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Opera for the 'country lout': Italian opera, national identity and the middlebrow in interwar Britain

Alexandra Wilson

Oxford Brookes University

ABSTRACT

Italian opera was simultaneously popular and unfashionable in interwar Britain. It was popular with audiences from across the class spectrum. It was unfashionable with intellectuals who were anxious about its modularity, its collaborative model of production, and its interactions with popular culture and celebrity. This article considers the reception of Italian opera, its performers and audiences in interwar Britain, and the ways in which this intersected with broader discussions about taste formation and national identity in the so-called 'battle of the brows'. Recent Italian operas – often likened at the time to cheap pot-boiler novels or films with mass market appeal – certainly complicated any claim that opera might be regarded as highbrow. Examining responses to such operas' treatment of themes including religion and what one critic called 'passionate love let loose' can tell us much about how interwar Britons perceived both Italian culture and their own, at a time of vital cultural self-definition.

RIASSUNTO

Tra le due guerre l'opera italiana era allo stesso tempo popolare e disprezzata in Gran Bretagna. Era popolare presso il pubblico proveniente da ogni ceto sociale. Era disprezzata dagli intellettuali che erano a disagio per la sua modularità, il suo modello collaborativo di produzione e le sue interazioni con la cultura popolare e le celebrità. Questo articolo prende in considerazione l'opera italiana, i suoi interpreti ed il suo pubblico in Gran Bretagna tra le due guerre, ed il modo in cui questa si innestò all'interno di più ampie discussioni sull'educazione del gusto, l'identità nazionale e la cosiddetta 'battle of the brows'. Le opere italiane più recenti – all'epoca spesso assimilate ai romanzi commerciali o ai film di cassetta –rendevano più difficile difendere l'idea che l'opera potesse essere considerata intellettuale. L'analisi delle reazioni agli argomenti trattati da tali opere, che comprendevano la religione o quello che un critico definì 'amore passionale a briglia sciolta', può dirci molto su come gli inglesi percepivano la cultura italiana e la propria, in un momento di vitale importanza per l'autodeterminazione culturale e identitaria.

KEYWORDS opera; highbrow; middlebrow; lowbrow; singers; audiences

PAROLE CHIAVE opera; cultura alta; cultura media; cultura bassa; cantanti; pubblico

Opera, like literature, the fine arts and other genres of music, became caught up in a large-scale debate known as 'the battle of the brows' that convulsed interwar Britain. This wholesale attempt to re-categorize culture played out in

the pages of the press, in public lectures, and in radio broadcasts, prompted by the threat posed to traditional art forms and audience structures by an explosion in popular culture after the First World War. The conversation about how to categorize opera according to the new framework of the highbrow, the middlebrow and the lowbrow was a complicated one that essentially failed to reach a firm conclusion: as I have discussed in further detail in Wilson (2019a), opera was simply too difficult to pigeonhole. Nevertheless, the debate revealed much about British cultural prejudices along the way, including against Italian opera – which after two centuries was still regarded as an essentially imported form of entertainment – and the singers who came to Britain to perform it.

As a hybrid of singing, acting, movement, and design, opera seemed determined to flout ideals of cultural purity that were considered vital in distinguishing the highbrow from the middlebrow. Opera was also difficult to categorize because it appealed to all sorts of different audiences from across the class spectrum and because its world overlapped with those of celebrity and popular entertainment. Furthermore, there was the added complication that not all operas were made equal: some were considered more highbrow than others, and this was dependent upon two criteria. The first was their age – highbrow critics were better-disposed to operas that were either very old or very new, and contemptuous of the 'bloated' operas of the nineteenth century – the second was their nationality.

Some musicians, managers and journalists who promoted opera during this era tried hard to get away from centuries-old discussions about the relative superiority of different musical schools and asserted the concept of music as a universal language. Insofar as most members of the interwar cognoscenti were concerned, however, Italian operas sat lower in the new cultural pecking order than their German counterparts and were almost never deemed worthy of the label highbrow. This article considers the aesthetic discussions that took place around Italian opera during the interwar period, and the ways in which these intersected with broader debates about cultural categorization. It was clearly not all about the music: from conversations ostensibly about Italian opera's place in the battle of the brows emerged broader strands of economic protectionism and cultural chauvinism that were intertwined with anxieties about national identity.

