done routinely at best.

When I asked early in the season if I might expect to hear *Wozzeck*, people told me that this would have to wait until Karl Böhm came to Vienna for his brief conducting stints. Though once one of Hitler's favored conductors, he also had a weakness for a composer who had counted as "degenerate" within the Nazi pantheon. Böhm's first *Wozzeck* of the season was scheduled for late in the autumn on a regular subscription night. Since the dollar enjoyed an uncommonly favorable exchange rate in those days, I could afford a good seat, which meant that I was surrounded by the subscribers. It was clear even before the first-act curtain went down that the people around me were unresponsive - or at least refusing to be responsive - to what they heard.

The only real applause at the end of the act came from the young people in standing room far behind me. In fact, they cheered wildly in clear defiance of their elders. I joined the cheering, only to find that the older folk in my section were trying to silence me, as though I had broken some taboo. "Wir haben keine Komponisten mehr [We no longer have any composers]," I overheard one woman mutter to her husband in disgust. "Pardon me," I interjected, "but Alban Berg has been dead for all of seventeen years." Although I remember the performance as powerful, above all the Marie of Christl Goltz, I also remained aware throughout the evening of a cold hostility emanating from much of the audience.

But the June 16 performance was something else again. Since it took place during the period annually demarcated as the *Wiener Festwochen*, the audience was not dominated by the subscribers - though I don't remember much cheering either. Still, the fact that a modernist work was part of the festival lent a certain festiveness to the occasion - a festiveness that was reinforced for me when the composer's widow, Helene Berg, walked slowly down the aisle shortly before the performance began. She was escorted by an American conductor, William Strickland, who had devoted himself to keeping Berg's name alive. Appropriately enough - for the Second Viennese School was at that time better known in foreign countries, especially the United States, than in the city of its origin.

I was made aware of who she was by my companions, a couple well acquainted with the circle around Alma Mahler and the Bergs. As I stared at Frau Berg, the husband whispered to me, "Whom does that long face remind you of?" I couldn't for the life of me find a response - until he asked me if it reminded me of Velazquez's portraits of the Spanish royal family. Indeed, it did, for she possessed the elongated face that, over the centuries, had persisted among the Hapsburgs. "She is the last of the known illegitimate offspring of Emperor Franz Josef," my friend revealed with a knowing smile.

Then the opera began, and my experience of the music was now colored by the presence of this dignified, aging lady, long known for the devotion she had shown to her distinguished husband and for the piety, after his early death, with which she guarded his memory. And here was a readily recognizable member (if not quite legally acknowledged) of one of the great European dynasties. As I looked downstairs admiringly during the performance from my seat in the first row of the balcony, I saw the devoted muse who had enabled her equally devoted spouse to create this drama of betrayal and revenge.

Little could I have known at the time that the external facts helping shape my experience that evening were altogether false. Soon after Helene Berg died over a quarter century later, the truth of her supposedly ideal marriage would be revealed: during his final decade, and beginning with an early performance of *Wozzeck*, Alban Berg's passion had been directed not toward Helene but toward Hanna Fuchs-Robettin, Alma Mahler's sister-in-law.⁷⁹ And he had even encrypted their love in his *Lyric Suite* by means of themes suggested by their initials and by an allusion to *Tristan und Isolde*. Indeed, Frau Berg's stubborn refusal, during her lifetime, to allow the not-fully-orchestrated final act of *Lulu* to be performed did not, as had long been thought, derive from the loyalty she expressed toward defending her late husband's intentions but, far more likely, from whatever revenge she could exercise for his disloyalty toward her. Here, indeed, was the *Wozzeck* story as reenacted on a higher, more civilized social level.

By the time of Frau Berg's death in 1979 Vienna had begun to recover its modernist past. The establishment, a few years before, of a major ensemble named the Arnold Schoenberg Choir suggests a new fashionability to a name and a movement that had long inspired contemptuous feelings. The architecture, decorative art and painting of modernist Vienna, by the final decades of the twentieth century, became the rage both in their home town and throughout the world. And the music of Berg, if not quite that of Schoenberg and Webern, now came to assimilate itself to earlier musical tradition. As I look back to the *Wozzeck* performances I heard in Vienna well over half a century ago, I recognize that they posed a challenge for me that they no longer do. This challenge, indeed, was inseparable from the

⁷⁹ For a book-length study of Berg's relationship to Fuchs-Robettin, see Constantin Floros, *Alban Berg and Hanna Fuchs: The Story of a Life in Letters*, trans. Ernest Bernhardt-Kabisch (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

power they exercised over me. While writing this section, I clicked "YouTube," on which I just watched the *Wozzeck* murder scene from a recent Berlin production. It now seemed as easy listening as Strauss.

