

**GALLOWAY**

**WILLIAM**

**JOHNSON**

THE OPERATIC PROBLEM

William Galloway  
**The Operatic Problem**

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# William Johnson Galloway

## The Operatic Problem

### Preface

Last autumn, having to speak at an organ recital given by my friend Mr Clegg, I took the opportunity of giving what encouragement lay in my power, to the Corporation of my native town, in an endeavour they had made during the summer months to provide suitable music in the various parks throughout the city. To my great surprise that speech was quoted in journals, of all shades of opinion, in the country, and brought me also a vast correspondence.

A copy of the speech will be found at the end of this book.

As I have long desired that Opera should be placed within the reach of those, whose purses are not able to bear the strain of the high prices charged in England, and having some leisure before Parliament met this year, I made inquiries regarding the various systems of running Opera on the Continent of Europe. I obtained a vast mass of most interesting information. How to make the best use of that information was my difficulty. It was much too bulky to compress into the narrow limits of a magazine article, and besides, much of it had no peculiar interest for us in this country.

My chief desire was to put it before the public in a form that would arouse interest in the subject. Also, I realised that this information, however valuable, was like the desert, in its unwieldy form, and without any attempt to outline the conclusion to which it led. So after much trepidation of thought I determined to run the gauntlet and march right up to the cannon's mouth with a scheme of my own for the establishment of a system for National Opera in this country.

This little book is the result of my efforts, and though I do not pretend that it offers a complete solution of the question, still less that it gives a *coup de grâce* to the schemes of those who have trodden the same path before me, I do hope it may help to call into existence some plan for the foundation of Opera upon a popular basis.

To my critics – and many I shall have – I venture to say that, however much they disagree, they should remember I lay no claim to completeness, and I will gladly welcome any suggestions thrown out with a real desire to perfect my very imperfect ideas.

But there are two forms of criticism I wish to meet in advance.

The first is the criticism of those, who will say it is useless hoping to get public money for a luxury, whilst the nation is engaged in a costly war. I frankly and freely admit the force of such criticism, but I would urge in reply that a proposal like mine has far to travel, before it takes its final shape, and one cannot hope to get Parliament to take the matter up until the subject has been fully ventilated in the country. And although at such a time our first thoughts should be given to those who are fighting our battles in the field, surely no harm, and possibly much good, may come from considering how we can deal with the social problems which confront us.

The second form of criticism is perhaps more easily met, namely, the criticism of those who look upon all theatres and opera houses as vicious and *contra bonos mores*. This battle was fought by Molière in the seventeenth century. Prescott, in his delightful essay on Molière, tells us what difficulties that author had to face at the beginning of his career on these very grounds. The clergy, alarmed at the then rapidly-increasing taste for dramatic exhibitions, openly denounced the theatre as an insult to the Deity, and Molière's father anticipated in the calling his son had chosen no less his spiritual than his temporal perdition. Yet who is there to-day who will deny that Molière helped to correct the follies of his age, by exposing them to ridicule? And if in providing National Opera for the people, we can assist in the higher education of the community, we may well ask those who object on the grounds I have named, to remember that "there is no felicity upon earth which carries

not its counterpoise of misfortunes," and that the evils they fear are not inherent only to the stage, but also exist in almost every other walk of life.

## The Operatic Problem

Opera has, since its origin, been considered the highest form of theatrical pastime. The very appellation "opera" indicates that in the land of its birth it was looked upon as the "work" *par excellence*, and to this day it is the form of Art which is invariably honoured by exalted patronage, and one that people pay the most to enjoy. It is hardly necessary to advance documentary evidence in support of this assertion; moreover, it is beyond the scope of this book to marshal all the historical facts. My chief consideration will be to deal with the prospect of National Opera in England, and to take the existing state of things as the basis for future action. But some retrospect showing that the originators of opera understood its importance, and knew admirably how to define its scope, may prove interesting.

The following extract from the preface to Vitali's *Aretusa*, the score of which is in the Barberini Library, performed in Rome on the 8th of February 1620, is worth quoting in corroboration of the statement: —

"This style of work (opera) is a new style, born a few years ago at Florence, of the noble intelligence of Messer Ottavio Rinuccini, who, dearly beloved by the Muses and gifted with especial talent for the expression of passions, would have it that the power of music allied to poetry, tended rather to gather fresh strength from the combination, than to suffer diminution in consequence. He spoke of it to Signor Jacopo Corsi, Mæcenas of every merit and most enlightened amateur of music, proving that the mission of music united to poetry should be not to smother words with noises, but to help those words to a more eloquent expression of passion. Signor Corsi sent for Signor Jacopo Perri and Signor Giulio Caccini, eminent professors of singing and counterpoint, and after having discussed the subject, they came to the conclusion that they had found the means for reaching the desired goal. Nor were they mistaken. It is in this new musical style, the fable of *Dafne* to the poem of Signor Ottavio Rinuccini, was composed and performed in Florence at Signor Jacopo Corsi's, in the presence of the illustrious Cardinal del Monte, a Montalto, and their most serene Highnesses the Grand Duke and Grand Duchess of Tuscany. The work pleased them so much that they were absolutely bewildered (*attonitidi stupore*). This style of music acquired a still greater number of fresh beauties in *Euridice*, a work by the same authors, and then in *Ariadne*, by Signor Claudio Monteverdi, to-day *Maestro di Capella at Venice*."