Companies and repertory

In order to place the analysis that follows into context, it is worth briefly outlining where people could watch opera during the interwar period and the sorts of opera they would have seen (for further reading on companies and venues, see Wilson 2019a, 26–37). The vast majority of listeners encountered opera via the performances put on by touring companies such as the

Carl Rosa, the British National Opera Company, and other short-lived troupes that sprang up from time to time. These companies took a mixed programme of popular operas to theatres in suburban London – there was a particularly enthusiastic following for opera in the East End, as discussed elsewhere in this issue by Holden – and on extensive tours around the provinces, often with several troupes on the road at once. Their productions were low-budget and in English; their audience members spanned the class spectrum. Lilian Baylis established a thriving culture of working- and lower-middle-class opera-going at the Old Vic in the 1920s, again on unpretentious lines; the operation would transfer to Sadler's Wells in the 1930s.

Covent Garden, meanwhile, was the most high-profile operatic venue in the land, and attracted much press attention, but it was far from typical of British operatic culture more generally. It presented opera only for a short period in the year, the glamorous, aristocratic summer 'Season', and was otherwise used for other purposes, including dances, film screenings and even boxing matches. It would be inaccurate, moreover, to assume that its audience was entirely 'elite': the so-called 'galleryites', who occupied the cheap seats at the top of the theatre, comprised many ordinary working people, such as suburban teachers and clerks, who queued for tickets on the day or even overnight (for a galleryite's memoir, see Cook 1950).

At this time, opera was usually performed in the original language at Covent Garden. The theatre still operated the pre-war 'star system', with most leading singers coming from overseas. In 1934, Glyndebourne was established by John Christie at his East Sussex manor house, creating a company that performed operas in the original language to a high standard in front of a small select, wealthy audience. This enterprise was therefore also atypical of the British opera-going experience more generally but prompted an important rise in operatic aspirations nationally through its efforts to emulate the performance standards of the best continental opera companies.

Audiences who saw the performances by the touring companies or who went to the Old Vic or Sadler's Wells tended to be presented with a mixed bag of works in any given season. The diversity of repertory is illustrated by taking a look at the assets of the Beecham Opera Company, which were bought for £15,000 in 1921 by the new British National Opera Company, and included the rights to 48 operas together with scenery, props, costumes, scores and instruments. Among these were eight works by Puccini, six by Wagner, four by Verdi, four by Strauss, three by Mozart, assorted works by Delius, Smyth and assorted unnamed Russians, and 'all popular stock operas' (*Financial Times*, September 29, 1921). We can presume that the touring companies' audiences would have treated whatever they saw as good entertainment, drawing no particular distinction between works of different nationalities, since everything was performed in English. However, the critics reviewing

productions at Covent Garden or Glyndebourne were far more attentive to questions of national style.

Certain French favourites were central to the performing canon of this period, most notably *Carmen* and *Faust*. Russian and East European operas were very much a rarity. There were intermittent efforts to promote the cause of English opera, as there had been throughout the nineteenth century, and much agonizing about the fact that the British could not produce a thriving operatic school. Few British works were successful, with the exception of Rutland Boughton's *The Immortal Hour*. For the most part, the interwar repertory was dominated by well-known German works on the one hand and well-known Italian operas on the other. Aesthetic discussions – as had so often been the case throughout the history of the art form – focused largely upon the respective merits of these two national schools (for a fuller discussion of the British interwar repertory see Wilson 2019a, 125–153).

The interwar canon is summarized neatly in a poem written to introduce the contents of a beginner's guide to opera by Stephen Williams (1948, 12), an author and presenter of opera broadcasts on the BBC's Light Programme. Although the book in question was published after the Second World War, the repertory had changed little since the interwar years:

> Gluck is not here, nor very early Verdi,
> Which some have likened to the hurdy-gurdy;
> [. . .] Chide not that I am generous with Puccini,
> But terse with Donizetti and Bellini;
> And give full licence to the noble frenzy
> Of Wagner's works – except the dull *Rienzi*.

German opera on the interwar British stage was indeed represented largely by Wagner, though certain works by Richard Strauss were also popular, with *Der Rosenkavalier* enjoying a particular interwar vogue, and Humperdinck's *Hänsel und Gretel* popped up intermittently. Meyerbeer's works had disappeared almost entirely: *Les Huguenots* was staged only twice at Covent Garden in the period 1919–1939 (Martin 1962, 680). Mozart's operas were put on comparatively irregularly during the 1920s, though gained much more prominence during the 1930s thanks to becoming the house speciality at Glyndebourne. But we should remember, of course, that only one Mozart opera in the standard repertory – *The Magic Flute* – was technically Germanic, the three Da Ponte comedies (*Le nozze di Figaro, Don Giovanni*, and *Così fan tutte*) being stylistically Italian.

