MUSIC IN THE BAROQUE

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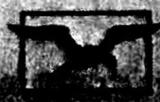

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CHAPTER SIX

Opera in Venice and Beyond

After a trip to Venice in 1645, the English traveler and diarist John Evelyn penned a vivid description of an evening at the opera, one of the most "magnificent and expensive diversions the wit of men can invent." He lauded the excellent vocalists and instrumentalists, noting the reputation of the Roman singer Anna Renzi as the best female soprano. He mentioned an unnamed eunuch (castrato) who in his view was superior to Renzi, as well as an "incomparable" bass from Genoa. He was also fascinated by the visual spectacle, including 13 scene changes "painted and contrived with no less art of perspective," lauding the flying machines with their "wonderful motions," all of which "held us by the Eyes and Ears til two in the morning."

Opera may have been invented in the self-consciously humanistic atmosphere fostered by the northern Italian courts (see Chapter 3), but it was in Venice that it became a commercial enterprise, gaining characteristics that would shape the genre over the next several hundred years. In this chapter, we explore how the special nature of the Republic of Venice, the allure of the city's singular beauty, and the many pleasures afforded by Carnival shaped and nurtured opera. Over the course of the seventeenth century, the style of commercial opera that first flourished in Venice spread to every city on the Italian peninsula and beyond. The skills of the Italian poets, singers, composers, choreographers, and designers who knew how to produce Italian opera became a precious commodity in many of Europe's most powerful courts.

OPERA AND THE VENETIAN REPUBLIC

The unique features of Venetian opera and the industry that developed around it were in large part a result of Venice's republican form of government. Unlike the absolute monarchies that dominated the rest of Europe, Venice was essentially an oligarchy. A Senate and various councils consisting of the nobility (from which women were excluded) ruled the Republic of Venice. Laws carefully regulated the reach of the doge, the elected ruler, whose power was largely symbolic.

Foreigners and natives alike extolled La Serenissima for the special beauty of the watery city that had developed atop structural pilings in a lagoon off the Adriatic Sea. The evocative canals and enviable maritime position that allowed Venice to gain so much power both in the Mediterranean and the East also made it a crossroads for trade and travel. During Carnival, the period after Christmas when Catholics traditionally indulged in pleasures (fireworks, ballets, gambling, masquerades) before the sobriety of Lent, Venice became one of Europe's most popular destinations.

All of this had a profound effect on musical theater. While in most court cities, artistic patronage was largely concentrated in the hands of a single patron or family, Venice's political system fostered an artistic milieu funded by noble families and investors. Financial investment in opera, like many other activities in the city, was motivated both by the ever-elusive hope of monetary gain (opera was usually unprofitable) and by the quest for a less tangible commodity: prestige. Thus competition was an important element in Venetian opera from its inception.

Venetian opera was also shaped by the somewhat libertine intellectual leanings of the Venetian nobles and citizens who were involved in its production. The first Venetian opera theater opened in 1637, only 34 years after the end of the Interdict, when the pope had briefly excommunicated the entire Republic on account of Venice's defiance of papal authority. Although firm in their Catholicism, many Venetians who grew up during this period were particularly eager to declare their independence from Rome and the stifling effects of the Inquisition. The Accademia degli Incogniti (Academy of the Unknown Ones), founded in the 1630s by the Venetian nobleman Giovanni Francesco Loredano, became the center of intellectual and literary activities both for native Venetians and for the many poets, artists, and freethinkers who were drawn to the liberties afforded by the Most Serene Republic. In addition to publishing poems and discourses, many of which were banned by the Church, some Incogniti penned opera librettos, using the new genre to promote their pride in Venice's beauty and special freedoms. (In Chapter 10, we will sample some of the pleasures enjoyed by the Venetian academies, in particular the music of the singer-composer Barbara Strozzi.)