Your modern theorist could hardly express his operatic creed with greater felicity than the Florentine noble, Ottavio Rinuccini, and the whole quotation breathes in its quaint phraseology, the spirit of love for all that is new and beautiful in Art, which gave Italy her hegemony amongst other nations.

The operatic spectacle, when first imported into France, was a Court entertainment for the privileged few, but it soon tempted private enterprise, and here, again, its importance, as an attraction, was not underrated, for the first *impresario*, one Pierre Perrin, took good care to obtain a monopoly for the new style of performances, whilst the royal *privilège* (letters-patent), granted to him, sets out their advantages in unmistakable terms.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Here is an extract of this *privilège*: — "Nous avons au dit Perrin, accordé et octroyé, accordans et octroyons par les présentes signées de notre main la permission d'establir en notre bonne ville de Paris et autres de nostrec Royaume, des Académies composées de tel nombre et qualité de personnes qu'il avisera, pour y représenter et chanter en public des opéra et représentations en musique et en vers français, pareilles et semblables à celles d'Italie. Et pour dédommager l'Exposant, des grands frais du'il conviendra faire pour les dites Représentations, tant pour les Théâtres, Machines, Décorations, Habits qu'autres choses nécessaires; nous luy permettons de prendre du public telles sommes qu'il avisera et à cette fin d'establir des gardes et autres gens nécessaires à la porte des lieux où se feront les dites Représentations; Faisant très expresses inhibitions et défences à toutes personnes de quelque qualité et condition qu'elles soient, *mesme aux officiers de nostre Maison d'y entrer sans payer, et de faire chanter de pareils opéra ou Représentations en musique et en vers français* dans toute l'entendue de nostre Royaume pendant douze années sans le consentement et permission du dit exposant, à peine de dix huit mil livres d'amende," etc., etc.

Therein "Louis par la grace de Dieu," etc., concedes to his "ame et feal Pierre Perrin" the exclusive rights of operatic performances throughout France, not only that they should contribute to his own recreation, or that of the public in general, but chiefly in the hope that his subjects, "getting accustomed to the taste of music, would be led all but unconsciously to perfect themselves in this the most noble of liberal arts." (Que nos sujets s'accoustumant au goust de la musique, se porteroient insensiblement a se perfectionner en cet art, l'un des plus nobles de liberaux.) These Royal letters-patent were dated 1669, demonstrating that two hundred and thirty-two years ago France recognised the educational mission of the art of music, and its accessibility by the means of opera.

The taste for this new entertainment grew and spread throughout Europe, and it is a matter of common knowledge that everywhere the encouragement and support came from the highest quarters, always having for its object the benefit of the masses.

Thus Italy, France, Germany, Austria, Spain, Russia, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Greece have their endowed or subsidised theatres; they can boast of an artistic musical past and operatic tradition, and make a proud show of creative and interpreting talent for over two centuries. It is equally well known that the patronage thus accorded, always took the form of a monetary subsidy granted either by a Sovereign or by a municipality – at times for a period of years, at others for a specified occasion, sometimes unconditionally, sometimes under certain restrictions, now limited to a given figure, then giving the manager *carte blanche*. The solicitude and favour shown by the State went at times the length of taking a direct interest in the management of an opera house, as was the case for a certain period in France.

England alone in civilised Europe remained indifferent, and took no active part either in fostering or patronising the new form of art; and whilst the spirit of emulation was animating other states and nations towards helping native production, England was satisfied to import spectacles and performers from abroad, just as she would have imported any other commodity. True enough, only the best article was brought over, and the best price paid in the highest market. If one could reckon up the money thus spent on foreign operatic performances within the last hundred years, the figures would prove instructive – instructive, that is, of England's foolhardiness in alienating so much national cash, without any benefit to the nation, and to the direct detriment of native talent. For over a century this country has been the happy dumping-ground of Italian opera and Italian singers and dancers; for there was a time when a ballet and a *prima ballerina* were of paramount importance in an operatic season. Within late years French, Belgian, German, American, Polish and even Dutch singers have found their El-Dorado in England. Composers of all nations have found hospitality and profit. Foreign conductors, *virtuosi*, teachers and chorus-singers have taken up a permanent abode here, and things have come to such a pass that one may well wonder whether there is any room at all for an Englishman, and whether the time has not arrived for a voice to be raised on behalf of native artists and native art.

