

# ‘Ma in Spagna son già mille e tre’: On Opera and Literature

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It is perhaps inevitable that a Hispanist should, out of local loyalties, deal to some extent with Spain in an Address of this kind, but I hope that my materials are sufficiently multilingual and interdisciplinary to be of general interest. In any case, opera in its original language or in translation knows no boundaries, and as a kind of literature or as a vehicle for what was originally literature in the strict sense (plays, novels) surely enjoys the respect, often the love, of many members of this Association.

To consider opera from a literary standpoint does not mean that I am about to launch into some new approach in which the sharpest tools of modern literary criticism will be used to dismember and outrage the innocent body of opera. Thoughts of doing so had, none the less, occurred to me, and it is tempting (before dismissing them) to record a few possibilities that the brighter kind of graduate student might care to take up.

Postmarxist criticism (unfashionable, but surely muted only temporarily) might concern itself with the unstudied action of Dr Dulcamara when shamelessly exploiting the credulity of Italian peasants for profit (*L'elisir d'amore*),<sup>1</sup> or with the point of view of the put-upon proletarian gardener in *Le nozze di Figaro* when the upper-crust Cherubino smashes the flowers over which he has laboured, and when his angry protests are silenced not only by the assembled aristos but also by Figaro, a proletarian who betrays class solidarity when he is persuaded to collude with them: this, from the man who had earlier sung his embittered and class-conscious ‘Se vuol ballare, signor Contino’. Leporello is another sadly corrupted proletarian: his instinct may be that ‘Non voglio più servir’, but sheer economic dependence keeps him at his master’s side (*Don Giovanni*). The peasant Mazetto’s angry denunciation of the Don’s lewd advances to Zerlina (‘Ho capito, signor, sì [. . .] Cavalier voi siete già’) is calmed by Leporello’s cynical manipulation of him, and in an ultimate symbolic degradation he is shown as heavy-footed in the upper-class minuet (‘No, no, ballar non voglio!’). Later the Don disarms the vengeful Mazetto, snatching his musket and pistol, and leaving the peasant both sexually humbled and powerless. Is not all this an indictment of conditions of the sort which led not only to 1789, as has often been noted, but to 1917 also?

Deconstructionists have failed to turn over a few sods in the corners of the rich field that awaits them in apparently minor, but surely significant, comments upon the military life which nineteenth-century operas offer in abundance. At the start of *La Fille du régiment*, the noise of not very distant gunfire suggests action is at hand, but the troops when they appear have been concerned more with choral training

<sup>1</sup> It seems best to cite titles in their original language, and personages in the form in which they most commonly appear in English.

and with protecting young Marie as a sort of regimental mascot (a goat-substitute?) than with battlefield heroics. La Marquise may fear outrage from the brutal and licentious soldiery ('Je vous confie mon honneur'), but they turn out to be a bunch of softies whose only claim to heroism is that they are 'Le régiment, en tous pays, | l'effroi des amants, des maris'. They have, moreover, taught Marie some very unbecoming language ('Ah! mon Dieu! Elle jure!'). Sergeant Belcore shows why, at any rate so far as his part of the army of Lombardy was concerned, the reunification of Italy was to take so long: on receiving a clear written order to move his unit, his reaction is 'Espresso è l'ordine — non so che far' (*L'elisir*). At one point the plot of *Il barbiere di Siviglia* hinges upon the little-noticed corruption of officers concerned with billeting arrangements ('Oggi arriva un reggimento' — 'Sì, è mio amico il colonnello'). In the same opera the Sevillian police honour their brilliant uniforms and show up the soldiers by routinely carrying out basic duties: on entering Bartolo's house, they ask the equivalent of 'Hullo, hullo, hullo, what's all this?' ('Questo chiasso donde è nato?') and try to arrest the military officer who is causing the trouble; but the disguised Count pulls rank and leaves a free man. His pretended drunkenness is a further significant factor in our deconstruction. *Il barbiere* is thus, on a modern analysis, all about military abuses and a plea for reform. *Carmen* offers a casebook study: Don José deserts, carouses in taverns, consorts with smugglers, gypsies, and the wrong sort of girls, ending as a murderer. Being a mere corporal, he had little rank to pull, and he was not in the least entitled either to the 'Don' that the ignorant French awarded him. (In defence of the opera's librettists, it must be said that they inherited the 'Don' from Mérimée. In his story José explains to the narrator (Chapter 3) that 'Je m'appelle don José Lizarrabengoa, et vous connaissez assez l'Espagne, Monsieur, pour que mon nom vous dise aussitôt que je suis Basque et vieux chrétien. Si je prends le *don*, c'est que j'en ai le droit, et si j'étais à Elizondo, je vous montrerais ma généalogie sur parchemin'. But then again, he is an extremely unreliable witness, and why should we trust the narrator?)

The police are singularly ineffective in *Carmen*'s Seville, then, and there were none on the trail of the smugglers either. But their corrupt power is all too prevalent in *Tosca*. For similar tracts about reform of the prison service, see of course *Fidelio*, *Carmen* again, *Aida*, also *Nabucco*, and (though one really should not put it in the same sentence) *Die Fledermaus*. In the senior service, the matter of Pinkerton's use of his shore leave in *Madama Butterfly* also calls for deconstructive inquiry.