Finally, Venice was home to one of Europe's most famous Carnivals, where opera became the featured entertainment. This topsy-turvy world, in which servants and masters traded identities, and courtesans roamed the streets or floated down the city's canals with masked lovers even more freely than usual, flowed onto the stage in Venice, much to the delight of onlookers such as Evelyn (Fig. 6.1).

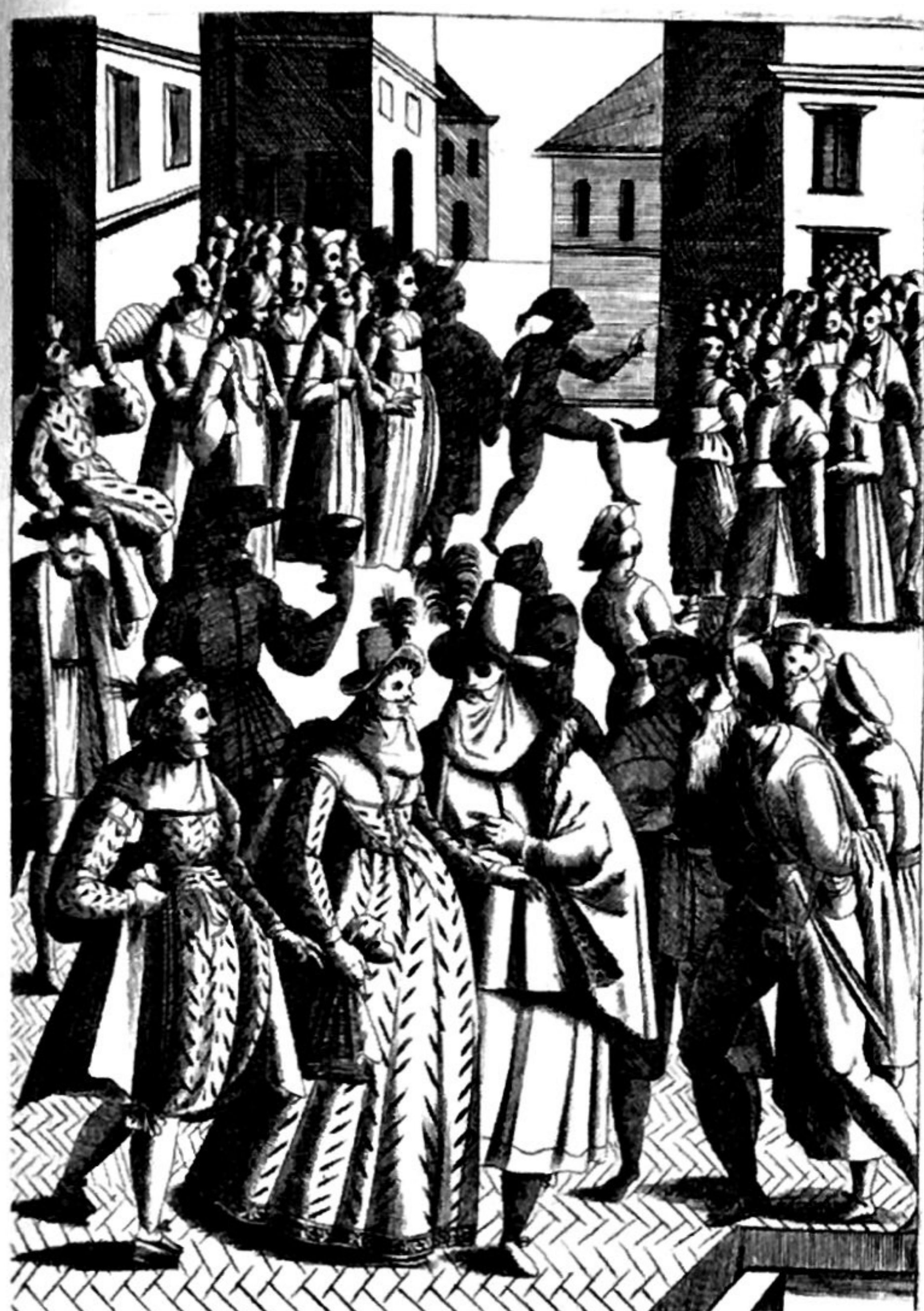

Figure 6.1: Venetian Masque in Piazza Santo Stefano during Carnival, *from Giacomo Franco,* Abiti d'uomini e donne veneziani *(Venice, 1610)*

