

Naturalising *Semiramide* in 1842:
Adaptation, Spectacle and English Prima Donnas

by

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Declaration of Authorship

I Catherine Lucy Jean Hutchinson hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

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Abstract

This thesis examines how Rossini's *Semiramide* was adapted by T.H. Reynoldson for Covent Garden in 1842, where it was mounted for the first time in the English language, in a spectacular production. *Semiramide* was performed by Adelaide Kemble, a compelling actress who overturned what had been the dominant interpretation of the role, Giuditta Pasta's, creating a new one that was vulnerable and womanly. Mary Shaw as Arsace had a refined simplicity and gave meaning to recitative in a way that was unknown in England. With their high standard, Kemble and Shaw were seen as English singers who could compete as equals with the fashionable foreign singers at Her Majesty's Theatre. The transfer of *Semiramide* to Covent Garden resulted in an entanglement of English, Italian and other cultural values and operatic practices.

The main purpose of this study is, through a close reading of newspapers, memoirs, letters and other contemporary documents, as well as existing iconography, to examine how the opera was 'naturalised' for Covent Garden; and to test how well Werner and Zimmermann's model of *histoire croisée* and Homi Bhabha's theories about ambivalence can be applied to this revival of Rossini's opera. In so doing, it analyses the norms, prejudices and preoccupations of the interpretative communities of the adapters, singers and critics.

I argue that the adaptation and spectacle tilted the opera towards the populist genres of melodrama and pantomime. I also propose that Kemble and Shaw's performances represented a fusion of English and Italian singing. On a larger scale, this study shines a light on the values and performance practices in London theatres at the time and adds to the body of literature about operatic adaptations and staging, as well as prima donna culture.

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1. Introduction

On 1 October 1842 Covent Garden was filled for the first night of a spectacular production of Gioachino Rossini's *Semiramide*, an opera which hitherto had only been performed at the Her Majesty's Theatre. This was the latest in a series of productions there featuring the star English singer Adelaide Kemble, who had been performing to sell-out audiences at the theatre following her return from Italy a year before. This time she would be joined by Mary Shaw, a singer who had also won bouquets for her performances on the continent. Critics wrote enthusiastically about the massive scale of the production, the intensity and compelling nature of Kemble's acting and the quality of Shaw's 'pure' and 'mellow' voice.¹ However, most significantly they talked about the high standard of the two singers, native cantatrices who they regarded as equal to the fashionable and foreign prima donnas who performed at Her Majesty's Theatre. Kemble and Shaw's star status inspired a tantalising vision of London having its own corps of English operatic singers.

This thesis examines the production and the critical reception of the 1842 revival of *Semiramide* in the context of earlier productions in London and abroad, as well as the climate of London theatre at the time. To this end, I have consulted: Kemble's letters at the Garrick Club; little known images connected with the performance held at the Portland Collection; illustrations on the music covers; and a large number of contemporary newspaper reviews. I examine the way Thomas Reynoldson adapted the libretto, fitting it into the translation styles of the period, and explore how his version, compares with earlier ones. This investigation adds to our knowledge of operatic adaptations in London and compliments Christina Furhmann's work on the subject. By comparing the iconography available with a close reading of the newspaper reviews and travel writing of the time, I have been able to glean information about the scenery, costumes and special effects, and I suggest where the Grieve family may have found inspiration for the set design. Furthermore, by examining the written and visual information, I investigate the performances and critical reception of Kemble and Shaw individually and together. I thus contribute to a broader understanding of the work of female singers and their work, the critical approaches and taste of

¹ *Morning Post*, 3 October 1842.

the period, as well as a greater knowledge of Kemble and Shaw, and notably about Shaw of whom little has been written so far.

Rossini's *Semiramide* was first written for La Fenice, Venice, where it was premièred on 3 February 1823, with Isabella Colbran in the title role. Rossini subsequently brought the opera to London where it was mounted on 15 July 1824 and where it would continue to be performed regularly until 1887. In the following year on 8 December 1825, Rossini conducted the Paris première, where the opera was presented frequently until 1864, with occasional appearances after that date, notably in 1874 with 12 performances. In both London and Paris, the opera outlasted many of Rossini's other operas. The scale of *Semiramide*, with its four-hour length and, at times, thick orchestration, meant that in addition to virtuosity, the eponymous singer needed power and stamina that was unusual for the time. The part points forward to roles written later in the century, for example by Verdi. *Semiramide*, with its technical difficulty, was sung by some of the best singers, including Giuditta Pasta and Giulia Grisi, many of whom sang it on both sides of the Channel. In the second half of the century, pairs of singers developed, who were known for singing the roles of *Semiramide* and *Arsace* together. Carlotta Marchisio sang with her sister Barbara (from 1858 in Italy),² Thérèse Tietjens with Zélia Trebelli (1865-1876) and Adelina Patti with Sofia Scalchi (1878-1888).³ The opera was also used for high profile events, such as the opening of the Royal Italian Opera at Covent Garden in 1847.

By the 1840s foreign operas were being performed regularly in English on the stages of the patent and minor theatres in London.⁴ Yet although *Semiramide* was often performed at Her Majesty's Theatre, the 1842 production was the first and remains the only London production to have been sung in English. *Semiramide*'s length, many ensembles, long recitatives and lack of pretty tunes went against the singable melodies and spoken dialogue usually favoured by audiences when foreign opera was adapted into English. At the time, James Davison in the *Musical World* described *Semiramide* as 'an opera presenting far more obstacles to success on the English stage ... than in the whole range of the Italian repertoire'.⁵ There were also practical problems, such as the need for four virtuoso singers and, if it was to be performed as the composer intended, an onstage band in addition to the orchestra; these forces would have added to the cost and reduced profit margins.

² The Marchisio sisters gave 28 performances at the Paris Opéra in 1860. They sang at Her Majesty's Theatre and toured Britain in 1862.

³ See Appendix I for cast lists of London performances.

⁴ The patent theatres were Drury Lane and Covent Garden. The minor theatres were all the remaining London theatres, apart from Her Majesty's Theatre.

⁵ *Musical World*, 6 October 1842.

The 1842 *Semiramide* was both conceived as a spectacle and as a vehicle for Adelaide Kemble, a singer who had been attracting a large following and was due to retire at Christmas. Kemble was joined by Shaw, who had previously been known in London as a concert singer, but after six years on the continent, where she sang as *prima donna assoluta*, she was now returning to London to sing opera. Both singers enjoyed star status: Kemble was known for her acting, Shaw for her beautiful voice. Together they formed another star pairing. The success of Kemble and Shaw, together with the opera's spectacle, meant that the 1842 *Semiramide* would almost certainly have lasted longer than its 28 performances had Kemble not retired.

Rossini's *Semiramide*

Semiramide was written at the height of Rossini's popularity. The opera was composed just after Rossini left Naples, where he had been working for six years. There he had been assured of a fine orchestra, a virtuoso company of singers and adequate rehearsal time. It meant that he had been able to write to the singers' strengths, and to experiment with sonorities, textures and scale: in *La donna del lago*, for example, he used six on-stage hunting horns spatially distributed to create echo effects; in *Maometto II* he disrupted the expected structure for the Act I 'terzettone' so as to create a form with extended dramatic action. During this time, Rossini gradually increased the amount of ornamentation in his operas, with the result that *Semiramide* is the most highly ornamented of his operas. In writing for the Venetian audience, which was more conservative than that in Naples, Rossini brought the large scale and the sonority of the onstage *banda* which he had been able to use in Naples, but he toned down the experimental elements he had tried there. Rossini, as Philip Gossett argues, smoothed out the 'cragged edges' and 'unusual juxtapositions' found in his Naples operas, replacing them with a 'vision of Olympian control and perfection'.⁶ Rossini was feted when *Semiramide* opened in Venice: wreaths were flung into the water and a flotilla of gondolas escorted the maestro to his lodgings while a band played excerpts from the opera.⁷ The young Bellini was very taken by *Semiramide* when he saw it as a student in Naples.⁸ According to Giuseppe Radiciotti, for a long time *Semiramide* was regarded as Rossini's best composition after *Guillaume Tell* and was seen as the high point in the progress of Italian opera during the first quarter of the nineteenth century.⁹

⁶ Philip Gossett, 'Introduction' to *Semiramide: Melodramma tragico in Two Acts. A Facsimile Edition of Rossini's Original Autograph Manuscript*, by Gioacchino Rossini (New York: Garland, 1978), [1]-[2].

⁷ Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, Vol. 1 (London: Cassell, 1973), 139.

⁸ Herbert Weinstock, *Vincenzo Bellini: His Life and his Operas* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972), 26.

⁹ Giuseppe Radiciotti, *Gioacchino Rossini: vita documentata, opere ed influenza su l'arte*, Vol. 1 (Tivoli: Arti Grafiche Majella di Aldo Chicca, 1927-29), 488.

The Prima Donna

This study contributes to the growing body of literature about the role of the prima donna in nineteenth-century operatic culture. The adulation that had been given to the castrati in the eighteenth century was replaced by the growing idolisation of the female star singer. Angelica Catalani, Giuditta Pasta and Maria Malibran were all star singers in the early nineteenth century who were paid enormous fees and whose presence could win audiences for a particular theatre and production.

Kemble and Shaw both had star status and had a series of identities projected onto them by the press. Richard Dyer and Edgar Morin showed how audiences conflated the public and private personas of film stars with the characters they played, and how the identity seen by the public was a constructed one which could act as a marketing tool.¹⁰ Several essays in the *The arts of the prima donna in the long nineteenth century* relate how the singer could manipulate the public's image of her.¹¹ Notably, Hilary Porris, for example, describes how prima donnas could 'correct' their reputations by presenting themselves as generous and philanthropic. More directly related to the way Kemble and Shaw were presented in 1842, Roberta Montemorra Marvin writes about the *Illustrated London News* – a newspaper aimed at the middle classes who which prided themselves on their social respectability – which made a point of presenting opera singers as good, feminine and socially worthy. This was particularly important when the singer was performing a controversial role such as Semiramide, who was both a murderer and had usurped the throne. In such cases, the newspaper would attempt to distance the real person from the role by stressing the performer's genealogy and social class. Marvin's chapter puts into perspective the way the *Illustrated London News* – which barely mentions Semiramide's immorality – and some other newspapers such as the *Theatrical Journal* wrote about Kemble and Shaw. It may also indicate that in describing Kemble's performance of Semiramide as 'womanly', Anna Jameson may likewise have been trying to distance the singer from the Queen's criminality. Given the potential for Kemble and Shaw to be linked to the roles they played, the chapter underlines the need for Kemble and Shaw to guard their personal reputation.

Kemble was particularly known for the intensity and individuality of her acting; her interpretation of the role of Semiramide was unlike the way Giuditta Pasta had portrayed the character. Susan Rutherford has written about the changes in acting and vocal styles in *The Prima Donna and Opera, 1815-1930* and also about Pasta's acting in her essay, "La cantante delle passioni":

¹⁰ Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2004); Edgar Morin, *The stars*, trans. Richard Howard, 1st University of Minnesota Press ed., Forward by Lorraine Mortimer (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

¹¹ Rachel Cowgill and Hilary Porris, *The Arts of the Prima Donna in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Giuditta Pasta and the Idea of Operatic Performance'.¹² In her acting, Pasta moved away from the stylised gestural codes which had dominated operatic acting in the eighteenth century, towards a new naturalism. Rutherford has shown that, from Giuditta Pasta onwards, as gesture began to be abandoned in favour of 'instinct', the most prized quality of dramatic expression became originality.¹³ Kemble was like Pasta in that her interpretations of characters were passionate, original and were not influenced by other artists. Both Kemble and Pasta sometimes had intonation problems; yet the power of their performances was such that audiences forgave them their inaccuracies. Rutherford's discussion of Pasta shines a light on Kemble's performances, which were both similar to and different from Pasta's. In *The Prima Donna and Opera*, Rutherford also discusses Denis Diderot's views, expressed at the end of the eighteenth century, that actors should create an inner model of the character, which would represent the ideal and could be repeated without the vagaries of sudden impulse. The actor awakened the audience's emotional response through his display of feeling through gesture, and orally through the timbre and rhythm of the voice. It was a stylised art in which the actor conveyed the idea of the character or 'affective situation'. This view contrasts with the development of 'natural acting' during the nineteenth century, in which passionate actors touched the spectators by feeling the emotional content of the scene. In her book *Natural Acting*, Lynn Voskuil explores the ideas of William Hazlitt and George Henry Lewis who promoted natural acting.¹⁴ At a time when acting styles were changing, these books provide a context for Kemble's acting which was seen as compelling and unique.

The voices of operatic singers were changing at the beginning of the nineteenth century. By 1842, when Kemble and Shaw were performing, a consolidated international repertory of operas was developing so that increasingly singers no longer sang roles specifically written for them. This called for a greater specialisation in the different voice types. In addition, bigger voices were needed if they were to carry sufficiently across the larger concert halls being built and the new heavier nineteenth-century orchestration. These developments are described by John Rosselli and Geoffrey Riggs.¹⁵ The singers Jeffrey Snider and Dan Marek both say that Colbran, Pasta and Malibran as well as other singers of the time were essentially altos with an upper extension and

¹² Susan Rutherford, *The Prima Donna and Opera, 1815-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Susan Rutherford, "La cantante delle passioni": Giuditta Pasta and the Idea of Operatic Performance', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2007), 107-38.

¹³ Rutherford, *The Prima Donna and Opera*, 253-54.

¹⁴ Lynn M. Voskuil, *Acting Naturally: Victorian Theatricality and Authenticity* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004).

¹⁵ John Rosselli, *Singers of Italian Opera: The History of a Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Geoffrey S. Riggs, *The Assoluta Voice in Opera, 1797-1847* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003).

that as a result they had a very wide range as well as great power.¹⁶ As Kemble's first performances were as a contralto, although later she sang soprano, this may have been the type of voice that Kemble had. Snider and Marek both refer to this as the *soprano sfogato*. However, this is a problematic term as it had a variety of meanings in different periods. A more useful term may be the *soprano drammatico d'agilità* as it describes the dramatic quality of the voice together with its flexibility;¹⁷ however, Riggs refers to it as the *prima donna assoluta*, even though this term more specifically this indicates the singer's position within the operatic company. To my mind a more useful term is the *doppia voce*, used by Marco Beghelli and Raffaele Talmelli about Malibran and others, and which indicates that she could function both as a soprano and as a contralto.¹⁸

Semiramide was composed during the approximately thirty-year period between 1800 and 1830 when composers wrote roles for female *musici* rather than the castrati who were going out of fashion. It was the high voice, vocal agility and hyperbolic ornamentation that marked out the castrato as the hero, and these features continued to signal the hero once women took over the same roles. The last major opera written for a castrato (Giovanni Battista Velluti) was Meyerbeer's *Il crociato in Egitto* in 1824; Velluti's last concert in London was in 1829. In the wake of the castrato's demise, composers tried to replace the *musico* hero with an equally androgynous although different female *musico*. Freya Jarman builds on Thomas Laqueur's theory, that a binary opposition between male and female was still taking shape at the beginning of the nineteenth century.¹⁹ Jarman argues that before this binary opposition was established, there was an abstract relationship between a person's sex and their theatrical role. It would take a gradual shift in the medical, social and cultural conception of what it was to be male and female before the two sexes were seen as being fundamentally different, something that did not fully establish itself until the mid-nineteenth century.²⁰ These changing ideas about gender called into question how women should sing *vestito* contralto roles such as Arsace so that they came across as masculine and yet retained their femininity.²¹ Mary Shaw's abilities as an actor were weak.

¹⁶ Jeffrey Snider, 'In Search of the *Soprano Sfogato*', *Journal of Singing*, Vol. 68, No. 3 (Jan. 2012); Dan H. Marek, *Alto: The Voice of Bel Canto* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

¹⁷ Snider, 'In Search of the *Soprano Sfogato*', 331, 333n.

¹⁸ See Marco Beghelli and Raffaele Talmelli, 'Maria Malibran: soprano o contralto?', in *Malibran: storia e leggenda, canto e belcanto nel primo ottocento italiano: atti del convegno*, Bologna, Accademia Filarmonica, 30-31 maggio 2008, ed. Piero Mioli (Bologna: Pàtron, 2010), 195-227.

¹⁹ See Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (London: Harvard University Press, 1990).

²⁰ Freya Jarman, 'Pitch Fever: The Castrato, the Tenor, and the Question of Masculinity in Nineteenth-Century Opera', in *Masculinity in Opera: Gender, History, and New Musicology*, ed. Philip Purvis (New York: Routledge, 2013), 51.

²¹ See Heather Hadlock, 'Tancredi and *Semiramide*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Rossini*, ed. Emanuele Senici (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 148.

Therefore, her performances were feminine rather than being merely androgynous. Yet she carried the part through the exceptionally rich sonority of her voice and her nuanced singing. To that extent she carried forward the vocal excellence of the castrato voice.

The Theatrical System

London's theatres, including Covent Garden where the 1842 *Semiramide* was mounted, was part of a theatrical system which had been in place for over a century. Yet, the licencing system which prevented the theatres from encroaching on each other's repertoire was breaking down and would be abolished within a year.

In 1842, Covent Garden and Drury Lane were governed by system of patents, licences and agreements dating back to 1662-63 and 1662 respectively, which secured these theatres a monopoly over all theatrical entertainments. They were the only companies allowed to perform an unlimited repertoire throughout the year, including spoken drama, opera and other dramatic or musical pieces. These so-called 'patent theatres' were subject only to the Lord Chamberlain's censorship. After 1737, they became the only theatres allowed to perform English language plays. Although they were expected to mount literary and aesthetically superior drama such as Shakespeare, the genres of pantomime, spectacle and, particularly while Adelaide Kemble was performing between 1841 and 1842, opera were highly popular and won audiences. Covent Garden and Drury Lane were each run by a manager who was responsible for the programming and the entire business of running the theatre. During the run of *Semiramide*, Adelaide Kemble's father Charles took on this role. Although these theatres had been set up by royal patents, they did not benefit from royal or government funding. They therefore had to rely entirely on private capital and commercial success.²²

Her Majesty's Theatre, known as the King's Theatre until 1837,²³ had been founded by John Vanbrugh in 1705. It was protected by licences and agreements dating from 1707 and 1792, which gave it a monopoly of Italian opera, thus preventing the patent theatres from encroaching on its repertoire. The bulk of the income of Her Majesty's Theatre came from subscriptions for boxes during the season. The booksellers started buying tickets and box subscriptions and selling them on at a discount. Although it brought new audiences to the theatre, it was the booksellers who mostly benefited from the extra income. Until it was disbanded in 1824, the Opera House

²² Gabriella Dideriksen, 'Repertory and Rivalry: Opera at the Second Covent Garden Theatre, 1830 to 1856' (PhD diss., King's College London, 1997), 18-19.

²³ The name of the theatre depended on the monarch at the time. Founded in 1705 during Queen Anne's reign, it was first known as the Queen's Theatre. It was then the King's Theatre from 1714, before becoming Her Majesty's Theatre in 1837 following Queen Victoria's accession. It was also variously referred to as the 'Opera', the 'Opera House' and the 'Italian stage'.

was run by a noble committee; even after that date the noblemen continued to contribute to the theatre and exert their influence on how it was run. There was thus at times an uneasy relationship between the manager and the nobles.

The patent system was extended in 1766, when a royal patent was granted to Samuel Foote to operate the Little Theatre, Haymarket, in the summer seasons, thus ensuring that it did not compete with the other major theatres. During the next two decades, ten patents would be granted to theatres outside London, beginning with Edinburgh's Canongate Theatre in 1767.²⁴ There were further calls during the early nineteenth century to establish another patent theatre in London although this did not take place.²⁵

The provisions of the 1737 Licensing Act were relaxed slightly at the end of the eighteenth century, allowing the 'minor' or 'illegitimate' theatres – those that were not the patent theatres or the King's Theatre – to apply for a licence to perform productions focused on music and spectacle rather than speech. They were not allowed to present full-length opera or drama. These licences were issued annually or bi-annually.²⁶ The strict licencing system was devised to prevent the various theatres from encroaching on each other's repertoire. It also meant that London had only a very few theatres during the eighteenth century apart from the patent theatres, the Theatre Royal Haymarket, the King's Theatre, Sadler's Wells and a few other minor establishments. However, the number of minor theatres increased during the nineteenth century, expanding particularly rapidly in the 1830s, so that by 1843 there were 31 theatres in London.²⁷

The minor theatres covered their costs and mounted productions more efficiently than the major theatres (Covent Garden, Drury Lane and Her Majesty's Theatre), which were over staffed and made consistent losses. Under the terms of their licence the minor theatres were supposed to put on musical entertainments. Yet the licencing restrictions were not upheld; their productions included less and less music, with the result that their repertoire approached that of the patent theatres with their programmes of spoken drama. The patent theatres on the other hand wanted to put on opera in Italian. Thus, the repertoire of the different theatres moved towards each other. Yet, even though the licensing restrictions were not being upheld, they remained in force until

²⁴ Peter P. Reed, 'Interrogating Legitimacy in Britain and America', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre, 1737-1832*, ed. Julia Swindells and David Francis Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 256-57.

²⁵ There were unsuccessful petitions to set up a third patent theatre in 1808, 1810 and 1813 (Clive Barker, 'A Theatre for the People', in *Essays on Nineteenth Century British Theatre: The Proceedings of a Symposium, Sponsored by the Manchester University Department of Drama*, ed. Kenneth Richards and Peter Thomson (London: Methuen, 1971), 12).

²⁶ Dideriksen, 'Repertory and Rivalry', 43.

²⁷ See Allardyce Nicoll, *A History of English Drama, 1660-1900*, Vol. 4, *Early Nineteenth Century Drama, 1800-1850*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: University Press, 1955), 222; Dideriksen, 'Repertory and Rivalry', 43.

1843 when the Act for Regulating Theatres repealed all current laws governing theatres and theatrical entertainments. After 1843, all establishments, except the patent theatres were to be licenced annually by the Lord Chamberlain; licences were granted for the public performances of stage plays, including tragedy, comedy, farce, burletta, interlude, melodrama, pantomime and other entertainments of the stage. The minor theatres were now allowed to apply for a licence to perform any kind of drama, breaking the monopoly of the patent theatres to perform spoken drama.²⁸ Faced with this competition, Covent Garden would become dark from the autumn of 1843.

Fidelity and Opera Variants

Christina Fuhrmann has written about the many productions of foreign opera on the English stage in the early nineteenth century.²⁹ At the beginning of the century these operas were significantly altered. Yet the concept that there was a canon of revered musical works that should be respected was beginning to be established in the early nineteenth century. Initially the work-concept was applied principally to instrumental music, and it took longer to affect opera. Hitherto, opera had been regarded as a fluid entity, where the singer ‘composed’ her ornaments, imposed key changes and interpolations, while local operatic conventions forced numbers to be swapped around and endings altered. Not only was the composer paid less, but he came lower down the chain of command. Although copyright for composers had been established in England from 1777, this did not apply to performances of works, which could be readily performed or rearranged without any permission required or payment of royalties.

First attempts at establishing the work-concept centred around the revered works of Mozart, and in future years would include other Austro-German composers such as Beethoven and Weber. Rossini was not so respected. Establishing the work-concept meant changing opera from a genre in which the performer, and often the nobility, were central to the event, to one in which the composer took precedence over the prima donna or impresario. Michael Talbot considers that this change took place between 1780 and 1820,³⁰ although with opera it took longer than that and was linked both to alterations in copyright law and questions of genre. Cuts, adaptations and rearrangements would still be very common in the 1830s and 40s and often did not meet with discouragement by the critics. The importance given to the principle of ‘fidelity’ to the composer depended on the perceived worth of the original work. Thus by the 1830s, hallowed works by

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

²⁹ See Christina Fuhrmann, *Foreign Opera at the London Playhouses: From Mozart to Bellini* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

³⁰ Michael Talbot, ‘The Work-Concept and Composer-Centredness’, in *The Musical Work: Reality or Invention?*, ed. Michael Talbot (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), 172.

Mozart, such as *Don Giovanni*, were no longer being tampered with as they had been fifteen years before. In contrast, operas by Auber – a composer perceived as lacking the ‘originality crucial to genius’ – were not considered worthy of careful preservation in the same way.³¹ It was also regarded as more acceptable to adapt Rossini than the German Mozart, who by the end of the 1810s was beginning to acquire canonical status. However, by the 1830s the issue of authenticity, or rather ‘fidelity’ to the composer’s work, was becoming an important concept as a result of a stronger approach to enforcing copyright, the rise of the work-concept and new aesthetic ideas about the musical genius of the composer.³² Consequently, the adapters of foreign opera in the patent theatres became increasingly faithful to the composer; these theatres used the principle of fidelity as an advertising strategy, even if they did not always abide by it.

