

The most excellent of All its glorious Vanities

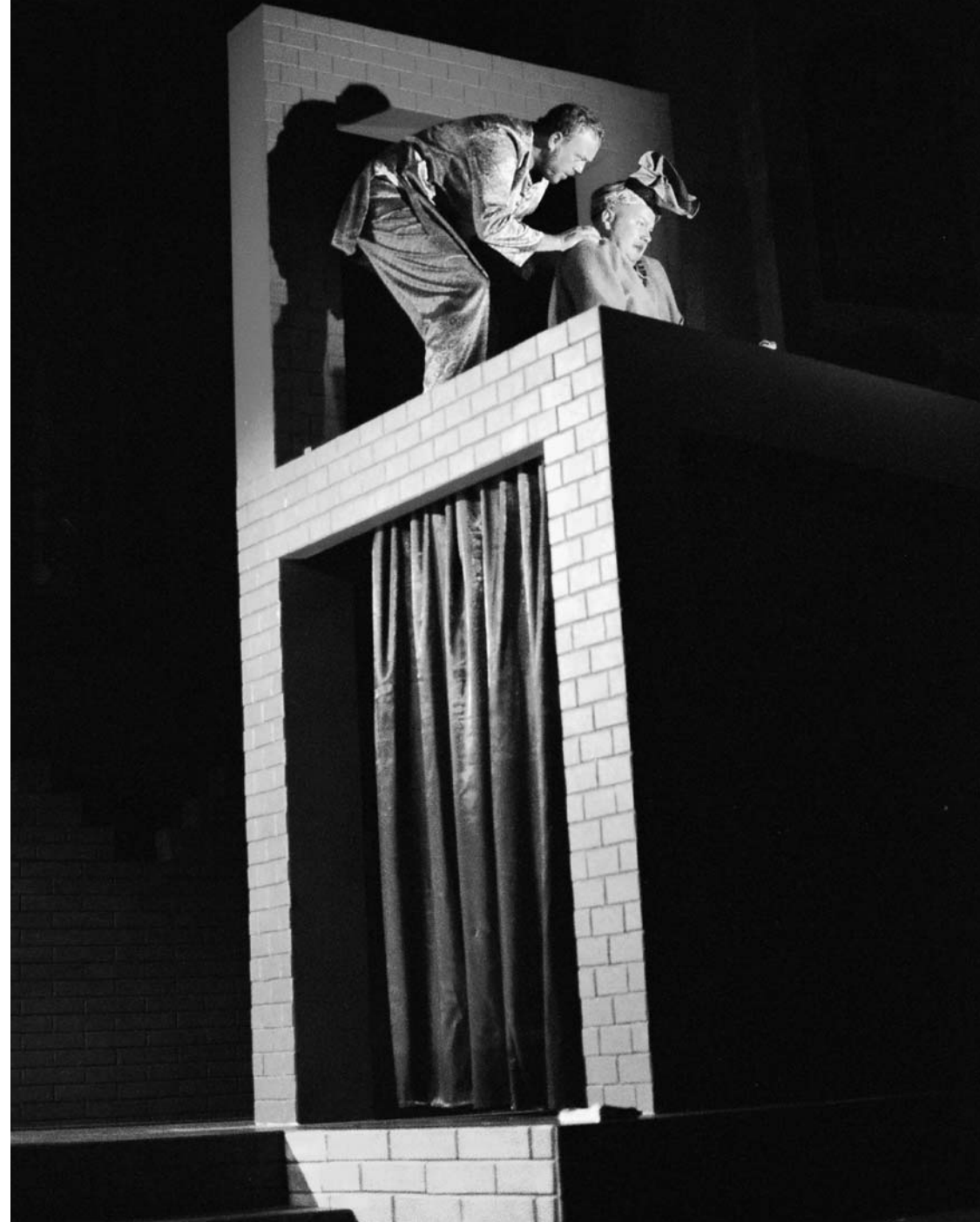
'...But above all, surpassing whatsoever their inventions can else stretch to, are their Opera's (or Players) represented in rare musick from the the beginning to the end, by select Eunuchs and women, sought out through all Italy an purpose... one Opera I saw represented about 16 severall times; and so farr was I from being weary of it, I would ride hundereds of miles to see the same over again: nay I must needs confess that all the pleasant things I have yet heard or seen, are inexpressibly short of the delight I had, in seeing this Venetian Opera; and as Venice in many things surpasses all places elce where I have been, so are these Opera's the most excellent of all its glorious Vanities.'

From the Journal of English merchant Richard Bargrave, on the occasion of his visit to the Venetian Carnival of 1655 (1)



After *Erismena* was first performed at the Teatro Sant' Apollinare in Venice in January 1655, its enormous success led to further performances in Bologna, Florence, Milan, genoa, Lucca and other "foreign" cities of Italy. So profitable was it for the impresario Marco Faustini that it nearly saved his fortune at the Sant' Apollinare, which had a series of disasters between 1653 and 1657. In February 1670 it was represented in a much revised version at the Teatro San Salvatore at Venice, and was again rapturously received. *Erismena* was one of the most successful operas of the 17th century.

It was in Venice after 1637 (the year of the opening of the Teatro San Cassiano) that opera defined itself. The experiments at the princely and papal courts in Florence, Mantua and Rome were transformed at Venice into a public art, with a highly receptive, socially diverse, paying audience. Venetian carnival, lasting from 26 December until Shrove Tuesday, had been since the 15th century an important tourist attraction; by the 1650's the Venetian population of 50,000 more than doubled at Carnival time, and the audience for fashionable music drama was prepared by the licentious atmosphere to enjoy it. More than 150 new operas were performed in the Most Serene Republic between 1637 and 1678, and their printed librettos defined the aesthetic of the art form. Venetian opera practice may have been deplored as mercenary in aristocratic circles at Rome and Versailles, just as the princess of Venetian society were known to have an unparalleled taste and aptitude for trade – but the unwalled marine city cared nothing for such judgments, and the new genre of drama per musica flourished, attracting investors from the highest ranking of merchant families and enthusiastic audiences who developed the habit of booking tickets in advance.



