

Introduction

Retrospect Opera: Reviving Britain's Operatic Past

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The average music lover knows little about British opera between Henry Purcell and Benjamin Britten. Composers such as Thomas Arne, Sir Henry Rowley Bishop and Isidore de Lara are hardly household names, performances and recordings are sparse, and a sense of Britain as 'Das Land ohne Musik' lingers. In recent years, however, interest in this neglected repertoire has grown. This is in large part due to the tireless efforts of organizations such as Retrospect Opera, founded in 2014 by David Chandler and Valerie Langfield to record 'forgotten' British operas.¹ To date, they have issued recordings of works by Charles Dibdin, Edward James Loder, Ethel Smyth, Liza Lehman, George Grossmith and Edward Solomon, with projects on George Alexander Macfarren and Charles Villiers Stanford in progress. This special review section highlights and contextualizes Retrospect Opera's achievements. Paul Rodmell addresses the many complex reasons why the English Musical Renaissance – the period in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from which most of Retrospect Opera's repertoire comes – did not see the same flowering of opera as of other genres. James Brooks Kuykendall interviews Chandler and Langfield about their beginnings, their goals, and the challenges they face. The section concludes with reviews of their recordings of *Raymond and Agnes* (Loder) by Justin Vickers and of *The Boatswain's Mate* (Smyth), *Pickwick* (Solomon), and *Cups and Saucers* (Grossmith) by William A. Everett.

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Why has it taken well over a century for many of these works to receive professional recordings? In many cases, as Rodmell explores, it is because these works were overlooked or maligned even in their own time. Foreign competition, native tastes and prejudices, and issues of venue and funding all hampered attempts to establish a 'school' of British opera in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although numerous types of British music drama flourished in the seventeenth century, the production of Handel's *Rinaldo* in London in 1711 signalled a craze for foreign works that marked the British operatic scene for much of the next two centuries. By 1851, George Hogarth bemoaned that 'the practice of adapting Italian, German, and French operas to the English stage ... has almost put an

¹ See www.retrospectopera.org.uk (accessed 8 June 2021).

end to the existence of English melody'.² There were a few notable efforts to mount native productions, such as the English Opera House in the 1830s and the Carl Rosa touring company, which began in the 1870s. Still, foreign opera formed the core repertoire, British operas the periphery.

British tastes and prejudices also undermined efforts to establish native opera. Although a handful of eighteenth-century British composers wrote successful serious operas in English in the fashionable Italianate style – most notably Thomas Arne – the most effective response to the flood of imported Italian operas was comic opera, especially *The Beggar's Opera* (1728). Light burlettas, musical comedies, and pantomimes continued to entertain throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, most prominently with the operettas of W.S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan. Yet, these were rarely viewed as equal to serious continental operas. Even one of the most tireless advocates of British music, Nicholas Temperley, judged British efforts by continental European standards: '[o]nly in the last hundred years has a flourishing tradition of English-language opera, in the fullest, continental, sense, existed'.³ British musicians and critics were also often the harshest opponents of their own efforts. Periodicals featured lengthy disquisitions on why the national character and language were inherently inimical to music. The *London Literary Gazette* critic, for example, referred to 'the almost insuperable obstacles which the English language opposes to the writing of words which can be sung to the music of a serious opera'.⁴

While some contemporary commentators were resigned to the dearth of native opera, others valiantly tried to rectify 'the operatic problem', as William Galloway termed it in 1902.⁵ Galloway, like many commentators before him, felt that this 'problem' stemmed from a lack of venue and government support. While numerous European metropolises contained at least one theatre dedicated to opera in the vernacular by native composers, London – the centre of operatic production in Britain – had never possessed such a house. Theatres devoted to opera were dominated by foreign imports, while native operas appeared at venues where they competed for attention with spoken dramas, foreign operas translated into English, and other entertainments. The situation was difficult to change because, prior to the twentieth century, opera did not receive the same level of governmental funding as other European countries. Opera impresarios, almost continually on the brink of fiscal collapse, rarely wished to gamble on native operas. As Rodmell discusses, British opera was often caught in a kind of stalemate in which composers blamed a lack of support, while impresarios blamed a lack of viable native operas. Both positions contained some truth, but neither led to a healthy environment for British opera.

A final barrier to performance of this repertoire lies in the lack of comprehensive or definitive performance materials. Publishers had an eye to profit rather than posterity; printed scores often exist only in piano-vocal reductions, and printed libretti (sold at the theatre) sometimes include only the words for the musical numbers. The constant revisions of theatrical performance also pose challenges. A

² George Hogarth, *Memoirs of the Opera in Italy, France, Germany, and England*, 2 vols (New York: Da Capo Press, [1851] 1972): 140–41.