With many different people involved in the process of mounting an opera, writers such as Roger Parker have increasingly taken an approach that does not privilege the composer as before, but instead recognises that in opera there are many authorial intentions. They perceive opera productions not as static artworks that should never be tampered with, but as fluid and continually changing entities with many variants and which leave a series of palimpsests. Parker argues that thanks to ‘music’s sheer slipperiness’, the operatic work can survive startling transformations and remain coherent.³³ On this basis, Parker has written about arias and operas that were altered and varied,³⁴ while Hilary Poriss has written about the use of interpolations during the nineteenth century, including ‘one-hit wonders’ such as Pacini’s ‘Il soave e bel contento’, an aria used by numerous singers including both Giuditta Grisi and Antonio Michellini in *Semiramide*,³⁵ and although not mentioned in Poriss’s book, also by Adelaide Kemble in Mercadante’s *Elena da Feltre*.³⁶

In this thesis I take the view that the early performances of *Semiramide* and the 1842 production are each operatic events, linked to each other and different.

³¹ Christina Fuhrmann, *Foreign Opera*, 190.

³² See *Ibid.*

³³ Roger Parker, *Remaking the Song: Operatic Visions and Revisions from Handel to Berio* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 11.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Hilary Poriss, *Changing the Score: Arias, Prima Donnas, and the Authority of Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

³⁶ Kemble used this aria when she sang the title role in Padua in July 1839, although it is not known if she used it again when she sang the role at Covent Garden in the spring of 1841 (Adelaide Kemble to Therese Maria Anna van Thun (Countess van Thun), 25 July 1839 (Kemble Papers, Garrick Club); see also *Ibid.*, 21 September 1838).

The 1842 *Semiramide* as Third Space

Cultural transfer or cultural exchange concerns the movement of cultural materials from one domain or environment to another. It came into focus as an independent branch of research during the 1980s, particularly with Michel Espagne and Michael Werner, who worked on the exchanges between France and Germany in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.³⁷ They attempted to investigate cultural relations from a transnational point of view by conducting ‘simultaneous research into neighbouring societies and peripheral zones’.³⁸ In so doing they studied the ‘varying forms of interconnection, transition, and adaptation of cultures among one another’.³⁹ By examining *inter alia* the circulation of philosophical texts, trade in wine and the arrival of German bankers in Paris, Espagne and Werner were able to expose the flow of traditions and value systems in France and Germany at the turn of the nineteenth century.⁴⁰

Cultural transfer is concerned with processes that take place over time and result in transformation. Analysing the events of displacement and appropriation that take place when an item changes locale, can lead to reconstituting a chain of events. Yet in doing this, account needs to be taken of the fact that the same terms of reference can have differing meanings or understandings across borders; furthermore, examining these variations can reinforce the notion of the homogeneity of national entities, even though the project might be trying to demonstrate the permeability of the boundaries. Transfers often take place in several criss-crossing non-linear stages, making it difficult to establish a clear beginning and end.⁴¹

Although Werner, working together with Bénédicte Zimmermann, associates exchange with social, cultural and political formations at the national level,⁴² it has been widely used in more local situations. Annegret Fauser and Mark Everist suggest that opera itself often represents a cultural transfer from one artistic domain (play, novel) to another (stage, music) and that scenery

³⁷ Michel Espagne and Michael Werner, *Transferts: les relations interculturelles dans l'espace franco-allemand (XVIIIe et XIXe siècle)* (Paris: Éditions recherche sur les civilisations, 1988).

³⁸ Manuela Rossini and Michael Toggweiler, ‘Cultural Transfer: An Introduction’, *Word and Text*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (December 2014), 6.

³⁹ Jin-Ah Kim, ‘Cultural Transfer as a Branch of Research for Music Sociology and Music Anthropology’, *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (June 2015), 43.

⁴⁰ See Michel Espagne and Michael Werner, ‘La Construction d'une référence culturelle allemande en France: genèse et histoire (1750-1914)’, *Annales ESC*, No. 4 (July-August 1987), 969-992.

⁴¹ Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, ‘Beyond Comparison: *Histoire Croisée* and the Challenge of Reflexivity’, *History and Theory*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (February 2006), 36.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 31.

and costumes also help to shape the culture. They also consider institutions to be cultures: operatic works may lose or gain contexts, audiences and meanings with a change of theatre.⁴³

While cultural transfer can be one-directional, two-way or reciprocal, Werner and Zimmermann now stress the multi-directional relationship that exists between two cultures that have a shared history. They see the boundaries between these societies as fluid, so that at the meeting point a process of interweaving or *métissage* (interbreeding) takes place. In this context, they now write about *histoire croisée* (intercrossed-history) to express the intersection, intercrossing and entanglement that takes place when two cultures meet. *Histoire croisée* is a self-reflexive process, which takes account of a ‘multiplicity of possible viewpoints and divergences resulting from languages, terminologies, categorizations and conceptualizations, traditions, and disciplinary usages’.⁴⁴

Werner and Zimmermann try to find a middle way that bridges both comparison and transfer. They regard comparison as a static process, which places a binary opposition between differences and similarities, even though the items may be separated diachronically and consist of many interpenetrating dimensions. When comparing two items set in history, there is an assumption that it is possible to pause the flow of time and compare them synchronically, even when the researcher is dealing with a process of transformation that takes place over a period of time. In order to avoid errors, it is important that the scale and terms for analysis are equally relevant to both objects under scrutiny; and that they are not inadvertently compared asymmetrically because the researcher is more familiar with the language of one object rather than another. There is thus a synchronic analytical logic, even when the items being compared are separated diachronically.⁴⁵

Histoire croisée takes a multidimensional approach that acknowledges plurality and complex configurations. Entities and objects of research are considered both in relation to each other and through one another, in terms of relationships, interactions and circulation. *Histoire croisée* examines the crisscrossing and interweaving that takes place, as well as the resistances, inertias and modifications in the transfer’s trajectory, form and content. As cultures come into contact, objects are changed, they hybridise, creating novel and original elements that are as important as the constituent entities from which they are developed. *Histoire croisée* therefore attempts to examine the evolving nature of situations, aiming to ‘articulate various dimensions and place them into movement’.⁴⁶ The intercrossings examined come from the object of research; the

⁴³ Annegret Fauser and Mark Everist, ‘Introduction’, in *Music, Theater, and Cultural Transfer: Paris, 1830-1914*, ed. Annegret Fauser and Mark Everist (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 7.

⁴⁴ Werner and Zimmermann, ‘Beyond Comparison’, 32.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

different viewpoints in which the object is observed; and the relationship of the observer to the object under study. Intercrossings are not given to be observed and recorded: an active observer needs to construct them in a to-and-fro movement between the observer and the object, so that the empirical and reflexive dimensions of *histoire croisée* take shape. Werner and Zimmermann describe it as a cognitive process which articulates object, observer and the environment.⁴⁷

Werner and Zimmermann's model is not dissimilar to Bhabha's 'Third Space',⁴⁸ a conceptual area in which two or more cultures meet and interact. Likening it to the meeting of two individuals, Bhabha wrote that:

The pact of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You ... The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot 'in itself' be conscious.⁴⁹

As with individuals, cultures meet in the Third Space, overlapping and displacing each other; identities constantly shift and interact with each another, incorporating a multiplicity of influences. According to Bhabha, it is here in the interstices between cultures that meaning is constructed in an on-going process involving translation and negotiation;⁵⁰ signs are 'appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew';⁵¹ and hybridities emerge in moments of historical transformation.⁵² In his 1990 interview with Jonathan Rutherford, Bhabha says that hybridity *is* the Third Space:

This Third Space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom.⁵³

Bhabha uses the Third Space to examine how cultural differences play out. These differences, which are often incommensurable, are recognised at the signifying boundaries between cultures. When one culture tries to dominate the other in the name of cultural supremacy by giving itself the authority of absolute truth, its cultural identification becomes split between a tradition with a stable system of reference and the negation of that certitude in the articulation of new cultural demands, meanings and strategies in the political present for domination or

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Jin-Ah Kim considers that Werner does use Third Space (Jin-Ah Kim, 'Cultural Transfer as a Branch of Research for Music Sociology and Music Anthropology', *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (June 2015), 46).

⁴⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), 53.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 2-3.

⁵³ Homi K. Bhabha, 'The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha', in *Identity: Community, Culture, and Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 211.

resistance.⁵⁴ As Bhabha says with reference to investigating the Third Space: ‘I try to place myself in that position of liminality, in that productive space of the construction of culture as difference, in the spirit of alterity or otherness.’⁵⁵

Much of Bhabha’s writing is closely tied to the postcolonial experience and the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised, where one dominates the other. In this context, the Western coloniser may speak ‘for’ the Other, taking away his voice, while the Other loses his ability to signify or establish his own discourse.⁵⁶ Bhabha sees colonial discourse as an apparatus of power, which both recognises and disavows racial, historical or other differences.⁵⁷ Bhabha was influenced by Freud, who links the process of identification and disavowal to the subject (in this case, the coloniser) who wants both to retain and give up a particular belief. The colonial subject is marked by ambivalence: his identity splits when he both wants both to remain as he is but also identify with the Other; it allows the colonised to fantasise about taking the dominant role and look down on the coloniser; meanwhile the colonial is caught between fantasies of megalomania, and then, when he identifies with the colonised Other, he fears persecution.⁵⁸ Similarly, when the subject wants to be in two places at once, his identity can ‘double’, such as the man who wants to belong both to his homeland, with its particular cultural area and geographic boundaries, *and* to be part of a universal history.⁵⁹

This process of ‘double and split’ appears as part of a number of survival strategies in the colonial world. Others include the use of the stereotype, mimicry and national pedagogy. In repeating a stereotype, such as the Coolie’s inscrutability, the colonial connotes the fixity of an unchanging order. The colonial is caught anxiously repeating this ‘truth’ in order to confirm that it has always been so and to make sure the colonised accepts it.⁶⁰ The stereotype is there to cover fear and to negotiate a crisis by the reaffirmation of the unruly and therefore threatening native who ‘justifies’ the coloniser’s dominance.

Mimicry is another strategy of colonial power, whereby certain colonised people are induced to copy the language, culture, manners and ideas of the dominant culture. The colonised appear like the coloniser, but their copying is exaggerated, making them similar but different. They become

⁵⁴ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 51.

⁵⁵ Bhabha, ‘The Third Space’, 209.

⁵⁶ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 46.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 279.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 111.

‘authorized versions of Otherness’⁶¹ who repeat colonial authority and become a presence that is partial, both incomplete and virtual.⁶² Their character is split, for they are almost the same as the coloniser, but not quite; the better they imitate the authority of the coloniser, the more they become a threat to him. Similarly, representations of the colonial nation are also split: the nation is proclaimed as having a homogeneity based on a pre-given origin in the past, yet the people addressed are heterogeneous and live in a differently constituted present.

Werner and Zimmermann’s ‘cognitive process’ of constructing cultural intercrossings and Bhabha’s Third Space have much in common. These writers see them as heuristic exercises aimed at seeing what happens when two cultures come into contact with each other.⁶³ They also consider that hybridisation takes place in these spaces, out of which something new is produced: Werner and Zimmermann say that out of the convergence of the constitutive entities, ‘novel and original elements are produced by the intercrossings’;⁶⁴ Bhabha states that: ‘The importance of hybridity is the Third Space which enables other positions to emerge.’⁶⁵

But there are also important differences. Werner and Zimmermann focus on the actions of people and institutions in a fundamentally cooperative process of interbreeding, intermixing and intertwining between two or more equal societies. Indeed, they stress the importance of taking steps to ensure that the results are not skewed inadvertently by treating the cultures asymmetrically – for example, because the researchers have greater familiarity with either the subject or the language of one or other locale.⁶⁶ Espagne, Werner and Zimmermann offer a very practical approach to cultural transfer. Espagne’s *Les transferts culturels franco-allemands* gives a worked example of the way France and Germany’s cultural history has been woven together.⁶⁷

Bhabha, on the other hand, writes about the meeting of post-colonial cultures in which one sector tries to retain its dominance, while the other with lower status resists and tries to subvert the other’s supremacy. Not only are the interactions far from the cooperative ones of Werner and Zimmermann, but furthermore, Bhabha has been influenced by Michel Foucault who regarded all social relations as being fundamentally relationships of power. Yet Bhabha does not focus on power relationships so much as the strategies used by the colonial subject to exert and resist power. In addition, many of Bhabha’s core ideas, such as those relating to ambivalence, do not

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 123.

⁶³ Werner and Zimmermann, ‘Beyond Comparison’, 38-39; Bhabha, ‘The Third Space’, 209, 211.

⁶⁴ Werner and Zimmermann, ‘Beyond Comparison’, 38.

⁶⁵ Bhabha, ‘The Third Space’, 211.

⁶⁶ Werner and Zimmermann, ‘Beyond Comparison’, 41-42.

⁶⁷ Michel Espagne, *Les transferts culturels franco-allemands* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1999).

only apply to unequal societies. Nevertheless, the Third Space as described by Bhabha, where these cultures interact, is a place of contestation and agonism. Yet although Bhabha refers to specific literary and historical examples, one of the criticisms of his work is that it is unclear to what extent his ideas are tied to those specific situations, or whether they apply more widely to the colonial subject or to society generally.⁶⁸ Part of the problem is that *The Location of Culture* is a compendium of essays written at different times and tackling a variety of concepts within the arena of post-colonial studies. As a result, although he returns to the same themes, his models do not fit together into an overarching design.

Methods and Materials

Mounting the production of *Semiramide* at Covent Garden involved a number of cultural encounters: between the Italian and English musicians in London; the traditions of Italian opera and popular English theatre; and with its sets based on Persepolis, between East and West. I use Bhabha's theories of cultural encounter to examine the way this opera was interpreted in the context of London theatrical culture at the time. I argue that the spectacle and Reynoldson's translation borrowed from, and tilted the opera towards popular genres including melodrama and pantomime. I also suggest that Kemble and Shaw, who had both trained on the continent and performed on the operatic stage in Italy, managed to fuse ideas about Englishness and Italian singing in the minds of their audiences. On a larger scale, this thesis shines a light on the values and performance practice in London theatre at the time; it also shows how well Bhabha's theories can be applied for a cultural encounter that does not involve two unequal societies.

The study will focus on a close reading of the various accounts in newspaper articles and reviews together with other contemporary written accounts, letters and music. It will also examine the information contained in the iconography relating to the production, including in the music covers, drawings and paintings. The way the production was received will be analysed to see how the opera was naturalised for Covent Garden and how the various cultural ingredients were negotiated to create the production.

The 1842 *Semiramide*, which can be seen as a variant of Rossini's opera, stands out from other London productions of the opera, as it was the only one performed on the English language stage. There is a direct line of transmission from the early performances conducted by Rossini to Kemble who sang the role in 1842. Kemble had studied with Giuditta Pasta, who sang in the first London performance which Rossini conducted and later took over the role in Paris on the second and subsequent nights, after Joséphine Fodor-Mainvielle lost her voice during the Paris première

⁶⁸ See Peter Childs and R.J. Patrick Williams, *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory* (Harlow: Longman, 1997), 143.

in 1825. I therefore choose to set the 1842 *Semiramide* against the earliest productions of the opera to show how they were mounted and to see which singers interpreted the roles.

The study will begin in Chapter 2 with an examination of the origins of the Queen Semiramis myth and how Rossini and his librettist Gaetano Rossi approached writing their opera. This chapter then considers the opera's first performances and its reception in Venice (1823), London (1824) and Paris (1825), all of which were conducted by Rossini. I focus on the singers and the spectacle, where known, and discusses how they were received. These productions established a performance tradition from which the 1842 *Semiramide* was varied and adapted.

During the early part of the nineteenth century, Italian opera was licensed only at Her Majesty's Theatre, a venue which favoured foreign, and preferably Italian, singers. However, this theatre's preferential position was under threat: the licencing laws which protected it would collapse completely in 1843, just a year after the English *Semiramide*. I start Chapter 3 with a short survey of the social make-up of London and its theatre audiences. Since the French wars, London had enjoyed an economic boom, with the result that the middle classes now had money to go to the theatre. Theatres other than Her Majesty's became more affordable and increasingly mounted foreign operas on the English stage. But as the major theatres were suffering financially, and the licencing laws not being upheld, the minor theatres were encroaching on their repertoire. In this chapter I examine ways in which the major theatres tackled the resulting financial crisis, including by putting on extravaganzas and spectacles, rapidly becoming a popular feature of London theatre.

In Chapter 4, I show how T.H. Reynoldson, a writer who had hitherto worked at the Surrey Theatre, adapted the libretto, borrowing from aspects of melodrama and pantomime. In so doing he adjusted the opera so that it fitted into more popular forms. I continue by examining the production as spectacle in Chapter 5. As I shall show, much was made of the large architectural sets depicting the city of Babylon, as well as the large chorus with its multinational characters from the many countries of Semiramide's empire. In line with the theatrical plays by James Robinson Planché and others, the sets and costumes were prepared with 'antiquarian accuracy' based on the artefacts and travel writing from Persia and particularly Persepolis, lending historical truth to this account of Semiramis and her empire. Particularly impressive were the two transformations at the end of each act. However, as I shall show in Chapter 6, rather than the impressive spectacle, it was the performances of the two 'native cantatrices', Adelaide Kemble and Mary Shaw, that chiefly won over audiences. Both singers had trained on the continent and had gone on to sing principal roles on the operatic stage in Italy. Kemble was a compelling actress who interpreted the role of Semiramide, not as a magnificent barbaric queen, as Giuditta Pasta had done, but as a queen who was suitably regal, yet with a vulnerable side to her character.

According to the social critic, Anna Jameson, Kemble presented *Semiramide* first and foremost as a woman, an interpretation which predominated over her role as queen and her crimes.⁶⁹ The chapter therefore discusses how Kemble and Shaw's performances fitted into Victorian ideals about womanliness. Kemble's performances were perceived as Italian, Shaw's were defined by her 'masterly simplicity'.⁷⁰ The chapter considers to what extent their duet singing represented a fusion of different national styles. Kemble and Shaw's performances together sparked a discourse about the possibility of forming a corps of native vocalists. Despite this and the fact that Kemble had a keen desire to 'naturalize the Italian lyrical drama',⁷¹ critics wished that Kemble and Shaw would contribute their skills to English rather than Italian opera. Ultimately the vision was unrealistic. London did not have enough singers of a sufficiently high standard, particularly as far as men were concerned.

Chapter 7 is something of a coda and considers the events after Kemble and Shaw's performances in *Semiramide* in the autumn of 1842. Kemble had retired to be married at Christmas 1842. Within eighteen months, Shaw had lost her voice and had to retire in May 1844. Both Elizabeth Rainforth and Giulia Grisi sang the role of *Semiramide* in the spring of 1843, but after Kemble's mesmeric performances neither performance was a success. I would argue that both Rainforth and Grisi suffered from new tastes for larger and darker voices and for natural acting in the place of classic poses.

The Conclusion in Chapter 8 examines the 1842 *Semiramide* through the filter of *histoire croisée* and an analysis of ambivalence in line with Bhabha's theories. Although Bhabha's models are normally applied to societies with unequal power structures, I argue that studying the ambivalence within a discourse, such as the press reception of Kemble and Shaw, can reveal important new insights.

⁶⁹ Anna Brownell Jameson, 'Adelaide Kemble: and the Lyrical Drama in 1841', in *Memoirs and Essays, Illustrative of Art, Literature and Social Morals*, ed. Anna Brownell Jameson (New York: Wiley & Putnam, 1846), 67.

⁷⁰ *Morning Post*, 5 October 1842.

⁷¹ Jameson, 'Adelaide Kemble', 56.

2 Semiramis becomes *Semiramide* in Venice, London and Paris

Semiramide was the last opera Rossini wrote for Italy; the première took place on 3 February 1823 at La Fenice, Venice. By the end of the year, Rossini had moved to London and then seven months later on to Paris, both cities in which he would conduct the opera's first performances. Rossini's *Semiramide* was an adaptation of an Italian version of a Voltaire play, *Sémiramis*,¹ which in its turn was an adaptation of an old story rooted in classical history. The eponymous queen regularly featured as the subject for plays and operas during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, although the plots differed widely.

Rossini's opera, the 1842 Covent Garden production and the newspaper reviews all abounded with allusions to the Semiramis of ancient history. According to Gaetano Rossi's stage directions for the original libretto, *Semiramide*'s showcase aria 'Bel raggio' took place in the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, which Pliny the Elder suggested Semiramis may have created.² The Grieves' set for the final scene of the 1842 production featured statues of elephants, animals associated with Semiramis' attempt to invade India. As noted in the previous chapter, a further link between the 1842 production and the very early performances of Rossini's opera was created by the fact that Kemble was taught by both Giuditta Pasta and Marco Bordogni: Pasta sang the role of *Semiramide* in the early London and Paris productions; Bordogni was the first Idreno in Paris.

Rossini's opera therefore fitted into a network of earlier retellings of the Semiramis story. In order to appreciate fully the reception of the 1842 *Semiramide*, it is important to understand both the ancient story of the Assyrian queen, how it was altered over the centuries, and how Rossini adapted Voltaire's play. This chapter will then discuss the premières in Venice, London and Paris,

¹ Voltaire, *Sémiramis, Tragédie* (The Hague: 1749); Voltaire, *La Semiramide: tragedia*, trans. M. Cesarotti (Venice:1799).

² See Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History* 19.19.4. However, Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica* 2.10.1, claimed that the 'Hanging Garden ... was built, not by Semiramis, but by a later Syrian king', a statement which clearly implies that others believed that Semiramis had built the Gardens, even though Diodorus disagreed (translation from Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History of Diodorus Siculus*, trans. Charles Henry Oldfather, Loeb Classical Library ed., Vol. 1 (London: William Heinemann, 1933), 385).

all of which Rossini conducted. As much of the discussion of the 1842 production focuses on the production and the singers, this chapter also discusses how the early productions of Rossini's opera were mounted and received.

Semiramis Queen of Babylon

The legend of Semiramis dates back to classical literature, notably to fables told by Ctesias in his *Persika* during the fifth century BCE and then retold by the Roman historian, Diodorus Siculus three hundred years later in the *Bibliotheca Historica*.³ Other references to Semiramis appear in Herodotus, Pliny the Elder and Strabo. Ultimately, Semiramis is probably rooted in the conflation of two, or possibly three, historical queens who lived between the ninth and seventh centuries BCE.⁴

Diodorus presents Semiramis as a beautiful, intelligent and ingenious warrior, who found a way to win Bactria when the other generals had failed. King Ninus was so captivated that he married her and had her previous husband killed. After the King's death, Semiramis disguised herself as her son because he was too young to command authority.⁵ She ruled over Assyria and extended the kingdom so that it stretched from Libya to Bactria. However, she was defeated when she tried to invade India, after which her empire was reduced to a third of its size. Semiramis rebuilt Babylon, surrounding it with a high wall, and was associated with building the Hanging Gardens there.⁶ Herodotus also credited her with building the high banks that confined the Euphrates and also mentions a gate in Babylon dedicated to her.⁷

The accounts of Semiramis crossed the boundaries of fable, ancient history and classical literature; over the centuries it was altered by the accretions of myth, legend and Christian propaganda. According to myth, Semiramis was the daughter of the fish goddess, Derceto; meanwhile, Christian writers such as Orosius emphasised her masculinity, bloodletting and incest

³ Ctesias, *Persika*, F1; Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica*, 2.4-2.20.

⁴ Current research indicates that the character of Semiramis is based on a conflation of Sammu-ramat, wife of Shamshi-Adad V (823-811 BCE), and Naqia Zakutu, also referred to as 'Nitocris', second wife of Sennacherib (704-681 BCE). Both of these queens acted as regent for their respective underage sons and were able to wield great power; the powerful queen as regent is a theme of some versions of the Semiramis story. Semiramis may also be linked to Atalya, wife of Sargon II (721-705 BCE), although this latter attribution is more problematic (Stephanie Dalley, 'Semiramis in History and Legend: a Case Study in Interpretation of an Assyrian Historical Tradition, with Observations on Archetypes in Ancient Historiography, on Euhemerism before Euhemerus, and on the So-Called Greek Ethnographic Style', in *Cultural Borrowings and Ethnic Appropriations in Antiquity*, ed. Erich S. Gruen (Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 2005), 11-18, 20).