For gender and feminist studies, one offers just about everything from Monteverdi onward, but Mozart gives a convenient start. Zerlina's 'Batti, batti, o bel Mazetto, | La tua povera Zerlina' (*Don Giovanni*) is surely no longer permissible on a politically correct stage, though the genre is somewhat redeemed by Isabella, the heroine of *L'Italiana in Algeri*, when she berates the men for their cowardice ('una donna t'insegni | ad esser forte') and is bold enough to initiate the ennoblement of the uncomprehending Bey as 'Pappataci'. *La traviata* is of course the outstanding casebook study of the degradation of woman at the hands of both the aristocracy (the Baron) and the wealthy bourgeoisie (Alfredo). Mimi is briefly rescued from drudgery by love, but the attic is hardly up to acceptable standards, and the love of poets is no replacement for adequate social and medical services (*La Bohème*).

The postmodern approach would find itself at home with the tumultuous cacophony of animal noises that concludes Act I of *L'Italiana in Algeri* to express confusion and uncertainty. Also with the thought that since all texts are equal, *The*

*Mikado* performed in a village hall in deepest Dorset is every bit as worthy as *Madama Butterfly* at La Scala, no allowances being made for the varying degree of musical competence and quality of costumes in the performances, since this would involve value-judgements.

For Freudians, the obvious case for putting most of the cast of *Le nozze* on the analyst's couch or straight into therapy has presumably long since been made out. Cherubino has not merely one but two substitute fathers, the Count and Figaro, who order him about; and two substitute mothers, the Countess and Susanna, both playfully encouraging the attentions of the adolescent lad who is also, at one point, dressed as a girl, and at another, returns to the womb when concealed in darkness on a chair under a cloak. The fact that the part of the boy is always sung by a female adds piquancy. Beaumarchais started all this in *Le Mariage*, since his direction reads: 'Ce rôle ne peut être joué [. . .] que par une jeune et très-jolie femme.' (Who were Cherubino's biological parents, anyway? They surely have much to answer for.) But Freudians may not have inquired into the symbolism of the open window or non-glass through which Cherubino propels himself, to crash into the flowerpots below and shatter their red carnations; he survives, not too seriously bloodied, this symbolic initiation into manhood, this deflowering of the circular and leafy genital vessel. Furthermore, the cherub falls from celestial innocence onto the earth earthy, from childhood above into the adult state, as he makes off in his new military uniform. But in his fall he has dropped his commission, the paper that justifies his passage into manhood, and now a substitute evil uncle, no less, the gardener Antonio, has picked up the paper and will in the next scene drunkenly wave it in the faces of the now displaced father-figures, Figaro and the Count.

Finally, the *Rezeptionstheorie* specialists can ponder accounts of performances of Auber's *Masaniello* of 1828, whose theme was the Naples rebellion of 1647. 'When this opera was produced in 1830 at Brussels, the audience went out into the street and started a revolution of their own which led to the separation of Belgium from Holland.' Much was to be expected of this volcanic work in any case: 'The heroine [. . .] leaps from the balcony of the royal palace at Naples into the crater of Vesuvius, a distance of some eight or nine miles.'<sup>2</sup>

As a lead into my main theme, on opera and literature or opera as literature, I offer a thoroughly contemporary instance. In September and October 1995 BBC1 showed Andrew Davies's adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* in six long episodes. Transient in a way it may prove to be, but it is said to have had over ten million viewers (fourteen million, even, for the final episode), and the film is naturally available as a video, so as the Spaniards say 'no es cosa del otro jueves'. Also, many thousands have rushed to libraries and bookshops to secure Jane Austen's novel, and there is a fierce debate between enthusiasts and purists, surely a healthy outcome. Among the small additions made by Davies there figures in Episode 5 (corresponding to Chapter 45 of the novel) a scene at Pemberley in which Elizabeth plays the magnificent instrument recently bought by Mr Darcy for his sister. Elizabeth's musical talents have already been examined at length in Chapter 32, so that Davies's Pemberley scene is by no means unwarranted. She sings in a light, untrained soprano voice (entirely fitting: no criticism of the actress is intended) one

<sup>2</sup> Edward J. Dent, *Opera*, revised edn (Melbourne, London, and Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1949), pp. 69–70.

stanza of 'Voi che sapete' from *Le nozze*, in an English version ('Say ye who borrow | Love's witching spell, | What is this sorrow | Nought can dispel?') presumably learned from a sheet of printed music as any aria might be. This new 'text' is created and indeed is visibly before Elizabeth as she plays.

Here, opera intrudes into literature and perhaps enriches it. It is pointless to ask whether the author would have approved of this or any other aspect of the televisual transformation.<sup>3</sup> But the adapter's choice of the aria is interesting. Elizabeth might, after all, have sung 'Home, Sweet Home' (also an operatic piece, but from a work later than 1813, when *Pride and Prejudice* was published; it came from Bishop's *Clari, or the Maid of Milan*, 1823), or something equally anodyne. 'Voi che sapete | che cosa è l'amor' even in English is electrically charged in any context, and in the film carries a voltage high enough to stun Darcy at a distance of several yards, especially when Elizabeth casts a demurely smouldering glance in his direction as she finishes playing. She is plainly much affected by Darcy's presence and is delighted to have the chance to play and sing to him. Da Ponte's brilliant lyric and Mozart's divine tune, even when sung by a not very gifted amateur (again, this is not a criticism of the actress) float across the music-room.