It is not as though native opera had failed to show signs of life. Our failure to create a body of art comparable with that of Germany, Italy and France has sometimes been attributed to inherent lack of the dramatic instinct in music, but that view is contradicted by the historical facts. From the time of Purcell, whose operatic genius is beyond question, neither the impulse to write on the part of musicians nor the capacity to appreciate on the part of the public has been lacking. We find throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, breaking through the stifling influence of exotic art, an irrepressible tendency towards the creation of a purely native form of opera. Again and again English or British composers returned to the task with significant, if temporary, success. The list is surprisingly large and almost continuous down to the present day. It includes many forms of art, some of which have no pretension to a high standard, but the one thing common to them all is the yearning towards some sort of musical drama which they exhibit. This is seen in nothing more plainly than in the "ballad operas" of the eighteenth century, which were inaugurated by the immensely popular *Beggar's Opera* in 1728, only some thirty years after Purcell's flourishing period. A string of ballads took the public by storm when thrown into a dramatic setting. Arne's ambitious project of building

up in the middle of the century an English operatic school to rival the Italians in their own domain indicates an instructive confidence in the forces of his day. It failed not so much from lack of support as from active opposition on the part of those undying enemies of the unaccustomed, who play the game of follow-my-leader like a flock of sheep. They did it then. They do it now.

This failure did not deter Arne's successors from freely following their own operatic bent, in the earlier and less ambitious style. The agreeable and distinctive national talent of Dibdin, Arnold, Linley, Shield, Horace, Hook, Braham and many others found expression in a host of musically set plays, which hugely delighted the public. English musicians received encouragement and responded to it. The 1809 English Opera House produced a quantity of works, and at the same time Drury Lane and Covent Garden offered a field of activity to Bishop, who was a born operatic composer of charming and original gifts. To this period belongs Balfe, who may be said to mark its culmination. The *Siege of Rochelle*, his first opera, was brought out at Drury Lane in 1835, and the *Bohemian Girl*, his most successful one, in 1843 at the same theatre. This opera has been before the public for nearly sixty years, and is still enjoying the undiminished favour of popular audiences. Wallace's *Maritana*, which belongs to the same period, is also very much alive to this day. Barnett's *Mountain Sylph* (1834) and Loder's *Night Dancers* (1846) met with as much success and lasted as long as four out of five contemporary Italian works, and they were only amongst the most prominent of a number of native operas, called forth in this period of sunshine and received with appreciation.

This period passed away, and has not been renewed. The promise held out by Carl Rosa, an *impresario* of enlightenment and enterprise, almost amounting to genius, was balked by his premature death, and the patriotic effort embodied, in the theatre which is now the Palace Music Hall ended in worse than failure. That well-meant but disastrous venture was the heaviest blow that English opera has ever received, for it cast the shadow of hopelessness over the whole enterprise in the eyes of the public in general and the theatrical and musical world in particular. Naturally perhaps, but most unjustly.

For the general disappointment and disillusion attending the failure of *Ivanhoe* the critics were largely to blame in holding out expectations which could not be realised; the thing was doomed to eventual collapse from the outset. It started, it is true, with an unparalleled advertisement and amid universal good wishes; it commanded popular and fashionable patronage alike, and every adventitious attraction was provided with a lavish hand. But it lacked the essential elements of real success, and had to fight against insuperable difficulties. In the first place, the stage was far too small for grand opera, which moves in a large way, requiring large spaces. The principal characters must stand out clear, with abundant room for movement and gesture on a heroic scale. If they are huddled or crowded up against the chorus – which also requires ample space – the action is confused and leaves an impression of futility. The effect is gone. This might not altogether prevent enjoyment of a familiar work by audiences accustomed to small theatres, but it ruins the chances of a new piece conceived on a larger scale, and presented in London to playgoers accustomed to more adequate boards. The stage at the ambitious New Opera House was so small, and the foreshortening so excessive in consequence, that in the opening scene of *Ivanhoe* Cedric and his guests actually sat at meat in Rotherwood Hall with their knees above the table, producing a ludicrous effect. And yet the piece was projected on the most pompous scale, with tournament, siege, fire, solemn trial, battle, murder and sudden death – in short, all the details that require the most ample spaces. The reporters were told, of course, that the stage was the largest in Europe, and they may possibly have believed it. At any rate, they told the public so. They ought to have known that *Ivanhoe* had no chance so cramped and huddled together.