THE VENETIAN OPERA INDUSTRY

Public opera first took hold in Venice during the Carnival of 1637, when a traveling troupe of professional musicians and actors presented the opera *L'Andromeda* at the Teatro S. Cassiano, the first of several comedy theaters to be retrofitted for opera under the auspices of Venetian patricians. Venice had thus found its signature entertainment, which would display the city's many fine musicians, poets, and artists to the entire world. By 1660 Venice could boast five opera theaters spread throughout the *sestieri*, or six city districts. In 1678, with the opening of the luxurious Teatro S. Giovanni Grisostomo, one of several run by the Grimani family, there were nine functioning theaters in Venice, although on average only four new operas were produced a year. Competition was the name of the game, simultaneously resulting in innovation and in the development of a set of stable dramatic and musical conventions that would shape Italian opera throughout the seventeenth and early eighteenth century.

Since no single patron supported Venetian opera, producers solved the problem of financial backing by involving an eclectic group of supporters, each of whom played a different role. The opera theaters usually had an owner, an

impresario who rented the theater building from the owner, individual investors or companies who put up the money, guarantors who pledged to cover the loan in case of problems, and cashiers who managed the payments and receipts. Noble protectors functioned more like conventional patrons in lending their names and therefore their prestige to the undertaking, and in using their power to negotiate with other nobles who served as patrons for singers. The impresario took charge of the production from both the practical and creative ends, often choosing singers, composers, librettists, designers, and choreographers.

Unlike the duke of Mantua, who did not have to worry about ticket sales for the operas performed for the wedding of his son in 1608 (see Chapter 3), the producers of Venetian opera were deeply concerned about raising capital from investors at the beginning of the season in order to pay for costumes, scenery, and singers. Additional income was generated by ticket sales, the sale and rental of boxes, or *palchi*, and even the rental of seats. The system of boxes was essential to the "public" nature of Venetian opera. Placed on different levels, boxes made it possible for the theater to accommodate spectators from different social classes who might not care to mingle with one another. A private box, decorated and furnished, enabled noble spectators to entertain select visitors, converse, eat supper, or play cards at the opera. Indeed, boxes were so prized that in one instance an owner actually stabbed the theater superintendent several times for letting a well-known Venetian noble sit in his private box without permission.

Although many went to the opera to see and to be seen, artistic merit also mattered. A less popular opera ran the risk of incurring a financial loss, which would reflect poorly both on the theater owner and on Venice itself. Opera may have been "public" in that anyone who could afford it was eligible to buy a ticket. But the most influential members of the audience were the investors and patrons, and the nobles and foreign dignitaries to whom printed librettos were so often dedicated.

THE ANATOMY OF AN OPERA: MONTEVERDI'S *L'INCORONAZIONE DI POPPEA*

How was a Venetian opera put together, and what was it about this particular style that would take so much of Europe by storm? We can explore these questions by considering one of the two surviving Venetian operas by the elderly Claudio Monteverdi: *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (The Coronation of Poppaea), composed at the end of his life in 1643 (and perhaps finished by one or more of his younger students). Unlike the mythologically based operas we have considered, *Poppea* is based on a lurid episode in Roman history, when Emperor Nero (37–68 CE) (or Nerone in the opera) rejected his wife, Octavia (Ottavia), to marry his high-born mistress, Poppaea Sabina (Poppea), against the objections of his tutor, the philosopher Seneca.

