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Review Essay

'Wanted – An Opera'

The title of John Fuller Maitland's article 'Wanted – An Opera', in which he argued for the establishment in Britain of a state-supported national opera house, could almost be read as a statement of desire for an operatic work of British origin itself.[1] The perception that composers produced little opera of value in the period of the so-called 'British Music Renaissance' has become a trope, despite research in recent years showing the extent of activity, both in terms of composition and performance, during the 20 years either side of 1900.

Like many tropes, however, this one contains fundamental truths, though the situation is inevitably more complex and nowhere near as pessimistic as it initially appears. What is undeniable, though, is that British composers faced an elevated set of challenges compared to their European counterparts,[2] rendering it more difficult to 'break through' and to produce work as musically and dramatically effective as their continental contemporaries. Equally, though, they were rarely sufficiently self-critical, and often failed to 'play the system' successfully.

It is not, for example, the case that British audiences were unsympathetic to opera: between about 1830 and 1865, British composers, especially those working in London, had enjoyed a fair degree of success and popularity, although financial rewards were typically negligible. Balfe, Wallace, Loder, Benedict, Macfarren and others all produced works that brought at least national recognition, and possessed a recognizable style and ethos. Balfe and Wallace at least were fortunate in composing operas (*The Bohemian Girl* and *Maritana* respectively) that remained in the national repertory into the next century; other works, of which Loder's *Raymond and Agnes* and Macfarren's *Robin Hood* are examples, deserved more recognition than they received at the time or afterwards.

In the mid-1860s, however, this era of relative acclaim came to an abrupt end: Balfe retired, Wallace and Loder both died (with Balfe following shortly afterwards), Benedict reorientated himself to the concert hall, and Macfarren largely gave up composition for the next few years and subsequently showed little interest in opera.[3] At the same time, in London, performance opportunities contracted sharply, most obviously evidenced by the collapses of the Pyne-Harrison and English Opera companies, while the popularity of Italian and French operas at London's highbrow theatres (Covent Garden and Her Majesty's) effectively sidelined English opera, largely redefining it as a middlebrow entertainment for the suburbs and provinces rather than a desirable art form performed in the fashionable West End.

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[1] John Fuller Maitland, 'Wanted – An Opera', *Nineteenth Century*, 43 (1898): 977–84.

[2] Conversely, there are many *parallels* to be drawn between circumstances in Britain and the United States.

[3] Macfarren's sole later attempt, *Kenilworth* (1880), remains unperformed.

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In the following two decades, Britain's opera composers effectively diverged along two separate paths. The first to emerge, represented initially by composers such as Clay, Cellier and, above all, Sullivan, built on the ballads and glees of their mid-century predecessors, while incorporating elements of French *opéra comique* plus the suddenly but immensely popular Offenbachian *opéra bouffe*, to forge a new style of operetta that proved hugely successful, resilient, and profitable, and lay the foundations for what ultimately has evolved into West End and Broadway musical theatre. It is into this genre that Solomon's *Pickwick* and Grossmith's *Cups and Saucers* (in the form presented by the D'Oyly Carte Company), fit.

The second path, characterized by music and drama of a more serious and highbrow style, only emerged in the 1880s, due partly to the arrival of a new generation of British composers (Cowen, Stanford, Mackenzie, Goring Thomas, Corder and Parry), and partly to a concatenation of circumstances that provided a brief window of opportunity for them to attempt to define and promote their new path; these were the appearance in London in close order of all of Wagner's mature works, the decline and eventual collapse of the 'Italian opera' mode of production, and the success of Carl Rosa's company, all of which seemed to combine to present a slew of new opportunities.

Things did not work out, however, as well as this new generation hoped. The window of opportunity opened only briefly before narrowing and then virtually closing: the Rosa Company abandoned its commissioning policy, while, at Covent Garden, the Royal Italian Opera and its successor organizations bounced back but, essentially for social reasons, almost entirely froze out British composers until after the Great War. This lack of interest caused a great deal of resentment: in the absence of an officially recognized 'National Opera', the Covent Garden company effectively acquired this status, yet its doors were barely ajar; British composers started to view achieving a premiere in the Covent Garden spring season as the musical equivalent of storming the Bastille.

It is unsurprising, then, that British composers and their supporters blamed the nation's operatic infrastructure for their lack of success. Maitland's article is just one of several from this period that argued for the establishment of a national opera house – meaning a dedicated building and performing troupe, financially supported by the state – and that cited arrangements in France, Italy, Germany and Austria as evidence of what could be achieved with the aid of active public intervention.[4] The provision of a foundation that acted as commissioner, promoter and general beacon for British opera, immune from the erraticism of society patronage and able to provide tickets affordable by (almost) all, would, its advocates believed, release the nation's potential to create, perform and consume opera, and provide a model to be followed in other parts of the country.

Laudable as these objectives were, their advocates' energy was, in certain respects, misdirected. In the absence of a National Opera, the focus on and appeal of Covent Garden were obvious (not least in terms of extensive press attention composers gained when their works were produced there), but this led to Britain's many touring companies being viewed as poor, provincial relations, whatever their actual merits. Underlying this situation were hard economic realities: Britain's opera companies were all commercial ventures, and bringing out

[4] Parallel arguments ran throughout this period for the establishment of a national theatre.