Surprising as it may seem, Wagner was often identified by 1920s critics as the nation's favourite composer (e.g. *Musical Opinion*, June 1928, 881). His works, performed in English by the touring companies, had wide popular appeal and audiences clamoured to see them more regularly; at the same

time, they were also considered sufficiently intellectual to be esteemed by self-identified highbrow critics. In part this could be explained by the fact that his music dramas could be classified as not really being operas at all.

To be considered highbrow, an art-work had to be culturally 'pure' insofar as possible. Opera, and Italian opera in particular, flouted the new rules of cultural categorization on three counts. First, it was a hybrid artform, bringing together music, text, acting, movement and design. Second, it was fragmentable, with individual arias being performed not only in isolation on the concert platform, as had long been the case, but increasingly also on gramophone recordings. Third, it was produced collaboratively by many different people. Wagner's works, on the other hand, qualified as being artistically 'purer': they were through-composed and the product of a single artistic imagination, and could even function at a certain level as 'absolute music'. Take, for example, the assessment of Harvey Grace, editor of *The Musical Times*: 'At moments when Wagner the composer is at his best we close our eyes and try to forget Wagner the dramatist. Wagner was not so much an opera composer as a great symphonic writer who took the wrong turning' (*The Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, December 8, 1924).

The real bedrock of the contemporary canon was formed by popular Italian operas of the later nineteenth century and first decade of the twentieth, a repertory that most certainly did not qualify for highbrow status, offending as it did on all the counts noted above. Among these works were the predictable mid-period Verdi favourites, *Il trovatore, Rigoletto* and *La traviata. Il trovatore* – an opera often ridiculed for its convoluted plot and conventional musical language – dominated the repertory and had filtered into popular culture to such an extent that it had come to be regarded as the Verdi opera *sine qua non*. Verdi's early works had long since dropped out of the repertory and were considered rather trite. *Otello and Falstaff*, meanwhile – the only two Verdi operas most highbrows were prepared to countenance – were still considered by the more aloof music critics to be a little too advanced for general audiences, though began to be performed more widely over the following decade (Toye 1930, 159).

Although Britain did not emulate the 'Verdi Renaissance' that took place in interwar Germany (Kreuzer 2010, 138–190), there was something of a reappraisal of the composer's career during the later 1930s. As *The Times* reported on January 28, 1939: 'Sadler's Wells is busy in correcting our ideas about Verdi. It has placed side by side *Don Carlos* and *Il trovatore*, the former an opera of which most people know too little; the latter one of which everybody knows too much'. *The Times* also noted that a production of *Macbeth* at Glyndebourne the previous year – a first foray for the company into anything beyond Mozart – had forced critics to reconsider their perceptions of Verdi as a composer few would dare admit to admiring.

Italian opera of the earlier nineteenth century, meanwhile – the *bel canto* works of Rossini, Bellini and Donizetti – was out of fashion and considered by many 1920s critics to be beneath contempt. When Bellini's *Norma* was put on at Covent Garden in 1929 after a long absence, for the purposes of showcasing the American star Rosa Ponselle, some critics grudgingly admitted that the opera was not quite as bad as they had remembered (for example, *The Manchester Guardian*, May 30, 1929). The 1930s saw more *bel canto* works being staged – including *Don Pasquale* at Glyndebourne in 1938 – but critics still hesitated to accept their artistic merits. Stand-alone arias from the *bel canto* repertory did crop up regularly, however, on the programmes of celebrity concerts that drew a large popular audience, a fact that only further damned the music in the highbrows' eyes (Wilson 2012).

The *verismo* operas of the 1890s – referred to by *The Daily Mail* (November 17, 1920) as 'the "blood-and-thunder" Italian school' – were popular with audiences, Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana* and Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* becoming particular staples of the repertory. The self-styled highbrow critics of the era set themselves determinedly against these works, which they disparaged as sensationalist, lowbrow operas full of 'cheap and pretty tunes' (*The Musical Times*, February 1, 1920, 122). Less familiar works from this repertory staged at Covent Garden in the interwar period such as Umberto Giordano's *Fedora* were dismissed as crowd-pleasing celebrity vehicles, staged at the whim of a visiting prima donna (in this case Maria Jeritza) or star tenor, and lacking any real musical or dramatic substance (*The Manchester Guardian*, June 25, 1925).