Wagner, Tristan und Isolde, New York, Metropolitan Opera, 28 March 2008

It was the last of six scheduled performances, of which the first five had all been marred by bad luck. Bad luck in opera means the cancellation of major singers - something far worse in the eyes of fans than, say, the scenery collapsing or the lighting going awry. The motive behind this run of *Tristan und Isolde* was the Met's success in scheduling the two currently reigning Wagnerians, Deborah Voigt and Ben Heppner, together in these roles for the first time.

During its century-and-a-half life, *Tristan und Isolde* has gone through three distinct stages in its relation to its audiences. In the early years of its performance history this so-called music drama disturbed listeners through its sheer difficulty, above all its refusal to resolve - at least until its end many hours later - the notorious chord that appears in the work's first phrase. By the turn of the twentieth century *Tristan* had become a site for erotic bonding, as Alban Berg had once bonded to its music both with his wife Helene and (through his cryptic allusion in the *Lyric Suite*) with his later beloved, Hanna Fuchs-Robettin - or as the tuberculous adulterous lovers in Thomas Mann's story "Tristan" had bonded while the heroine, Frau Klöterjahn, played the music on the piano. By our own time the *Tristan* score presents few difficulties for listeners, and other, more strident forms of music have replaced it as a convenient means for bonding. Today we go to this now familiar opera to thrill to those big, steely voices - during any single decade never more than one or two *Isoldes*, at best a single, if any, *Tristan* - that can cut cleanly through Wagner's large, lush orchestra.

But cancellations of these few voices can badly compromise anybody's *Tristan* experience. During the New York run it was Heppner who missed the most performances - the first four, in fact, and due, it was reported, to some medical misdiagnosis. One substitute tenor after another was engaged to fill in - none of these, according to the reviews I saw, really up to par. Voigt was present for these four performances, but in the fourth she bowed out before the end because of a reported digestive mishap - and what is called her "cover" quickly took over. Finally, Heppner made it for the fifth performance (and triumphantly so, I read), but Voigt was still indisposed, though her cover was favorably reviewed.

Some six months before, knowing I should be in the East for a few days in early spring, I purchased a ticket for the last *Tristan*. But well before I arrived, I recognized that my chances of hearing the scheduled singers remained small. The *New York Times*, after having reported the cancellations and substitutions regularly, announced the morning before the last performance that the originally scheduled singers would be on hand that evening. While busy that day with my usual museum-going during my brief trips to New York, I prepared myself for the forthcoming evening with the same dedication that I assumed the great stars themselves felt during the day. But I also exercised some skepticism: who knows what new digestive problem (the soprano had, after all, undergone a much-publicized gastric operation) or drug reaction (something known to afflict the tenor) would develop in the course of the day (or even of the performance)?

As I approached the opera-house entrance I noted that no new names had been plastered over Voigt's and Heppner's on the large poster near the door. Things looked hopeful. As I entered the lobby I overheard people chatting nervously about whether they were going to be singing after all. Strangers encouraged one another that this would surely be true. But just before the curtain went up a management representative appeared on the

stage. This was surely a sign of bad news, as operagoers had long learned to assume. As the *New York Times* reviewer recorded, "The audience erupted with groans, hisses and cries of 'No!'"⁸⁰ But the dreaded man on stage quickly reassured us all that he had come simply to announce a replacement for the Brangaene - and, as it turned out, somebody I had heard before in this role and much admired. We sighed collectively in relief.

And what about the performance? Obviously it was thrilling - at least that's the way one had to experience it, for I'm sure that what I took to be my experience was mediated by the knowledge that this was to be seen as a memorable event. Although I rarely depend on the judgment of critics, I could only agree with the *Times* when it spoke of Heppner's "maximum expressivity, utter honesty and visceral power" or of Voigt's "gleaming phrases soaring over the orchestra." Even though Voigt failed to land quite securely on her pianissimo F# at the end of the "Liebestod" and cut the whole-note noticeably short, I recognized that such minor flaws merely confirm the fact that I was never so carried away that I lost my ability to discern what was going on musically.