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new works in an inherently expensive genre was a huge financial risk that no company, even those with adventurous managers, undertook lightly. For touring companies, whose residences at individual theatres rarely exceeded two weeks, the greater part of the repertory had to be 'tried and tested' to have any chance of balancing the books. This made it difficult not only to secure premieres, but also the crucial follow-up performances that cemented a new work's reputation and familiarity. Even when new British operas were produced, they rarely had the chance to 'bed down' such that, in 1914, the most frequently performed British operas remained the two by Balfe and Wallace mentioned above. Yet the touring network was extensive and its managers supportive if cautious: had British opera advocates been a little less London-centric, they may have found different ways to facilitate the performance opportunities they desired.

It would, however, be unfair to argue that challenges faced by British composers in this period were solely structural. While the commercial set-up of Britain's opera companies was a major handicap, the massively successful genres of operetta and musical comedy show that there was a huge appetite for at least some musical drama. And, although the touring companies' existence was precarious, most British towns of any reasonable size (that is, populations of roughly 50,000 or more) could expect a visit at least annually, so even more 'serious' opera was catered for. In other words, outlets and demand did exist, although they were certainly neither so stable nor embedded as elsewhere in Europe.

In creative terms, there were two recurring problems: composers all too often wrote to their own agendas, and much of what they produced was uneven. British composers too rarely thought of their potential audiences' existing knowledge when creating new works: outside the rarefied atmosphere of elite West End theatres, spectators in 1900 would have seen almost no opera composed after 1860: their knowledge of Verdi was restricted to *Il Trovatore*, *La Traviata* and *Rigoletto* and of Wagner to *Lohengrin*, *Tannhäuser* and *Der fliegender Holländer*.[5] *Faust* and *Carmen* were the only post-1860 operas to have become staples among British touring companies, although works by Saint-Saëns, Massenet, Puccini and Mascagni were performed occasionally. So, when the neo-Wagnerian operas of composers such as Stanford and Mackenzie appeared in the 1880s, it was hardly surprising that provincial audiences especially found them difficult to grasp, audiences were sparse, and the works rapidly dropped. Outside the West End, this mismatch between composer aesthetic and audience experience was persistent.

A bigger problem was the lack of sure-footedness amongst composers and librettists when dealing with the fundamentals of musical drama: characterization, narrative pacing, and the creation and resolution of dramatic tension.[6] Playwrights and other literary types had neither the experience nor the incentive to write libretti, given the minimal financial or critical rewards; the few that tried were typically well-meaning but produced texts that were wordy and laden with cliches and archaic language, but lacked three-dimensional characters and compelling narratives. Composers themselves rarely had the dramatic insight, nor perhaps

[5] Individual arias from a far wider range of operas were performed in concerts, but I am referring specifically here to the immersive experience of whole operas performed in theatres.

[6] It is, perhaps, no coincidence that the most successful of this period's playwrights, such as Wilde and Pinero, did not produce works that lend themselves easily to operatic adaptation: in short, few were capable of producing work that was operatic by the standards of the time.

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sufficient bluntness to steer their librettists in the right direction. The result, in many cases, was operas in which dramatically static scenes were set impressively and engagingly, but plots that unfolded haltingly, superficial characterization and climaxes that did not deliver. Over time, the situation did improve, if slowly and sporadically: Smyth's *The Boatswain's Mate* is a good example of an opera from late in this period where the narrative flows, the characters are credible, and the dialogue avoids archaisms and cliches.

Critics and reviewers, meanwhile, tended only to make the situation worse by complaining about a lack of popular native operas and derivative musical styles while having only ephemeral ideas as to what a 'British' opera should look and sound like; commonplace references to characters who embodied the putative national characteristics of patience, nobility and fortitude were bandied about but no coherent vision was presented while, in relation to music, critics were even less helpful, effectively taking a 'we'll know it when we it see it' approach.[7] All they – and most composers – agreed on was that the mid-century style of Balfe and Wallace had to be left behind; the result was a succession of new works hugely diverse in musical style and dramatic subject matter but lacking any sense of forming a coherent corpus.

If all this seems harsh, it is worth noting that, for all the challenges and limitations they faced, many British composers showed both interest and determination in writing opera: more than 100 new works by British composers were premiered between 1880 and 1920 and, while none could be said to have established a really long-term foothold in the repertory, some were revived reasonably regularly or have subsequently gained critical regard.[8] In largely rejecting the mid-century style, composers set themselves the challenge of developing an approach that would be recognizably national in contemporaneous terms, while working with an infrastructure that was fragmented and fragile and, in some places, blatantly inhospitable. In the circumstances, perhaps we should not wonder so much that a corpus of successful British operas from this period is lacking but marvel that so many composers committed themselves to so much work when faced with so slight a prospect of reward. Such resilience and determination seems hardly suggestive of a nation lacking in either creativity or interest.

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[7] The combative John Runciman conceded that he had no idea what musical style might be appropriate: 'All that can be said is that English [*sic*] music must possess the subtle qualities necessary to make it acceptable to English people'; *Magazine of Music*, 1 July 1893, 162.

[8] It is almost invidious to name specific examples, but contemporaneously successful operas include Goring Thomas's *Esmeralda*, Boughton's *The Immortal Hour*, Maccunn's *Jeanie Deans* and Stanford's *Shamus O'Brien*. Works that have been favourably viewed recently include Holst's *Savitri* and Smyth's *The Wreckers*, plus those reviewed elsewhere in this issue.

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