THE IMPRESARIO AND THE SINGERS

The first step in planning an opera production was for the impresario to choose the creative artists: the librettist, composer, scenographer, and choreographer, some of whom may have been regular employees at a given theater. Very early in the process—perhaps even before the season was fully planned—the impresario would hire the principal singers, which was probably the most expensive and complex part of the planning. Although impresarios had available to them some local singers, such as the men who sang at St. Mark's Basilica, in order to hire the best singers they needed to cast a wider net and send out agents with good ears to scout the best prospects.

Casting in Venice followed certain conventions: the major female characters were always sung by women, while the male heroic characters (such as Emperor Nero) were usually played by castrati. This contrasted with Rome, where the influence of the Church often prevented women from singing in public. The emphasis on high voices would remain a characteristic of Italian opera throughout the seventeenth century. Tenors were usually not heroes in this period; instead they played comic characters (sometimes in female dress). Basses sang the roles of kings and older characters. In Monteverdi's *Poppea*, the philosopher Seneca was cast as a bass, the soprano Anna di Valeria is thought to have sung the role of Poppaea, and Anna Renzi, who two years later would earn John Evelyn's praise, received acclaim as Empress Octavia.

We can see something of how the business worked from the 1644 contract that Renzi signed with the impresario Geronimo Lappoli at the Teatro Novissimo (Newest Theater), in which she agrees to sing in one or more operas that season (SR 89:569–71; 4/9:61–63). A clause allows for a reduction of her wages by half if she is ill and cannot perform. Should the opera be canceled for reasons beyond her control, however, she will still be paid in full. The contract provides Renzi with a box for the season, and all her costumes. Lest she worry about the theater going bankrupt, it also stipulates that a local resident, in this case a Jewish physician, will guarantee her fee.

THE LIBRETTIST

In seventeenth-century Venice, the librettist was perhaps the most important member of the dramaturgical team. He took responsibility for deciding how the drama should be presented: what episodes in myth or history would be used, the alterations that needed to be made for theatrical purposes, how the material should be distributed over the usual three-act scheme (some of the first Venetian librettists followed classical precedents and wrote five-act operas), and what would be included in the prologue. As a result, he usually received top billing. During opera's formative years in Venice, poets penned librettos as a hobby. Many were professional lawyers or diplomats, or nobles who had no need

of employment beyond the various jobs they performed in service to the Venetian government. In the case of *Poppea*, the librettist was Giovanni Francesco Busenello, a lawyer of the citizen class (the class that included Venetians who were not noble but who ranked above commoners). He was also an amateur poet and a member of the Accademia degli Incogniti who had already proved his skill by writing two librettos set by Monteverdi's young student Francesco Cavalli (whose opera *Giasone* we consider below).

It may well have been Busenello, in consultation with Monteverdi, who made the unusual decision to write an opera based not on mythology, but instead on an episode in Roman history in which none of the characters behaves in a particularly admirable way. The first-century Roman historian Tacitus is responsible for the most famous rendition of this story. Over the course of the opera Poppaea persuades Nero to banish his wife (the historical Octavia was killed by Nero), marry her, and crown her as empress. When Seneca objects to the marriage, Nero orders his suicide. Even the wronged characters—Poppea's husband, Otho (Othone), and Nero's wife, Octavia—make decisions that are morally suspect. Octavia manipulates Otho into disguising himself as a woman to sneak into the garden and attempt to murder Poppaea. (He is prevented from doing so by the appearance of Love, who defends Poppaea.) Like most seventeenth-century operas, the opera ends happily—at least for Nero and Poppaea, who sing a sensuous love duet at the end. However, since Nero marries his mistress, banishes his wife, and calls for the suicide of the virtuous Seneca, this is a work in which it is fair to say that virtue is not rewarded and vice is not punished.

Busenello and Monteverdi may have had a good reason for choosing this unconventional topic. During this period several of Busenello's colleagues in the Accademia degli Incogniti had published satirical novels focusing on the sexual and political misconduct of figures from imperial Rome. The badly behaved Romans served Venetian republican interests, since the Roman Empire offered an excellent example of the questionable moral values of a monarchy. Both libretto and music encapsulate the Academy's fascination with moral ambiguity and its preoccupation (as expressed in the writings of other Incogniti) with the allure and danger of female power and sexuality.