⁵ Marcus Junianus Justinus, 1.2.

⁶ Diodorus Siculus, 2.4-2.20.

⁷ Herodotus, 1.84, 3.155.

because it was imperative that the pagan queen was not seen as being rewarded with a mighty empire. These many strands which dated from ancient times contributed to Semiramis as an archetype who represented ‘superlative queenship’ and had more-or-less divine status. She became a character on whom writers could stamp their own ideas.⁸

The tale of the Assyrian queen was a favourite subject for plays and operas in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: Cesare Questa lists over 65 written between 1593 and 1910.⁹ The earliest opera is attributed to Francesco Saccati (*La Semiramide in India*, Venice, 1648) while the latest is Ottorino Respighi’s *La Semirâma* (1910). Others include Antonio Cesti’s *La Semirami* (Vienna, 1667), Antonio Caldara’s setting of Apostolo Zeno’s *Semiramide in Ascalonia* (1725) as well as some thirty settings of Pietro Metastasio’s *Semiramide riconosciuta* including those by Leonardo Vinci (1729), Christoph Willibald von Gluck (1749) and, with a revised libretto, by Giacomo Meyerbeer (1819).¹⁰

In opera, retellings of the story vary from the nymph’s daughter fed by doves, to the slave who became a concubine, to the good ruler or the murderer of the queen’s husband Ninus. References to Semiramis also appear in other art forms, including in Dante and in paintings by Guercino and Degas.¹¹ Generally the stories become darker over time. There were also national differences in the treatment given to Semiramis. Many of the French plays make Semiramis responsible for killing her husband; and many have Semiramis killed either by her own hand or her son’s. However until the appearance in 1748 of Voltaire’s influential tragedy, *Sémiramis*, operas in Italy were largely pastoral and eschewed violence.¹²

Voltaire wrote *Sémiramis* with the clear intention of outshining his rival, Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon, an older poet who had been the reigning tragedian of the previous generation. When he was commissioned to write a new tragedy, Voltaire chose the same subject as one of Crébillon’s less successful works, *Sémiramis* (1717), and additionally incorporated elements from his own

⁸ Dalley, ‘Semiramis in History and Legend’, 11, 18-20.

⁹ Cesare Questa, *Semiramide redenta: archetipi, fonti classiche, censure antropologiche nel melodramma*, Letteratura e antropologia (Urbino: QuattroVenti, 1989).

¹⁰ Pietro Metastasio, *Semiramide riconosciuta*, set by Leonardo Vinci (1729), Christoph Willibald Gluck (1748) and Giacomo Meyerbeer (libretto revised Gaetano Rossi; 1819).

¹¹ Dante, *La divina commedia*, ‘Inferno’, 5.52-60 (see Philip Gossett, ‘Prefazione’ to *Semiramide: melodramma tragico in due atti. Edizione critica delle opere di Gioachino Rossini*, by Gioachino Rossini and Gaetano Rossi, ed. Philip Gossett and Alberto Zedda, (Pesaro: Fondazione Rossini, 2001), XXV); Guercino, *Semiramis receiving the news of the Fall of Babylon*, c.1645, East Clandon, Guildford, National Trust Hatchlands; Edgar Degas, *Sémiramis construisant Babylone*, 1861, Paris, Musée d’Orsay).

¹² Don Neville, ‘Semiramide riconosciuta’, *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera. Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online* (Oxford University Press), <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/O007348> (accessed 10 September 2016).

earlier *Eriphyle* (1732); he set out to create a work that was better than either drama.¹³ Possibly in order to eclipse Crébillon's reputation as the master of terror, Voltaire made his a dark retelling of the story, with Semiramis weighed down by grief 'as if some vengeful God pursued her'.¹⁴ The tragedy was first performed on 29 August 1748 at the Comédie-Française.¹⁵ Contrary to accepted practice for the French tragic stage, the play was mounted in an elaborate spectacle with sound and lighting effects. These reached a climax when King Ninus' ghost appeared, at which point the thunder rumbled, the lights dimmed and the tomb shuddered as if in an earthquake.¹⁶

However, *Sémiramis* had a mixed reception: the elaborate sets were unconvincing, and the crowd of spectators so great that the ghost was unable to access the stage. After a reduction in the scenery and some rewriting, the play was remounted, whereupon it received a respectable 15 performances and was subsequently repeated before the court at Fontainebleau in the following October.¹⁷ *Sémiramis* would be regularly revived at the Comédie-Française during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In 1772, the tragedy was adapted and translated into Italian by Melchior Cesarotti, who retained the ghost, the lightning and the extinguishing of the sacred flame on the altar, all elements that Voltaire had inserted into the plot. Cesarotti's version would be the immediate source for most Semiramis operas after that date, including Rossini's.¹⁸

The Semiramis of classical history had been a great ruler and strategic thinker; she had extended her empire and been responsible for important civil engineering projects. But over the course of the next 2,500 years, the personality of the mighty queen would mutate, so that she became many different and competing characters, ranging from the fanciful to the sinister. It would be the success of Voltaire's dark version of the tale, with its Oriental subject matter and ghost, that would set a precedent for spectacular productions of the operas about Semiramis during the next century.

The Writing Process

Negotiations for Rossini to write a new *opera seria* for La Fenice began in 1822. The final contract specified that the new opera would be called *Semiramide*; the poetry would be by Gaetano Rossi (1774-1855); the music would be by Rossini; the singers would include Rossini's wife, Isabella Colbran, and Filippo Galli. Giuseppe Radiciotti records that the contract mentioned

¹³ Marvin Carlson, *Voltaire and the Theatre of the Eighteenth Century*, Contributions in Drama and Theatre Studies, No. 84 (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1998), 70.

¹⁴ Voltaire, *Sémiramis*, Act I, Sc. 1: 'De quelque Dieu vengeur évitant la poursuite'.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*; Voltaire, *La Semiramide: tragedia*; trans. Cesarotti.

¹⁶ Carlson, *Voltaire and the Theatre*, 71.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 71-73.

¹⁸ Voltaire, *La Semiramide*, trans. Cesarotti.

a fee of 5,000 Francs, although the financial records indicate that Rossini and Colbran received 26,000 lire in addition to reimbursement for their lodgings while in Venice. In return, La Fenice gained the sole rights to the new opera in perpetuity.¹⁹

Rossi and Rossini began working together on the opera on 4 October 1822 at Rossini's home near Bologna, Castanaso. This gave the two men an unusually long time, four months, in which to turn Cesarotti's version of Voltaire's stage play into an *opera seria* with its particular conventions. Rossi and Rossini knew each other and had previously worked together. Rossi had written the libretto for Rossini's other Voltaire adaptation, the highly successful *Tancredi* (1813), as well as his one act *farsa*, *La cambiale di matrimonio* (1810). Rossi and Rossini worked together for a month before both had commitments in Verona, after which Rossini needed to take up his contract with La Fenice. By 9 October the opera's subject had been chosen, Rossi had sketched out a skeleton plan for the libretto and Rossini was able to start writing the music.²⁰

It is not clear how Rossi and Rossini came to choose the Queen Semiramis as a subject for the opera, although it was a popular subject for libretti and they must have been familiar with the various adaptations of the Voltaire play. Indeed Questa suggests that a 17-year-old Rossi may even have played a part in writing the libretto for the version of *La morte di Semiramide* used by both Alessio Prati (1790) and Sebastiano Nasolini (1789),²¹ while Gossett suggests that Rossini may well have seen Isabella Colbran sing the title role of the Nasolini version in Naples, while he was there preparing the opening of *Elisabetta, Regina d'Inghilterra* in 1815. Even if he did not see it then, Rossini would probably have also been aware of Simone Mayr's *Mennone e Zemira ossia La figlia dell'aria*, which emphasised the more fantastical elements of the story, and in which Colbran also starred when it was reprised in 1817.²² It is clear that Cesarotti's translation of *Sémiramis* provided the direct source for Rossi's libretto: over half of the significant numbers of Rossini's opera can be traced directly back to it.

Transforming a play written for Paris in the eighteenth century into an opera for nineteenth-century Venice would have forced Rossi and Rossini to make changes. This is because, although plays and operas are related, they provide a different set of creative possibilities and limitations, while the difference in period and location offered a different set of aesthetic conventions. In France, Voltaire's tragedy had been governed by the principles of Aristotelian drama, including a unity of place, time and action. Thus, the location of the action of the play could not be

¹⁹ Giuseppe Radiciotti, *Gioacchino Rossini: vita documentata, opere ed influenza su l'arte*, Vol. 1 (Tivoli: Arti Grafiche Majella di Aldo Chicca, 1927-29), 480; Philip Gossett, 'Prefazione' to *Semiramide*, *Critical ed.*, XXIII.

²⁰ Philip Gossett, 'Prefazione' to *Semiramide*, *Critical ed.*, XXIX-XXX.

²¹ Questa, *Semiramide redenta*.

²² Gossett, 'Prefazione' to *Semiramide*, *Critical ed.*, XXIV-XXV.

transferred from the city of Babylon above ground to Ninus' tomb below. In addition, following the concept of 'les Bienséances' or decorum, which required literature to respect the moral codes and good taste, Sémiramis' death should not be shown on stage. The unity of action meant that the plot was tied very closely to the single theme of Arsace's return to Babylon and avenging his father's death.

Opera seria also looked to Greek forms, including Aristotelian principles. However, by the end of the eighteenth century, *opera seria* was breaking down: the libretti of Mattia Verazi (c.1730–1794) incorporated complex intrigues involving secondary characters, as well as spectacular, horrific scenes; Francesco Bianchi (c1752–1810) incorporated cavatinas, scene complexes and choruses at the end of Acts 1 and 3 of *Alonzo e Cora* (1786), and the number of exit arias had been reduced.²³ This meant that although the classical subject matter of *Semiramide* looked back to *opera seria*, by the start of the nineteenth century, opera composers had a wider and more fluid set of options open to them. Rossini was therefore able to transfer the action below ground to the tomb and show Semiramide's death. Although *Semiramide* was a number opera, the individual arias and numbers are much longer than in earlier operas; both the *introduzione* and Act I finale incorporate ensembles, choruses and dance sections.

In writing opera, as opposed to a play, Rossini was able to make time stand still, as he does, for example, in 'Giorno d'orrore', when the singers express their states of mind, while in ensembles, such as the duet 'La forza primiera' or the split choruses of townspeople and magi, a group of singers can express multiple points of view concurrently as they sing against each other. Another challenge is that sung text takes longer than spoken text to express itself, so Rossi and Rossini had to cut Voltaire's text substantially. With limited words and the lines of the poetry often repeated, the plot had to be simpler than for a play in which the spoken words can convey more information.²⁴ This may well be the reason why Rossi's libretto left out the passages where Mitrane reports on Semiramis' state of mind,²⁵ as well as Oroe's moralising in the last speech of the play.²⁶ Because less information can be conveyed, the librettist and composer have to ensure that the characters and plot are adequately filled out. Yet in tandem with this, the music of opera can express interiority and intensity of feeling more potently than can be done through the spoken

²³ Marita P. McClymonds and Daniel Heartz, 'Opera Seria', *Grove Music Online* (Oxford University Press, 2001), <https://0-doi-org.catalogue.libraries.london.ac.uk/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.20385> (accessed 28 December 2018).

²⁴ See Ulrich Weisstein, 'The Libretto as Literature', *Books Abroad*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Winter 1961), 17-19.

²⁵ Voltaire, *Sémiramis*, Act 1, Scene 1.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, Act 5, Scene 8.

text of a play. This is because words describe the emotions, whereas music has the potential to express the inner nature of those phenomena.²⁷

In adapting *Semiramide*, Rossini and Rossi retained the important characters of Semiramide (soprano), Arsace (contralto) and Assur (bass).²⁸ Having decided that he wanted Arsace to be sung by a *musicista*, he needed to redistribute the voice parts to avoid having three female voices plus a bass.²⁹ It is probably for this reason that Azema, who had a prominent part in Voltaire's play, all but disappears in the opera, while Rossini also adds in a minor character, Idreno, who provides a tenor for the ensembles, even though one or both of his arias were often dropped.

In both the Voltaire play and Rossini's opera much of the action takes place in front of an audience of royal guards, satraps, ladies in waiting, townspeople and magi. Voltaire's attendants are silent. However, Rossini's sung chorus has a prominent part in the action and at key points the chorus is split, with the chorus of townspeople singing against the all-male chorus of magi. In particular, the magi become independent operatic characters and show the priests of Baal both as another political force in Babylon, and as characters who help to drive the action during the scene in the tomb. It is an early example of the split chorus, which would become commonplace later in the century.

Although half the numbers in the opera can be traced to Voltaire, there are a number of changes. *Semiramide* opens with an *introduzione*, an operatic form in which the various characters are introduced, but which does not have a place in eighteenth-century theatre. However, the Act I finale does reflect events in Voltaire's Act III when the ghost appears. In the Act II finale, Rossini shows events as they unfold in the tomb, but these could not be shown under the Aristotelian convention of a unity of place and so had to be reported in Voltaire. What Voltaire does show is Sémiramis begging Arsace for forgiveness after she has been fatally wounded. Although this section is omitted from Rossini, it is transposed to Semiramide's prayer where she asks for forgiveness as she kneels by Ninus' tomb just before the fateful encounter. There is no real equivalent of Semiramide's Cavatina in Voltaire's play. It comes out of a change of genre to opera, where time is made to stand still as Semiramide exposes her feelings. Yet, aspects of this scene are drawn from a few verses in Voltaire Act I, Sc. 5,³⁰ even though Rossini's aria is not marked by the heaviness found in the Voltaire. Similarly at the end, Azema's soliloquy in the

²⁷ See Ulrich Weisstein, 'The Libretto as Literature', 17-19.

²⁸ See Gossett, 'Prefazione' to *Semiramide*, *Critical ed.*, XXVI, referring to Questa, *Semiramide redenta*, 259-329.

²⁹ Rodolfo Celletti, *A History of Bel Canto*, trans. Frederick Fuller (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), 157; Philip Gossett, 'Prefazione' to *Semiramide*, *Critical ed.*, XXVIII.

³⁰ Gossett, 'Prefazione' to *Semiramide*, *Critical ed.*, XXVI.

Voltaire, in which she tells of Assur's fury after his ambitions have crumbled,³¹ becomes a full-blown mad scene in the Rossini.³²

Yet although Rossini's version broadly follows Voltaire's play, the two works start in different places in the story and the characterisation is different. At the start of Voltaire's play, Sémiramis is already beset by grief and fear, something that began when she recalled Arsace to Babylon. It is only when Sémiramis receives the oracle saying that all will be well in Babylon once there is a marriage, that she rallies emotionally.³³ The only time she shows signs of strength is when she confronts Assur. Arsace is also beset by seemingly irrational fears. In fact, the whole kingdom appears afflicted by an unnameable doom.

Despite the melodramatic character of Rossini's opera, Rossini's queen is a much more rounded character than Voltaire's, who seems to be limited to one emotional state, that of feeling accursed. Rossini's queen is not only strong, confident and at the height of her powers, she has a greater range of emotions such as her girlish daydreams about Arsace in her Cavatina. Although Rossini's Semiramide has moments of trepidation, such as when the sacred flame goes out and when confronted by the ghost, she manages to conquer her fears. And yet, when reminded of Ninus' death she still has a conscience, in contrast to Assur who has thrown away any scruples in favour of his ambition. In comparison, Voltaire's Assur is more black and white: he is a brutish character left with few vestiges of humanity.

Rossi and Rossini adopt Voltaire's supernatural manifestations, the thunder, the tomb quaking and the appearance of the ghost, even though they take them further, adding to the drama by making the sacred flame go out, and making the ghost appear twice, not just once as in Voltaire. In addition, they point to Semiramide's subconscious awareness of potential incest when she announces to the assembled company, 'In him [Arsace] / *I give* you Nino and Ninias'; whereas according to Voltaire, Sémiramis makes a more ambiguous statement, telling them simply that 'in him Ninus and Ninias *are returned*'.³⁴

Semiramide is Janus-like, looking backwards and forwards in time and musical style. Looking backwards, Rossini wrote the part of Arsace for a female *musico*, a voice type that evoked the eighteenth-century castrato. Celletti maintains that the castrato was Rossini's ideal voice type

³¹ Voltaire, *Sémiramis*, Act.V, Sc.v.

³² 'Il di già cade' in Gioachino Rossini and Gaetano Rossi, *Semiramide: melo-dramma tragico in due atti*, ed. Philip Gossett and Alberto Zedda, 'Prefazione' by Philip Gossett, Edizione critica delle opere di Gioachino Rossini (Pesaro: Fondazione Rossini, 2001), Act II, Sc. viii.

³³ Voltaire, *Sémiramis*, Act II, Sc.7.

³⁴ 'In lui / vi *rendo* Nino e Ninia' (my emphasis; Rossini and Rossi, *Semiramide, Critical ed.*, Act. I, Sc. 13); 'Ninus et Ninias vous *sont rendus* en lui' (my emphasis; Voltaire, *Sémiramis*, Act III, Sc. 6); See Questa, *Semiramide redenta*, 282.

because of its expressiveness and virtuosity.³⁵ As in *opere serie*, the plot looked to classical history: all the main characters are of royal blood and have the set-piece arias found in *opera seria*; they are not of humble birth, nor do they convey the individualism and self-expression often found in later nineteenth-century opera. Yet, the number of arias is not linked either to their status in the story nor to the singer's position in the operatic company: the queen, Semiramide, has just one aria. In addition, with the exception of Idreno's two arias, all the arias have been greatly stretched in scale and show the character's journey of different memories and feelings, rather than expressing merely one or two affects.

Yet *Semiramide* is built on a monumental scale which points forward to the size of operas written later in the century. While in Naples, Rossini had experimented with expanding the structural form of opera, including the aria, increasing the number and length of the ensembles, and making the chorus an active participant in the drama. He incorporated the expanded versions of all these elements into *Semiramide*. The *introduzione* lasts 750 bars and develops steadily: it starts with a solo recitative and then as characters arrive on stage, it turns into a trio, and then a quartet. The Act I finale is even longer at 927 bars, much of which is taken up by a quintet. Although there are five numbers in between, this latter movement has the effect of completing the *introduzione* and giving the first act a quasi-symmetrical structure.

Act II has a more interior quality. In addition to the confrontations between Semiramide and Assur in 'Se la vita ancor t'è cara', and between Semiramide and Arsace in the grand duet, 'Ebbene... a te: ferisci', one of the numbers most worthy of note is Assur's aria, 'Il di già cade', a scene which could have been written much later in the century. Here, the vocal line is fractured, broken and disturbed, like Assur's deranged mind as his scheming falls apart. A chorus of Satraps calls out to him, acting both as a Greek chorus commenting on his delirium and becoming the voices in his head. This scene is a painful portrait of a person breaking down. And yet here again it looks back to the male mad scenes from Ariosto, and forward to the politically-driven male mad scenes of the nineteenth century, such as the Banquet Scene from Verdi's *Macbeth*.

The First Performance, 1823

Rehearsals for *Semiramide* started on 13 January. The opera opened on 3 February and had at least 23 consecutive performances until the end of the season on 10 March.³⁶ The parts of Semiramide, Assur and Idreno were written for Isabella Colbran, Filippo Galli and John Sinclair.

³⁵ Celletti, *A History of Bel Canto*, 139, 157.

³⁶ It is unclear exactly how many performances took place as the local newspapers which gave the most accurate information were not published on a Sunday. Radiciotti says there were 28 performances; *Il Teatro La Fenice* lists 23 (see Gossett, 'Prefazione' to *Semiramide*, *Critical ed.*, XXV; Radiciotti, *Rossini: vita documentata*, Vol. 1, 483).

Colbran and Galli, who had been part of the opera company at San Carlo, were both written into Rossini's contract with La Fenice.³⁷ Rossini had taught Sinclair, 1821-1822, who had gone on to sing a number of tenor roles in North Italy.

Colbran, who had married Rossini a year before, was a celebrated beauty with dark eyes and jet black hair; she had a magnificent stage presence and an 'instinct for tragedy'. She had been the leading prima donna in Naples.³⁸ Colbran had been Rossini's muse and created the parts of Elisabetta (*Elisabetta, regina d'Inghilterra*, 1815) and Desdemona (*Otello*, 1816). In her prime she was described as being 'perfect in method and style', with a range from g-e'''. She seems to have had what was essentially a dark voice, which was very agile in the top of her range and powerful in the middle and lower parts of her voice.³⁹ Writing about her performance in *Zelmira* in 1822, Giuseppe Carpani wrote of:

The fine *portamento* of her voice, perfect intonation, and highly polished method. And then the Graces sprinkle with nectar her every syllable, her every *fioriture*, every *gruppetto*, every trill. Runs of almost two octaves through clearly articulated and pearl-like semitones and the other choice artifices of her singing show her to be an artist of the first rate.⁴⁰

As Carpani was a keen apologist for Rossini, this assessment may have been overstated: his letter was written to defend *Zelmira* from its critics, so Carpani may have indicated that her voice was better than it was. By the time *Semiramide* was first performed in 1823, Colbran's voice was showing its age; the deteriorating vocal quality would force her to retire in 1824. However, in her prime, she had held audiences with the originality of her embellishments, her dazzling looks, and the drama which she gave to her performances.⁴¹ Some critics accused her of using too much showmanship, 'at times [abusing] the liberty given to her by the composer ... and embellishing every note with more or less pleasant foreign ornaments'.⁴² James Radomski considers that this reference to 'foreign ornaments' meant that they were recognised as being specifically Spanish and more florid than was usual at the time in Naples.⁴³

³⁷ Cast list is shown in Appendix I.

³⁸ Stendhal, *Life of Rossini*, trans. & annotated Richard N. Coe, new and revised ed. (London: Calder & Boyars, 1970), 152.

³⁹ Geoffrey S. Riggs, *The Assoluta Voice in Opera, 1797-1847* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003), 38.

⁴⁰ Giuseppe Carpani, letter to the Director of the Italian Library about *Zelmira*, in Giuseppe Carpani, *Le rossiniane, ossia lettere musico-teatrali* (Padua: 1824), 158 (translation by David R. B. Kimbell, *Italian Opera* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 451).

⁴¹ See James Radomski, *Manuel García (1775-1832): Chronicle of the Life of a Bel Canto Tenor at the Dawn of Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 108.

⁴² *Monitore delle due Sicilie*, 19 October 1811, quoted by *Ibid.*

⁴³ Radomski, *Manuel García*, 108.

Filippo Galli made his début with Rossini's *La cambiale di matrimonio* in 1811. A year later he sang the role of Tarabotto in the première of *L'inganno felice*; it was the first of eight Rossini premières in which he took part. Galli had a magnificent voice, full toned, resonant, and extremely flexible, which reverberated like thunder when he sang the role of Selim in *Il turco in Italia*.⁴⁴ Stendhal describes it as the most 'expressive bass voice in all Italy' and wrote that he played Ninetta's father in *La gazza ladra* 'in a style worthy of Kean or of de' Marini'.⁴⁵

Sinclair had studied singing in Paris and Milan before going to Naples where he reputedly had lessons with Rossini. His technique was said to be remarkable, particularly in the runs. However, there were mixed reviews when he returned to London as some critics found his singing and his high tenor voice too Italian and too effeminate for the English stage.⁴⁶

There is no record of Rossini having worked with either Rosa Mariani (Arsace) or her brother Luciano (Oroe) before 1823, although Luciano Mariani performed in many Rossini operas after that date. As Rosa Mariani had a particularly low voice, Rossini wrote variants for her as she had difficulty with some of the higher tessitura in the part of Arsace. Stendhal described the singer as 'remarkable' and 'the finest contralto now living'.⁴⁷ She was a coloratura contralto who specialised in travesti roles and sang in many of the leading opera houses in Italy, including as Isaura in the first performance of Meyerbeer's *Margherita d'Anjou* (1820) and as Tancredi in Piacenza (1821–23).