Puccini's popular turn-of-the-century operas *La bohème, Tosca*, and *Madama Butterfly* were central to the interwar British canon, to the extent that critics often called for them to be given a rest. The composer's later works were, of course, 'contemporary music' from the perspective of the 1920s: *Il trittico* was first staged at Covent Garden in 1920 and *Turandot* in 1927. Puccini was also much in the news as a living composer and then, from 1924, one who had only recently died. His obituaries prompted attempts to weigh up his career in its entirety, often in negative terms. Some predicted that only a few of his most popular works would survive or explained at length why he did not deserve to be included among the ranks of the 'great composers'. An obituary in *The Times* on December 1, 1924, for instance, concluded with the decidedly backhanded compliment: 'If Puccini's was not the greatest music, at least there could never be any doubt that it was music.'

There was much anticipation surrounding *Turandot* but when it was finally performed posthumously the work did not materially change the rather unfavourable general critical appraisal of the composer's merits. Its adventurous musical language prompted consternation, leading a reviewer for *The Times* who attended the première at La Scala to write on April 26, 1926:

> [Puccini] was used at least to drawing real people in his music, but with *Turandot* he is thrust into an unreal world of inhuman and monstrous figures, and he has no gift for musical monstrosities, unlike many modern composers, who have no gift for anything else.

Writers who appraised Puccini's career from the vantage point of the mid-1920s also offered a commentary upon the state and future of Italian opera more generally. There was an awareness, in Britain as much as in contemporary Italy, that a living tradition was to all intents and purposes at an end (Wilson 2007, 194).

Singers

The interwar dichotomy between German and Italian works was particularly acutely felt at Covent Garden. From the mid-1920s onwards, the theatre resumed its pre-war practice of putting on an International Season during the summer months that was divided into an Italian portion and a German portion. For much of the Victorian period and again during the later Edwardian era, Italian opera had reigned supreme at the theatre (Rodmell 2013, 35, 81). After the war, however, tastes began to change and throughout the 1920s the German seasons were considered to be far more artistically successful than the Italian ones: there were simply better German specialists around at that particular moment.

As the 1920s gave way to the 1930s, several new star exponents of the Italian repertory arrived at Covent Garden including the American soprano Rosa Ponselle, the Spanish mezzo-soprano Conchita Supervia, the Italian soprano Toti Dal Monte, and her male compatriots the tenor Beniamino Gigli, the baritone Mariano Stabile, and the bass Ezio Pinza. This injection of glamour seemed to herald a new glorious era for Italian opera at Covent Garden, yet complaints about the decline in standards of singing more generally continued to be made. Echoing a point that numerous critics had expressed throughout the 1920s, Francis Toye wrote: 'As has always been the case during the last ten years, but as ought and need not be the case, the Italian season gave us the impression of being rather a come-down' (*The Listener*, June 20, 1934, 1045). Italian singers were cautioned that they could no longer rest on their laurels and expect higher fees than everyone else (*The Listener*, July 19, 1933, 94).

In this hostility there was something of a generational shift. Younger highbrow critics wanted to turn their backs on what were perceived to be the excesses of the pre-war era at Covent Garden: the luxury; the seeing and being seen; and the star system, a celebrity circus that was particularly bound up with the Italian repertory. But some of the disparaging comments about Italian singers were downright racist. In 1920 *The Musical Times* published

a supposed fly-on-the-wall account of the opera rehearsal process in Italy. According to the author, the prima donna or leading man would always arrive late, complain of some indisposition or other, feign fainting fits, and merely mark the music, as friends and relatives sprang to their defence to stress their stupendous talent and reputation. A description by Claude Trevor of the typical lead singers' physical appearances compounded the impression that they were extravagant, vain, superficial, pretentious, dirty and superstitious:

> The general appearance of the [prima donna] in question is loud and showy, and in her ears and on every finger blaze ornaments, set with more or less authentic gems, while brooches, lockets, and chains are hung about her person wherever possible. But this is a trait of the sterner sex also, whose curious habit it is to adorn all the fingers of each hand – not by any means always immaculately clean – to wear a huge scarf pin, usually a horse-shoe in form, and a colossal watch-chain – from which hang all manner of charms for good luck and against the *iettatura* (evil eye). (*The Musical Times*, September 1, 1920, 633)