In adapting the historical narrative for the stage, Busenello made a number of changes that both conformed to Venetian operatic convention and called attention to the amorality of the protagonists. First, he invented several new characters: these include a young woman named Drusilla who is in love with Poppaea's husband Otho, two elderly nurses (one for Poppaea and one for Octavia), and a couple of young servants who sing a highly erotic love duet. Busenello distorted history so that the suicide of the great philosopher Seneca takes place in the center of the opera, rather than several years *after* the real-life Octavia was murdered and Poppaea was made empress. Also in keeping with operatic convention, Busenello included a prologue with allegorical figures, in which Love triumphs over Virtue and Fortune.

In consultation with the impresario and designers, Busenello, like other librettists, determined the settings and set changes for the various scenes, and provided descriptions of these along with basic stage directions. Since the poetic meter usually determined the placement of the arias and recitatives, the poet decided not only what words should be sung by the individual characters, but what style of singing should be used. A strophic text with a regular rhythm and rhyme scheme typically suggested an aria, while blank verse (*versi sciolti*) indicated that the passage should be set in recitative. One of the prime differences between Monteverdi's first opera, *L'Orfeo*, and a Venetian opera such as *Poppea* was the greater concentration in the latter on solo singing (principally lyrical recitative and brief arias). Since some dramatic moments were better suited to song than recitative, Italian librettists throughout the century developed conventions for certain types of arias (laments, vengeance arias, love duets, comic tirades against women, mad scenes, lullabies) and the appropriate situations in which they should be sung.

THE COMPOSER

None of Monteverdi's surviving letters provides details about the composition of his Venetian operas, but evidence concerning the collaboration between Busenello and Monteverdi can be derived by comparing the composer's actual settings to the poetic cues provided by the librettist. These reveal that Monteverdi—more than any of his contemporaries—took control of the lyrical flow of the opera. He often "recomposed" the poetry, turning text intended for arias into recitatives and vice versa. In Monteverdi's Venetian operas—and to some degree those of his contemporaries—characters often shift rapidly back and forth between speechlike recitatives and lyrical arias. The lyrical moments, usually in triple meter and featuring an expansion of a single phrase through word repetitions or more-virtuosic vocal writing, convey a spontaneous expression of emotions, or are calculated rhetorical gambits designed to seduce or persuade a given character.

One such example occurs in Act 1, scene 3 of *Poppea*, as Nero tries to leave his mistress after a night of lovemaking. Poppaea, eager for Nero to discard his wife and make her empress, uses lyrical recitative, generously laden with sensuous chromatic inflections, as she tries to extract from him a commitment not only to return to her bed but also to acknowledge their relationship officially. When he fails to succumb to her entreaties, Poppaea presents him with a sly ultimatum: "Sir," she sings modestly, "you always see me, but you don't really see me, for as long as you keep me hidden in your heart, you will not be able to gaze upon my eyes." In other words, Poppaea tells Nero that if he continues to keep her hidden—that is, if he does not acknowledge her publicly—he will no longer have the pleasure of seeing or sleeping with her.

Despite the fact that Busenello's poetry called for a continuation of recitative, Monteverdi sets this passage in aria style (Ex. 6.1). The chromaticism and languor vanish, and Poppaea sings in a diatonic C major over a bass that moves in quarter

Example 6.1: *Claudio Monteverdi, "Signor, sempre mi vedi" from* L'incoronazione di Poppea *(1643), Act 1, scene 3, mm. 94–98*

94 Poppea

Si - gnor, sem - pre mi ve - di, sem - pre, sem - pre, sem - pre mi

98

ve - di, An - zi mai non mi ve - di

Sir, you always see me, but you don't really see me

notes. After a deferential musical bow on the word "Signor," she slips into a jaunty rhythm with little bursts of coloratura (fast, florid passagework) as she provocatively repeats the most important words of her ultimatum, "sempre mi vedi" (you always see me)—almost like a musical striptease. The implied threat is unmistakable as she lingers coyly on the half-note G on the word "anzi" (but) in measure 98.