Did Andrew Davies intend intertextual operatic allusions in his invented scene? Several examples of what is evidently a minor topos in itself come readily to mind. There is Rosina's singing-lesson in *Il barbiere*, accompanied by Don Alonso (Almaviva in disguise) on the harpsichord and by many a flirtatious look. As the practice piece, Rosinas have sung a great variety of lyrics, including, anachronistically (but who cares?) 'Home, Sweet Home', 'Robin Adair', 'La biondina in gondoletta', and even, adjusting octaves, 'Non più andrai'. Quite a medley might ensue if encores were called for. There is Marie's singing-lesson in *La Fille du régiment*, with intrusion of phrases from the regimental anthem and a series of uncontrolled *coloratura* explosions. There is the grandly moustachioed Italian tenor in *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, who sings 'Il mio tesoro' beside the piano so effectively that he captures the heart of the hero-villain's mother, with fatal consequences for nearly everybody. Most tellingly, there is the operatic training and stage debut of the vocally-challenged soprano in *Citizen Kane*, the training having involved another moustachioed Italian as music-master.

Perhaps, however, speculation on these lines is useless, since even if Davies is hinting at such things and if they are meaningful for moderns, none of them can have meant anything in 1813, being of later date, and we cannot even be sure that Elizabeth Bennet knew her little song was an operatic aria in origin or what its context or even its original language was. These things took time to reach the author's Hampshire or the still-rural Hertfordshire where the Bennets lived, especially from a continent long blocked off by war. Equally, we cannot be sure that Mr Darcy when in London ever went to the opera. I do not suggest that Davies has permanently altered the canonical literary text, but film in cinema or on TV can be very powerful, and I suspect that many now reading the book for the first time, or

<sup>3</sup> Concerning any association with *Le nozze*, we can be fairly sure that Miss Austen would not have approved. Brigid Brophy described it as 'the most purely erotic opera ever composed', as cited by Gary Schmidgall, *Literature as Opera* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 70. I do not find these precise words in Brophy's second edition, *Mozart the Dramatist* (London: Libris, 1988), but much of Chapter 11 explores this aspect, and within it, pages 105–07 are devoted to a discussion of Cherubino's role as a sort of Cupid. Schmidgall's excellent book, which ranges from Handel to Britten, has much on aspects that interest me here.

even going back to a much-loved but uncertainly remembered text, will be surprised and grieved to find that the memorable music-room scene (and others of Davies's invention) are not in the original: will booksellers and librarians face protests for issuing copies with pages missing? Might a new 'book of the film' accompany the video and compete seriously with, or perhaps displace, Jane Austen's original? Evidence of this is just now to hand. The *Guardian* of 4 January 1996 (p. 13) reports the following: a young woman was overheard at the counter of a Waterstone's bookshop in London asking for a screenplay of *Pride and Prejudice*. 'I'm afraid we haven't got that one', said the assistant, 'but we do have Jane Austen's novelization of the BBC1 serial.'

The question of the displacement of a literary original by an operatic text is an interesting one. At one extreme Shakespeare's plays cannot be affected by any amount of operatic atmospheric, whether by the masters (*Otello*, by Rossini, very popular in its day; *Macbeth*, *Otello*, *Falstaff*, by Verdi; *Roméo et Juliette* by Gounod) or by lesser talents (*Hamlet*, by Ambroise Thomas; *Die lustigen Weiber von Windsor*, by Nicolai, now recalled only for its overture). There are a great many others.<sup>4</sup> That is to say, nobody listening to a Shakespearian *Othello* is likely to have his hearing disturbed by the intrusion of Verdian notes into his head in some scene, even if he had heard the opera the previous month. At the other extreme, it is probably true to say that some powerful and often-heard operas are not merely better known than their literary models but have virtually displaced them. Some, but probably relatively few, now read *La Dame aux camélias*. *La traviata* commands the boards, not only those of the opera-house, but metaphorically, of filmed live performances on TV, of cinema film, of video, of recordings on vinyl and tape and disk.

In this case, the displacement involves an intermediate phase. The novel by Dumas  *fils* appeared in 1848. The author thought of turning it into a play, but Dumas  *père* advised against: 'Ce n'est pas un sujet dramatique.' However, the son went ahead, and the play, at first banned by the censor, was performed with great success on 2 February 1852, after the change of régime. In the Paris audience on the first night was one Giuseppe Verdi.

The transformation can be followed in detail. There can be no more boisterous first scene in opera than that of *La traviata*, the explosion of vigour and gaiety at Violetta's party, attended by the principals and the full opera chorus of some thirty people. The stage is crowded and movements must be carefully rehearsed, especially if glasses of pretend-bubbly are to be swung to and fro. Anyone reading the novel may be surprised to find at this point (Chapter 9) no more than an informal gathering of four people at supper: Marguerite, Armand, Gaston, and Prudence, merry but restrained. In the play Dumas retains this (I.viii), adding just one character (Olympe), but Gaston now sings a not very wild song in praise of love and wine; this is a solo, and there is no refrain. The addition is vital, but its dimensions remain limited: the stage play needed no more, and an impresario would provide no more because of the cost, even if Dumas had asked for it. It was Piave and Verdi who imagined the greatly enlarged space (in every sense) for the scene and went

<sup>4</sup> These are merely those still best known. Hundreds, including for example fourteen *Hamlets*, exist or once existed: for some notions, see Winton Dean, 'Shakespeare and Opera', in *Shakespeare in Music*, ed. by Phyllis Hartnoll (London: Macmillan, 1964), pp. 89–175, and Schmidgall, *Shakespeare and Opera* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

ahead to fill it triumphantly. If you read novel or play today, they seem (*seem*, and of course the judgement is grossly unfair) both small and muted. If operatic 'Libiamo' is thought too unbearably vulgar to warrant consideration, try instead Germont's magnificent aria 'Di Provenza il mar, il suol' which was equally developed out of scattered small hints in the original novel and play but had no real antecedent.