An unsigned article in *The Musical News and Herald* published on April 24, 1926 welcomed the prospect of Covent Garden engaging an all-British chorus, which could be recruited locally and would 'give, of course, far less trouble'. The author shuddered to recall 'the metallic din' made by some unspecified Italian chorus of time gone by. This was consistent with protectionist talk throughout the decade of foreign musicians 'stealing' British jobs. Numerous voices within the musical establishment were critical of the fact that foreign musicians were 'over here' and British musicians were 'over there' – forced, in other words, to seek out work on the Continent. Although such views might make the present-day reader wince, interwar commentators evidently felt no embarrassment in expressing them. Indeed, much of the resentment towards foreign opera singers was exhibited by musicians themselves, a demographic we would expect nowadays to pride itself on its cosmopolitan attitudes (Wilson 2019b, 412–414).

The status of foreign singers during the interwar period was oddly paradoxical. They were reviled as immigrants, who supposedly took work away from British singers and distracted audiences away from 'worthier' local musical activities, yet at the same time were adored by audiences for their exotic star status. Some British singers, indeed, felt compelled to maintain the nineteenth-century practice of Italianizing their names in order to get work: see Thomas Beecham promoting his mistress Dora Labbette under the name Lisa Perli (Wilson 2019a, 181). Beecham may have been being mischievous (his girlfriend hailed from Purley) but there was still a perception that a singer with a common-or-garden British name was unlikely to make it at Covent Garden.

Audiences

If highbrow critics were snobbish about Italian singers, they were also disparaging of the audiences that enjoyed Italian opera. Such prejudices

were long-standing. It was, of course, Italian opera, though written by a German – Handel – that had first taken London by storm in the early eighteenth century, and the genre had become associated with 'Society': foppish buffoons who attended the opera purely as a social activity, a way of seeing and being seen. Two centuries had passed since then, yet some of this association with an unthinking social elite lingered on, even though upper-class support for Covent Garden was on the decline. Casting an eye over the Covent Garden season announced for 1930, which included the star vehicles *Norma* and *Andrea Chénier*, and the engagement of Ponselle and Gigli, *The Musical Standard*'s music critic wrote: 'There is more than a suspicion of the old-fashioned operatic mind about this preliminary list, the mind which used to regard opera partly as a social event, partly as a rather superior sort of circus, with vocal thrills in the place of physical ones' (November 2, 1929, 141).

Italian opera also appealed to other social demographics. Highbrows were equally concerned by its popularity among ordinary opera-goers from Lewisham or from Huddersfield, who were attracted by its good tunes, 'frivolous' subject matter and easy appeal. Verdi's biographer Francis Toye argued that the composer's popularity was a hindrance to his acceptance by serious critics, writing, tongue-in-cheek, that: 'There was no merit to be gained by professing admiration for a composer whose music could be enjoyed by anybody gifted with any musical receptivity whatever' (Toye 1930, xii).

At Covent Garden, a lively crowd of Soho Italians tended to be in attendance when Italian works were on the menu (*Illustrated London News*, June 27, 1925). This audience was often characterized as being fanatical about singers and voices, to a far greater extent than being interested in the operas themselves. Snide and patronizing comments abounded during the 1920s about the supposedly intellectually deficient audience that patronized Italian opera. Take for example, the words of Sir Richard Terry, former Director of Music at Westminster Cathedral, who described the 'Italian opera-goer' as someone who 'had no use for Wagner, but who would put up with anything that had a prima donna in it, though she weighed eighteen-stone-ten' (Terry 1927, 123). Terry proposed that average theatregoers were put off opera because they were repelled by the superior attitude of two distinct types who were set in opposition against each other, 'the Wagnerite and the Italian prima-donna worshipper' (Terry 1927, 124). Occasionally Italian audience members fought back. The critic and music pedagogist Percy Scholes quoted 'an Italian BBC listener' as writing to him in 1925 to say: 'English people are *not* musical. I mean this not as a disparaging remark, but as being, in my opinion, well founded on long experience of this country, the truth. Everything is against it, and no amount of education will ever alter things' (Scholes 1925, 230).

National identity

Indeed, notwithstanding Italian opera's popularity with audiences, esteemed critics and musicologists often argued that it was incompatible with Britishness. Edward J. Dent, music critic and a Fellow of King's College Cambridge, couched the issue in botanical terms in *The London Mercury* (April 1920, 763): 'in Italy opera is a tree which has sprung from a seed and grown swiftly in the course of centuries to an exuberant, perhaps an over-exuberant, maturity. … In England that tree has not flourished'. Dent was, undoubtedly, writing about opera composition as a creative activity, and referring to the long-lamented failure to launch a credible British operatic school, but other commentators argued that Italian opera was something that sat at odds with both British performers and audiences.