The La Fenice Production

In a drive for economy, La Fenice had decided not to have new productions for the Carnival season in 1823. However, they made an exception for the two Rossini operas, *Maometto II* and *Semiramide*, along with their attendant ballets. Monumental sets costing L. 3,300 were designed by Giuseppe Borsato for *Semiramide* and the ballet performed between the two acts from 8 February 1823, *La morte di Ettore*. As Maria Ida Biggi has shown, Act I opened with a round temple based on eighteenth-century designs and which included papyriform columns, caryatids and an illuminated cupola, below which sat a statue of Baal. Biggi proposes that Borsato may have aimed to be faithful to the historic styles as outlined by theorists and that he may have been

⁴⁴ Stendhal, *Life of Rossini*, 141.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 260.

⁴⁶ W. H. Husk and John Warrack, 'Sinclair, John', *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online* (Oxford University Press), <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/25853> (accessed 26 April 2017); J.C. Hadden, 'Sinclair, John (1791-1857)', rev. Anne Pimlott Baker, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/25628> (accessed 25 April 2017); See *Harmonicon*, Vol. 2., No. XV, March 1824, 54.

⁴⁷ Stendhal, *Life of Rossini*, 444, 322.

inspired by Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach's *Entwurf einer historischen Architektur*, published in 1721, which contained images of reconstructions of historic buildings from around the world, including from Assyria, Babylon and Persia.⁴⁸

The spectacle began in the very first scene when the doors of the temple opened, and the stage filled with a colourful crowd of Babylonians, Princes, captains, foreigners and girls, all accompanied by the Esterhazy Infantry band. The *Gazzetta privilegiata di Venezia* commented on this opening as adding to the 'magnificence of the spectacle'.⁴⁹ Biggi describes how lighting was used to add to the drama and spectacle. In the opening scene, the dome of the temple was lit up, which would have added to its splendour. In Act II, Assur's mad scene took place in front of a backdrop, showing a grand piazza with a pyramid at the back, together with a flat to the right, showing a tower, obelisks and statues. As Assur exited at the end of the scene, he appeared to go downstairs to the underground mausoleum which had been placed behind the backdrop. The stage was plunged into darkness and the backdrop raised as Assur entered the depths of the tomb. Here in the obscurity of the vault, the fateful encounter between Assur, Semiramide and Arsace took place, when Nino's death was avenged. There were no lights on the stage for at least ten minutes during this scene, which accentuated the confusion of the protagonists, who were unclear exactly who was present and who had been killed. In fact, lights had been set up behind the scenery and left covered throughout this scene until, at a given moment, which must have been when the priests appeared with torches following Semiramide's death, the covers were taken off the lights and the stage lit up.⁵⁰ Although I have not found any reviews to confirm this, the contrast between the long scene in darkness and the brightness of the lights was probably very dramatic.

At the first performance, the Venice audience did not know what to make of the first act. Yet by the end of the second act the mood had changed and there was loud applause. The reception improved at each subsequent performance.⁵¹ The *Gazzetta privilegiata di Venezia* waited until after the third performance before giving its verdict, when it declared that *Semiramide* was a 'new pearl' inserted into Rossini's 'rich garland'.⁵²

Despite this positive response, right from the first performance the opera was considered over-long. The full opera lasted four hours, which meant that once a two-hour ballet had been inserted between the two acts, the evening lasted six hours. In addition, Colbran and Galli were both

⁴⁸ Maria Ida Biggi, 'Scenografie rossiniane di Giuseppe Borsato', *Bollettino del Centro Rossiniano di Studi*, Vol. 35 (1995), 71, 73-77.

⁴⁹ *Gazzetta privilegiata di Venezia*, quoted in *Ibid.*, 73-74.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 76-77.

⁵¹ Review in *Gazzetta privilegiata di Venezia*, 6 February 1823, quoted by Radiciotti, *Gioacchino Rossini*, Vol. 1, 483.

⁵² 'Una nuova perla innestata nel ricco serto del celebre maestro' (*Ibid.*, Vol. 1, 484).

coming to the end of their careers and Rosa Mariani as Arsace had difficulty with her part. After an intense rehearsal period followed by consecutive performances for over twenty nights, the performers were very tired. The result was that an increasing number of passages were dropped as singers became indisposed, much to the irritation of the Venetian public. One of the worst nights was on 6 February when Filippo Galli lost his voice between Acts I and II, and most of the bass part was dropped in Act II, including Assur's duet with Semiramide and his mad scene.⁵³

A number of changes, which can be ascertained from the reviews and marks on the autograph score, were made in order to shorten the opera and save the singers' voices. These indicate that Arsace's cavatina, 'Eccomi infine in Babilonia', No. 2, was cut during the run and not reinstated, while the Idreno's aria and recitative, 'Ah dov'è il cimento', No. 4, was probably never performed. Although the Duet between Semiramide and Arsace ('Serbami ognor', No. 6) was a success, it was withdrawn almost immediately along with the recitative. The Duet between Semiramide and Assur, 'Se la vita ancor t'è cara', No. 8, was also often cut because one or other singer was indisposed. Sometimes the coro, scena ed aria Arsace ('In questo augusto soggiorno', No. 9) was cut, depending on Mariani's voice. Finally, Semiramide's prayer, 'Al mio pregar t'arrendi', at the Act II Finale was also cut during the course of the season, as were repeats, cadential phrases and other items.⁵⁴

Despite the need for cuts, the success of the Venice production was such that within five weeks of the opening, pirate copies of the overture were being sold in Venice; in addition, within a few months both Ricordi and Sauer & Leidesdorf were advertising their own editions, which in the case of the Ricordi edition included mistakes.⁵⁵ Yet, the record of both the Sinfonia and Semiramide's cavatina together with the chorus of women were particularly accurate, indicating that Ricordi may have had access to the score.⁵⁶ Many of the other numbers in the pirate edition appear to have been derived from what Ricordi's representative notated after listening to the opera night after night in the theatre. These were not always accurately recorded: notably there were errors in the harmony and chorus parts, while subtleties in Rossini's score, which were probably played and sung correctly in performance, were omitted. Nevertheless, Gossett considers that

⁵³ Gossett, 'Prefazione' to *Semiramide*, *Critical ed.*, XLIV.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, XLV-XLVI.

⁵⁵ Gioachino Rossini, *Lettere e Documenti*, ed. Bruno Cagli and Sergio Ragni (Pesaro: Fondazione Rossini, 1992-2004), Vol. 2, 140, 150-53; Philip Gossett, 'Piracy in Venice: The Selling of *Semiramide*', in *Words on Music: Essays in Honor of Andrew Porter on the Occasion of His 75th Birthday*, ed. David Rosen and Claire Brook (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2003), 123, 124-25.

⁵⁶ Gossett, 'Piracy in Venice', 127

some of the variants in the pirate edition may reflect changes introduced by singers in performance.⁵⁷

Trying to stem the flow of pirate music, La Fenice sold the exclusive publishing rights to Artaria, who brought out a vocal edition in 1823.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, Ricordi continued to sell its edition despite sharp protests from Artaria. A solution was found when La Scala, Milan, bought an official copy for 'the sole use of the theatre' ready for their first performance on 19 April 1824. As Ricordi were the official copyists for La Scala, this was a tacit agreement to let them bring out a new and corrected edition (1825), which replaced the previous pirate one.⁵⁹ Around the same time, an official copy of the score was also sold to the San Carlo, Naples, which premièred *Semiramide* for Carnival 1824. A year later in 1826 Ratti, Cencetti & Comp. published the full score, which included *spartini* and *banda* parts which were probably realised from a rough sketch in Rossini's autograph, although this no longer survives.⁶⁰

Although the Ricordi pirate edition was rapidly quashed, it had circulated widely and acted as a model for many of the vocal scores published in Paris, including those published by Boieldieu/Janet & Cotelte (1823-4),⁶¹ Pacini (1825), and Carli (1823-5), as well as Birchall (1824) in England.⁶² Until a critical edition was brought out in 2001, these scores were used extensively by singers and others throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, thus perpetuating mistakes in the pirate edition. Thus, although Kemble studied with Pasta who had worked closely with Rossini, and Shaw had performed the role of Arsace in Italy, their performances may have been coloured by this pirate edition.

London, 1824

After the Venice première, Rossini conducted the premières of *Semiramide* in London in 1824 and Paris in 1825. For an able young musician such as Rossini, London was seen as an important staging post before arriving in Paris, the acknowledged operatic capital of Europe.⁶³ The first

⁵⁷ The pirate edition includes a *b♭* in the Duettino, which was probably sung by Colbran, and a variant written by Rossini for Mariani in Arsace's entrance aria. (Gossett, 'Piracy in Venice', 134.)

⁵⁸ Gioacchino Rossini and Gaetano Rossi, *Semiramide: melodramma tragico* (Vienna: Artaria e Compagni, 1823).

⁵⁹ Gossett, 'Piracy in Venice', 136.

⁶⁰ Gossett 'Introduction' to *Semiramide. Melodramma tragico in two acts. A facsimile edition of Rossini's original autograph manuscript* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1978), [2].

⁶¹ Louis-Armand-Dauphin Boieldieu's music publishing business was sold to Janet & Cotelte in 1824. (Anik Devriès and François Lesure, *Dictionnaire des éditeurs de musique français*, Vol. 2 (Geneva: Éditions Minkoff, 1988), 62.)

⁶² Gossett, 'Piracy in Venice', 137.

⁶³ Mauro Bucarelli, 'Rossini Fever', in *Rossini 1792-1992: Mostra storico-documentaria*, ed. Mauro Bucarelli (Perugia: Electa Editori Umbri, 1992), 205.

negotiations for Rossini to go to London began in 1816 and became more definite in 1821, although the trip was postponed. After his marriage to Colbran in 1822, Rossini suggested that any contract should include his wife. In the event, because of commitments during the Carnival season at La Fenice, Rossini did not arrive in England until mid-December 1823, when he was hired as ‘Composer and Director of Music’ of the King’s Theatre.⁶⁴

Before his arrival in London, Rossini wrote to Artaria, the company which held the publishing rights for *Semiramide*, ordering a copy of the score to be sent as soon as possible to Giovanni Battista Benelli, impresario of the King’s Theatre, for the theatre’s exclusive use and ready for the opera to be staged on 1 January 1824.⁶⁵

Whether the copy did not arrive or for some other reason, the first production after Rossini’s arrival was not *Semiramide* but *Zelmira*, Rossini’s latest opera from Naples. Colbran was in the title role, with Rossini conducting. Richard Mackenzie Bacon wrote that *Zelmira* had ‘striking combinations of harmony and accompaniment more perhaps than melody’, but that he found it had too much ‘force and complication’ and that the military band increased the ‘clamour’ without adding to the effect.⁶⁶ Moreover, Colbran’s voice was failing, her intonation imperfect and even her movements seemed a little controlled. Only Manuel García, with his large personality, voice and ‘acrobatic’ agility, was a success.⁶⁷ *Zelmira* was rapidly replaced by *Il barbiere*, which did not fare any better, and then by *Ricciardo e Zoraide*. As Zoraide, Colbran’s performance improved, but it was to be her final role.

A further problem was Benelli’s management of the theatre. Benelli had hired a magnificent group of singers, including Manuel García, Giuseppe and Giuseppina Ronzi de Begnis, and Giuditta Pasta, all of whom were engaged with expensive contracts totalling £20,400.⁶⁸ Benelli had staked everything on engaging singers with beautiful voices but he had failed to give a clear direction or financial security. With the failure of *Zelmira*, and overwhelmed by the theatre’s running costs, Benelli went bankrupt and eventually departed from London, leaving behind massive debts.⁶⁹ For Rossini, a particular low point came when none of the players appeared for

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 206, 218n.

⁶⁵ Rossini, *Lettere e Documenti*, Vol 2, 191-92.

⁶⁶ ‘Public Establishments for Music in London’, *Quarterly Musical Magazine and Review*, January 1824, Vol. 6, No. 21, 52.

⁶⁷ Mauro Bucarelli, ‘Rossini Fever’, 208.

⁶⁸ This figure excludes the fee given to Angelica Catalani, who was hired later in the season (see John Ebers, *Seven years of the King's Theatre* (London: William Harrison Ainsworth, 1828), 229-230).

⁶⁹ Bucarelli, ‘Rossini Fever’, 209-10; Ebers, *Seven years of the King's Theatre*, 233-34; Herbert Weinstock, *Rossini: a Biography* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 135, 137, 140-41.

the dress rehearsal of *Ricciardo e Zoraide*, because they had not been paid.⁷⁰ Demoralised by the poor management of the theatre, Rossini increasingly absented himself, giving his attention instead to the salons of London, where he enjoyed celebrity status, the court and teaching.

Semiramide was eventually performed on 15 July 1824, six months after originally planned. The libretto indicates that *Semiramide* was performed in an unusually complete version, the only cut being the Duetto between Semiramide and Arsace. It was probably because the occasion was for García's benefit that both of Idreno's arias were included.⁷¹

Rossini knew García (Idreno) well. He had been a member of the company at Naples, where he had created the role of Norfolk in *Elisabetta* (1815), and he had sung the role of Almaviva in the première of *Il barbiere di Siviglia* under its original title, *Almaviva, ossia L'inutile precauzione* (Rome, 1816). García spent the next years divided between Paris and London. He sang the first London performances of *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (1818) and *Otello* (1822). García had a very flexible voice, which was deep for a tenor, although he could reach c'' in full voice; Radomski suggests that he may really have been a baritone. García was praised for his musicianship, acting, gift of invention and the warmth of his interpretations, although he was criticised for his crowd-pleasing ornamentation. He had a strong stage presence and was suited to dramatic roles⁷².

Giuditta Pasta (Semiramide) also knew Rossini; they had first met when he had rehearsed Pasta and García in *Otello*, during his stopover in Paris in November 1823 while travelling to London.⁷³ The role of Desdemona at the Théâtre Italien (1821) had been Pasta's first success. The next year she was billed as *prima donna assoluta* at the same theatre when she sang Tancredi, which was to become a signature role. She would go on to sing Enrico (*Elisabetta, regina d'Inghilterra*) and Elcia (*Mosé in Egitto*). Although Pasta always had intonation problems, she gained a following because of her immense stage presence and her acting, changing the timbre of her voice and 'giving such a variety of light and shade, that she [rendered] it the medium of extraordinary dramatic effects'.⁷⁴ As an actress, Chorley remembered how Pasta created a 'thrill of terror' through her gesture and declamation in a particularly tragic moment of *Zelmira*.⁷⁵ Stendhal

⁷⁰ Bucarelli, 'Rossini Fever', 209.

⁷¹ Gossett, 'Prefazione' to *Semiramide*, *Critical ed.*, L.

⁷² Rodolfo Celletti, *Voce di tenore* ([Milan]: IdeaLibri, 1989), 90; Radomski, James. 'García, Manuel', *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online* (Oxford University Press), <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-5000901857> (accessed 4 March 2018).

⁷³ Radomski, *Manuel García*, 164; Dan H. Marek, *Alto: The Voice of Bel Canto* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 84.

⁷⁴ Kenneth Stern, quoted Marek, *Alto*, 84.

⁷⁵ Henry Fothergill Chorley, *Thirty Years' Musical Recollections*, Vol. 1 (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1862), 126-127.

described Pasta as a mezzo-soprano, with a range from a to c'''-sharp or 'even to a slightly sharpened' d''' and that she possessed 'the rare ability to be able to sing contralto as easily as she [could] sing soprano'.⁷⁶

Elizabeth Vestris (Arsace), who first appeared at the King's Theatre in 1818 had sung in the London premières of several Rossini operas, in which she sang, *inter alia*, the roles of Pippo (*La gazza ladra*, 1821) and Malcolm (*La donna del lago*, 1823). Henry Fothergill Chorley described her as having 'one of the most luscious of low voices ... great personal beauty ... and no common stage address'.⁷⁷ He added that Vestris, who was half Italian, might have 'queened it' on the Italian stage had she had 'musical patience and energy'.⁷⁸ Instead she made a name for herself on the English stage in saucy trouser roles such as the title role of *Giovanni in London* and as a theatre manager, notably of the Olympic Theatre and Covent Garden, where she put on magnificent spectacles.⁷⁹

It was the first season in London of Remorini, who sang Assur. Both Ayrton and Bacon said that he was reputed to be well-known abroad, while Ayrton described him as 'a great celebrity in Italy';⁸⁰ however, I was not able to find any references to him outside the 1824 London season. Although Remorini's voice was powerful, neither reviewer liked the quality of his singing. Ayrton reported that although Remorini sang 'with great correctness and well in tune, and [acted] with spirit and propriety ... [his voice had] none of the sweetness that a *basso cantante* ought to possess'.⁸¹ Bacon pronounced his voice as 'uninteresting', although he added that he may have been 'obscured here by the superior attention bestowed upon the introduction of Mad. Pasta, about the same time'.⁸² Bacon, who lived in Norfolk, derived much of his information from his correspondence with London musical figures, one of which was Ayrton. It may be that the similarities between Ayrton and Bacon's assessments of Remorini did not in fact come from two different reviews, but were the result of Bacon having been influenced by correspondence with Ayrton.

⁷⁶ Stendhal, *Life of Rossini*, 364.

⁷⁷ Chorley, *Thirty Years' Musical Recollections*, Vol.1, 242.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ See Clifford Williams, *Madame Vestris – A Theatrical Biography* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1973); William Worthen Appleton, *Madame Vestris and the London Stage* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974).

⁸⁰ *Harmonicon*, Vol. 2, No. XVIII, June 1824, 124; see also *Quarterly Musical Magazine and Review*, Vol. 6, No. 22, April 1824, 239.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, No. XVIII, June 1824, 124.

⁸² *Quarterly Musical Magazine and Review*, Vol. 6, No. 22, April 1824, 239.

Opinion about the opera was divided. John Ebers and the *Morning Post* gave generally good reviews, although they agreed that it was not all good. Ebers wrote that ‘as a drama, it excels the ordinary mass of operas ... [and] abounds with marks of genius’,⁸³ while the *Morning Post* said that ‘there is an abundance of beauty in all the varieties of music ...’.⁸⁴

William Ayrton in *The Harmonicon*, on the other hand, published a highly-critical, three-page article about the music, in which he discussed every number in turn; he also wrote a second review about the production.⁸⁵ In the first place, he took issue with the opera for departing ‘so widely’ from Voltaire’s original, ‘that very little of the excellent French tragedy can be traced in the Italian libretto’, although he did admit that ‘it was better written, freer from absurdity, and more connected than most modern productions of its kind’.⁸⁶ However, unlike Ebers who thought the choruses and concerted pieces were ‘too paramount’,⁸⁷ Ayrton liked several of the choruses and ensembles, notably those with canonic writing, ‘Di tanti regi’ and ‘Qual mesto gemito’, both of which showed Rossini’s ‘genius’; he praised the chromatic passage at ‘Qual segnal rinnova il cielo!’ to express the horror of the crowd at the appearance of the ghost; he considered ‘Giorno d’orrore’, which he described as being written in the ‘style of Paisiello’, as the ‘most generally-admired piece in the opera’.⁸⁸

Ebers, Ayrton and the *Morning Post* all agreed that there were too many self-borrowings, something that Ebers noted was characteristic of Rossini.⁸⁹ Even his staunch defender, Carpani, admitted that Rossini borrowed from himself. However, Carpani argued that that other composers also repeated themselves, but that it was more noticeable in Rossini’s operas because they were performed so regularly.⁹⁰

Meanwhile, Ayrton, who regarded Rossini as a prolific composer who wrote in haste and did not intend his works for posterity,⁹¹ accused Rossini of producing a *pasticcio*. Ayrton, who was inclined to point out examples of ‘incorrectness’ in new musical works, wrote that the borrowings

⁸³ Ebers, *Seven years of the King’s Theatre*, 225.

⁸⁴ *Morning Post*, 16 July, 1824.

⁸⁵ *Harmonicon*, Vol. 2, No. XX, August 1824, 162-64, 167.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, No. XX, August 1824, 162.

⁸⁷ Ebers, *Seven years of the King’s Theatre*, 226.

⁸⁸ *Harmonicon*, Vol. 2, No. XX, August 1824, 164.

⁸⁹ See John Ebers, *Seven years of the King’s Theatre*, 225; *Harmonicon*, Vol. 2, No. XX, August 1824, 162; *Morning Post*, 16 July, 1824.

⁹⁰ See Emanuele Senici, ‘Rossinian Repetitions’, in *The Invention of Beethoven and Rossini: Historiography, Analysis, Criticism*, ed. Nicholas Mathew and Benjamin Walton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 249-50.

⁹¹ Leanne Langley, ‘Italian Opera and the English Press, 1836-1856’, *Periodica Musica*, Vol. VI (1988), 379.

betrayed ‘a want of industry, or an exhausted fund of ideas’.⁹² Ayrton took particular issue with all the instances in which Rossini had borrowed from other composers:⁹³ During the early part of the century there began to be a growing recognition that music was the intellectual property of the composer and that it related to a specific work on the page. This new approach was first applied to music by German musicians. However, this principle took longer to establish with opera, and it was only in the 1830s that authors won copyright to performances beyond the original theatre.⁹⁴ Ayrton, who had conducted the first London performance of *Don Giovanni* in 1817, was one of those who had helped to establish and consolidate the work-oriented approach to the production of Mozart operas: he objected to aria substitutions and excessive ornamentation, although he allowed cuts to shorten the overall length provided they were limited to secondary characters and incidents.⁹⁵

Ayrton argued that in *Semiramide*, ‘the property of others [had been] invaded’, and that, ‘in the absence of better authority’, a publication like the *Harmonicon* bore a duty to ‘guard the rights of all composers’, particularly those who had died.⁹⁶ In saying this, Ayrton was probably referring to Mozart, one of the first composers to gain canonic status, and several of whose works Ayrton accused Rossini of having poached.

To my mind, the most obvious of these borrowings in *Semiramide* is from ‘Mozart’s German air ... “Life let us Cherish”’, a theme and variations of a song by H. G. Nägeli: the first eight bars of the theme are virtually identical to the last movement of *Semiramide*’s overture, and only marginally different from the Act II chorus, ‘Un traditor’. However, although widely attributed to Mozart, ‘Life let us cherish’ was almost certainly not by him, and was possibly by Johann Michael Lanz.⁹⁷ Another clear similarity to Mozart is the fact that ‘L’usato ardir’ and ‘Di scrivermi ogni giorno’ (*Così fan tutte*) both open with the same ostinato accompaniment. However, while Mozart’s ostinato continues for six bars, Rossini repeats the ostinato for a mere

⁹² *Harmonicon*, Vol. 2, No. XX, August 1824, 162.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, No. XX, August 1824, 162.

⁹⁴ Christina Fuhrmann, *Foreign Opera at the London Playhouses: From Mozart to Bellini* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 9.

⁹⁵ Jennifer Hall-Witt, *Fashionable Acts: Opera and Elite Culture in London, 1780-1880* (Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire Press; Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2007), 47-8.

⁹⁶ *Harmonicon*, Vol. 2, No. XX, August 1824, 162.

⁹⁷ See Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Life let us Cherish*. (Edinburgh: N. Stewart & Co, 1800); Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Variationen über "Freut euch des Lebens" von H. G. Nägeli*. K Anh. 289a, K C.26.07 (doubtful authenticity, possibly by Johann Michael Lanz); Ludwig Ritter von Köchel, *Chronologisch-thematisches Verzeichnis sämtlicher Tonwerke Wolfgang Amadé Mozarts: nebst Angabe der verlorengegangenen, angefangenen, übertragenen, zweifelhaften und unterschobenen Kompositionen*, ed. Alfred Einstein, 3rd ed. (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1975), 901; Karlheinz Schlager and International Association of Music Libraries, eds., *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Verzeichnis von Erst- und Frühdrucken bis etwa 1800* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1978), 195.

two bars, using it instead as a starting point for the rest of the accompaniment. In both pieces, the phrases are separated by rests, holding in check the flow of the music, and the strong emotions of the protagonists.