On any objective assessment the opera here has, I think, displaced the novel. There is no need to arbitrate between Dumas's novel, hugely popular and somewhat *risqué* in its day, and the opera. They are different and that is that. The opera necessarily selects, concentrates, emphasizes, makes music of what is musicable and neglects the rest. Seven whole chapters at the start of the novel and much else have simply disappeared: without much sense of loss, since if you are going to be moved by the story of the consumptive courtesan, Violetta will be much more appealing than Marguerite. 'E tardi!', sobs Violetta, as the music of the Carnival passes in the street below, a finer moment than any in the novel or the play.

In at least one case, displacement has similarly occurred and for the better: that is, a value-judgement seems inevitable. Walter Scott's *The Bride of Lammermoor* (1819) is turgid stuff, surely one of the least satisfactory of his works in its literary technique. His lawyerly mind seems to override his novelistic instinct when, given a splendid plot, he festoons it with legalistic and genealogical detail, and here and there with ponderous mini-essays on Scottish history. His (to us) tedious passages of description of landscapes, interiors, or personal appearance are typical of their time and were obviously not going to concern makers of opera, except in so far as they conveyed information useful to designers of sets and costumes. Donizetti's excellent librettist Cammarano gives us back the bare drama of the plot, the series of scenes which properly represent the high points of the novel and make for good theatre.

Librettists, of course, have never been given their due as craftsmen-poets and dramatists, though some restitution is now being made.<sup>5</sup> Many French operas in the 1830s were said in announcements to be 'by' the famous Scribe, the musical composer (such as Auber or Meyerbeer) not being mentioned. *Le nozze* when recently televised was billed as 'by' Lorenzo Da Ponte and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *sic*, as they say, in alphabetic order, but while Da Ponte may be recognized as the doyen of them all, especially since his own life was full of operatic incident, he once went a little far in staking his claim. Late in life he took a Spanish company to New York, to perform *Il barbiere*. He adored Rossini, but thought that for a change they should do something else, perhaps 'il mio *Don Giovanni*, messo in musica dall'immortale Mozart'.<sup>6</sup> At the least, the great librettists of Italy and France deserve a substantial mention in histories of literature. It may also be the case, I think not sufficiently explored, that the extravagances normal enough in opera from the early nineteenth century, because it was opera (disregard of unities of time and place, stunning spectacle, exploitation of stage machinery and simple chemistry, and the like) may have stimulated writers to attempt, and doubtless prepared audiences for,

<sup>5</sup> On librettists, there is a good chapter (3: 'Do the Words Matter?') in Hamish F. S. Swanston's *In Defence of Opera* (London: Lane, 1978). Of interest also is Patrick J. Smith, *The Tenth Muse: A Historical Study of the Opera Libretto* (London: Gollancz, 1971). See now Deirdre O'Grady, *The Last Troubadours: Poetic Drama in Italian Opera 1597-1887* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), very properly reviewed as a work on literature in *MLR*, 90 (1995), 218-19.

<sup>6</sup> *Memorie*, 2 vols (Bari: Laterza, 1918), II, 77.

what were to seem the revolutionary innovations of 'Romantic' drama about which so much fuss was made at the time by theatre purists.

Perhaps, however, the librettist of *Lucia* was not 'giving back' anything, but merely retaining what was needed. Jerome Mitchell puts it well: 'Throughout this study I shall point out time and again the theatrical quality of the Waverley Novels. They usually break down into a few big scenes. They abound in direct discourse, with characters often being given Shakespeare-like soliloquies that can easily be converted into texts for arias.'<sup>7</sup> In any case when Cammarano wrote his *Lucia* libretto for Donizetti in 1835, there had already been from 1827 no fewer than five operas on this theme and Mitchell thinks (p. 142) that Cammarano may have known all three of the previous Italian works among these, being thus helped on his way. The only weakness of Mitchell's admirable study is that throughout his book, in which some fifty operas based on Scott's works are analysed, comparisons are made only between the original novels and the operas. In most cases the librettists of the operas, nearly all continental, surely based their work on French translations of Scott, which were instantaneous, numerous, and extraordinarily influential.