Reporting on a Winter season given by the BNOC at Covent Garden in 1923–24, for example, the critic 'Figaro' wrote that, although *Tosca* had played to very full houses, 'it is not an opera in which British artists shine, for obvious reasons'. And then he added: 'A drama of such hectic passion, fiendish torture and death … calls for qualities which do not get even a sporting chance of development in a land of fogs, gloom and early closing' (*Musical Opinion*, March 1924, 580). The 'nation of shopkeepers' trope also popped up from time to time in the context of rather mistrustful conversations about Italian opera. Since the mid-nineteenth century, the English character had been characterized as being defined by steady purpose, patient labour, silent reserve, and self-restraint in the domestic sphere (Mandler 2006, 100 and 103). These were virtues that found their very antithesis in the most recent of Italian operas, which were replete with love triangles and crimes of passion.

Opera-going in Italy was often portrayed as a normal part of everyday life, though some accounts were doubtless romantically embellished. George Dyson wrote that in nineteenth-century Italy, 'The whole public, rich and poor alike, supported opera with no more special concern than they would give to the reading of a book or the view of a picture. It was a part of their daily life, and they accepted it as such' (Dyson 1932, 137–138). In 1930 the critic 'Figaro' reported attending the dress rehearsal of *La bohème* at Torre del Lago (the recently deceased Puccini's home town), at which 'there was a real democratic touch … inasmuch as the audience was entirely made up of fishermen and their families, and other humble folk who had known and loved Puccini, and many of them brought their children' (*Musical Opinion*, October 1930, 23). Even those engaged in promoting opera in Britain dwelled upon this question of supposedly inherent national attitudes towards the arts. Arthur Winckworth of the Carl Rosa Opera Company was quoted in *The Musical Mirror* (June 1922, 171) as stating that:

> we are not trained to opera as the Italians. … In Italy the nursemaids take the children to the opera every Sunday afternoon. … To most of us English art is just a cloak to be put on and off. To Puccini it was a religion!

Puccini's own interwar British reception allows us to examine some nationalistically inflected responses to opera that became intertwined with discussions about the brows. First there was the perception of the composer's works lacking 'masculinity', which was a coded way of indicating their appeal to the middlebrow middle classes. The critic W. J. Turner, for instance, used gendered terminology to belittle the composer, calling his melodies 'suave and feminine' and arguing that 'they appeal more strongly to the present "feminine" world than the more peasant-like virility of Verdi' (*Illustrated London News*, June 9, 1928, 1066). This was surely a trope borrowed from earlier Italian criticism of the composer, most probably Fausto Torrefranca's book *Giacomo Puccini e l'opera internazionale* (1912), which attacked the composer as decadent, international and effeminate. Torrefranca's nationalistically-driven rhetoric was influenced by a contemporary right-wing critique of the 'softening' of early twentieth-century Italian society. Turner's observation about 'the present "feminine" world' seems also to link Puccini's music to some sort of societal decline, and like Torrefranca, effeminate here is probably also code for 'bourgeois'. His later comment about Puccini's 'graceful, flexible, rather invertebrate writing' (*Illustrated London News*, June 22, 1929, 1110) seems even more transparently indebted to Torrefranca, who writes about Puccini's male characters belonging to the world of spineless, feminized 'invertebrate men'.

Turner's disparagement of Puccini was far from a one-off case. Other writers, too, suggested that the composer's operas were 'feminine' in order to demean them in the operatic pecking order. Leigh Henry discussed a production of *Tosca* at Covent Garden in which the music had, he claimed, been badly conducted by a guest conductor from the Teatro Comunale di Bologna, Gaetano Bavagnoli. The music of a better composer, Henry argued, could just about have withstood such treatment, but not that of Puccini: 'The flamboyant bunting of Wagner would be torn to shreds by such vehement mauling; the tinsel, satin and georgette of Puccini was annihilated' (*The Musical Standard*, May 22, 1920). The first of these two decorative images brings to mind flags and patriotic pride; the second, women's evening dresses and cheap glitter. The gendered symbolism was inescapable.