The aria style is one of the rhetorical tools that Poppaea uses to seduce the emperor. Nero's wife, Octavia, on the other hand, who is represented as being less desirable, sings in angular recitative throughout almost the entire opera, breaking into triple meter only once as she furiously imagines Nero in the arms of his mistress. Anna Renzi, reputed to have been a superb singing actress, nonetheless earned considerable acclaim for her portrayal of Octavia, moving audiences to tears despite—or perhaps because of—the less opulent vocal style.

Poppea also includes ensemble singing, in which Monteverdi deftly incorporates the compositional styles employed in his collections of concerted madrigals, such as the *Madrigali guerrieri et amorosi* (see Chapter 3). In representing the moments before Seneca's suicide in Act 2, scene 3, for example, a trio of his faithful followers (*familiari*) plead with the philosopher not to end his life in an imitative passage featuring ascending chromatic scales, in which none of the semitones properly resolves (Ex. 6.2).

The vocal virtuosity associated with the madrigals comes to the fore in the highly sensuous duet sung by Nero and his companion Lucan (Lucano) in Act 2, scene 6: they celebrate the death of Seneca by interweaving their ornate melodic lines over a ground bass—again a descending tetrachord. The unmistakable eroticism in their duet may well reflect the sexual freedom championed by the Accademia degli Incogniti and a certain tolerance for same-sex desire apparent in some of their more controversial writings. Crossed-out sections in one of the surviving manuscripts of the opera suggest that the duet might even have been censored at some point.

The exquisite concluding duet that portrays Nero and Poppaea exulting in their passion, which scholars speculate might have been composed by one

Example 6.2: *Claudio Monteverdi, "Non morir, Seneca" from* L'incoronazione di Poppea *(1643), Act 2, scene 3*

1 Non mo - rir, non mo - rir, Se - ne - ca,
Non mo - rir, non mo -
Non mo - rir, non mo - rir, Se - ne - ca,
4 non mo - rir, non mo - rir, Se - ne - ca,
rir, Se - ne - ca, non mo - rir, non mo - rir, non mo - rir, Se - ne - ca,
non mo - rir, non mo - rir, Se - ne - ca

Do not die, Seneca

Example 6.3: *Claudio Monteverdi, "Pur ti miro" from* L'incoronazione di Poppea *(1643), Act 3, scene 8, mm. 14–18*

14 Poppea
- do, Più non pe - no, non pe - no, Più non mo - ro, non mo - ro,
Nerone
strin- go, Più non mo - - ro, Più non pe - - no,
Basso continuo
4 ♯ 6 7

No more suffering, no more death . . .

of Monteverdi's younger contempororaries, is perhaps the most unsettling moment in the opera. Since a castrato played Nero, the two voices sing in the same register, melding in a manner that might seem at first to erase gender differences for twenty-first-century listeners, but is in fact remarkably sensual. As in the *Lamento della ninfa* (see Anthology 5), we find a descending tetrachord ground bass. Here, however, it does not indicate sorrow or lament; rather, as in the Nero–Lucan duet, the constant repetition creates erotic tension, which in this duet becomes particularly acute with the searing minor-second dissonance on the words "peno"(suffering) and "moro" (death) in measures 16–17 (Ex. 6.3).

The listener is left with a dilemma: Are we to rejoice in the happy ending, despite the death of Seneca and the banishment of Octavia? Or does the opera convey an implicit judgment in light of the historical fact that the pregnant Poppaea would later die from a kick in the abdomen by an enraged Nero? Regardless, this morally ambivalent libretto inspired some of Monteverdi's most remarkable music.