³ Nicholas Temperley, 'Great Britain', in *Grove Music Online*, www.oxfordmusic.com (accessed 30 April 2021).

⁴ 'Drama: English Opera House', *The London Literary Gazette and Journal of Belles Lettres, Arts, Sciences, etc.*, 25 August 1827.

⁵ William Johnson Galloway, *The Operatic Problem* (London: J. Long, 1902).

manuscript libretto might be quite different from a printed one, or one might have to reconcile manuscript sources from early in the work's development with partial printed sources from later in its run.

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Given the rather bleak history of British opera, it is perhaps not surprising that so few of these works have been performed today. Yet, momentum has grown in recent decades for a reevaluation of this repertoire. Monographs such as Todd Gilman's *The Theatre Career of Thomas Arne*⁶ and Paul Rodmell's *Opera in the British Isles, 1875–1918*⁷ have advanced our understanding of the field, multi-year research ventures such as *The London Stage Project*⁸ and Roger Parker's *Music in London 1800–1851*⁹ have boosted interest in this area, and societies and conferences devoted to the study of music in Britain have burgeoned.

Retrospect Opera complements these scholarly efforts by giving voice to works that have too long languished unheard. This special review section emphasizes the many hurdles in Retrospect Opera's path. As noted above, the source situation for most works is incomplete and/or complicated. Two of the works reviewed – *Pickwick* and *Cups and Saucers* – are only extant in piano/vocal scores. Retrospect Opera makes a virtue of necessity here, recreating the drawing-room performances with piano that would have been how most Victorian and Edwardian listeners experienced these works. Other sources are missing completely. In the interview with Kuykendall, Chandler expresses his frustration that they have not yet been able to locate a full score of Smyth's last opera, *Entente cordiale* (1925). Even when a full score exists, it can be daunting to translate it into parts, as Langfield found with *Raymond and Agnes*.

Then there is the question of which version to perform, and whether any alterations should be made for a modern audience. Kuykendall delves into this issue in the interview, asking Chandler and Langfield about their stated goal that 'what you hear is what the composer really intended'. Langfield explains that for the purposes of a recording – as opposed to a live performance – they always endeavour to present what the composer intended for the premiere rather than for later revisions. But this is not as unambiguous as it seems, since Chandler and Langfield discuss cases in which they toned down flowery language, slimmed lengthy dialogue that might tire a CD listener, arranged a prohibitively lavish orchestral score for a smaller ensemble, or made small cuts when it 'did the composer no favours to include absolutely every note'. As Everett remarks in his review, ultimately the task of editing requires creativity, judgment and deep knowledge of the musical style. The reviewers agree that Retrospect Opera possesses plentiful amounts of all three.

Much like British opera impresarios of the past, Retrospect Opera is at the financial whim of audiences and philanthropists. Selling an aging technology like the CD is difficult in the era of streaming music, yet streaming services pay little to Retrospect Opera and do not include the detailed liner notes that are a hallmark of their recordings. Like most arts organizations, Retrospect Opera therefore relies

⁶ Todd Gilman, *The Theatre Career of Thomas Arne* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2012).

⁷ Paul Rodmell, *Opera in the British Isles, 1875–1918* (London: Ashgate, 2013).

⁸ See <https://londonstage.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/> (accessed 30 December 2021).

⁹ See <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/research/music-in-london-1800-1851> (accessed 8 June 2021).

heavily on donors, who sometimes shape their repertoire. The CD that Vickers reviews, for example, of Loder's *Raymond and Agnes*, was only possible through the tireless efforts and generous financial assistance of Nicholas Temperley. Of the recordings reviewed by Everett, *The Boatswain's Mate* was chosen partially because there are grants to support the revival of music by women composers like Smyth, while *Pickwick*, based on Charles Dickens's *The Pickwick Papers*, can tap into an audience of literary enthusiasts as well.

Throughout their existence, Retrospect Opera has also had to face the question of "why bother"? As Rodmell elucidates, British opera rarely experienced the popularity of its European counterpart, and the suspicion lingers that these works are simply not good enough. The CDs reviewed here, however, provide an excellent corrective to such prejudices. *Raymond and Agnes* boasts all the most beloved aspects of Romantic opera – the plot infused with Gothic and supernatural elements, the showpieces for the star singers, the lush, chromatic harmonies, the soaring melodies. *The Boatswain's Mate* draws on Britain's long relationship with the sea, and Smyth responds with a score infused with the rich heritage of sea shanties and folk music. Finally, both *Pickwick* and *Cups and Saucers* remind us that Britain was especially fertile in the arena of comic opera, and not just with Gilbert and Sullivan. British operas of the past may never conform to what audiences expect from serious, continental European opera. In today's increasingly eclectic operatic landscape, however, they are ripe for rehearing.