The second obstacle was the counterpart of an inadequate stage – to wit, an overloaded book. There were too many principal characters. They cluttered up the stage, got in each other's way and distracted attention from the main action. A skilful novelist can dispose of a great many characters in one story; a skilful dramatist can put fewer but still a good many into one play, because they are able to explain themselves quickly and by-play is admissible. In grand opera it is otherwise. The characters

move on a higher emotional plane; they express themselves in prolonged phrases and accents enlarged beyond the manner of speech, consequently they require more time and space. It must all be simple, large and clear. There must be no distraction of interest; to have several persons of equal importance is fatal. No musician could have made a successful opera of such a book as *Ivanhoe*. The talent, skill and experience of Sullivan did not fail to produce some agreeable numbers, but they failed most egregiously to make grand opera. A perpetual sense of disappointment pervaded the piece; it never rose to the height demanded by the situation, save when that was comic, and occasionally the failure was absolutely painful. The music kept trying to soar, but was all the time chained by the leg. The reason is obvious. You cannot serve two masters, nor can a man who has devoted a life to light musical composition, suddenly command the powers which can only be won by toil, and tribulation, and faithful devotion to a high ideal. To crown this fabric of shortcomings, the management committed the folly of running *Ivanhoe* every night. No masterpiece could have stood a test of this kind. And it was thus, with this single unfortunate specimen, that English opera was to be established. Let no one be cast down by this failure. We may rather point to the attempt, to the widespread interest, and to the eager if ill-founded hopes that accompanied it, as signs of vitality. They indicate the existence of a demand, while the recurrent efforts of recent, and of still living composers – of Goring, Thomas, Corder, Stanford, Cowen, Mackenzie, M'Cunn and De Lara – prove that the dramatic instinct has not departed from British composers, and that it is not hopeless to look for a supply in answer to the demand. The seed only needs systematic encouragement, and intelligent cultivation to bear fruit. I firmly believe that the time is ripe for such encouragement to come from an official sphere; in other words, I advocate State intervention in the matter, and the establishment of a subsidised national opera house on the lines successfully adopted in other countries. And that we may profit by the experience of others, let us examine how continental nations fare under the ægis of State-aided Art.

Italy, Germany and France present the most characteristic instances, and I will take a bird's-eye view of the operatic machinery in them, beginning with Italy.

## Italy

There are about five hundred theatres in Italy, and quite one half of these have seasons of opera at various times of the year. The traditional Italian operatic season begins on the 26th December of each year at San Stefano Day, and is called the Carnival Season; then follows Quaresima or Lent Season and Primavera or Spring Season – altogether some five months of opera. Besides these there exist (*stagioni di fiere*) short seasons of one or two weeks' duration, at the time of certain famous fairs. There are autumn seasons, and sporadic performances at fashionable summer and bathing resorts. I am quite within strict probability in asserting that in Italy two hundred odd theatres are devoted to opera the whole year round. These theatres may be briefly divided into two classes – municipal and private ones. The latter are run very much on the same lines as private theatres anywhere else, and do not come within the scope of my consideration.

The State does not interfere in any way with Italian theatres, and such help as these receive comes either from municipalities, or especially formed associations of institutions linked by common interest with the working of a theatre. But the principle of such help is always that of an act performed for the public good, or, as it is officially termed, *per ragioni di pubblica utilita*, and it naturally takes the form of a monetary subsidy. This subsidy varies according to the importance of the theatre, the rank of the city, the prospects of the season, and its grant is altogether opportunistic and at times arbitrary. In the majority of Italian theatres boxes are proprietary, and the *palchettisti* (box-holders) have a direct interest and a vote of some weight in the prospective arrangements of a season. The *impresario* desirous of running an operatic theatre must submit his prospectus to the box-holders at the same time he submits it to the municipality from which he wishes to obtain his contract, and of course, his subsidy. A theatrical board (*Commissione Teatrale*), composed of local authorities, and box-holders examines the prospectus, and if the decision is unfavourable another plan has to be submitted by the same man, or another aspirant, or perhaps the *Commissione* has a scheme of its own. As a rule, stipulations comprise either a novelty or a favourite opera, called in this case "obligatory" (*opera d'obbligo*), a ballet, or simply a specified number of performances. The length of the season varies from eight days (*stagione di fiera*) to two months, the repertory may consist of one opera or twenty, whilst the figure of the subsidy is anything between £20 and £8000. The average, however, is three operas for a medium season of one month – one obligatory, one *di repiego* (for a change) and another, *da de Stinarsi* (to be selected), at the choice of the *impresario* or in accord with the *Commissione*. Five performances weekly are the orthodox number, Mondays and Fridays being recognised as days of rest.

If an agreement is arrived at, the *impresario* is put in possession of the theatre for the period stipulated, and sets about running his season. He is given but the bare building and seats; he has to provide scenery, costumes, orchestra and chorus in addition to his company of artists. Sometimes orchestra and chorus are local institutions, and there are small places in which the conductor is an *employé*

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