There were also similarities in the musical treatment of the ghost in *Semiramide* and the Commendatore in *Don Giovanni*. Ayrton said that the whole of this part of the opera was:

An imitation of the last incomparable scene in *Don Giovanni*; indeed at the words, *Rispetta le mie ceneri!* Mozart's notes are boldly copied, and his accompaniment, slightly altered, applied to them.⁹⁸

Both Mozart and Rossini's ghosts are scored for bass and their parts contain stentorian lines with repeated notes on a single pitch and with a dotted rhythm, which drop an octave at the end of phrases. Both passages have regular forceful chords repeated in the orchestra complete with brass section. However, while Mozart focuses on diminished sevenths, Rossini opens the scene with a standard chord progression which includes dominant sevenths: I–IV–V7–I in F minor. Rossini would not have had much of a model for what operatic ghosts should sound like. In using a distinctive timbre and musical style for the Commendatore, Mozart had developed a sound world for ghosts; it is this sound world rather than the individual notes that Rossini had copied. Other borrowings included reminiscences of Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony in the opening of the overture. However, Ayrton's references to a relationship between the 'Preghiera' and either 'È amore un ladroncello' (*Così fan tutte*) or 'a cavatina in Winter's *Proserpina*' is less clear.⁹⁹

In promoting the work-concept, Ayrton distinguished between the 'music of Weber and other profound masters' and Rossini.¹⁰⁰ Although he found Rossini's 'velocity' had a 'sparkling freshness that [called] up involuntary delight', he judged 'its rapidity ... [did] not permit the mind to indulge in those profound emotions and soothing reveries that the slow movements of Mozart so seldom fail to awaken'. Indeed Ayrton, who liked melody and clear harmony, considered that 'this ever changing brilliancy [was] perhaps the chief reason why his compositions [left] no profound impression behind them'.¹⁰¹

The other feature that Ayrton objected to was the heaviness of the orchestration, something that audiences had disliked with *Zelmira*. Ayrton's article summed up with:

Semiramide is composed in the German style, but it is the German style exaggerated. Rossini is become a convert to this school, and his conversion does his judgement credit, though like all proselytes he passes into extremes: not satisfied with discarding the meagre

⁹⁸ *Harmonicon*, No. XX, August 1824, 164.

⁹⁹ See *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, Vol. 3, No. XXIX (May 1825), 74.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, No. X (October 1823), 136; see Leanne Langley, 'The English Musical Journal in the Early Nineteenth Century' (PhD diss., University of North Carolina, 1983), 369.

accompaniments of the Italian composers, he ... frequently smothers his concerted pieces and choruses by the overwhelming weight of his orchestra. ... They are too often destroyed by the storm of trumpets and trombones, and the battery of drums which he brings to act against them. The great objections to *Semiramide* are, that as a whole, it wants originality, and that as a piece for representation, it is too long by an hour at the least.¹⁰²

Earlier that year the French and English editions of Stendhal's *Vie de Rossini* were published,¹⁰³ in which Stendhal wrote about the 'two great schools of music', Italian and German. German music was studied, had an 'orchestral harmony' and 'requires private rehearsal', but as a result remained deeply imprinted in the memory. Italian music was melodic, he argued, and singing it would answer the peculiar passion raging in one's heart.¹⁰⁴ In this book, Stendhal, who had not yet attended a performance of *Semiramide*, judged the opera even more Teutonic than *Zelmira*.¹⁰⁵

When Ayrton first reviewed and printed excerpts from Stendhal's *Vie de Rossini* in January 1824, his article made only a very passing reference to German music.¹⁰⁶ He had probably not yet seen *Zelmira*, which was first performed on 24 January 1824. His conversion to seeing Rossini as over-German must have taken place after he saw *Zelmira*.

In fact, English critics often discussed their perceptions of German music. In addition to what they saw as charming folk-derived music, they considered German art music as involving the "scientific" traits of learned scores based more on counterpoint and harmony than melody,¹⁰⁷ with a preference for instrumental over vocal effects. By 1829 its attributes were seen as complex harmony, a preponderance of concerted numbers and novel, dense orchestration.¹⁰⁸ Melody was seen as taking second place.

There is an irony to *Semiramide* being seen as 'German music exaggerated', because several of the critics placed German music in opposition not only to Italian music, but specifically to Rossini, a composer favoured by the nobility. In fact, as a young man, Rossini had been fascinated by the works of Mozart and Haydn, and he had studied Haydn's string quartets, *The Creation* and *The Seasons*. These provided Rossini with lucid models for form, harmonic

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, Vol. II, No. XX, August 1824, 164.

¹⁰³ Stendhal, *Vie de Rossini* (Paris: chez Auguste Boulland, 1824); Stendhal, *Memoirs of Rossini. By the Author of the Lives of Haydn and Mozart* (London: T. Hookham, 1824).

¹⁰⁴ Stendhal, *Life of Rossini*, 5, 7.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 384.

¹⁰⁶ *Harmonicon*, Vol. 2, XIV, February 1824, 26.

¹⁰⁷ Fuhrmann, *Foreign Opera*, 86; Theodore Fenner, *Opera in London: Views of the Press, 1785-1830* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994), 266.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 107.

procedures and part-writing, and helped him to develop his ear for orchestral sonority.¹⁰⁹ It was Rossini's instrumental patterns that were perceived as particularly German. However, although he used a larger orchestra than his predecessors, the way he treated the woodwind as solo instruments and separated out the tone colours rather than blending them resulted in very different scoring from that of Beethoven or Weber.¹¹⁰

Ayrton wrote a second article about the production side of *Semiramide*, rather than the musical numbers, in this he said that Pasta was the main support of the piece, ably seconded by Vestris. It was unusual for reviews at the time to discuss the production side of operas at the King's Theatre. However, Ayrton does say the following:–

The appearance of García with a Cherokee plume of feathers on his head, is too ridiculous to escape comment. He is a king of India ... and the word "India" is the fatal trap into which the learned managers of this theatre ... have fallen. The other costumes, and the scenery, are less liable to remark, but are not much distinguished for classical correctness.¹¹¹

This makes it clear that the opera set in Babylon did have an element of spectacle. It implies that most costumes at the King's Theatre were 'classical' or conservative in nature and that Ayrton regarded that anything otherwise would justify his disapproval.

Despite the lateness in the season, the public came to the theatre. Rossini left for Paris a week after the first night of *Semiramide*, giving time for four more performances before his departure. *Semiramide* was performed on two of these occasions, including Rossini's last night in the theatre; it was announced for a third, although it was replaced at short notice because Pasta was ill; she may well have still been unwell two days later when *La donna del lago* was performed. Yet although notices for *Semiramide*'s third showing made it clear that this was the last performance, it was presented twice more that season, each time 'by particular desire for the last time'.¹¹²

In 1825, *Semiramide* had just two performances, and none in 1826. That might have been the end of the opera's fortunes in London, except that it was relaunched in 1827. As before Giuditta Pasta sang the part of Semiramide. Three new sets were built, and a feature was made of the poet Gabriele Rossetti's new translation of libretto.¹¹³ This included notes about the historic character of

¹⁰⁹ Richard Osborne, *Rossini*, Rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 7.

¹¹⁰ Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi* (London: Cassell, 1973), Vol. 1, 10.

¹¹¹ *Harmonicon*, Vol. II, No. XX, August 1824, 167.

¹¹² Performances of *Semiramide* were held on 15 (first night), 17, 24 (Rossini's last London performance), 31 July and 5 August 1824 (third last performance of the season). The opera was announced on 20 July, but replaced at short notice by *La donna del lago* (see *Morning Post*, 21 and 22 July 1824).

¹¹³ Gioacchino Rossini and Gaetano Rossi, *Semiramide: A Serious Opera in Two Acts, the Music by Rossini; With Critical notes, and Peculiarities of Madam Pasta's voice; the Translation in Easy Verse*

Semiramis as told by Ctesias plus extracts about Pasta's voice taken from Stendhal's *Memoirs of Rossini*. It also had a section on the musical numbers to listen out for, thus helping the audience learn what they were listening to. In this year, *Semiramide* and Meyerbeer's *Il crociato in Egitto* both had eleven performances, more than any other production at the King's Theatre and accounting for a quarter of the total of 88 in that year. From this point onward, regular performances of *Semiramide* at the King's Theatre were assured. By 1828, the *New Monthly Magazine* wrote a satirical article about the ubiquity of arrangements of *Semiramide*;¹¹⁴ while the 1834 edition of Edgcumbe's *Musical Reminiscences* says that '*Semiramide* has perhaps been the greatest favourite' of all Rossini's operas.¹¹⁵

While in London, Rossini had been courted by the fashionable. Yet as the above reviews indicate, his music provoked contradictory responses. Yet despite *Semiramide*'s length, Rossini's borrowings and the fact that Ayrton lambasted the opera, Ebers and the *Morning Post* seem to have generally liked the opera. The fact that extra showings were laid on after the final performance and very late in the season, indicate that the public did want to attend even if it was just out of curiosity.

Paris, 1825

Two days after conducting the third performance of *Semiramide*, on 26 July 1824, Rossini left London for Paris. He had begun discussions with the French government in 1823 about composing an opera for the Théâtre Italien as well as putting put on an opera such as *Semiramide* or *Zelmira*. After seven months of negotiations, Rossini signed the official contract on 27 February 1824.¹¹⁶ On his first arrival in Paris, Rossini worked on a number of performances including *Il viaggio a Reims*, which he wrote for the coronation of Charles X.¹¹⁷

The libretto for the Paris production of *Semiramide* shows substantial cuts, which are in line with those made during the first season at Venice.¹¹⁸ These include Idreno's first aria, No. 4, and the recitatives either side of it; the recitative after the Duettino of Semiramide and Arsace, No. 6; and Arsace's recitative and Cavatina, 'Ecomi alfine in Babilonia', No. 2. Although this last scene had

Line for Line with the Italian; as Performed at the King's Theatre, Haymarket; Revised by Signor Rosetti. A New Edition, Revised and Corrected (London: H. N. Millar, 1827).

¹¹⁴ *New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal*, February 1828, 67.

¹¹⁵ Richard Earl of Mount Edgcumbe, *Musical Reminiscences: Containing an Account of the Italian Opera in England, from 1773: Continued to the Present Time, and Including the Festival in Westminster Abbey*, 4th ed. (London: John Andrews and F.H. Wall, 1834), 132n.

¹¹⁶ Gossett, 'Prefazione' to *Semiramide*, *Critical ed.*, LII.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, LIII.

¹¹⁸ See Appendix II.

been dropped in Venice, it could not be used in Paris because it had already replaced Malcolm's Cavatina in the Paris production of *La donna del lago* in September 1824, the original Cavatina having previously been used in *Otello* in 1821. 'Eccomi alfine' would not be sung in a Paris production of *Semiramide* until Rosmunda Pisaroni sang the part of Arsace in May 1827.

The greatest change to the opera was at the end. Instead of expiring immediately she had been stabbed, as in Venice, in Paris the dying Semiramide sang a shortened version of her final speech from Voltaire's play: she admits her guilt and blesses the union of Arsace and Azema, who she declares are innocent. After this poignant recitative, Rossini's triumphal chorus was deemed inappropriate and was replaced by a serious chorus about the awful day of slaughter and terror.¹¹⁹

The première of *Semiramide* had been planned for the autumn of 1825. Unfortunately, both Giuditta Pasta and Joséphine Mainvielle-Fodor, a favourite of Paris audiences, had been promised the title role. Rossini had invited Pasta to sing the role; meanwhile he had also expressly invited Fodor to come to Paris and her contract stipulated that she could select two roles to sing, one of her choices being *Semiramide*.

Fodor had sung a number of Rossini roles in Paris and London. In September 1823 she sang the part of Semiramide to great acclaim at the Kärntnertortheater, Vienna, and this was followed by her singing the role at the San Carlo, Naples, during the Winter season, 1823.¹²⁰ Stendhal described Fodor's voice as 'charming and infinitely flexible',¹²¹ while the *Morning Post* wrote that it was 'rich, harmonious and without possessing extraordinary power, of a considerable compass. ... To the brilliance or ornamental flights she joins the still greater charm of feeling'.¹²² In fact there were criticisms that the beauty of her voice was not matched by a comparable sensitivity in expression, and that she made up for this lack by a display of 'opulence'.¹²³ But although Stendhal said she expressed no 'positive emotion' he also said that she radiated a kind of 'indeterminate joy':¹²⁴ it may well have been this latter quality that drew audiences in.

Rossini attempted to persuade Pasta to sing the part of Arsace opposite Fodor as Semiramide, but this was not a compromise Pasta was prepared to accept. The argument between the two singers spilled over into the press. Backed by Paër, Director of the Théâtre Italien, Fodor won the battle. Fodor was French; she had come especially from Naples; and it was written in her contract. Yet

¹¹⁹ See Gossett, 'Prefazione' to *Semiramide*, *Critical ed.*, LV-LVI.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, LIII.

¹²¹ Stendhal, *Life of Rossini*, 203.

¹²² *Morning Post*, quoted by Elizabeth Forbes, 'Fodor family', *Oxford Music Online* (Oxford University Press), <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000043365> (accessed 19 March 2018).

¹²³ Stendhal, *Life of Rossini*, 265.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 357.

Fodor had been experiencing vocal problems and there were delays with rehearsals. After repeated postponements, Fodor was given an ultimatum that if there were further delays, Pasta would be given the part. With this threat, Fodor agreed to sing on 8 December opposite Adelaide Schiassetti as Arsace.¹²⁵

The rest of the cast is shown in Appendix I. Filippo Galli, who had sung Assur in Venice, took the same role again in Paris. Schiassetti, who sang Arsace, had worked as a singer in Munich from 1818 to 1824, before returning to the Théâtre Italien, where she created the role of the Marchesa Melibea in *Il viaggio a Reims* (1825) and later sang in many other of Rossini's best-known operas. Schiassetti would also become known for her performances as both Armando and Felicia in *Il crociato in Egitto*.¹²⁶

Giulio Bordogni (Idreno) had been engaged by the Théâtre Italien in 1819, where he performed in ten of Rossini's operas. A few months before the première of *Semiramide* he had created the role of Libenskof in *Il viaggio a Reims*. He had a very agile voice, perfectly placed and with good intonation. He could sing up to a' in full voice and up to f' in falsetto. However, his voice was small and he was not a natural actor: he therefore appeared awkward and stiff on stage. From 1823 to 1833, he worked as a singing teacher at the Paris Conservatoire, teaching among others Laure Cinti-Damoreau and Henriette Sontag, as well as Adelaide Kemble from 1831 to early 1834.¹²⁷

After the public row between Fodor and Pasta, the Théâtre Italien was packed on the opening night with an enthusiastic audience waiting to welcome the great French singer Fodor back to Paris. As described by Stendhal: 'Fodor created some magnificent sounds. Her pure and silvery voice shone brilliantly.'¹²⁸ Yet according to Stendhal, her voice sounded weak; the embellishments were not grand enough for a noble queen; and there were breaks in the voice, seemingly due to faulty breathing.¹²⁹ The majority of the newspaper reviews agreed that Fodor was not in good enough health to sing the part. *Le Globe* said her voice was too tight, her support poor and that she could neither fill the hall nor soften her voice. She sang at half volume and missed out the grand duet with Arsace in Act II so as to save her voice for the end. *Le Globe*

¹²⁵ Gossett, 'Prefazione' to *Semiramide*, *Critical ed.*, LIV.

¹²⁶ Armin Schuster, *Die italienischen Opern Giacomo Meyerbeers*, Vol. 1 (Marburg: Tectum, 2003), 155, 175-77, 221.

¹²⁷ Celletti, *Voce di tenore*, 81-82; Ann Blainey, *Fanny and Adelaide: the Lives of the Remarkable Kemble Sisters* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001), (source unconfirmed).

¹²⁸ 'Ella a fait entendre des sons magnifiques. Sa voix pure et argentine a brillé de tout son éclat' (*Journal de Paris*, 10 December 1825, reprinted in Stendhal, 'Notes d'un dilettante', in *Vie de Rossini: suivie des notes d'un dilettante*, ed. Henry Prunières, nouvelle éd., Vol. 2 (Geneva: Editio-Service, c.1968), 373).

¹²⁹ See *Ibid.*, 373-74; *Le Mercure du XIXe siècle*, 1825, Vol. XI, 470, reprinted in *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, 377.

blamed the theatre for making her choose whether to perform, while Castil-Blaze put her vocal problems down to fear.¹³⁰

So what lay behind Fodor's vocal failure? There are inconsistencies in Stendhal's reports. However, the apparent contradiction between what he says about Fodor having created magnificent sounds and the voice being weak and having breaks implies that there were moments when the voice shone as it should. However, the fact that the performance had to be interrupted because of Fodor's singing and that the Act II grand duet was omitted,¹³¹ suggests that her voice was at its best near the beginning, and then deteriorated during the evening. Both Stendhal and *Le Globe* blamed Fodor's poor breathing, which would certainly have accounted for the weak voice and her inability to sing dramatic *fioriture* as required. Castil-Blaze's suggestion of fear would have also affected her support, but was it fear for her reputation or damaging an already weakened voice? Elizabeth Forbes, in Groves, writes that Fodor had 'not completely recovered from an illness',¹³² but her recovery seems to have already taken an unusual amount of time which suggests that it was more than an average infection. Stendhal described Fodor's voice as light and said that she excelled in comic roles, such as Rosina in *Il barbiere di Siviglia*.¹³³ While the vocal part of *Semiramide* is highly ornamented, it also requires considerable power. It may be, that when she performed in Vienna and Naples, Fodor had begun to damage her voice by singing a role for which it was not naturally suited, and this was the reason it did not heal easily. Whatever the cause of the poor voice, Fodor's performance in *Semiramide* compounded any vocal damage she already had; it marked the end of her career.

The other problem, on which all the reviewers commented, was the opera's length. Stendhal, writing for the *Journal de Paris*, expressed it succinctly: 'It seems there are not many numbers in Rossini's new masterpiece, but each part is too long'.¹³⁴ However, in a different article and showing his loyalty to Rossini, Stendhal says, 'This admirable score created no spark – but the public are wrong'.¹³⁵

¹³⁰ See Gossett, 'Prefazione' to *Semiramide*, *Critical ed.*, LVI-LVII.

¹³¹ Herbert Weinstock, *Rossini: a Biography* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 146.

¹³² Elizabeth Forbes, 'Fodor family', *Oxford Music Online* (Oxford University Press), <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000043365> (accessed 19 March 2018).

¹³³ *Le Mercure du XIXe siècle*, 1825, Vol. XI, 470, reprinted in Stendhal, 'Notes d'un dilettante', Vol. 2, 378.

¹³⁴ *Journal de Paris*, 10 December, 1825, reprinted in Stendhal, 'Notes d'un dilettante', Vol. 2, 374.

¹³⁵ *Le Mercure du XIXe siècle*, 1825, Vol. XI, 470, reprinted in Stendhal, 'Notes d'un dilettante', Vol. 2, 380.

Another important difference in the libretto concerned the stage directions, which had been very detailed in Venice, but were much shorter in Paris. As an example, the directions for the scene with Semiramide's Cavatina are as follows:–

<p>PA1825/PA1826 Giardini nella reggia. SEMIRAMIDE preceduta dalle Dame e citariste.</p>	<p>VE1826 Giardini pensili. SEMIRAMIDE seduta in un fiorito berceau: Giovani Citariste, e Donzelle in vari gruppi cercano distrarla, le scherzano intorno, è misto al suono il seguente [coro].¹³⁶</p>
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Compared to the Venice production, the Paris scene now takes place simply in a 'garden in the kingdom' rather than the famous hanging gardens. There is also a change in emphasis. In line with the spectacle of the Venice production, Semiramide is accompanied by young 'citharists' and 'donzelle', damsels or young women who try to distract her, while in Paris in addition to the citharists, Semiramide is accompanied by 'Dames'. No mention is made about them trying to distract her and no age is given to the citharists. It would seem that those accompanying Semiramide in Paris are older than in Venice and are Semiramide's contemporaries, probably her ladies in waiting. In addition, there would undoubtedly have been action on stage that did not appear in the stage directions.

Gossett speculates that these simpler directions may indicate that the Paris production was less elaborate and had fewer supernumeraries.¹³⁷ Yet, Hippolyte Lecomte's costume designs and notes survive (see Figure 1): they show the costumes as expensive, and include drawings for a wide array of different characters in the chorus and supernumeraries, including magi, satraps, Babylonians, citharists, Scythians and Indians and members of the royal guard. Stendhal described the costumes as magnificent and referred to the sky-blue set which appeared to have been painted fifty years before in the time of François Boucher.¹³⁸ Although Stendhal said that the sets were not grandiose, his description suggests that the set or backdrop may have had the blue sky framed by clouds and possibly trees as in so many of Boucher's pictures.

<p>¹³⁶ PA1825/PA1826 Garden in the kingdom. Semiramide preceded by ladies and citharists.</p>	<p>VE1826 Hanging gardens. Semiramide is seated in a flowered bower. Young citharists and maidens in various groups endeavour to entertain her, dancing around her, and sing the following [chorus].</p>
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¹³⁷ Gossett, 'Prefazione' to *Semiramide*, *Critical ed.*, LV.

¹³⁸ *Le Mercure du XIXe siècle*, 1825, Vol. XI, 470 reprinted in Stendhal, 'Notes d'un dilettante', Vol. 2, 380.



Figure 1: Costume designs for Semiramide, Assur and Arsace by Hippolyte Lecomte for *Semiramide*, Théâtre Italien, Paris, 8 December 1825.¹³⁹

Instead of being only a modest production as suggested by Gossett, I consider that the Théâtre Italien may have chosen to mount *Semiramide* with a degree of restraint: the theatre prided itself as being the ‘bastion of aristocratic values’ and resisting the kind of spectacle offered by melodrama or put on at the Paris Opéra.¹⁴⁰ Instead, audiences came for the music. *Semiramide* being accompanied by ‘Dames’, or ladies in waiting, instead of frolicking dancing girls as in Venice, would have fitted in with this kind of refinement. However, Lecomte’s costumes and Stendhal’s description of a set, possibly inspired by Boucher, indicates that the production did have a degree of spectacle. Yet, I suggest that it was also presented with elegance and good taste.

After insisting that the theatre publish a notice saying that she was in no way supplementary to Fodor, Pasta sang the role of Semiramide for the remaining Paris performances that season. When she first appeared on stage on 3 January 1826, Pasta faced a claque of Fodor’s supporters waiting to find fault with her. The chauvinism was reinforced by *Le Globe*, which commented: ‘This music is not made for [Pasta], and it will never be one of her best roles.’¹⁴¹ Yet Pasta was able to overcome this opposition and sang the part on both sides of the Channel. *Semiramide* was to

¹³⁹ Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Bibliothèque-musée de l’opéra, D216-19 (fol. 58), <http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb413422678> (accessed 11 October 2016); Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Bibliothèque-musée de l’opéra, D216-19 (fol. 59), <http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb413425077> (accessed 11 October 2016).

¹⁴⁰ Benjamin Walton, *Rossini in Restoration Paris: The Sound of Modern Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 19.

¹⁴¹ *Le Globe*, 7 January 1826.

become one of her signature roles in which she showed the queen as possessing majestic dignity. Later in 1829, Pasta would give the first performance in Bologna.

Semiramide quickly spread around the world, with performances in St. Petersburg (1829) and in Mexico (1832), brought by Manuel García.¹⁴² In 1836, seven years after the opera first arrived in St. Petersburg, it would be a benefit performance with a Russian cast, and notably the Russian star Anna Vorob'yova as Arsace, that turned around the fortunes of *Semiramide* there and helped to tip Russian taste towards Italian opera and away from the French opera that had until then dominated the repertoire.¹⁴³ This example of a star singer, Vorob'yova, almost singlehandedly being responsible for the opera's impact was characteristic of the fortunes of *Semiramide*, both in the early performances considered in this chapter and throughout the century, including in 1842.

Rossini's *Semiramide* was based on the quasi-mythological-quasi-historical warrior and empress-queen Semiramis. She was the central character of many plays and operas of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with portrayals ranging from the villainous to the fanciful. It was the success of Voltaire's 1748 tragedy *Sémiramis* and its many adaptations that gave a primacy to sinister versions of the tale. In turning Voltaire's play into an opera, Rossini not only made *Semiramide* a more rounded character than Voltaire's unidimensional queen, but he extended Voltaire's supernatural elements and turned the story into a gothic yarn.

Musically, Rossini's opera looked forwards and backwards: its form and the elaborate *fioriture* looked back to *opera seria*, while the sonority of a female *musico* for the male lead evoked the castrato. At the same time, the immense scale of the opera and sizeable orchestra looked forward to music from the later nineteenth century. Rossini's *Semiramide*'s had an uncertain start: the opera was unanimously criticised as too long and in Venice and Paris was cut, both to make it shorter and to save the singers' voices. The music was also difficult both for the auditors and for the singers, some of whom developed vocal problems.

It was her performances in London and Paris which helped to establish Pasta as one of the leading exponents of the title role. Moreover, the success of this greatest of Semiramis operas meant that it remained in the repertoire for half a century in London and Paris.¹⁴⁴ The story of the Assyrian queen, as retold by Greek and Roman historians, had led to a multiplicity of stories, which coalesced in Voltaire's play, and through Rossini's opera, quickly spread around the world.

