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Introduction

Issue on Opera and Ancient Sources in the Nineteenth Century

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The two centuries of Baroque and Enlightenment opera were the golden age of 'ancient' plotlines. From Monteverdi and Lully to Gluck, Mozart and Cimarosa, topics from classical myth and history dominated the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century opera stages, beginning with the always-popular story of Orpheus and ending with Metastasio's celebrations of clement monarchs like the Roman emperor Titus and the Persian Artaxerxes. But interest in these subjects on the part of composers and audiences waned, and ancient plots in the familiar operatic repertory from the nineteenth century are correspondingly rarer: those that readily come to mind are Spontini's *La vestale* (premiere 1807), Rossini's *Semiramide* (1823), Bellini's *Norma* (1831), Offenbach's *Orphée aux Enfers* (1858), Berlioz's *Les Troyens* (1863) and, stretching the time frame slightly, Strauss's *Salome* (1905) and *Elektra* (1909). This perception is deceptive. Though not evident from the perspective of the present-day canon of performed works, interest in ancient narratives did persist among nineteenth-century composers, whether because of long-established tradition or because the makers of opera were still finding effective and grand stories in the ancient world. Such stories would have served different purposes than in past centuries; nevertheless, titles such as Pacini's *Saffo* (1840), Mercadante's *Gli Orazi e i Curiazi* (1846), Rubinstein's *Néron* (1879), or Bungert's tetralogy *Homerische Welt* (1896–1903) appeared as interest in the classical and Biblical worlds continued to claim the attention of composers and audiences.

In Italy, for example, Verdi's attraction to ancient subjects illustrates the persistent influence of antiquity. Even though one may not normally associate Verdi with opera subjects taken from the ancient world, he showed interest in them to a much greater extent than is commonly understood. The majority of the operas he wrote were derived from nineteenth-century and early modern sources (for example, Schiller, Shakespeare, Hugo, Dumas, Byron[1]); nonetheless, the composer

[1] On Verdi's evolving preferences throughout his career, see, for example, Gilles de Van, *Verdi's Theater: Creating Drama through Music*, trans. Gilda Roberts (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

considered operatic subjects that were quite varied, drawn from diverse European literary traditions and chronological periods, including the Biblical and Greco-Roman worlds. Among his works, *Nabucco* (1842) was adapted from Biblical and classical historiography, and *Aida* (1871) was an invented Egyptian tale penned by a well-known Egyptologist.[2] If one considers the presence of Romans of the late Empire in the dramatis personae, *Attila* (1846) could be included as well. What is less known about Verdi's interests is his contemplation of several opera plots that either directly or indirectly dealt with ancient sources: as a few examples (using Verdi's titles), *Caino* (a Biblical character based on Byron's play *Cain*), *Baldassare* (a Biblical story from Gomez de Avellaneda's play *Baltasar*), *Fedra* (from Racine's play *Phédre*, drawn from Euripides's *Hippolytus*), *Medea* (Della Valle's eponymous play drawn from Euripides), *Acté et Néron* (from Dumas *père*'s historical novel, based on material from Tacitus, Suetonius, Cassius Dio and the New Testament) and *Arria* (from Tacitus's *Annals and Letters* and Pliny's *Epistulae*).[3] Clearly, these works provided not the 'usual things, without novelty or variety',[4] but the 'grand', 'varied', 'bold' and 'daring' plots that excited Verdi's imagination.[5]

And this was only Verdi. Mercadante composed around a dozen operas on ancient subjects, as the *ottocento* music historian Francesco Florimo remarked: 'in subjects drawn from Roman history, Mercadante finds himself in a large field in which his imagination wanders'.[6] Mercadante and Verdi both set librettos by Salvadore Cammarano, who could write *Gli Orazi e i Curiazi* (1846, based on a Roman legend) for the former and *Il trovatore* (1853, based on an 1836 Spanish play) for the latter. The old thus continued to exist alongside the new. Consequently, even if operas about antiquity did not enter the canon as often as those on newer subjects, works on ancient topics were still very much available to nineteenth-century audiences. Late-eighteenth-century 'ancient' operas continued to be performed in the early nineteenth century, and some young nineteenth-century opera composers set librettos that used the older traditions. In the later century, opera composers found new approaches to antiquity that addressed shifting contemporary esthetic and social concerns.

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[2] It has been proposed and refuted that elements in the libretto of *Aida* resemble other Egyptian-based sources. Among these can be counted Metastasio's libretto *Nitetti* (Vienna, 1756), which, as Metastasio noted in his published *Argomento*, had some origins in the ancient Greek historians Herodotus and Diodorus Siculus. See Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, 3 vols (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981): 3:165–6.

[3] On subjects Verdi considered in general, see Roberta Montemorra Marvin, *Verdi the Student – Verdi the Teacher* (Parma: Istituto Nazionale di Studi Verdiani, 2010): 96–107; on the titles found in a short list of potential subjects written in Verdi's *Copialettere*, see also Alberto Rizzuti, 'Argomenti d'opere', in *Verdi e le letterature europee*, ed. Giorgio Pestelli, Quaderni 25 (Turin: Accademia delle Scienze di Torino, 2016): 71–107, and on problems surrounding Verdi's reference to *Arria*, esp. 101–4.