We do not know what Dumas made of *La traviata*. Scott did not live long enough to see Donizetti's *Lucia*. However, on 31 October 1826 he did record his impression of *Ivanhoé* in Paris, without mentioning the librettist, the composer, or the music (cobbled together by Rossini from four earlier works, which at least had been his own): 'In the evening at the Odeon where we saw *Ivanhoe*. It was superbly got up, the norman soldiers wearing pointed helmets and what resembled much hauberks of mail which looked very well. The number of the attendants and the skill with which they are moved and grouped on the stage is well worthy of notice. It was an opera and of course the story greatly mangled and the dialogue in a great part nonsense.'<sup>8</sup>

A good example of the impact of opera on literature is entertainingly documented by Bernard Levin (*The Times*, 16 July 1974). An arch-Mozartian who claimed to have seen *Le nozze* 'upwards of fifty times', he went in 1974 to Jonathan Miller's production of Beaumarchais's *Le Mariage de Figaro* at the National Theatre. The problem: 'What I had forgotten was how closely Da Ponte and Mozart followed Beaumarchais; in places the opera corresponds to the play virtually line for line.' The consequence was that 'again and again I found myself wriggling my shoulders back into my seat in anticipation of the musical pleasures to come, and again and again it was missing'. The power of the absent music (with varying tempi, depending on the preferences of singers whose names and relative speeds are recalled at one point) superimposed itself throughout the performance of the play. Levin's worst moment came in Act II, when Cherubino sings 'Voi che sapete': 'In the play there is an equivalent song, which is even accompanied, as in the opera, by Susanna on the

<sup>7</sup> Jerome Mitchell, *The Walter Scott Operas* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1977), p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> *The Journal of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. by W. E. K. Anderson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 226. I am grateful to Miss Elizabeth Erskine for this reference.

guitar, *but goes to the wrong tune*' (his emphasis).<sup>9</sup> I rest my case. It only remains to speculate whether in the minds of most of those millions who watched the 1995 *Pride and Prejudice* on TV, 'Voi che sapete' or rather, 'Say ye who borrow' will be for ever associated with Elizabeth Bennet as singer and Mr Darcy as audience, and of course with Jane Austen as lyricist and (all too possibly) composer. To put it coarsely: roll over, Wolfgang Amadeus and Lorenzo.

The question of the language of opera is always fiercely debated. Most members of our Association, privileged by their profession, will have no problem with French, the Italian at least of well-known operas, and the German of *Die Zauberflöte* (whose darker parts are dark because of their symbolism, not their language) and of Wagner. So also for the select audiences of the greatest opera-houses. But if opera is to go more widely, it has to be translated, as it has been since it emerged long ago from its royal and aristocratic patronage into public paying theatres. For many, of course, it is enough to catch the general drift of the action while transported far away by the music and the presence of the singers (disbelief having been suspended at the moment of taking one's seat, as is not the case with the drama: people are unnaturally going to sing their thoughts and their arguments). But translation of opera poses more problems than it does with other genres. It is hard enough with any verse, more difficult still when the result must fit the rhythms and particular emphases already fixed by the music. The good translator in this specialized field is rightly accorded an honoured reputation, a fine English example being Edward J. Dent, Cambridge's Professor of Music from 1926 to 1941, who was closely concerned with opera production at the London Old Vic and Sadler's Wells from 1920. Translation is usually much freer than would be allowed in other genres; it has to be. Geoffrey Dunn's lively versions of Offenbach for the London stage in the 1960s had a huge success. These translations for performance must be distinguished from the literal ones offered as aids to understanding, printed and issued in theatres commonly in the last century or with modern recordings. Bad translations can be memorable too. The synopsis of *Carmen* helpfully provided for anglophone patrons in the programme of the Paris Opéra as recently as the 1980s begins: 'Carmen is a cigar-makeress from a tobago factory who loves with Don José of the mounting guard. Carmen takes a flower from her corsets and lances it to Don José. Duet: "Talk me of my mother".'<sup>10</sup>

It is perhaps a providential accident that older modes of opera, until well on in the nineteenth century, embraced so much repetition that a text half understood first time round was better grasped on the second or even third hearing within the same aria. Thus Leporello's famous 'Madamina' goes at a steady and not excessive pace, and if the 'V'han fra queste contadine . . .' part goes at a gallop, at least it is repeated. Did the repetitious style develop, indeed, not from any musical consideration but as an aid to the audience's comprehension? Rossini used it as much as anybody, but could also see its funny side, as when he has the supposedly

<sup>9</sup> Chérubin does indeed sing a 'Romance' of his own composing to the Countess, to Susanna's accompaniment on the guitar (II.4). The tune was that of 'Marlbroug s'en va-t-en guerre'. The printed text has eight rather tedious stanzas, of which, according to the author's direction, only the first five were to be sung in performance. The words provide no basis whatsoever for 'Voi che sapete'.

<sup>10</sup> The full text was contributed by Modwenna Chamberlain to the 'Pitfalls and Howlers' section of the *Professional Translator and Interpreter*, 1 (1991), having been noted a few years earlier. I am grateful to Dr Elizabeth Macdonald for this gem.

fever-stricken Don Basilio (*Il barbiere*) lengthily delay his departure for bed ('Buona sera, buona sera').