¹⁴² *Harmonicon*, February 1833, Part 1, 22.

¹⁴³ Richard Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically: Historical and Hermeneutical Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 195.

¹⁴⁴ *Semiramide* was performed regularly in London between 1824 and 1887 (63 years); and between 1825 and 1874 in Paris (49 years).

3 London and its Theatres

In 1842, when the English *Semiramide* was performed, London's theatre and operatic culture was undergoing rapid change. At the beginning of the century, Italian opera was performed complete with recitative by Italian singers for aristocratic audiences at the King's Theatre. English opera, a genre which Carl Maria von Weber referred to as 'Drama with songs', played to mixed audiences at London's 'patent' theatres. These relationships began to change when the middle classes started to attend the King's Theatre at the end of the 1810s. Meanwhile, also in the 1810s, adaptations of continental opera in the English language began to appear on the stages of the English language theatres, which in turn began to influence the musical language of English opera.

The other factor driving change was that there had been a sizeable increase in the number of theatres in London during the early nineteenth century; the new minor theatres put on productions more cheaply and efficiently than Her Majesty's Theatre, Covent Garden and Drury Lane, which had all been losing money. When the licencing laws were abolished a year after the Kemble production of *Semiramide*, Covent Garden no longer had a monopoly and became dark.

To appreciate the significance of the 1842 *Semiramide*, it is important to understand the theatre culture out of which it was born: how it fitted into opera production of the time, and the way it straddled the divide between Italian and English opera. This chapter examines the social make up of London; the licencing system and the various theatres which it governed, with particular reference to their audiences and repertoire; and why the patent theatres were in financial difficulties. In that context I examine the changing nature of English opera and the foreign adaptations. Unusually, for an English adaptation, the 1842 *Semiramide* was performed with sung recitative. I therefore discuss attitudes to this controversial, foreign practice and efforts to improve orchestral performance. Lastly, I analyse the difficult position of English musicians and singers, given the elite's enthusiasm for foreign musicians.

The Social Fabric of London

At the beginning of the century, Italian opera catered to the privileged at the King's Theatre, while English opera was performed to mixed audiences. There were therefore class associations

with the different repertoire. In order to understand how these differences played out, it is important to understand how the social classes in 1842 were made up. However, this is difficult because social historians disagree about how class structure should be analysed, particularly with respect to the middle classes.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, there were some 180-300 noble families at the apex of London society. These ranged from aristocrats with an income of £8,000 p.a. to landed magnates whose agricultural income alone was several times that.¹ Below them there were several thousand gentle families whose income was derived from land, trade and inheritance. The City's mercantile and financial bourgeoisie was dominated by just a few merchants, whose income, which was derived from overseas trade and banking, was greater than that of many aristocrats. Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, there was a certain amount of intermarriage between the City merchants and the gentry; this later declined as the social classes became increasingly stratified.²

Below them came the middle classes, who were highly concentrated in London and had been slowly increasing in number and income. Social historians differ as to quite how many of those from the middle classes lived in the metropolis, partly because of conflicting views about who should be included. Malthus, writing in 1814, talked of the middle classes as the 'manufacturers or merchants, wholesale dealers, and retail dealers', who, as consumers, were the 'demanders in the middle ranks of life'.³ Marxist analysis divides the classes according to economic production, while E.P. Thompson referred to a model which involved a power equilibrium between the gentry and the common people. Thompson's model has been criticised for leaving out an emerging middle class made up of those from commerce and the professions.⁴ The different approaches to categorising class, meant that potentially the middle classes could include both millionaire financiers and artisans.

The most successful attempts to establish the numbers in the middle classes have been derived from tax records. Leonard Schwarz has shown that in 1798 no more than 5% had incomes over £200 p.a. while a further 20% had an estimated income £70–£200, who could be said to correspond with the 'comfortable' middle class. These people, who represented a quarter of London's population, could afford to go to the opera, at least on occasion.⁵ For those earning less,

¹ P.L. Garside, 'London and the Home Counties', in *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750-1950*, Vol. 1, ed. F. M. L. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 480.

² *Ibid.*

³ Dror Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, c. 1780-1840* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 242, 244.

⁴ Eileen Janes Yeo, 'Class', in *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture 1776-1832*, ed. Iain McCalman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 143.

⁵ There is no comparable study that is closer to the year 1842 because income tax was not levied between 1816 and 1842 (Leonard Schwarz, 'Social Class and Social Geography: The Middle Classes in London

it was more difficult if not impossible. However, while income tax records give the most accurate indication of the numbers in the middle classes and their purchasing ability, it does not show their educational background or cultural affiliations.

Likewise, it is debated whether the upper classes should include the gentry, on the one hand, while many of the artisan class earned more money than lowly clerks, even though some of the clerks had privileges which came as perks with their jobs. Politically, Lord Grey thought the middle classes should be attached to the gentry, as they formed the ‘real and efficient mass of public opinion’,⁶ while reformers such as the National Political Union argued that ‘the People’ were the middle and working classes, who together constituted the ‘industrious, useful, intelligent and virtuous classes’.⁷

For people such as these, Britain was known as one of the most upwardly mobile countries in Europe, with the middle classes having greater political, economic and social freedom than say in France, Spain or Italy.⁸ Already by the end of the eighteenth century, a consumer society was developing. In this climate, theatres, assembly rooms and coffee houses flourished. Catering for this consumerism, newspapers such as *John Bull* and *The Illustrated London News*, founded in 1820 and 1842 respectively and aimed specifically at the middle classes, wrote about fashion items and exciting new products such as china dinner sets, thus creating a demand for goods and services.⁹

From the end of the eighteenth century, there was an emerging middle class made up from those from commerce and the professions, who with the politically moderate gentry and aristocratic friends created a sphere of literary culture and political action.¹⁰ It is these people I consider to be the middle class for the purpose of this study: they could afford to attend the theatre; they were educated; and their number included journalists, who not only wrote about the opera, but some of whom, like William Ayerton and James Davison, wrote trenchant reviews in the attempt to influence the public’s taste.

at the End of the Eighteenth Century’, *Social History*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (May 1982), 167-69; see also W.D. Rubinstein, ‘The Victorian Middle Classes: Wealth, Occupation, and Geography’, *The Economic History Review*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (Nov. 1977), 602-23.

⁶ Lord Grey, quoted in Yeo, ‘Class’, 149.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Nicholas Temperley, ‘Xenophilia in British Musical History’, in *Nineteenth-Century British Music Studies*, Vol. 1, ed. Bennett Zon (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 1999), 11.

⁹ Roy Porter, ‘Consumerism’, in *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture 1776-1832*, ed. Iain McCalman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 181-83.

¹⁰ Yeo, ‘Class’, 143.

Covent Garden

Covent Garden, where *Semiramide* was performed in 1842, held 2,500 people and gave approximately 200 performances a year.¹¹ It was governed by a manager who was responsible both for running the theatre as a business venture and for its artistic policy. As such, the managers would choose the actors, decide the programmes and frequently cut or rearrange them to suit the production. He would superintend rehearsals and, if he were an actor, would perform many of the leading roles in the repertoire. He was responsible for paying salaries and selecting the key staff as well as keeping an eye on the door-keepers, box office staff, machinery and auditorium.¹²

In 1832, the minimum annual running costs for Covent Garden were estimated to exceed £50,000, although during the period when Alfred Bunn and David Osbaldiston were the managers (1833-37), they succeeded in bringing these down to £30,000 p.a. However, during Elizabeth Vestris and Charles Mathews' management (1838-1842) costs rose again to an average of £51,000–55,000.¹³ The main source of income to cover these costs came from box-office receipts; however, in the 1830s, receipts rarely exceeded £50,000, with the result that the managers all made significant losses.¹⁴

Half of Covent Garden's expenditure related to personnel costs: the patent theatres had substantial numbers of scene shifters, carpenters, scenic painters, costume designers, a prompter, stage manager and other technical staff. Gabriella Dideriksen tells us that Covent Garden employed an estimated 1,000 people between 1820 and 1840,¹⁵ although during the 1839-40 season under the management of Vestris and Mathews only 684 employees were recorded on the payroll; these included 80 actors, 89 supernumeraries, 116 in the wardrobe and 199 technical staff.¹⁶ However, 2,000 might be employed during the labour-intensive pantomime season, and extra staff may well have been engaged for a large scale production like *Semiramide*. Attempts to cut down the

¹¹ Gabriella Dideriksen, 'Repertory and Rivalry: Opera at the Second Covent Garden Theatre, 1830 to 1856' (PhD diss., King's College London, 1997), 30, 45. There are a number of conflicting statements about the capacity of Covent Garden: 2,500 was the figure given to the 1832 Select Committee; in 1826 E.W. Brayley said the capacity was 3,000 'exclusive of standing-room' (Dideriksen, 'Repertory and Rivalry', 46, 64n122); Charles Beecher Hogan in *The London Stage, 1776–1800: A Critical Introduction*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968), xlv, said that Covent Garden held 3,013 playgoers in 1792. As a comparison, the figure given to the 1832 Select Committee for the capacity of Drury Lane was 3,000; Brayley in 1826 said it was 3,110; and *The London Stage*, 'a little over 3,600' in 1794 (see Dideriksen, 'Repertory and Rivalry', 46, 64n122; Hogan, *The London Stage, 1776–1800*, xliii-xlv).

¹² Michael R. Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 28-29.

¹³ Dideriksen, 'Repertory and Rivalry', 22-23.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁶ Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age*, 34.

staffing by Bunn, Osbaldiston and Vestris had little success. Effectively the theatre ran as four separate troupes which performed tragedy, comedy, opera and ballet; a total of 80-90 artists were employed, with additional actors, singers and dancers being hired for the occasion.

The theatre's repertoire consisted of a variety of theatrical genres, including serious drama, comedy, opera, ballet, pantomime, farce, interlude, melodrama and spectacle, with all performances in English. There was a long-standing tradition that the patent theatres should foster native drama and literary talent. Yet the manager in charge at the time would put his own stamp on the repertoire: when Bunn was in charge of both patent theatres between 1833 and 1835, he assigned opera, ballet and pantomime to Covent Garden, with tragedy, comedy and farce performed at Drury Lane as a way of cutting costs.¹⁷ After Vestris and Mathews became the managers of Covent Garden in 1839, they put on comedy in addition to mounting the magnificent spectacles they had been known for at the Olympic Theatre;¹⁸ in their final year (1841-42), they also put on a programme of highly successful adaptations of Italian operas in English with Adelaide Kemble. Adelaide's father Charles Kemble took over the management of Covent Garden for a short season in the autumn of 1842. He put on a mixed repertoire of comedy, farce, a spectacular production of *The Tempest*, as well as continuing the programme of Italian operas with his daughter: one of these was *Semiramide*. The evening's entertainment began with a main piece, either a full-length drama or an opera, plus one or two afterpieces, either a farce, melodrama, ballet or short opera. During the 1830s drama accounted for 70% to 85% of the performances with opera between 20% and 30% and ballet less than 5%.¹⁹

The audience profile of Covent Garden can be inferred in part from the population of the West End, where the theatre was situated, which encompassed the fashionable shops of Oxford Street and Regent Street and the professional people who lived between the Strand and the Thames, while census returns show a wide range of tradesmen, apprentices, skilled artisans as well as French and German migrants.

Yet, some of the fashionable moved away from the area as London increased in size,²⁰ while after the arrival of melodrama at the beginning of the century other members of the upper classes chose to go to the King's Theatre. In 1842, Covent Garden's audience probably comprised a range of social classes, although its core audience were probably comfortably off as they could afford the ticket prices which were slightly higher than most other theatres.

¹⁷ Sarah Hibberd, 'Grand Opera in Britain and the Americas', in *The Cambridge Companion to Grand Opera*, ed. David Charlton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 405.

¹⁸ Dideriksen, 'Repertory and Rivalry', 30-31.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 135.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 171.

The Italian Opera

Her Majesty's Theatre was an important part of the London theatre scene. It was a fashionable venue which put on Italian opera, concerts and other events during the social season. Although its main income came from subscriptions, the theatre was now attempting to become more commercial in an attempt to stem its financial losses. Until the Covent Garden production, this was where *Semiramide* had always been performed. The elite prized the Italian singers who performed at the Opera House above English singers. It is significant that Kemble and Shaw were compared with these Italian singers, and knowledge about them provides an important background to understanding the esteem given to Kemble and Shaw.

The capacity of the theatre was approximately 3,280.²¹ In 1842, the theatre gave performances from March until July or early August, coinciding with the social season. Starting the season in March made it possible to recruit star singers from Paris after their winter season.²² The bulk of the theatre's repertoire consisted of Italian opera. Mozart was introduced in 1806 when *La clemenza di Tito* was performed for Elizabeth Billington's benefit. Mozart became more popular after performances were given of *Le nozze di Figaro* and *Don Giovanni* in 1816 and 1817 respectively, his operas accounting for 48% of the performances in the period 1816 to 1820, although the figure would drop to 11% in the decade 1821 to 1831, when Rossini topped the repertoire with 59% of the performances; he too would fall to 30% in the following decade (1832 to 1841). In the 1830s and 1840s Bellini and Donizetti were also well-liked, but it would take until the 1840s before they overtook Rossini in popularity.²³ After 1832, when a French company brought *Robert le diable* to the theatre, and a German cast brought other operas, including *Fidelio* and *Der Freischütz*, a small number of operas were performed in the original languages by visiting French and German troupes.

The theatre was also used for other events: in June and July 1842, Mlle Rachel starred in a series of classical French tragedies.²⁴ Concerts were also given by well-known performers, sometimes as private events which were part of the social season. In addition, there were balls and masquerades. Ayrton's account books for 1821 show that non-operatic events only accounted for 3% of the total

²¹ The figure given to 1832 Select Committee (see Dideriksen, 'Repertory and Rivalry', 46.); Jennifer Hall-Witt, on the other hand, says that in 1790 the newly rebuilt King's Theatre seated 2,500 spectators, and 3,300 when filled to overflowing (see Jennifer Hall-Witt, *Fashionable Acts: Opera and Elite Culture in London, 1780-1880* (Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire Press; Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2007), 105).

²² The winter season at the Paris Opéra lasted until March: the Théâtre Italien to the end of April (Hall-Witt, *Fashionable Acts*, 158).

²³ See Hall-Witt, *Fashionable Acts*, 52 and 297-98. The proportion of performances at the King's Theatre in the period 1842 to 1851: Mozart 9%; Rossini 14%; Donizetti 34% and Bellini 18%.

²⁴ Rachel Félix gave seven performances between 10 June and 11 July 1842.

revenue.²⁵ It is unlikely that the figure was very different for 1842 as the theatre faced even greater competition from concerts, performances in other theatres, and opera in translation. Nevertheless, the theatre had a number of high-profile charity events that year. These included a concert organised by Ignaz Moscheles in aid of victims of a conflagration in Hamburg; it featured a series of star performers including Felix Mendelssohn and Sigismond Thalberg.²⁶ There was also the spectacular Spitalfields Ball, held at the command of Queen Victoria, which raised £1,000 for the silk trade which was in difficulty.²⁷

The foreign singers who performed at Her Majesty's Theatre commanded high fees and controlled what happened in the opera house. Isabella Colbran's 1824 contract for six months specified that she was to be paid £1,500, although in the event she lost her voice.²⁸ At the time Richard Mackenzie Bacon complained about 'the immoderate expectations of principal singers and dancers ... when an English engagement is offered them' and that 'the sums paid are not only far greater than those enjoyed by any similar establishment in Europe, but far beyond'.²⁹ Although Bacon was known for his views that too much notice was given to foreign performers, the fact was that foreign performers could rarely earn more than they did in London.³⁰ as John Rosselli has shown, fees paid to Italian singers were two or three times what was available in Italy.³¹ Yet a singer's career was often short and it was only the top performers who earned the highest fees which were based on their recent performances and drawing power. The majority of singers were paid far less: in 1827 four principals were paid over £1,000; the rest were paid an average of £338.³² Yet Colbran's fee was not especially large: Giuditta Pasta's contract in 1826 specified that she was to be paid £2,300 for three and a half months' work and that she was not obliged to sing more than six performances a month, thus a total of 21 performances. In addition, she had the right to choose the roles she sang, the other actors, the distribution of the roles and to direct the

²⁵ Hall-Witt, *Fashionable Acts*, 154.

²⁶ The concert was held on 24 June 1842 (see *Bell's Weekly Messenger*, 25 June 1842; *Era*, 26 June 1842).

²⁷ 2,402 tickets at a guinea each were sold for the ball, which was held on 26 May 1842. The related costs came to £2,200 including £1,800 for remodelling the theatre, thus raising approximately £1,000 (see for example, *Bell's New Weekly Messenger*, 29 May 1842; *Era*, 29 May 1842; *Morning Post*, 21 June 1842).

²⁸ Mauro Bucarelli, 'Rossini Fever', in *Rossini 1792-1992: Mostra storico-documentaria*, ed. Mauro Bucarelli (Perugia: Electa Editori Umbri, 1992), 206.

²⁹ *Quarterly Musical Magazine and Review*, Vol. 6, No. 21, (January 1824), 48, 47, quoted by Leanne Langley, 'The Musical Press in Nineteenth-Century England', *Notes*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (March 1990), 309.

³⁰ See John Carnelley, *George Smart and Nineteenth-Century London Concert Life* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: The Boydell Press, 2015), 171-72; Bucarelli, 'Rossini Fever', 205.

³¹ John Rosselli, *The opera Industry in Italy from Cimarosa to Verdi: The Role of the Impresario* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 64-65.

³² See John Ebers, *Seven Years of the King's Theatre* (London: William Harrison Ainsworth, 1828), 392, 394.

rehearsals and the *mise en scène*.³³ That same year, Angelica Catalani attempted unsuccessfully to enter into a contract on similar terms, although instead of a fee she wanted half the ‘general receipts of the theatre’ without any of the costs.³⁴

The ambience of the theatre was coloured by its subscription culture, under which aristocratic audiences paid for a box for the season. In the eighteenth century, the aristocracy was restricted in size, and many of the noble families knew each other personally. The close relationship between the theatre and the noble families began to change after the theatre was rebuilt in 1782 and 1791, making it much larger in size and less intimate. In addition, the number of peers had increased rapidly at the end of the eighteenth century because many new knights and baronets were created who did not belong to the old landed families who all knew each other.³⁵

From the 1780s, the theatre was in a permanent state of insolvency due to the debts which had mounted up during the renovation and rebuilding in 1782 and 1791, and the high fees paid to the singers. This poor financial situation forced the Opera House to become more commercial. In order to cover its obligations, a number of boxes were sold at the end of the eighteenth century for a term lasting until 1824.³⁶ As these so-called ‘property boxes’ could be resold or sublet, bookshops started selling them at a discount for the season, for alternate weeks, months or even for the night. Although the theatre did not benefit from these sales, it was the start of a process whereby the booksellers would sell tickets, undercutting the box office price and giving families of the gentry a cheaper way of attending the opera.³⁷ The sale of property boxes also meant forfeiting revenue streams in the future, a difficulty that was overcome by steadily raising the subscription price from 120 guineas p.a. in 1791 to more than double at 300 guineas p.a. in 1811, a figure unaffordable by many of the lower aristocracy. In an attempt to find new sources of income, Laporte increasingly put on additional performances on the non-subscription nights: by the mid-1840s, the programme generally consisted of extracts of a variety of operas and ballet so that it did not compete with the regular subscriptions.

Even with these changes, the cost of seats was still high. The elite nature of Her Majesty’s Theatre was reinforced by the high cost of tickets and subscriptions. Most seats were sold on subscription, with a box costing £300 and a stall seat £40 for the 1840 season.³⁸ A few tickets

³³ *Ibid.*, 387-90.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 283-85, 387-90; see also Susan Rutherford, *The Prima Donna and Opera, 1815-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 167-69.

³⁵ The peerage doubled in size between 1780 and Queen Victoria’s accession in 1837 (see Hall-Witt, *Fashionable Acts*, 111).

³⁶ Ebers, *Seven years of the King's Theatre*, 9; Hall-Witt, *Fashionable Acts*, 84.

³⁷ Hall-Witt, *Fashionable Acts*, 153.

³⁸ See Appendix IV for a comparison of Seat Prices in London Theatres.

were sold by the night, with seats in the gallery and upper gallery costing 5s and 3s respectively when purchased from the theatre. For middle-class people earning £150 p.a., such as teachers and music students, four seats in the gallery would have been a considerable luxury at 1.5% of their annual income. Those in the middle levels of the commercial and professional classes such as retailers and members of the liberal professions, earning £250 p.a., might be able to afford tickets in the pit at a half-guinea, but some chose not to do so as this required formal dress. Families with an income of £700–800, such as gentlemen and top civil servants, could easily afford tickets on occasion in the pit or one of the few empty boxes in the top tiers, while a gentry family earning £1,500 might also be able to afford tickets in the pit or a box on a nightly basis during a visit to London.³⁹ These ticket prices were significantly higher than the other London theatres, all of which sold tickets in the galleries for 1s., or even 6d., and where ticket prices were reduced after 9 p.m. Thus tickets at Her Majesty's Theatre were prohibitive to anyone from the working class and barely affordable by those from the lower middle class, with the result that access to Italian opera was thus restricted to the well-to-do.

During the first four decades of the century, the customer base and repertoire of Her Majesty's Theatre had undergone a process of change, which was still continuing in 1842. The theatre still retained its position as a fashionable venue frequented by the upper aristocracy with the bulk of its income from subscriptions. Most of the singers came from the continent. But instead of serving a restricted number of aristocratic families, the peerage had become larger and the theatre was reaching out to non-subscribers with special programmes on Thursday nights, while families with more modest means could buy tickets that were more affordable through the booksellers. Although the opera attempted to become more commercial, the fact that the booksellers undercut the theatre's box office meant that the bulk of its income still came from subscriptions and the Opera House did not yet derive an income from the new audiences who came to the theatre. The repertoire was also changing: the bulk of the repertoire was still Italian opera, with Bellini and Donizetti in the ascendant; however, some French and German opera was now being performed.

The Minor Theatres

Before 1842, the licences granted to the minor theatres allowed them to perform burlettas. At the start of the 1820s, the younger George Colman, Examiner of Plays, judged that a three-act play with at least five songs in each act qualified as a burletta. However, the licencing laws were not upheld and the plays were gradually stripped of their musical content. Thus by the 1840s, the

³⁹ See Hall-Witt, *Fashionable Acts*, 105, 107.

amount of music required was minimal.⁴⁰ Songs were dropped in performance and gradually the lines between the different genres were blurred: plays were presented with songs or performed in excerpts, while burlettas were interspersed by dialogue.⁴¹

After the licensing laws were relaxed at the end of the eighteenth century, an increasing number of enterprising actors and managers applied for restricted licences to perform burlettas, ballad operas and melodramas. New theatres, such as the Olympic and St. James's, were opened in Westminster close to the patent theatres. Between 1800 and 1843, a further 26 new theatres opened, although four of these were destroyed by fire.⁴² The illegitimate theatres were associated with heterogeneity, spectacle, song and foreign elements.⁴³ In 1800, Dutton's *Dramatic Censor* considered the illegitimate theatres as unskilled and lacking in originality. However, the quality of the work produced at the minor theatres improved substantially, so that theatres such as the Olympic drew sophisticated audiences for its spectacular productions under Vestris' management.

Although spectators would travel from outside the centre of London to theatres in the West End, generally audiences reflected the neighbourhood in which the theatre was located. In the East End performances were attended by artisans, immigrants and those involved in the sea and river industries, as well as distilling and brewing. The plays in the area also reflected the local population, with heroes or heroines who were sailors or Jewish, for example, *The Sailor's Frolic* and *Esther, the Royal Jewess* (Pavilion, 1835). However, in Southwark, both the Surrey and Royal Coburg theatres took steps to bring audiences from outside the area: they sold tickets in the West End and a series of coaches became available to transport theatregoers from other parts of London.⁴⁴

Challenges to the Theatrical System

By 1842, the theatrical system was in crisis. Not only had there been an explosion in the number of minor theatres during the early part of the century, but the licensing laws were not being upheld. This put pressure on the major theatres, which all had trouble filling their houses and lost money. As the repertoire of the major and minor theatres converged, the major theatres lost their

⁴⁰ Allardyce Nicoll, *A History of English Drama, 1660-1900*, Vol. 4, *Early Nineteenth Century Drama, 1800-1850*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: University Press, 1955), 138-39; Martin Banham, *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 338.