[4] Verdi to Cesare De Sanctis, about the subject *Paoli*, 18 January 1854, *Carteggi verdiani*, ed. Alessandro Luzio, 4 vols (Rome: Reale Accademia d'Italia – Accademia nazionale dei Lincei, 1935–47): 1: 22–3.

[5] Verdi explained his libretto preferences to De Sanctis, 1 January 1853, *Carteggi verdiani*, 1: 16–7.

[6] Francesco Florimo, *La scuola musicale di Napoli e i suoi conservatori*, 4 vols (Naples: Morano, 1880–84): III (1883):116: 'E davvero nei soggetti tolti dalla storia romana, il Mercadante sa trovarsi in largo campo, nel quale spazia la sua fantasia.'

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Those concerns were admittedly Euro-centric, whether the opera was being produced in Europe in the language of the local opera house, or by Americans looking back to their European origins. This raises challenges that should be acknowledged here. During the preparation of this issue, the fields of Classics and Musicology, like so many academic enterprises, have been publicly examining their historical and contemporary roles in relation to indigenous populations and people of colour. The question of who owns the Classics, or even the issue of their value for society, has become part of the larger political dialogue, especially in the United States, but also elsewhere in the world. Attackers at the US Capitol on 6 January 2021 sported clothing with Spartan and ancient Roman insignia.[7] In February of the same year, the *New York Times Magazine* highlighted the struggles of a Black classicist with the traditional whiteness of the field.[8] The growing technical scholarship in archaeology and art history, which has shown how the famous sculptural and architectural monuments from Greece and Rome had in antiquity been brightly painted with skin that was not always white, has generated popular interest and acrimonious debate in the blogosphere.[9]

Quarrelling over ownership and use of the ancient Mediterranean cultures that we have traditionally called 'classical' is not a new phenomenon, however, and the essays in this volume can provide perspectives on our own debates, because they document equally vigorous quarrels on the plane of nineteenth-century national and artistic ideologies. Metastasian operas about Roman emperors were rejected by the French revolutionaries because those works celebrated monarchs, but then their performance was encouraged by Napoleon in his role as Consul and Emperor. Rossini's early opera *Ciro in Babilonia* negotiated the spaces between monarchy and autonomy in Napoleonic northern Italy. A Schubert adaptation of Aristophanes's *Lysistrata* connected German-American immigrants in Hoboken, New Jersey, with their homeland in Europe. Saint-Saëns in Paris criticized Offenbach's apparent mockery of Greco-Roman antiquity and with his *Phyrné* wrote his own, more respectful version of ancient comedy. David's *Herculanum* capitalized on current archaeological finds to shift antiquity from a pagan to a Christian world.

Given the enduring interest in ancient material in the nineteenth century, the essays contained in this journal issue aim to illuminate aspects of the history of such topics in operatic production of the era and to explore in detail examples of how such sources were appropriated by those who created operas and received by those who attended performances at the time. The predominance of these topics in opera in earlier times, specifically with regard to their reception through opera, has been addressed by musicologists and classics scholars, who are producing a

[7] 'Capitol Terrorists Take Inspiration from Ancient World', *Pharos*, 14 January 2021, http://pages.vassar.edu/pharos/2021/01/14/capitol-terrorists-take-inspiration-from-ancient-world, accessed 6 March 2021. One may note in this connection a US president's espousal of classical architecture for Federal buildings, which generated a response on the blog of the Society for Classical Studies after the 6 January attack; https://classicalstudies.org/scs-blog/elizabeth-w-thill/blog-classical-architecture-and-attack-capitol, accessed 6 March 2021.

[8] Rachel Poser, 'He Wants to Save Classics from Whiteness: Can the Field Survive?" *The New York Times Magazine*, 2 February 2021; updated 12 February 2021.

[9] For a journalistic account, see 'The Myth of Whiteness in Classical Sculpture', *The New Yorker*, 29 October 2018.

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developing list of books and essays.[10] Especially for nineteenth-century repertory, however, there remains much fertile ground for exploration.

The first two essays in this issue help shed light on the murky world of libretto production between the fall of the Ancien Régime and the more familiar world of Italian and German opera of the century. In 'Under Cover in Babylon: Rossini's Cyrus the Great for the Lenten Season', Robert C. Ketterer examines how Rossini and his librettist Aventi synthesized their ancient sources for *Ciro in Babilonia* for their own purposes. He argues that, by combining the older classical material familiar from Metastasian opera with Biblical material unusual in an opera, this transitional work explores new ways to present an ancient subject at a time when interest in such topics was in decline. He explores the political relevance of this topic for an Italian composer and an audience, perhaps both Christian and Jewish, who had been grateful for French republican liberation but were ambivalent about the Napoleonic empire under which they currently lived. In 'Félicien David's Grand Opera *Herculanum* (1859): Rome, Early Christianity, Multiple Exoticisms, Great Tunes – and Satan', Ralph P. Locke discusses why the opera was so successful in its time and what has helped it regain attention in recent years. The composer and his librettist, Joseph Méry, created a sensational ancient world that dealt with topics such as faith, theology and religious persecution or tolerance. Locke explores how the opera shifts geographical location away from Rome to the Bay of Naples and the plot from pagan to Christian antiquity. Two young lovers, adherents of the early Christian religion, are opposed by two formidable aristocrats from the Greek east, by Satan himself, and finally by the eruption of Mt Vesuvius. The quality and variety of both David's music and the opera's libretto contribute to Locke's analyses of nineteenth-century performance and modern revivals.