French and especially Italian held and hold the field, naturally, being the languages of so much original composition, the record of German on the international stage being patchy until the arrival of Wagner (and again since), with other languages making an occasional showing. The situation in Spain is illustrative. From early court performances in the seventeenth century onward and still in the days of opera in the public theatres, Italian has dominated to an extraordinary degree. It was not only the singers who were Italian, as members of semi-permanent or visiting companies, but frequently the conductor, some of the orchestral players, and more often than not the stage-managers, set designers, lighting engineers, and specialists in mechanical contrivances. It was even known for perfectly good native Spanish singers to italianize their names to enhance their professional standing. At the Gran Teatro del Liceo in Barcelona, the major home of opera in the Peninsula, texts originally French were often given in Italian, these including for example *Gli Ugonotti* by Meyerbeer and *Il Conte Ory* by Rossini. The Romantic tragedy *Los amantes de Teruel* by Hartzenbusch, a Spaniard despite his name (1837), was made into an opera by the noted composer Tomás Bretón, who also wrote the libretto, and was performed in Spanish in Madrid in 1889, but when it went to the Barcelona Liceo later that same year it was given in an Italian version.

Italian texts posed no great problem for audiences in the sister language, but this very sisterhood often led Spaniards to wonder why they could not rival the Italians by composing and singing their own operas. There are many reasons why indeed they could not: the sheer strength of native musical traditions (including *zarzuela*, musical comedy), lack of a mass audience and of regular patronage from a middle class beyond that of Madrid and Barcelona, the fact that Castilian and Catalan are rich in song but less *cantabile* than Italian in grand opera, and so on. A few analysts have even taken a Johnsonian line and dismissed the whole business as unbecoming and contrary to reason. The musicologist Antonio Eximeno in 1796 defended Spanish *zarzuela* against opera, the latter being 'un género repugnante a la razón, al buen gusto y a la naturaleza de las lenguas modernas'.<sup>11</sup> Américo Castro commented: 'La música y la letra de aquellas trovas [the medieval Occitan lyric] debe compararse con la ópera cantada en italiano desde el siglo XVIII, y que ha divertido hasta el XX a las clases acomodadas en España, sin promover por eso el nacimiento de una ópera española. Fracasaron hasta los ensayos de hacer cantar en español las óperas extranjeras, porque el efecto era sencillamente bufo. Ese espectáculo ha interesado a muchas generaciones a causa de la música [. . .], pero su acción, por dramática que fuese, siempre valió como una broma o una falsedad.'<sup>12</sup>

Comprehension of the sung text was not, in any case, always a desideratum. Today one hardly dares to rustle a chocolate wrapping after the conductor has made his initial bow. But for a long time, opera in the major cities of Europe was a social event, at least for those in the boxes and the dress circle. One thinks of the Swedish baroness in *La Vie parisienne* who 'behind the bars of conversation' had 'the

<sup>11</sup> *Origen y reglas de la música*, quoted by E. Cotarelo y Mori, *Orígenes y establecimiento de la ópera en España* (Madrid: Revista de Archivos, Bibliotecas y Museos, 1917), p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> *España en su historia*, 2nd edn (Barcelona: Editorial Crítica, 1983), pp. 468–69.

sensation of someone singing on the stage': this was Madame Patti, no less, as Rosina in *Il barbiere*. In Milan (of all places, one might think) it was even worse, and Berlioz left a performance of *L'elisir* when he found he could not hear the music over the hubbub: 'The noise of the audience was such that no sound penetrated except the bass drum. People were gambling, eating supper in their boxes, etcetera, etcetera.'<sup>13</sup> Earlier, Stendhal recorded in his *Life of Rossini* that in the boxes at La Scala (220 in number) 'silence is observed only at premières; or, during subsequent performances, only while one or other of the more memorable passages is being performed. Anyone who wishes to concentrate on watching the opera right through goes and sits in the pit.'<sup>14</sup> It was just as bad in New York. Edith Wharton, at the start of her novel *The Age of Innocence* (1920), set in the 1870s, records that 'it was not "the thing" to arrive early at the opera'; Newland Archer lingers over his after-dinner cigar and arrives at *Faust* just in time to catch the first aria by the prima donna Madame Nilsson, which could actually be heard because 'the boxes always stopped talking during the Daisy Song'.

Even visual concentration by the audience upon the stage action must have been less than total for a long time. It was not until 1903 that at the Barcelona Liceo the house lights, which had been electric for some years and were therefore easily switched on and off, were put out during performances; till then, the ladies had been accustomed to dress and bejewel themselves so as to be seen to advantage throughout, not merely during intervals. A strong letter of protest about the change was sent by some regulars to the impresario: among other undesirable consequences, darkness in the theatre would diminish social contacts and gravely affect the trade of local dressmakers and jewellers. The letter began, unbelievably, by declaring that 'although the dramatic performance is an attraction which leads people to go to the theatre, the chief interest is concentrated within the house rather than on the stage'.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps one can now see why, in the last century, singers abandoned their places and came to the very front of the stage to execute their principal pieces: they simply wished or hoped to be heard. It was the suspended or concealed microphone, not any concern for realistic placing and grouping of personages, that permitted better operatic acting. Was the crashing Rossinian crescendo an attempt to smother audience noise? Bernard Shaw once reviewed a play performance in terms of the extravagant hats worn by Edwardian ladies; somewhere there must be that unregarded treasure, a Spanish opera review conducted in terms of the quality of conversation, the brilliance of diamonds, and the depth of cleavages in the audience. Bécquer's 1863 review of *Il barbiere* at the Teatro Real in Madrid almost fills this bill. While the overture was being played the writer surveyed (the house being fully lit throughout) the charms and dresses of the ladies, and wrote them up in a long paragraph rich in sensual notes ('éstan con los hombros desnudos redondos y más blancos que la blanca gasa que los rodea, de modo que no se sabe dónde acaba el seno y dónde comienza el tul'). He began to concentrate on the stage for the Count's

<sup>13</sup> Quoted by Schmidgall, *Literature as Opera*, p. 146.