⁴¹ Dideriksen, 'Repertory and Rivalry', 43.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Reed, 'Interrogating Legitimacy' in *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre, 1737-1832* ed. Julia Swindells and David Francis Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 249.

⁴⁴ Jane Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 172-3.

monopoly status. In this increasingly competitive climate, managers looked for ways to make a profit, including by hiring star singers, or mounting a spectacle. It was therefore particularly important that *Semiramide* made a profit.

The minor theatres wanted to be able to put on straight plays and increasingly they got away with including less and less music in their productions. Meanwhile, the patent theatres wished to mount opera in the Italian language, although with the licencing laws in place this was barred to them. Indeed William Dunn, Treasurer to the Committee that owned Drury Lane, asserted that the theatre would have been able to ask £4,000–5,000 more per year in rent had they been able to do so,⁴⁵ a view echoed by Pierre François Laporte who told the 1832 Select Committee that as manager of Covent Garden he might ‘perhaps’ have been willing to pay more than the already high rent had he been allowed to put on opera in Italian.⁴⁶

The losses incurred by the major theatres were blamed on the cost of running theatres of such a large size. Yet some of the minor theatres were also vast: compared to Covent Garden’s capacity of 2,500, Sadler’s Wells held 2,220 and the Coburg, the largest of the minor theatres, 3,800.⁴⁷ The difference was that the minor theatres used fewer staff: the Coburg, for example, employed about 500 artists, while the Surrey had about 400, and generally these theatres managed to cover their expenses.⁴⁸

The fact was that on the continent full-scale opera of high quality only managed to be financially viable when subsidised by a royal patron as in Berlin, or by the state as in Paris.⁴⁹ Yet although Britain’s major theatres had royal patents, they did not benefit from royal or government funding. They therefore had to rely entirely on private capital and commercial success.⁵⁰ The financial crisis faced by the major theatres was tackled in different ways. Bunn made stringent cuts to the salaries of the artists, only making an exception for Maria Malibran, who became the highest paid artist in the 1830s. When Bunn managed both patent theatres, he combined the staff of the two theatres during 1833-35. However, regularly performers had to shuttle between the two theatres between the main and afterpieces.⁵¹

⁴⁵ Christina Fuhrmann, *Foreign Opera at the London Playhouses: From Mozart to Bellini* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 5.

⁴⁶ Dideriksen, ‘Repertory and Rivalry’, 27.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 23-25.

⁴⁹ Carnelley, *George Smart*, 170-71.

⁵⁰ Dideriksen, ‘Repertory and Rivalry’, 18-19.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

At the King's Theatre, Pierre François Laporte also took a parsimonious approach to staffing and wages. Although he brought some of the century's most famous singers to London, including Luigi Lablache, Giovanni Rubini, Giulia Grisi and Giovanni Mario, he tried to restrict the theatre's heavy losses, including the sums paid to Italian singers. However, by the time of Laporte's death in 1841, Her Majesty's Theatre, as the theatre was now called, was tired following a decade of extensive cuts: it was now in a wretched state and had become something of a 'slough of despond'.⁵² In order to retrieve this situation, one of Benjamin Lumley's first actions on taking over as manager in 1842 was to redecorate the theatre.⁵³

Another way for the patent theatres to win audiences was by putting their efforts into set design and spectacle. Yet this was invariably expensive and put the theatres in direct competition with minor theatres such as the Olympic, which was known for its extravagant spectacles and which were mounted at less cost. Her Majesty's Theatre concentrated instead on the quality of the continental singers.

When the anonymous author of *The Italian Opera in 1839* wrote about a possible revival of *Semiramide* for Her Majesty's Theatre 1840, they pleaded that it should be 'a revival ... with every possible attention to *spectacle*'.⁵⁴ The writer's comment may have been made with reference to Laporte's frugal management, particularly in contrast to the writer's memories of Alessandro Sanquirico's magnificent set designs at La Scala, where the writer had reputedly performed. Yet, it also suggests that there was a desire that the high-quality singing at the Opera House should be complemented by fashionable spectacle.⁵⁵ In addition, I would argue, that it signals that the writer considered that the beauty of the singer's voice was not the only criteria for a great operatic performance and this may indicate that there was some pressure for Her Majesty's Theatre to edge towards more populist production values. However, when *Semiramide* was next performed in 1841 (not 1840), there is no indication that it had any greater degree of spectacle than previously.⁵⁶

It would be the Covent Garden *Semiramide* in 1842 that would come closest to fulfilling the role the writer seemed to be asking for: Adelaide Kemble was a star singer in a spectacular production, which, as we shall see, was said to put the productions of *Semiramide* at Her Majesty's Theatre in the shade.⁵⁷ Kemble's performances, 1841-1842, represented something of a swan-song for

⁵² *Musical World*, 19 September 1846, quoted by Hall-Witt, *Fashionable Acts*, 160.

⁵³ See Hall-Witt, *Fashionable Acts*, 159-60.

⁵⁴ *The Italian Opera in 1839: Its Latest Improvements and Existing Defects Impartially considered. By the author of 'The Star of La Scala', etc.* (London: J. Alfred Novello, 1840), 95 (writer's emphasis).

⁵⁵ Alessandro Sanquirico (1777-1849) worked at La Scala between 1818 and 1832.

⁵⁶ See *Morning Post*, 14 and 16 June 1841.

⁵⁷ *Spectator*, 8 October 1842, 974.

Covent Garden. The challenges to the theatrical system were resolved the following year when the Act for Regulating Theatres 1843 repealed all the licencing laws. Without protection for its repertoire, Covent Garden almost immediately ceased to be a playhouse. Between November 1843 and the summer of 1846, no manager leased the theatre for more than four months.⁵⁸

English Opera and Foreign Adaptations

English opera was mounted at both the patent and minor theatres. During the period 1809 to 1820, English operas had an uncomplicated structure in which solo numbers were put within the setting of spoken dialogue or play. The songs were often made up of two to three strophic verses and had an elementary harmonic language. Large-scale ensembles were placed in the opening scene and the finale to each act.⁵⁹ In these operas, spoken dialogue was used to convey the action of the plot, while the music functioned to express the emotion of the situation rather than to push the story forwards. As the anonymous author of the preface to the 1826 edition of *The Lord of the Manor* said, although the music and dialogue were ‘rendered independent of each other ... [they were] happily interwoven’.⁶⁰ The librettist William Dimond, writing in 1824, wrote that the dialogue should ‘banish *ennui* during the necessary spaces between song and song’, while music should ‘spring with spontaneity out of the very necessities of the Scene’ and appear as an ‘integral’ and ‘indispensable’ part of the story.⁶¹ As can be seen from these quotations, the music and dialogue had different roles, although they worked together to create a single entity. Because of this separation of music and action, the cast was often divided between those with singing roles and those with speaking parts. Almost all the leading male roles in the first quarter of the nineteenth century were spoken.⁶²

The plots of English opera were often derived from foreign ballet, plays or operas.⁶³ They frequently concerned the complications of love, such as the innocent maiden rescued by the faithful hero or the young penniless man who makes his fortune after arduous adventures and marries the girl he loves. The opera invariably had a happy ending, and there was an expectation that good should be rewarded and bad punished. Operas with exotic locations were also popular and gave scope for ingenious stage design, costumes and illustrative music: an example was Weber’s *Oberon* (1826), set in Baghdad and Tunis and featuring a harem as well as Shakespeare’s

⁵⁸ Dideriksen, ‘Repertory and Rivalry’, 49.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 255.

⁶⁰ Preface to John Burgoyne, *The Lord of the Manor* (London: John Cumberland, [1826]) quoted by *Ibid.*, 246.

⁶¹ William Dimond, quoted by Dideriksen, ‘Repertory and Rivalry’, 245.

⁶² Fuhrmann, *Foreign Opera*, 40-41.

⁶³ Dideriksen, ‘Repertory and Rivalry’, 248.

fairies. Yet exoticism could equally include a plot involving gypsies, as in Michael William Balfe's *The Bohemian Girl* (1843), or European locations such as Switzerland, as in Henry Rowley Bishop's *Home Sweet Home* (1829), or the Tyrol, as in William Rooke's *Amilie* (first performed in 1837).⁶⁴

During the 1820s, there was little harmonic complexity or overall tonal scheme for the opera: Bishop's *Home Sweet Home* was largely written in B flat major and D major, with only occasional modulations to the dominant or other relative keys.⁶⁵ As part of the composer's income was derived from sales of sheet music, it was in his interest to provide the singable ballads and songs that audiences liked and sold in the music shops. But as several critics argued, the incentive to provide saleable music encouraged composers to write opera ballads with little dramatic purpose.⁶⁶ A number of writers and composers, such as James Robinson Planché, Bishop and Weber, felt limited by the conventions of a genre which had non-singing actors and appeared to make the music subservient to the dialogue.⁶⁷

Yet starting in the 1810s, English versions of continental operas began to be performed alongside English operas in the London playhouses. Works by composers such as Mozart, Rossini, Auber and Meyerbeer, were freely adapted so as to suit English musical tastes and expectations. Because English audiences favoured simple strophic airs and liked the action to be separated from the music, libretti were cut freely and musical numbers replaced, while spoken dialogue replaced recitative. Bishop dominated the first of these adaptations, which included *The Libertine* (an 'Englished' version of *Don Giovanni*, 1817), *The Barber of Seville* (1818) and *The Marriage of Figaro* (1819), all operas performed at Covent Garden.

Although the first of these adaptations of foreign opera took place in the patent theatres, this changed in 1824, when *Der Freischütz* became a popular success. With its melodramatic plot and catchy tunes, it was so much in demand that within four months eight different English versions were mounted. It was the first time that the minor theatres became interested in putting on adapted opera; they raced to bring out their productions ahead of the patent theatres. Yet although *Der Freischütz* had charming folk-like melodies, several critics thought that the music was too 'wild and extravagant' and would 'never suit the English taste'.⁶⁸ Others like Bacon disliked what they saw as the studied nature of Weber's German music, with its 'preference for instrumental over

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 250.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 263.

⁶⁶ Alison Mero, 'The Climate for Opera in London, 1834-1865', in *Musicians of Bath and Beyond: Edward Loder (1809-1865) and his Family*, ed. Nicholas Temperley (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2016), 71.

⁶⁷ Dideriksen, 'Repertory and Rivalry', 244.

⁶⁸ Henry Phillips quoted by Fuhrmann, *Foreign Opera*, 73.

vocal effects ... the absence of melody except in occasional short traits [and] the chromatic structure of the voice parts'.⁶⁹ The first of these adaptations was William Hawes' version at the English Opera House, which kept many of the long ensembles, fluid arias and the extended Wolf's Glen scene, with its meeting of action and music, but few singable tunes. It was the spectacle and the supernatural nature of this last scene, which was retained almost complete, that tapped into the popularity of supernatural tales, phantasmagoria and melodrama at the time and helped to guarantee the opera's success. However, Hawes also made significant changes, the most striking of which was to split Caspar into two separate roles: Caspar became a completely spoken part, while a new character Rollo was added who sang.⁷⁰ Thus, the action was separated from the music, as was the norm for English opera.

The first adaptations of *Der Freischütz* in the English language were loose arrangements of Weber's opera. However, partly because of copyright issues, later versions became increasingly concerned with being faithful to the composer's score. As Fuhmann has shown, fidelity to the composer became a matter of prestige and was used as a selling point by the patent theatres.⁷¹ Yet, despite this, initially the public did not always like the results and thought the operas should be curtailed. There were also practical issues for the theatres: if a production advertised its fidelity, the music could not be changed to support less-skilled singers as was sometimes needed.⁷² It also took longer to produce an accurate version, for, instead of arranging a few ballads and choruses, it meant revising a greater part of the opera. As a result, the minor theatres, which were not as concerned about keeping close to the original, were able to bring out new adaptations more quickly than the patent theatres and thus win audiences. By the time *Der Freischütz* appeared in the patent theatres, the critics had become attuned to the rapidly mounted adaptations in the minor theatres and accordingly critiqued the more authentic revisions that were not what they expected. Bishop's version of *Der Freischütz* in English was the last to appear. He chose to include more of Weber's music than had anyone else, building on what had become the public's familiarity with the music: he kept all the ensembles and Weber's protracted finale, which had previously been removed and which many critics thought went against British taste.⁷³ Yet, not only did critics think Bishop's version was the most altered, but the *Literary Gazette* disliked Caspar being both a singing and speaking role as in Weber's original, because it preferred the English convention of giving speaking roles to the leading men rather than having a faithful score.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Richard Mackenzie Bacon quoted by Fuhmann, *Foreign Opera*, 86.

⁷⁰ Fuhmann, *Foreign Opera*, 74.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 166-67.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 85-86.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 85-86, 89-90.

In response to the arguments about copyright and fidelity, Edward Holmes, writing for *The Atlas*, tried to redefine the term ‘adaptation’:

This word ... is ... generally understood, to refer only to the arrangement of a new language, and to the trifling alteration of the music which that operation renders necessary, while the original score remains intact ... But the term *adaptation* has never ... been applied to the total rescoring of a composition.⁷⁵

Yet despite advocating faithfulness, the attitudes of critics were inconsistent and audience tastes contradictory. Thus, apparently authentic productions, such as *Robert le diable* at the King’s Theatre (1833) and Covent Garden (1847), were condemned, while other radically altered versions, including Planché’s English version of Auber’s *Gustave III (Gustavus the Third)*, were praised.⁷⁶ This latter opera was reduced from five acts to three, by omitting some of the ensemble numbers and ballet; major changes were also made to the plot, which was seen as immoral. Nevertheless, the production became a society event as nobles and politicians appeared onstage in the ball scene at the end. Ignoring questions of fidelity, the critics lapped up the changes and praised the opera’s ‘anglicised’ plot and the ‘grandeur’, ‘chasteness and elegance’ of the lavish production.⁷⁷ Fifteen years later, the heavily reworked *Gli Ugonotti*, an Italian version of *Les Huguenots* for Covent Garden (1848), was praised for preserving the spirit of the work. The opera was shortened, and the structure simplified. The revised opera was well-liked, for by placing the focus on the principal soloists rather than the crowds, *Les Huguenots* now fitted the Italian opera genre normally performed at the Royal Italian Opera.⁷⁸

Despite these contradictions, foreign operas were popular and allowed the public to become familiar with European music. Over time, audiences, particularly at the patent theatres, changed their attitudes and began to expect adaptations to be faithful to the composer, or at least thought of fidelity as an ideal to espouse. This was reflected in Bishop’s 1833 adaptation of *Don Giovanni* for Drury Lane, which had more of Mozart’s music than any other London production to date, including those at the King’s Theatre.⁷⁹ In the 1833 version, music predominated over spoken dialogue; every character sang difficult music; there were lengthy and intricate ensembles; and the music was essential to understanding the plot.

However, some devotees of Italian opera, such as the author of *The Italian Opera in 1839*, held that the adaptations of foreign opera were ‘mutilated compositions’ with ‘scanty indifferent

⁷⁵ *The Atlas* quoted by *Ibid.*, 165.

⁷⁶ See Fuhrmann, *Foreign Opera*, 159-69, 191-92; Sarah Hibberd, ‘Grand Opera in Britain and the Americas’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Grand Opera*, ed. David Charlton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 408, 410.

⁷⁷ Hibberd, ‘Grand Opera in Britain and the Americas’, 408.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 409-10.

⁷⁹ Fuhrmann, *Foreign Opera*, 173.

orchestras'.⁸⁰ Indeed in the minor theatres they often were, although they could be rather more faithful to the original in the patent theatres. Referring to the great popularity of what the same writer considered an overrated opera, *I Puritani*,⁸¹ they argued that the poor quality of the adaptations of foreign operas meant that the [middle-class] public were 'delighted' with any grand opera 'performed in its entirety by a magnificent orchestra'.⁸² Their taste, they said, needed to be 'matured' by listening to the great works of Mercadante and Donizetti, which 'forcibly [combined] musical and dramatic effect'. They would then no longer rank *I Puritani* as a 'work of first-class excellence'.⁸³

Yet despite the strictures of the writer, the elite expressed little interest in seeing how the musical taste of the public might be improved. In addition, for a very stratified society, the writer's remarks seemed, at least in part, to be concerned with the fashionable maintaining a distance from those of lower rank and less musically educated than themselves. By contrast, a number of professional journalists, including Davison and George Hogarth, did indeed try and raise the public's taste, but many of them tried to promote German music, serious listening and respect for the work concept, in preference to Italian opera, which they regarded as light in character.⁸⁴

Although the writer of *The Italian Opera in 1839* may have disliked *I Puritani*, according to Henry Chorley it was immensely popular during the 1830s, being ground out by barrel-organs and disseminated through sales of sheet music.⁸⁵ The public started to become familiar with German, French and Italian music as the most popular numbers from operas such as *I Puritani* spread and English adaptations of continental opera were mounted. In turn, these sound-worlds began to influence English opera. *Der Freischütz*, for example, showed that even with extensive dialogue, characterisation could be achieved by musical means; opera could incorporate lengthy set pieces which allowed for emotional development.⁸⁶ The impact of Weber's music was reinforced through the successful production of *Oberon* two years later.⁸⁷ John Barnett, who had received a German-oriented musical training, was one of those influenced by the composer. Barnett

⁸⁰ *The Italian Opera in 1839*, 19. See also *Spectator*, 5 February 1831, 135.

⁸¹ *I Puritani* had been performed at the King's Theatre in 1835, 1836, 1837 and 1839.

⁸² *The Italian Opera in 1839*, 19.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Hall-Witt, *Fashionable Acts*, 228-31, 233-36.

⁸⁵ See Henry Fothergill Chorley, *Thirty Years' Musical Recollections*, Vol. 1 (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1862), Vol. 1, 93-94.

⁸⁶ John Caldwell, *The Oxford history of English Music*, Vol. 2, *From c. 1715 to the Present Day* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 181.

⁸⁷ Michael Hurd, 'Opera: 1834-1865', in *The Romantic Age 1800-1914*, ed. Nicholas Temperley (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 307.

described his popular *The Mountain Sylph* (1834) as his ‘first attempt at legitimate opera’:⁸⁸ Although there was spoken dialogue, the work was largely through-composed with concerted action pieces: it had few strophic songs and no binary or sonata-form arias. Barnett managed to create strong emotion and dramatic tension through the richly scored music.⁸⁹

The popular adaptations of French operas by Boieldieu, Auber and Meyerbeer also began to influence English opera during the 1830s. An example is George Rodwell’s *Paul Clifford* (1835), which included a couple of concerted pieces. The whole of the robbery, in which Paul meets Lucy, was set to music, and other scenes were only briefly interrupted by spoken dialogue. The chorus was also used in a new way: instead of merely accompanying the soloists as was usual for English opera, the chorus was split into prisoners and warders and incorporated into the dramatic action. Although the music was plain and the opera had structural problems, using music dramatically in this way was completely new for English opera.⁹⁰

While *Paul Clifford* borrowed from French opera, other operas such as Rooke’s *Amilie* (1837) borrowed from Italian forms.⁹¹ In this opera, none of the vocal numbers had strophic settings; the solo numbers and many of the ensembles were introduced by recitative rather than spoken dialogue; the opera included a lengthy *scena* for each of the principal singers; and one of the duets had the conventional Italian four-movement structure. Although there was no overall tonal scheme, Rooke used key changes and modulations to heighten dramatic tension: Amilie’s lapse into madness in Act II was paralleled by a descent from F major via B flat major and E flat major to F minor; when it appears that she will be rescued in Act III, the music modulates briefly from D minor to B flat major. Orchestral colour was also used, with brass and wind for the hunters and gypsies, and an organ to accompany the hymn.⁹²

Some of the most successful British operas during the 1830s and 1840s were by the Irishman Michael William Balfe. These included *The Maid of Artois* (1836), written for Maria Malibran, and *The Bohemian Girl* (1843) which ran for over 100 performances at Drury Lane and gained an international reputation from performances on the continent and USA. This opera was particularly known for the ballad ‘I dreamt that I dwelt in marble halls’, written for Elizabeth Rainforth who

⁸⁸ John Barnett quoted by Caldwell, *From c. 1715 to the Present Day*, 181.

⁸⁹ Nigel Burton and Nicholas Temperley, ‘Mountain Sylph, The’, *Grove Music Online* (Oxford University Press, 2002), <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-5000903311> (accessed 14 August 2018); Hurd, ‘Opera: 1834-1865’, 309.

⁹⁰ Dideriksen, ‘Repertory and Rivalry’, 267-68.

⁹¹ Originally written in 1818, Dideriksen considers that *Amilie* must have been revised before its first performance at Covent Garden in 1837 as neither the music nor the libretto concurs with works of the earlier date (*Ibid.*, 270).

⁹² *Ibid.*, 272-77.

had taken over the role of Semiramide after Adelaide Kemble's retirement. Balfe, who had studied composition and singing in Italy, was particularly influenced by Rossini. He was familiar with the latest Italianate idioms and was able to write convincing ensembles.⁹³ By the 1840s, English opera was beginning to have a greater synthesis of music and drama; it also included aspects derived from continental opera including Italian *scenas*, French choral scenes and German complex harmonies, as well as English ballads and glees.⁹⁴

Recitative

Although English opera was increasingly being influenced by continental models, an important difference between Italian and English opera, including foreign opera in translation, concerned the use of recitative. Although it was an essential feature of through-composed Italian opera, it remained controversial. Audiences found recitative distasteful in English opera, even though it was deemed acceptable in oratorio: John Braham's performances of Handel recitatives, such as 'Deeper and deeper still' from *Judas Maccabeus*, were found to be particularly moving and were talked about a decade after the event.⁹⁵ Yet, recitative could also be difficult for the singers. As the *Champion* wrote with reference to Thomas Arne's through-composed opera, *Artaxerxes*: 'There are few singers who do not find a difficulty in so harmonising the dialogue with the music that one or the other do not suffer in the attempt.'⁹⁶

Audiences felt strongly that recitative should not be used in dialogue scenes in English opera, even though it was acceptable in an Italian *scena* within English opera; nevertheless, it was almost always marked out as something distinct.⁹⁷ The majority of newspapers lambasted Balfe for putting the dialogue of his 1837 opera, *Catherine Grey*, into recitative. Yet although the *Standard* described it as being 'constructed altogether on the foreign principle' and said the attempt was 'in defiance of English prejudices', and as such 'extremely hardy', the critic judged the opera to be a 'decided success', which made Balfe's use of recitative even more 'honourable'.⁹⁸ By contrast, the *Observer* said that putting the opera 'entirely in air or recitative ... [gave it] a weight to the whole undertaking that must be disadvantageous'.⁹⁹ In the event, the opera had four performances. When it was revived two months later at the English Opera House, the recitative

⁹³ Caldwell, *From c. 1715 to the Present Day*, 181.

⁹⁴ Alison Mero, 'The Climate for Opera', 58.

⁹⁵ Robert Toft, *Bel Canto: A Performer's Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 100-01.

⁹⁶ *Champion and Weekly Herald*, 20 October 1839.

⁹⁷ Mero, 'The Climate for Opera', 61.

⁹⁸ *Standard*, 29 May 1837.

⁹⁹ *Observer*, 28 May 1837, quoted by Alison Mero, 'The Quest for National Musical Identity: English Opera and the Press, 1834-1849' (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2014), 85.

was replaced by spoken dialogue and its reception improved. Yet the critic of *Psyche* would later say that in removing the recitative, *Catherine Grey* had been ‘divested of its true musical character’.¹⁰⁰ Although, the opera had few performances with recitative and was rejected by the majority of the critics, the fact that a few newspapers supported its use may indicate a slight shift towards recitative’s acceptance under certain conditions.

Possibly because it concerned an Italian rather than an English opera, there does not seem to have been the same criticism of Planché’s adaptation of *Norma* at Drury Lane, which also put into recitative dialogue that had been written in a ‘sort of measured prose’¹⁰¹. According to the *Standard*, Planché apologised for this ‘innovation’ but justified it by saying that the opera was set among the Celtic people and that the ‘public [were] familiarised with the style of Osian’s [sic] poems’. He hoped that people would not be ‘offended at the novelty of his plan’. What is significant is that Planché felt he needed to apologise for the recitative. The *Standard* argued that the apology was misplaced as the ‘measured prose ... [was] much better adapted to recitative than the rumbling blank verse which is tortured into anything to meet the variations of the music’.¹⁰² Thus according to the *Standard*, recitative was fundamentally foreign and against public taste, yet there were times, particularly when the text was written appropriately, when it could succeed.