The feminization of Puccini by British critics in this period was bound up with their loathing of the perceived sentimentality of his works. Highbrow critics expressed disdain for the fact that the works of Puccini and his compatriots were so focused upon the subject of romantic love, a subject matter regarded as trivial by self-styled highbrows. Reporting on a new opera by the Austrian composer Egon Wellesz, *Die Prinzessin Girnara*, Edward J. Dent

wrote: 'It is a relief to get away from the crass realism of Puccini, and still more from the crass sentimentality – to give it no harder name – of those operas whose interest centres on the *duetto d'amore*' (*The Nation and the Athenaeum*, May 21, 1921, 297).

Operatic love – the lifeblood of much popular Italian opera – made many highbrow critics squirm. A particularly damning response to Puccini's *Il trittico* – a triptych of three one-act operas – may be found in *The Saturday Review*, whose unsigned author discusses the first two of the three, *Il tabarro* and *Suor Angelica*, using the sort of terminology that might usually be associated with cheap pot-boiler novels or films with mass market appeal. (This is not as incongruous as it might at first seem: as Holden demonstrates, opera and film converged regularly in a variety of ways in the 1920s.) Puccini had written two 'tabloid stories of illicit love', brutal in deed and in sentiment (*The Saturday Review*, June 26, 1920). Even worse, however, was the combination of sensuality and religion in *Suor Angelica*, whose reception took on a peculiarly British colouring.

Puccini intended the three works to be performed together but when the triptych arrived at Covent Garden, *Suor Angelica* was dropped after only two performances. Although there was some suggestion that the evening was simply too long, some commentators explained that it had been abandoned because British audiences could not relate to its Catholic subject matter. Francis E. Barrett, for example, noted that 'in England … the convent is not well understood, and the listener is inclined to say "Why?" to the whole business. … The story lacks the necessary quality of attraction for this country' (*The Musical Times*, August 1, 1920, 547).

Yet this generalized anti-Catholic reception of the work seems implausible, when one takes into account the huge popularity in Britain of Karl Volmöller's nunnery-themed mime play *The Miracle*, choreographed to music by Engelbert Humperdinck and directed by Max Reinhardt. This musical extravaganza – discussed further by Shewring (1987) – was originally staged at Olympia in 1911 as a Christmas pantomime of sorts, with a cast of almost 2,000; the next year it was turned into a British silent film, with the première screened at Covent Garden. A 1924 New York production, which subsequently toured Europe, drew a great deal of attention from the British press because it starred the socialite Diana Manners in the leading role.

The fact that a musical work about a nun who is tempted by worldly distractions – and which features a Madonna who comes to life – was one of the theatrical sensations of the pre-war and post-war period undermines the argument that 1920s British audiences would be turned off by a cloistered setting and subject matter. The problem with *Suor Angelica* was perhaps something else: its perceived immorality in appearing, as some critics saw it, to condone both illicit love and suicide, and its perceived lowbrow status as a 'blood-curdler' (*The Saturday Review*, July 3, 1920). This

sort of language placed the opera far closer to the novelistic potboiler or the sensationalist silent film than to the redemptive world of serious music drama.

Any contemporary suspicion of Italian emotionalism on the part of audiences seems peculiar, on the face of it, given the fact that the long-standing British fascination with the Mediterranean region and its cultures was still very much alive during the interwar era (Holland 2018, 240–241). Italy continued to be constructed as a place of personal transformation, of youth, hope, and of idyll in the English literature of the period, particularly in the immediate aftermath of the war. In 1930, meanwhile, half a million people enthusiastically visited Burlington House to see a major exhibition of Italian old master paintings that had been sent to London with Mussolini's endorsement as an exercise in cultural propaganda.

For all the efforts by the highbrows to belittle it, opera was part of this broader fascination with Italian culture. A trip to the opera was still a central attraction of a sojourn in Italy. *Country Life* magazine regularly published articles about foreign opera festivals for the delectation of its well-heeled, well-travelled readers. Advertisements by the Italian State Tourist Department enticed readers to make a trip to Naples, Sicily or San Remo to coincide with these regions' respective opera seasons (see, for example, *Country Life*, January 26, 1935, xxvii). While for the privileged few, a trip to the opera in Italy was part of a modern version of the grand tour, there were also many more ordinary people with a committed interest in opera, who were in it for the music rather than the social occasion, who travelled abroad to pursue their hobby.