By 1645 (only the 8th season of opera at Venice), the traveller John Evelyn recorded in his memoirs:

This night, having... taken our places before, we went to the opera where comedies and other plays are presented in recitative music by the most excellent musicians vocal and instrumental... taken together it is doubtlesse one of the most magnificent and expensfull diversions the Wit on Men can invent... This held us by the Eyes and Eares til two in the morning.

The opera Burney attended was Francesco Cavalli's seventh Venetian opera; Burney stayed there through the Carnival of 1646, experiencing "the universal madness of this place during this time of license", and saw three more operas by the same composer. These were Cavalli's early collaborations with librettist Giovanni Faustini, the first professional librettist. It's worth remembering that librettists of any quality were well ahead of composers in order of importance: they were at least educated in letters, and their words claimed immortality for them, while "composers, no matter how intelligent and well educated – and whatever the higher claims of music as theory – were essentially artisans, practitioners of a trade, for hire". (2)

Even so reputable a composer as Cavalli would have been contracted to attend all rehearsals in order to make changes, cuts and additions deemed necessary by the impresario (or even the singers by 1670). Cavalli seems to have been the only composer who for a time acted as an impresario, but after a few seasons he gave it up, his shift in status to employee an indication of the rapid shift in power in the opera business from composer to librettist and then to singer.

At the height of his career Francesco Cavalli was paid extraordinarily well for a composer, earning up to 450 ducats per opera. By then

he had been supplying Venetian theatres with music for 20 years, and had fulfilled important opera commissions for Florence and Milan, all the while holding the prestigious position of organist of San Marco. Still, like all composers his fees remained static after 1658, while individual singers' fees rose and far exceeded his, and librettists made fortunes as impresarios.

Cavalli's fame guaranteed his artistic freedom, however, and when his regular collaborator died, it looks likely that he was able to bully the inexperienced writer of **Erismena**, Aurelio Aureti, into drafting into it a whole prison scene which had already proved successful in the Cavalli/Faustini opera **Ormino**. Borrowing on a smaller scale was not uncommon, but always a cause for apology in a printed libretto – a writer was expected to be original, even if a composer wasn't!

Erismena shows signs of being written during a time of transition, particularly in the contrast between the 1655 and 1670 versions. Librettos adapted to accommodate larger musical forms, indulging the inclinations of composers and the abilities of singers. While in early Venetian opera musical settings were dictated by the imagery and dramatic function of the text, increasingly texts became less specific, and more conventional, expressly to contain longer airs. As this happened, the conventions which opera has continued to follow – the sleep scene, the letter aria, the mad scene, the disclosure through dreams, the lovers' duet, the exit/entrance aria, the comic (often cross dressing) servant's parody song – were cast.

Erismena has something of a mystery attached to it, which is part of the reason why I was attracted to produce it. On the 4th of January 1674, Evelyn noted in his diary "I saw an Italian opera in musique, the first that had been in England of this kind" (3). His remarks

were taken to refer to a French opera which he may have seen at the Royal Academy, but as Evelyn had seen a good number of Italian operas at Venice it is an unlikely confusion. Nearly 300 years after Evelyn's entry, J. Stephens Cox found a manuscript of "An Opera in English", dated by internal evidence to 1670-80; it turned out to be **Erismena**, in a careful English singing version, the first known opera translation. Inserted in the score was a sheet of paper bearing "a handwritten Estimate or state of the Victualing for this present year 1673", being an account of provisions for the navy in that year. (4)

Although there is no proof that the English version of **Erismena** was performed, and it is possible that Evelyn only saw the score, it is tantalising to think that at the Duke's Theatre in Dorset Garden or the theatre Royal in Drury Lane something of the Venetian carnival was represented in the cold London January of 1674.

OTC's edition of **Erismena** is the work of Lionel Salter, who combined the musical text of the 1655 version with the dramatic compression – and some of the finer extended numbers – of the 1670 version, using as much as possible of the anonymous contemporary English translation. We have made a few suppressions of our own, including two characters (a general and a Moorish servant) whose voice types had been altered by Salter. Instrumentation has followed the evidence of the account books of Cavalli's impresario Faustini.

Apart from the intriguing English language version, the wonderful score, and an interest in representing what was clearly one of the great successes of opera's first century, **Erismena** has a terrific story. It may appear conventional at first glance (because we see it with conventional understanding), but it is delicately subversive on stage, matching a serious

argument about the nature of hope with the carnival elements of disguise and sexual confusion: amid the titillating infatuations of a king for a slave, a brother for his sister, and a woman (and perhaps a man) for woman who appears to be a man, there is a sense of folly which can still accommodate the gravest and finest feelings, perfectly realised in the opera of Venice, "the most excellent of all its glorious vanities".

James Conway
General Director

Notes (1) Eric Walter White, *A History of English Opera* (London: Faber, 1983), p55. (2) Ellen Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth-century Venice: the Creation of a Genre* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), p.210. (3) Rosand's masterly account of Venetian opera informs this note. W. Bray, ed., *Memoires of John Evelyn* (London, 1819), vol. 1, p191. (4) White, "English Opera", *Theatre Notebook* xxi (1966), p.34.