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Remaking the Aria

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What does an aria do; or, what can be done with, about or around an aria in approximately 1500 words? This was the brief given to the contributors of this special issue. Our purpose in part was to prompt discussion about how the aria figures in current opera studies. In many ways its status is unassailable: since opera's early history it has been the locus for elaborate musical expression; or, put another way, for making opera operatic. It remains the composer's and performer's showpiece such that it seems to exemplify the genre. Yet the boundaries of 'aria-dom' have constantly been blurred by formal experimentation, as well as by its lack of exclusivity: not only are there arias in cantatas, oratorios, operettas and instrumental pieces, but they have also constantly been transferred between works, and refashioned for other media. Even the notion that an aria is for a single voice might be questioned. In the remarkably broad definition offered by *The New Grove*, since 1945 'the term "aria" has come to signify any large-scale item that could be distinguished musically and dramatically from the surrounding structure'. That sense of separation, of musical difference, is something which the contextual studies that now dominate opera scholarship can seem loath to acknowledge, in part because of its formalist overtones. Instead, the aria becomes material evidence of, say, a singer's presence in a particular production, or of the process of a composer's or work's canonisation. The aria thereby lurks, Antigonish, seen but not seen.

The thirty-two short essays in this special issue suggest that there is still much to be gained from addressing the aria more directly. They inevitably provide snapshots of current academic preoccupations, from performance to transnationalism, reception studies and transmediality. Some of them even talk about notes. The repertoire extends from Handel through van der Aa, taking in along the way quite a lot of Italian and French opera. This wide range – and the near-absence of Wagner – also reflects the fact that this issue is conceived as a tribute (determinedly not a *Festschrift*) to one of the founder editors of *Cambridge Opera Journal*, Roger Parker. Each of the contributors here has been taught, mentored and guided by him, formally or informally, and most of us had to resist the ingrained instinct to send him drafts of our contributions for his feedback. Our varied approaches to the aria – as well as the fact that we are not all opera specialists – might also seem to track his own adventures, from close analysis via the remaking of songs to the street repertories of nineteenth-century London, as well as paying homage to his boundless intellectual generosity in supporting students and colleagues. Most of us promised him that we would never let something like this volume happen; we can only hope he will forgive us in the end.

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