At the same time, however, there was a vogue in early 1930s Britain for all things German. Francis Toye noted that there is a 'general tendency in England and the United States to favour anything that comes from the north rather than the south' (*The Listener*, May 25, 1932, 751). Since the mid-Victorian period there had been much discussion of the Anglo-Saxon origins of the nation and the ways in which the English (as distinct from the British) character had been shaped by distant German ancestry (Mandler 2006, 62, 86–87). The war had cast doubt upon ideas of Nordic homogeneity and concepts of national character being rooted in biology were widely questioned during the interwar period (Mandler 2006, 155–156). Nevertheless, there was a surge of British interest in northern cultures during the early 1930s. Toye argued that one consequence was that Italian opera had become 'more unfashionable than at any time during the last 300 years' and that, currently, 'popular taste is entirely central European' (*The Listener*, May 25, 1932, 751).

Yet in talking about fashionability and even 'popular taste', Toye was not really talking about popularity among ordinary operagoers. There was no question that Italian opera was still popular; in fact, it was popular with more

people than ever before, since it had been substantially 'democratized' via new technologies during the 1920s. Toye was referring to how opera was regarded by the people who really mattered within his personal milieu: the musical gatekeepers who were his fellow critics. Most, with a very few exceptions, demonstrated a pronounced bias against the genre. High-profile critics such as Ernest Newman of *The Sunday Times* and Eric Blom of the *Manchester Guardian* and *Birmingham Post* expressly favoured German music (Scaife 1994, 258). This was unsurprising, in the context of a reviewing culture – and indeed a musical culture more broadly – that was becoming consciously more 'intellectual', a term that began to be used far more regularly at the turn of the 1930s, and to some extent supplanted the term 'highbrow' (Collini 2006, 33).

Toye argued that 'all pedants and academics' were inclined to view Italian music unfavourably because it gave them little opportunity to 'exercise their peculiar talents of analysis, of cerebral theorizing, and so on' (*The Listener*, 25 May 1932, 751). Italian opera's relative simplicity, then, compared with the more complex genres of German instrumental and orchestral genres and the related genre of Wagnerian music drama, sat ill-at-ease with a growing aspiration to learned respectability among cultural commentators of the interwar era. Indeed, 'Schaunard' mused in *Musical Opinion* (July 1929, 904) that anyone who took Italian opera seriously was likely to be dismissed as a 'country lout'. As a form of art whose achievements had long been measured more by popularity and market success than by aesthetic qualities, it held little appeal for the British highbrows. This tendency towards severe intellectualism was bound up with a certain puritanical joylessness that Toye identified as a peculiarly British trait, arguing that the bias against Italian music has been 'accentuated by our national tendency to value earnestness for its own sake' (*The Listener*, May 25, 1932, 751).

We may conclude that Italian opera was not considered highbrow in interwar Britain. Indeed, in certain contexts it was regarded by highbrow commentators as veritably lowbrow. For the most part, however, it occupied a space somewhere in between, and was patronized by audiences with eclectic tastes – a defining characteristic of the middlebrow mentality – who might go to the cinema on a Friday and to hear a touring opera company on a Saturday. Italian opera was treated by most listeners as a form of enjoyment, pure and simple, with none of the 'elitist' associations that are generally attached to it today. It nevertheless became embroiled in a vexed conversation about self-identity and good taste that was shot through with complicated nationalist anxieties. Perhaps we might reflect on the fact that the nation that emerged from this conversation looking most foolish was not Italy, with its supposedly ridiculous operas and singers, but Britain, with its curious mixture of philistinism on the one hand and puritanical snobbery on the other.

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Notes on contributor

Alexandra Wilson is Professor of Music and Cultural History at Oxford Brookes University. She has worked extensively on Italian opera and operatic culture from the period 1880–1930. Wilson is the author of *The Puccini Problem: Opera, Nationalism, and Modernity* (Cambridge, 2007), which won the American Musicological Society's Lewis Lockwood Award; *Opera in the Jazz Age: Cultural Politics in 1920s Britain* (Oxford University Press), which was funded by a British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship; and *Puccini's La bohème* (Oxford University Press). Wilson currently holds a Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship for the period 2018–2021, during which she is writing a book tracing the historical development of the opera and elitism stereotype in Britain. Future plans include editing the volume *Puccini in Context* (Cambridge University Press) and writing a Cambridge Handbook on *Cavalleria rusticana* and *Pagliacci*. Wilson has a high profile as a public musicologist, can regularly be heard discussing opera on BBC Radio 3, and has written for publications including *BBC Music Magazine, Opera* magazine, and *The Sunday Times*.

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