<sup>14</sup> *Life of Rossini* [1824], trans. and ed. by Richard N. Coe, revised edn (London: Calder & Boyars, 1970), p. 438.

<sup>15</sup> Roger Alier i Aixalà and Francesc X. Mata give extracts from the letter in *El gran teatro del Liceo (historia artística)* (Barcelona: Edicions Francesc X. Mata, 1991), pp. 80–81. The Liceo's taste was dubious in other ways. Its programme for *La traviata* in the 1907–08 season had a notice, prominently placed in the middle of the plot summary, in which a local pharmacist advertised a sure cure for consumption (Alier and Mata, p. 89).

*cavatina* 'Ecco ridente in cielo', feeling some obligation only because the singer, Mario, was a friend of his.<sup>16</sup>

If Spanish language has not made it in grand opera, many Spanish singers have done and do, and the country has, for reasons which will concern me, been the setting for more operas than any other. These are my 'mille e tre'. They cover the map from 'Biscay and Aragon' (*Il trovatore*), Navarre in Massenet's *La Navarraise* (1894), again Aragon (*Ernani*), and the Catalan Pyrenees (Montsalvat, the castle of the Holy Grail in *Parsifal*), all the way down to lower Andalusia (*Der Corregidor* by Wolf, 1895, based on Alarcón's *El sombrero de tres picos*, set in Arcos de la Frontera). No doubt the forgotten *Cristoforo Colombo* (Franchetti, 1902) and *Cristophe Colomb* (Milhaud, 1930) involve the mariner's departure from Palos on the ocean's very rim. Much of the rest of 'la geografía nacional' is dotted with little piles of débris. Seville in particular vibrates operatically to a dangerous degree. To the well-known canon can be added Schubert's little-performed *Alfonso und Estrella* (1821), based on the Spanish Golden Age play *La estrella de Sevilla*, and Massenet's *Chérubin* (1905), which develops the character invented by Beaumarchais and Da Ponte. Massenet in *Le Cid* (1885) varied things a bit by placing a Christian royal palace in Granada some four centuries ahead of historical fact. The ballet music of this survives, for four dances performed in the square beside the cathedral of Burgos, including inevitably an 'Andalouse'. The Hispanist scratches his head as he wonders what point in the action could possibly justify a ballet, and even a French critic snorted 'Ce ballet n'existe évidemment pas dans Corneille', but since the hero is a romantic tenor rather than a heroic baritone or soldierly bass, presumably anything goes. The French are again to blame: 'Tout Paris pour Rodrigue a les yeux de Chimène', a transformation if ever there was one, and there was no turning back. By Massenet's time twenty-six operas on the Cid, mainly Corneille-based, existed, not counting a *Don Rodrigue* by Bizet (1873, as he got into the mood for *Carmen*, 1875), never completed and surviving only in fragments.

In 1972 the music critic Philip Hope-Wallace spent a few days in Seville. He thought that after half a century of writing about operas set there, he should go and inspect the reality. He was shown Carmen's tobacco (or tobago) factory, which still stands, a magnificent edifice of the early eighteenth century. He saw the Civil Guard turn out, and recorded hot competition among several houses to be that of Dr Bartolo. However, 'I peeped through one such iron-grilled casement but inside [saw] no Barber, only two nuns glued to a quacking television set showing Match of the Day' (the *Guardian*, 2 December 1972). But Bécquer, a passionately proud Sevillian, in the review of the Madrid performance of *Il barbiere* mentioned above, mused nostalgically that Figaro was everywhere in the city and wrote a whole paragraph about the solidity of his existence. Earlier, Richard Ford devoted all of Chapter 19 of his *Gatherings from Spain* to the real presence of Figaro in Seville.

Whether the setting of so many operas in Spain has any significance is a fair question. To some librettists and composers Spain must have seemed, unlike other perfectly ordinary European countries in which they lived and travelled and performed, an exotic land whose history, scenery, and archaic way of life were ready-made for the exaggerations and unrealities of opera. It abounded in crags,

<sup>16</sup> For the full review, see Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, *Páginas olvidadas*, ed. by Dionisio Gamallo Fierros (Madrid: Valera, 1948), pp. 313–25.

castles, bandits, smugglers, friars, sinister priests, corrupt lawyers, honour-crazed aristos, vendettas, bullfights, superstitions, and violently sexy dance rhythms. After all, Beaumarchais had willed himself into a real-life operatic experience in Madrid in 1764, and used elements of it in his plays.<sup>17</sup>

Spain was a perfect operatic 'space', just as it had been a perfect epical space for French *chansons de geste*, a sort of semi-mythic Wild West. The Inquisition was abolished only in 1812, Ferdinand VII (he of the dark looks and twisted mouth in Goya's paintings) when back on the throne in 1814 considered restoring it, so Schiller's play *Don Carlos*, although set in the reign of Philip II, could have almost contemporary echoes, and Verdi's *Don Carlos* (1867) based on it made the theme even better known. Here, the historical event certainly, the play and the opera possibly, contributed something to the 'leyenda negra'. The series of Carlist civil wars, frequent attempted military coups, and the scandalous lifestyle of Queen Isabel II would have enhanced the impression.