The second two articles move from serious operas about the ancient world to comic adaptations of ancient literature. Evan A. MacCarthy's '*Lysistrata* in Kleindeutschland: The German-American Reception of Schubert's *Die Verschworenen* (D. 787)' tells the story of the United States premiere in Hoboken, New Jersey, of Schubert's little-known *Singspiel Die Verschworenen* (*The Conspirators*), adapted from Aristophanes's comedies *Lysistrata* and *Women at the Thesmophoria*. Composed in 1823, but not premiered until 1861 (in Vienna), the work was successfully revived for a thriving German-American cultural community at the time of the American Civil War. MacCarthy addresses the historical conditions of early performances in the New York City area and the reasons for the work's programming by its conductor, Friedrich Adolf Sorge, a prominent German-American political and labour leader. The *Singspiel* had multiple levels of significance for its mid-century ethnic audience: as an adaptation of *Lysistrata* set during the Crusades, in New Jersey it appeared as a comic plea for peace in the early years of the American Civil War. Its use of parts of *Women at the*

[10] For a survey of scholarship on opera and classics from the seventeenth to the twenty-first centuries, see 'Classics and Opera', ed. Robert Ketterer and Jon Solomon, *Oxford Bibliographies Online*, www.oxfordbibliographies.com, accessed 8 July 2020. General studies and collections include *Ancient Drama in Music for the Modern Stage*, ed. Peter Brown and Suzana Ograjenšek (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Michael Ewans, *Opera from the Greek: Studies in the Poetics of Appropriation* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); special issue of *Syllecta Classica* 23 (2012), https://muse.jhu.edu/issue/27519, accessed 11 July 2020; Danielle Porte, *Roma Diva*: *L'inspiration antique dans l'Opera*, vol. 1: *L'istoire romaine dans les oeuvres de 1800 à nos jours* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1987).

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Thesmophoria suggested relevance to mid-century labour disputes that Sorge would eventually lead himself. MacCarthy concludes that in this context the work becomes both 'Germanic and Hellenic, medieval and modern', thereby becoming an assurance of shared educational background and Old-World culture for its audience. In '*Phryné* as *Opéra Comique*: Saint-Saëns contra Offenbach', Steven Huebner outlines how Saint-Saëns, with his operatic representation of the Greek courtesan Phryne, made the case for the sustainability of the *opéra comique* genre in a cultural environment in which lighter works on classical subjects, specifically the *opérettes* by Jacques Offenbach, were applauded on Parisian stages. Huebner addresses Saint-Saëns's efforts, through his dislike of Offenbach's music and the flexibility in application of generic designations for comic musical stage works of the period. He demonstrates that Saint-Saëns and his librettist, Augé de Lassus, connected their Hellenic subject matter with paintings and sculptures as well as with musical qualities that were considered to be 'classical' at the end of the nineteenth century and argues that by doing so, they delineated aesthetic space for comic musical works that were not by Offenbach.

As a whole, the collection furnishes snapshots that span the arc of nineteenth-century reception of the ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern worlds in opera and suggest that interest in classical and biblical topics had not really waned, but rather that librettists and composers had shifted their ways of presenting the old subjects. Once the representation of an aristocratic and monarchic seventeenth- and eighteenth-century world had been impacted by the age of revolution, opera no longer needed to celebrate a divine-right king or emperor but could instead reflect a variety of emerging cultural and esthetic concerns.[11] Changing realities in different geographical and temporal contexts meant that the classical world could be a mirror for multiple, and even conflicting, social, political and religious points of view.

Finally, something should be said about music and text. Reception studies of classical or ancient sources in opera by necessity deal primarily with the verbal text. Music would always have been derived from the style of the era in which an opera was composed; although music may have sometimes been innovative, composers rarely made conscious attempts to be 'ancient' and, of course, could not have copied ancient music, of which only a few fragments survive. As these essays show, the manner in which ancient texts were brought into play for the purposes of opera – with verbal, scenic and musical components tailored to their audiences – can shed light on cultural aspects of the societies for which they were created and performed. The authors of these studies encourage readers to consider what a librettist might have expected his audience to know about the stories, based on their educational background and their exposure to opera performances; which dramatic practices – for example, use of choruses, willingness to explore tragic endings – would have been acceptable in the theatre; and where comic or tragic approaches to revered antiquity would have been acceptable. In sum, the essays add new perspectives to the ongoing conversation about the extent to which, in the nineteenth century, classical learning (though sometimes beneath the surface) played a role in opera creation, production and reception.

[11] For the most complete exposition of eighteenth-century *opera seria* as a celebration of monarchy, see Martha Feldman, *Opera and Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

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