Certainly those neural circuits in my brain that respond to music - and especially to a score as seductive and overpowering as *Tristan und Isolde* - would have lit up furiously if I, as well as the others around me, had been wired to an fMRI. The *Times* reviewer stressed the risk-taking that Voigt and Heppner encouraged one another to engage in, and this contrasted strikingly with an earlier moment, nine years before, in which I had heard Heppner, during his first run of *Tristans*, when, though singing beautifully,

⁸⁰ Anthony Tommasini, "A 'Tristan und Isolde' Well Worth the Wait," *New York Times*, March 30, 2008,

www.nytimes.com/2008/03/30/arts/music/30tristan.html.

he had also appeared hesitant, even choosing to cut much of the taxing final act to make sure he would not lose his endurance (after all, the first Tristan, Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld, had died of pneumonia only weeks after he had created the role in 1865). And this reviewer in his enthusiasm compared the whole occasion to a night in 1974 when Birgit Nilsson and Jon Vickers, the reigning Wagnerians of that era, had done the opera together for the one and only time at the Metropolitan - an event I could appreciate at best from afar, though I had had a ticket for the two of them doing it in San Francisco three years before only to find Vickers having to cancel after his throat had collided with a guy-wire in his garden!

Such is opera! How many events such as the March 28 *Tristan* does the avid opera consumer after all experience in the course of a lifetime? In the succeeding months, whenever I mentioned having been present at this performance, I found myself congratulated for my good luck, not only by the Wagner fans I knew but also by anti-Wagnerian operagoers and even non-opera people who had read about this production's fate in the media. Being witness to a significant operatic event amounts to a badge of honor among those who take opera seriously. Indeed, great performers you have heard in person are like trophies you collect, and this applies not simply to opera or classical music but to any form of music, and to sports, for that matter. Getting to that *Tristan* performance was like catching Bob Dylan going "electric" at the 1965 Newport Festival or watching the USA beat Russia in ice hockey at the 1980 Olympics. My own trophies include serving as a page boy in the NBC studios for Toscanini's 1947 *Otello*; hearing both Joan Sutherland and Leontyne Price in minor roles when they were still unknown to me as well as to the general public; or hearing Deborah Voigt herself during her student days, when I told myself that this was a voice I would be following in later years; or attending one of Glenn Gould's last public concerts during the early 1960s (though not, alas, the very last). Of

course, I should love to have boasted of hearing Maria Callas in the flesh, but she canceled both the performances for which I had purchased tickets (the excuses she gave were later exposed as utter lies!), and she remains the only generally acknowledged great singer of my lifetime whom I never heard in person.

So how do I account for this greed to experience the musically great? After all, I remain wholly indifferent to whatever charisma may emanate from pop artists, sports heroes, and film stars. Doubtless it all derives from the household culture within which I was raised. My mother boasted of attending the first production (though not quite the premiere) of *Der Rosenkavalier* in Dresden. My father spoke repeatedly of hearing Geraldine Farrar when, at 18, she made her debut in Gounod's *Faust* in a Berlin performance that granted her immediate international renown; catching the young Chaliapin while on business travel in Russia; hearing Caruso in any number of roles in several different cities; and making it to one of Adelina Patti's annual farewell concerts.

But seeking out, remembering, and boasting of having caught great singers at their height (and often, to be sure, when they were already over the hill, as were Beniamino Gigli and Lauritz Melchior on the only occasions I heard them) is something that goes back to near the beginnings of opera, to the ascendancy of Anna Renzi as the first acknowledged star.⁸¹ Over the centuries diaries, letters, memoirs, and newspaper reviews, even poems,

⁸¹ Renzi, called by Ellen Rosand "the first diva of the Italian operatic stage," created the role of Ottavia in Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, as a result of which a volume of poetry by diverse hands, *Le glorie della Signora Anna Renzi romana* (1644) was addressed to her. See Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice: The Creation of a Genre* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), p. 385, as well as the discussion of Renzi's career (pp. 228-35).

novels, and films, attest to the near-divinity status attached to names such as Renzi, Farinelli, Malibran, Pasta, Melba, Caruso, and Callas. The young Richard Wagner claimed he underwent a transformative experience when he heard Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient as Leonore in *Fidelio* and later composed several roles in his own early operas for her.⁸²

Good ensemble productions of certain works such as *Le nozze di Figaro* and *La bohème* can satisfy audiences even without major voices. *Pelléas et Mélisande* and certain modernist operas can make do with performers who are better actors than they are singers as long as they are supported by a good orchestra. The mechanical marvels of seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century opera, together with the corresponding digital marvels we witness today, can excite audiences regardless of the singers on stage. But the ability occasionally to transform an individual's soul rests squarely in the lungs and throats of great singers.

⁸² Modern research has demonstrated the probability that this experience occurred while he heard her as Romeo in Bellini's *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* - and that he changed the claim to *Fidelio* in order to establish a genealogy extending from Beethoven to himself. Wagner admitted that his transformation owed more to her stage presence than to her voice, which showed considerable flaws. See John Deathridge and Carl Dahlhaus, *The New Grove Wagner* (New York, NY: Norton, 1984), p. 7.