The Spaniards' own Romantic dramas on medieval themes when turned into operas collaborated in the process. First, after the liberal restoration of 1833, came Rivas's *Don Alvaro, o la fuerza del sino* (1835; = Verdi's *La forza del destino*, 1862); then García Gutiérrez's *El trovador* (1836; = Verdi's *Il trovatore*, 1853), and his *Simón Bocanegra* (1843; = Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra*, 1857, revised 1881). Hartzenbusch's *Los amantes de Teruel*, the least worst of this awesomely extravagant bunch, has been mentioned earlier. Even *La traviata* includes a bullfighting episode (unknown to Dumas) in the second party scene. One could say that Bizet's *Carmen* in 1875, based on Mérimée's story of 1845, which in turn had reflected plenty of direct experience in the country (with some details filched from Borrow), was simply waiting to happen, flooding the theatre with local colour in all possible aspects.

Don Juan, however pronounced (an interesting point in itself) is my final, key case. The Spaniards are proud of him, as they are of Don Quixote,<sup>18</sup> in both his domestic and international careers, but they resent some foreign glosses. To them, Don Juan is the protagonist of a fundamentally theological drama, *El burlador de Sevilla* by the Mercedarian friar Tirso de Molina (1624?), and much more, of Zorrilla's play *Don Juan Tenorio* of 1844, in which the hero is saved from hellfire by the power of true love, that of Doña Inés, whom he had earlier in best Spanish style ravished away from her convent. This was until recently played each year throughout Spain on All Souls' Eve in some sort of collective catharsis. Spaniards know not Molière's free-thinking Don Juan, reject Byron's frivolous poem and Shaw's intellectual version, and have never taken much to the creation of Da Ponte and Mozart. At the Barcelona Liceo, *Don Giovanni* had been played only fifty-nine

<sup>17</sup> It is worth recalling that Beaumarchais's *Le Barbier de Séville* was first written as an 'opéra comique', a four-act play with music, in 1773, and was adapted as the play we know in 1775. The author wrote the libretto for an opera, *Tavare*, in 1790. The extraordinary circle was, as it were, nearly completed when Beaumarchais's real-life Madrid experience was dramatized by Goethe in 1774 in *Clavijo*, a five-act tragedy made out of a reality one might have thought potentially more *buffo*. Clavijo was the name of the errant Spaniard whom Beaumarchais pursued in Madrid in the breach-of-promise action concerning his sister. For the circle to be truly completed we have to suppose that in some Italian repository there lies a forgotten opera (based on Goethe) entitled *Clavijo, ossia il Spagnolo punito*.

<sup>18</sup> Except for a misguided and long-forgotten effort in 1905, Spaniards have preferred to keep 'their' Don Quixote unsullied and, as the record shows, have generally resisted any of the numerous operas and ballets on the subject by foreigners. However, Massenet's *Don Quichotte* was allowed a very short season at the Liceo in 1929. For a survey, see Barbara P. Esquivel-Heinemann, *Don Quixote's Sally into the World of Opera* (New York: Lang, 1993).

times up to 1991 (compare, for example, *Rigoletto* with 335 performances). In the standard Spanish *Espasa-Calpe* encyclopedia, the survey of Don Juan literature occupies six closely printed pages (the very first entry in the section 'Sevilla', as it happens), in which all of three lines are grudgingly devoted to a mention of Mozart. Spaniards would specially have resented the 1994 and 1995 Glyndebourne *Don Giovanni*, televised by Channel 4 on 27 August 1995, not so much for the modern dress (though it was hard to accept the protagonist without finery and even bereft of sword) as for many other compelling reasons: that in it the Don had no aristocratic authority and little sexual power (both at the core of his being), that he made himself ridiculous by repeatedly manhandling Leporello and wrestling him to the ground, and so on. Worst of all, the portable statue of the Virgin which the Don caressed and later mounted was a crassly misconceived intrusion which destroyed the solemnity of the confrontation with the Commendatore's statue in the cemetery, and later the tension of the supper scene. There were boos at Glyndebourne, apparently; in Barcelona, the producer Deborah Warner would have suffered much worse, perhaps Roman-style in the bullring restocked with lions. Any rage felt by purists about Andrew Davies's handling of Jane Austen would seem like the merest squeak in comparison.

Scott found his *Ivanhoe* as opera 'in a great part nonsense' and expected nothing more; but this I think is not often the case, at least with the great operas I have been concerned with here. The words, infinitely enhanced by the music, are a communicating text that deserves to be treated as a form of literature. How far we are influenced by it depends on the degree to which we have suspended our disbelief. 'España es diferente': well, yes, opera seems to demonstrate it, and as a slogan for the tourist industry the notion has proved beyond price. Early evidence is provided by the young Benjamin Disraeli when he disembarked at Cadiz in July 1830: 'Figaro is in every street, Rosina on every balcony.' However, the package holidaymaker in Benidorm is not likely now to be assaulted by operatic events, and even in a narrow street in Seville the first notes of any approaching Figaro may be drowned out by the roar of a motorcycle. The citizens of the modern democracy want to be perfectly ordinary Europeans, ever less 'diferentes'. One can only hope they will not seek to ban, in some politically correct European Union, the marvellous portrayals of them in so many of those 'mille e tre'.