SINGING OF CONQUEST? OPERA, HISTORY, AND THE AMBIGUITIES OF EUROPEAN IMPERIALISM

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For Joost Langeveld, ‘mentor in musica’

Introduction: From Opera as Politics to ‘History Opera’

Ever since its ‘invention’ in the late sixteenth century—at the court of the Medici, in Florence—melodrama, in the original sense of the word, has been a prime vehicle for the representation of power. To put it more bluntly, ‘opera’—per musica—often served as a means for political propaganda. Rulers needed to reach the political nation, the elites without whose support they could not function. These elites, who were already well versed in the politics of the day, had to be impressed with the political messages of the governing group. Consequently, throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, European princes (both religious and secular) rightly perceived and indeed constructed melodrama as a Gesamtkunstwerk: following the baroque ideal of the bel composto, they set out to make it as persuasive a medium as possible for as large an audience as possible—one should not forget that, for example, the Barberini Opera House, in seventeenth-century papal Rome, held some 2,200 spectators.

Since time immemorial, themes taken from history have been used to convey contemporary political messages. So, political opera, too, mostly took its subject matter from the past, whether it was biblical, classical, or in a more narrow sense, European-historical. To what extent (given the above remark about the size of early modern audiences) this constitutes public access to those pasts per se remains, of course, to be seen.

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Even within the first two subgenres, the theme of cultural contact and cultural conflict provided both librettists and composers with both dramaturgically and politically exciting possibilities, as can be seen when one analyses, for example, Mozart’s *La Betulia liberata* (1771) or Paccini’s *Alessandro nell’ Indie* (1824). However, I propose to concentrate on those operas that pretend to re-create actual moments from European history, more specifically from the history of European overseas relations.

**Preliminary Remarks**

Before going into the main questions raised in this essay, three preliminary remarks seem relevant, all related to an analysis of the problem whether free access to the past can, somehow, be considered part of the phenomenon of the history opera.

The critical theorists—not only the Marxist-Socialist analysts in the late nineteenth century but, far more so, the neo-Marxists of the 1960s—who have branded opera as a ‘typically’ bourgeois phenomenon, somehow linking it to the capitalist economy of Europe’s industrial age, only showed they knew little about the history of the genre. While, admittedly, opera was created in and for a courtly context, already in the seventeenth century the bourgeoisie took to it as well. Indeed, though in some parts of Europe aristocratic elites, until the end of the eighteenth century, continued to enjoy their opera in private (that is, in opera houses that did not admit non-nobles), this was not always so. Certainly in the many city republics of Europe—Amsterdam, Bremen, Hamburg, to name but a few—opera was performed in theatres that made no such socio-legal distinctions. But even in France’s capital, the royal opera house had its *parterre*, where both people from the bourgeoisie and the lower classes often clamorously reacted to the performances given, though it often is unclear whether they did so because the music offended them or because the libretto’s message was not to their taste—or, indeed, simply because this was a major opportunity to make themselves publicly heard.³