The quality of the verse was a subject also raised in a letter to the *Morning Post* in 1837. The anonymous correspondent – who may even have been the *Morning Post*’s own critic, John Parry, for the letter reflected views that he had expressed elsewhere¹⁰³ – argued that the English language, which was both ‘musical and poetical’, was in fact not unsuited to accompanied recitative as was often claimed: the real problem was that excellent poetry was needed instead of the ‘wretched trash’ that was used in our national theatres. The writer suggested that someone such as Sheridan Knowles should be employed for grand serious operas in the English language; they insisted that when a theatre for a national opera was built, the programme should include opera with recitative.¹⁰⁴

As can be seen from the above examples, resistance to recitative remained strong in 1837. Yet, there are hints that attitudes were changing even though it is difficult to determine by how much: recitative was only discussed when critics wanted to attack or promote it. Even the *Standard*, which supported the genre, thought it was foreign. The difference in the reception of the recitative in *Catherine Grey* and *Norma* is stark. The majority of the critics rejected its use in *Catherine*

¹⁰⁰ *Psyche*, February 1840, 51, quoted by *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁰¹ *Standard*, 26 June 1837.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*; see also *Athenaeum*, 1 July 1837, 485.

¹⁰³ See, for example, *Morning Post*, 30 May 1839.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 22 May 1837.

Gray, an opera by a popular British composer, and which had few performances until the recitative was replaced by spoken dialogue. Yet with *Norma*, the recitative was barely noticed apart from by Henry Chorley and the *Standard*,¹⁰⁵ both of whom supported its use. This may have been because *Norma* was an Italian opera in which recitative was recognised as part of the genre; its acceptance may also have been helped by Planché's Ossianic poetry. Schröder-Devrient's poor performance in the title role was probably not a factor as the critics wrote favourably about her singing and acting even if she could not manage the English text and kept lapsing into German.¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, the fact that Planché felt that he had to apologise, underlines an ambivalence to the genre. Six years later, when an English adaptation of *The Lady of the Lake* (*La donna del lago*) was mounted at Covent Garden, the fact that it was an Italian opera did not prevent it from being performed with spoken dialogue.¹⁰⁷ The theatre was now under the management of Alfred Bunn, a shrewd businessman who had been the manager at Drury Lane when Schröder-Devrient sang *Norma*: after that debacle and with his eye on the profit margin, he probably did not want to risk alienating audiences with foreign recitative.

Musical Standards

In the theatre, Michael Costa and George Smart tried to improve orchestral standards. Although London attracted many of the best musicians in Europe, English orchestras had a reputation for being under-rehearsed. It was standard practice for orchestral players to absent themselves while they earned extra money from outside engagements.¹⁰⁸ Indeed, when George Smart toured Europe, he found that orchestral discipline was not as high as, for example, at Prague.¹⁰⁹ Similarly, excellent results were achieved in Berlin when the full complement of court musicians were able to work together. Yet they were often divided between the various theatres, with the result that the general standard was uneven.¹¹⁰ In the theatre, it was accepted that singers, even foreign ones, would demand that items were transposed to the key that suited their voice or would refuse to sing at short notice, including in the middle of performances.¹¹¹

The role of the independent conductor was only beginning to establish itself in the second quarter of the nineteenth century: before then, the task of the conductor was usually divided between the

¹⁰⁵ *Athenaeum*, 1 July 1837; *Standard*, 26 June 1837.

¹⁰⁶ See for example, *Theatrical Observer*, 28 June 1837.

¹⁰⁷ *Standard*, 1 February 1843.

¹⁰⁸ Naomi Matsumoto, 'Michael Costa at the Haymarket: The Establishment of the Modern Role of "The Director of Music"', in *Orchestral Conducting in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Roberto Illiano and Michela Niccolai (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 30.

¹⁰⁹ Carnelley, *George Smart*, 162, 171.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 160.

¹¹¹ See Matsumoto, 'Michael Costa at the Haymarket', 44-45.

continuo player who gave cues to singers and the first violinist who controlled the orchestra, thus risking a disconnection between the two musicians. On the continent, the music was sometimes directed from the piano, and sometimes from a desk with or without the assistance of the orchestra leader.¹¹² When Mendelssohn conducted the first performance of his Symphony No. 1 in C in the Seventh Philharmonic Concert at the Argyll Rooms on 25 May 1829, a reviewer remarked on his use of a baton:

[This is] customary in Germany, France, &c. where the *discipline* of bands is considered of more importance than in England. We have often remarked that it is not the *ear* solely by which the orchestral performer must be guided. We hope to see the *baton* ere long at the Italian Opera.¹¹³

The implication of the article is that the Italian Opera did need a guiding beat, and it mattered not whether a violin bow or a roll of parchment was used.

Starting in 1830, the conductor Michael Costa set about raising the quality of performances at the King's Theatre. He introduced exacting standards, running daily rehearsals and beating time at performances, as well as making interpretive decisions about the music.¹¹⁴ Indeed, once Costa started using a baton in the 1830s, the improved discipline of the band at the King's Theatre was noted.¹¹⁵ In addition, his increased concentration on interpretation brought out the nuances in the music and 'the delicacies of light and shade'.¹¹⁶

George Smart, who worked at Covent Garden from 1826 to 1830, was also keen to improve musical standards. In 1825, he toured Europe with Covent Garden's manager, Charles Kemble, observing opera performance practice with the aim of raising standards at home. He took particular interest in the use of the baton, questions of pitch and how particular works should be performed, notably Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Although he noted that Britain was slow to adopt the baton when conducting, Smart felt that having adequate rehearsal was far more important for producing high standards.¹¹⁷ It is unclear how this impacted practice at Covent Garden, although Fanny Kemble wrote warmly of his 'supervision of the musical representations' and how he pushed for adequate rehearsals for his concerts elsewhere.¹¹⁸

¹¹² Carnelley, *George Smart*, 171.

¹¹³ *Morning Post*, 27 May 1829 (reviewer's emphasis); Matsumoto, 'Michael Costa at the Haymarket', 36; see also Colin Eatock, *Mendelssohn and Victorian England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 28, 162.

¹¹⁴ See Matsumoto, 'Michael Costa at the Haymarket', 27, 36.

¹¹⁵ See *Ibid.*, 37.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹¹⁷ Carnelley, *George Smart*, 171.

¹¹⁸ Fanny Kemble, *Records of a Girlhood*, 2nd ed. (New York: Henry Holt, 1883), 95; Carnelley, *George Smart*, 214.

The Battle for English Music and Musicians

Many talented musicians from the continent were drawn to London, where they earned high fees and were lionised by the fashionable. Rossini and Catalani, for example, were both given star status. Many British musicians felt they could not compete with the foreigners who performed on the concert and opera platforms. As a consequence, during the 1820s and 1830s, there was a growing resentment on the part of some English musicians towards the presence of foreign musicians in London.¹¹⁹ It resulted in a sustained campaign in the press to force the recognition of British performers and composers, notably in the *Quarterly Musical Magazine and Review*.¹²⁰

In one of the Philharmonic Society's concerts, a performance by the Austrian Henri Herz was hissed in 1834 for a solo that resembled a set of quadrilles. In 1842, George Alexander Macfarren and James William Davison, both keen supporters of English music and musicians, heckled the German pianist Sigismond Thalberg whom they regarded as a money-maker; they found his shallow acrobatics on the piano the 'opposite of all that was good in art'.¹²¹ As his son recalled, Davison used to make facetious remarks about the Philharmonic Society ignoring English musicians, while 'their eyes beamed on the undeserving foreigner' instead.¹²² Indeed, the Society's programming between 1813 and 1834 showed a clear bias in favour of the symphonies by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven and continental overtures; few works by British composers were programmed.¹²³ The Society did give trials of works for possible programming, but few English composers passed this hurdle: when John Braham proposed to sing John Barnett's 'Queen Mab', the score was returned unopened by the directors.¹²⁴ One problem was that in the late eighteenth century, British composers had concentrated their efforts on vocal music, but after the 1784 Commemoration the dominance of Handel left little space for other composers.¹²⁵

Bacon, writing in the *Quarterly Musical Magazine and Review*, regularly complained that native talent was withering, and Britain needed to be rescued from obscurity. National genius, he said, remained latent and awaited nurture and encouragement.¹²⁶ After the demise of the *Quarterly*

¹¹⁹ Simon McVeigh, 'The Society of British Musicians (1834-1865) and the Campaign for Native Talent', in *Music and British Culture, 1785-1914: Essays in Honour of Cyril Ehrlich*, ed. Christina Bashford and Leanne Langley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 151.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹²¹ Henry Davison, *From Mendelssohn to Wagner: being the memoirs of J.W. Davison forty years music critic of 'The Times'* (London: W.M. Reeves, 1912), 41; see also McVeigh, 'Society of British Musicians', 156.

¹²² Davison, *From Mendelssohn to Wagner*, 41.

¹²³ McVeigh, 'Society of British Musicians', 147.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹²⁶ See *Ibid.*, 148-49.

Musical Magazine, the *Musical World* took up the task of campaigning for English musicians and English opera to be taken seriously. In 1841, one of the *Musical World*'s writers complained about the 'fashionable twaddle in high quarters – that the English cannot be a musical people'.¹²⁷ The more militant Society of British Musicians did not permit any non-British performers. The musical standards of its members suffered because they lacked the practice of playing alongside more experienced [foreign] players and performers.¹²⁸

English singers also had a problem being recognised. With a premium being placed on Italian singers, it was very difficult for the limited number of English singers who returned from having trained and performed on the continent. They were caught between two styles: Italian and English. Only a few singers managed this divide. Elizabeth Billington was considered a 'mistress of both schools'.¹²⁹ According to critics at the time, she saved the Italian style for the operas of Paisiello and Mozart when working at the King's Theatre, but when working alongside English singers in the operas of Arne and Storace, she 'assumed the character of an English artist'.¹³⁰ Similarly, although John Braham had a voice of the 'finest quality', he could be 'two distinct singers', adopting at times 'the over-florid and frittered Italian manner; at others, [falling] into the coarseness and vulgarity of the English'.¹³¹

English singers could always find work on the English stage. Yet, from the early 1830s, sought-after foreign singers such as Joséphine de Méric and Maria Malibran were being given lead roles on the English boards.¹³² At Her Majesty's Theatre, it was the continental singers who were favoured, and only a very few English singers managed to find work there. Consequently, the status of those English singers who did perform at the Italian Opera was a source of national pride: reviews of singers who débuted there often made a feature of their Englishness and detailed the features of their voice. The fact was that very few English singers had made a success of singing at Her Majesty's Theatre, and according to Chorley, since the days of Mrs. Billington 'no female artist belonging to this country [had] been able to maintain anything approaching to first position at the Italian Opera in London',¹³³ let alone managed a permanent career there. Billington

¹²⁷ *Musical World*, 11 March, 1841, 155.

¹²⁸ See McVeigh, 'Society of British Musicians', 149-50, 162.

¹²⁹ *Spectator*, 8 October, 1842, 974.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ Richard Edgcumbe, Earl of Mount-Edgcumbe, *Musical Reminiscences: Containing an Account of the Italian Opera in England, from 1773: Continued to the Present Time, and Including the Festival in Westminster Abbey*, Fourth ed. (London: John Andrews and F.H. Wall, 1834), 95.

¹³² De Méric starred in *Don Giovanni* at Drury Lane in 1833. Malibran starred in *La sonnambula* at Drury Lane in 1833 and in *Fidelio* at Covent Garden in 1835.

¹³³ Henry Fothergill Chorley, *Thirty Years' Musical Recollections*, Vol. 1 (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1862), 240.

had been well received at the King's Theatre. She had 'a delightful fresh voice of very high compass' and an 'inexhaustible fund of ornaments, always elegant, always varying, always extemporaneous'.¹³⁴ Yet when Catalani arrived in London in 1806, Billington was eclipsed and forced to retire from the Italian stage, even though she continued singing in concerts and English opera.¹³⁵

Certainly, in England, music did not feature in a liberal education, and a musical profession did not have the high status it had in other European countries. The culture in Britain contrasted with that of Vienna and Berlin, where upper and middle class 'amateurs' of both sexes were expected to be proficient in music and have a high level of musical appreciation.¹³⁶ A number of reasons were given to explain why English musicians since Purcell had not been successful. For example, an article entitled, 'Why Are Not the English a Musical People?', argued that making music was not an integral part of English culture, as it had been with the Ancient Greeks.¹³⁷ Yet, sales of sheet music and cottage pianos, as well as the popularity of parlour songs, indicate that there was a culture of music making in middle-class households up and down the country. Another argument was that English musicians were expected to imitate Handel, crushing their inventiveness. Yet another was that there were few opportunities for musicians outside London: yet even in London, English musicians failed to have the success of their foreign counterparts.¹³⁸ Nicholas Temperley argues that the real problem was not the innate unmusicality of the British, but a failure of confidence. Unlike in France and Germany, music in Britain was not regarded as a gentlemanly or intellectual pursuit: an English musician could never become a gentleman. As the unspoken ambition of the middle-classes was to raise one's social status, the English were therefore discouraged from pursuing a career in music or finding their individual voice.¹³⁹

Although there was music making around the country, such as at the provincial festivals and opera in Dublin, London offered more performance opportunities and lessons with known teachers such as Domenico Crivelli; but there was also much more competition from native and foreign musicians. Work might be found in the minor theatres, but this did not necessarily lead to the high-profile jobs that the ambitious musician might desire. To train abroad was costly and

¹³⁴ See Edgcumbe, *Musical Reminiscences*, 90; *Harmonicon* quoted in Olive Baldwin and Thelma Wilson, 'Billington, Elizabeth', *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online* (Oxford University Press), <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/03083>, (accessed 30 December, 2014).

¹³⁵ Edgcumbe, *Musical Reminiscences*, 97.

¹³⁶ Carnelley, *George Smart*, 171.

¹³⁷ See *Mirror of Literature, Amusement and Instruction*, 6 September 1828, 146-48; Mero, 'The Quest for National Musical Identity', 46-47.

¹³⁸ Temperley, 'Xenophilia', 9-11.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 13-16.

prohibitive to anyone without independent means or a patron to sponsor them. The critical problem was that for aristocrats and the fashionable, who had the money to pay for music, continental musicians had an exotic appeal that English musicians could never equal merely by reason of their birth. The English musician had to be extraordinarily talented and distinctive if they were to be considered seriously.

The early 1840s were marked by the breakdown of the theatrical system. The minor theatres were becoming increasingly successful and encroaching on the repertoire of the major theatres which all lost money. The other trend was the increasing popularity of adaptations of foreign opera in the London theatres, which were beginning to influence the musical language of English opera, even though recitative remained controversial. A few star singers from the continent performed in these adaptations; while the preference on the part of the fashionable for foreign performers made it difficult for English singers and other musicians to find work. Meanwhile, musical directors such as George Smart and Michael Costa tried to improve musical standards in the opera and learn from new conducting practices on the continent.

4 Naturalising *Melodramma* as Melodrama

The star of *Semiramide*, Adelaide Kemble, reputedly ‘wished to naturalize the Italian lyrical drama’.¹ This view was expressed not just by her family friend Anna Jameson but echoed by Edward Taylor in the *Spectator* and by *John Bull*. This chapter examines this claim and what ‘naturalizing’ might have meant at the time. It also studies how T.H. Reynoldson adapted the opera so as to bring out the drama. I argue that Reynoldson, a writer who had worked in the minor theatres, scripted the libretto so that it incorporated elements of pantomime and melodrama, both popular genres at the time. He thus fitted the opera to the contemporary mores of London theatre.

Naturalising the Opera

The social critic, Anna Jameson, wrote that right from her début on the English stage, Adelaide Kemble ‘wished to naturalize the Italian lyrical drama, with all its beautiful capabilities, on the English stage; to cultivate a taste for a higher and better school of dramatic music’.² After her first success in *Norma*, Kemble said about this project: ‘Whatever may be the issue of this, – whether I eventually stand or fall ... I shall at least have opened a path for those who come after me.’³ These comments probably came out of conversations that she had had with Kemble, for as she wrote, Kemble ‘frequently and earnestly discussed [these views] with such of her friends as could sympathize with them’.⁴ Jameson knew the Kemble family well and although they were twenty years apart in age, Kemble and Jameson appear to have understood each other and had a good, if possibly on occasion tempestuous, relationship. When Kemble’s father Charles needed to consult a physician in Paris and could no longer chaperone his daughter in Italy, it was Jameson whom Adelaide wanted to fulfil that role: for with Jameson, Adelaide felt she could be herself.⁵ While

¹ Anna Jameson, ‘Adelaide Kemble: and the Lyrical Drama in 1841’, in *Memoirs and Essays, Illustrative of Art, Literature and Social Morals*, ed. Anna Jameson (New York: Wiley & Putnam, 1846), 56.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ See Adelaide Kemble to Therese Maria Anna van Thun (Countess van Thun), 21 December 1838, 14 January and 23 February 1839 (Kemble Papers, Garrick Club).

Jameson had the advantage of knowing Kemble's mind, much of the information she gives comes from an essay written to accompany a series of portraits by John Hayter of Kemble in her operatic roles and commissioned by the Marquis of Titchfield, later Duke of Portland, who had been in love with her. Not only was Jameson a loyal friend to Kemble, but in the circumstances and very possibly paid by Titchfield, she might have thought it inappropriate to write a critical assessment of Kemble's performances. As a result, any criticisms – for example, about her performance as Susanna in *The Marriage of Figaro* – were veiled.⁶

Jameson's account of Kemble wanting to naturalise the Italian lyrical drama appears to be backed up by *John Bull*, which refers to Kemble devoting 'her great talents to the naturalisation of foreign music'.⁷ Furthermore, Edward Taylor, referring directly to the *Secret Marriage* and *Semiramide*, both operas in which Kemble appeared during the autumn season 1842, wrote taking issue with it being a 'necessity [to produce] these operas on the English stage, in order to improve the musical taste of the public'.⁸ Although he argued that opera was a luxury that the middle classes could not afford and did not know how to appreciate, it is clear from Taylor's remarks that reaching the middle classes had been a reason given for mounting these two operas. It therefore seems likely that Kemble, or those linked to the productions she was in, did indeed want to 'naturalise' Italian opera.

Ostensibly the Italian lyrical drama had already been naturalised in the many adaptations of continental opera on the English stage, with which, as *John Bull* noted, the country was already oversupplied.⁹ Kemble would have been familiar with these highly adapted operas and the arguments for and against fidelity. Assuming Jameson's statement is true, Kemble must have wished to naturalise the Italian lyrical drama differently. So the question is: what kind of naturalisation did Kemble wish for?

One clue as to what Kemble meant by naturalising is found in Taylor's comment about her wanting to 'improve the taste of the public',¹⁰ which he made clear was a middle-class public. Another indication may be found in Jameson's statement that Kemble wanted to cultivate 'a taste for a higher and better school of dramatic music', although it is not clear whether she meant that this 'higher ... school' was better than English opera or the adaptations of French and German opera being performed on the English stage. Evidently Kemble wished to introduce and familiarise audiences to new repertoire. Given that all the operas in which Kemble appeared were

⁶ Anna Jameson, 'Adelaide Kemble', 63.

⁷ *John Bull*, 8 October 1842.

⁸ *Spectator*, 5 November 1842, 1068. (Taylor's emphasis.)

⁹ *John Bull*, 8 October 1842.

¹⁰ *Spectator*, 5 November 1842, 1068.

Italian and Jameson referred specifically to naturalising the ‘Italian lyrical drama’, it may be that Kemble wished to make Italian opera as well known as the French or German opera which dominated the English adaptations of foreign opera in London. Other pointers may be deduced from the way the word ‘naturalised’ was used in the mid-nineteenth century: it was applied to a variety of things and people, including productions, scores and the singers themselves.

One example of the word concerns a French production of *Lucia di Lammermoor* at the Théâtre de la Renaissance in Paris in 1839. The libretto was adjusted in order to comply with French dramatic conventions about a unity of place and the *liaison des scènes*. New scenes were written for which Donizetti wrote recitative, and changes were made to the story and characterisation. The libretto contained an open letter from the librettists, Alphonse Royer and Gustave Vaëz, to Donizetti, stating: ‘The new scenes that you composed with us, in order ... to meet the demands of our theatre, are for your opera *a true naturalization*.’¹¹ In similar vein, John Hawkins wrote in 1776 that Henry Aldrich’s recompositions of works by Palestrina, Carissimi and others, were ‘remarkable instances of that faculty which [Aldrich] possessed of naturalizing as it were the compositions of the old Italian masters, and *accommodating them to an English ear*’.¹² With both *Lucia* and the recompositions of Aldrich, the musical works were changed and adapted to the theatrical and musical practice of the new location. Admittedly, Hawkins was writing before the emergence of the musical work concept, and *Lucia* was altered with Donizetti’s agreement. Yet in both cases, the altered and recomposed works were regarded as naturalised to the host community.

The idea of being naturalised was also taken up by a review of *Artaxerxes* in 1833, which commented that the recitative had ‘not been naturalised by custom, as a true and natural medium of conveying sentiment and passion’.¹³ Meanwhile, when Thomas Moore’s *The Irish Melodies* were translated into Irish, it was ‘like naturalising them on their own land, bringing them home’.¹⁴

Lastly, the word was used about the Italian-born singer, Mme Maria Caradori-Allan (1800-1865):

Though this lady is a foreigner, yet she has been so much naturalised among us, and has gained such an acquaintance with, and proficiency in, English music, that she is entitled to be placed in the first rank of English vocalists.¹⁵

¹¹ Rebecca Harris-Warrick, ‘Lucia Goes to Paris: A Tale of Three Theatres’, in *Music, Theater, and Cultural Transfer: Paris, 1830-1914*, ed. Annegret Fauser and Mark Everist (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 205-206. (My emphasis.)

¹² John Hawkins, quoted by Robert Shay, ‘“Naturalizing” Palestrina and Carissimi in Late Seventeenth-Century Oxford: Henry Aldrich and His Recompositions’, *Music & Letters*, 7, No. 3 (Aug., 1996), 371. (My emphasis.)

¹³ *Dublin Observer*, 13 July 1833.

¹⁴ Thomas Moore, letter to *Northampton Mercury*, 6 November 1841.

¹⁵ *Evening Chronicle*, 25 September 1840.

The passage also includes a subtext that a bargain or exchange has taken place. One of the reasons that Caradori-Allan was perceived as naturalised was because she had taken the trouble to become both acquainted with and proficient in English music. There is an implication that she had done this because she respected English music and having become proficient in it, found that it suited her. In return, consciously or unconsciously, the English had decided to accept her as belonging and allowed her to become one of their own. Thus, Caradori-Allan had found a home within the ranks of English vocalists, while the English had gained a vocalist of the first rank for themselves.

In all these examples, *Lucia*, the other music and Caradori-Allan, action had been taken so that the naturalised person or music was accepted as natural by the host community and had found a home. By contrast, the public were not comfortable with recitative in *Artaxerxes*, even though it was an English opera: they did not find it natural. On this basis, the process of naturalising *Semiramide* did not mean that the opera did not change. Rather it meant that, although the opera might remain Italian, it fitted more closely to the theatrical and musical mores of nineteenth-century England, so that the public could appropriate it as rightfully theirs and belonging to them, as well as giving *Semiramide* a home.

The Adaptation

The person tasked with fitting *Semiramide* to London theatrical customs was the playwright Thomas Herbert Reynoldson (c.1808-1888). Before 1842, he had worked primarily at the Surrey Theatre, one of the most successful of the minor theatres, which produced a mixture of burletta and melodrama, including a succession of highly successful nautical melodramas. Prominent plays at the theatre had included adaptations of Walter Scott novels, such as *The Bride of Lammermoor*; or, *The Spectre at the Fountain* (1819), Douglas Jerrold's melodrama *Black-Eyed Susan* (1829) and several plays by Edward Fitzball, including *Jonathan Bradford* (1833).¹⁶ Although the audience 'sometimes [included] nobility and gentry, tradespeople [and] mechanics in the gallery',¹⁷ the spectators would have been drawn from the diverse population in Southwark.¹⁸ As one of the minor theatres, the repertoire had to have enough music to comply with the licensing regulations. In addition, and in comparison with the patent theatres, the management would very probably have placed a greater emphasis on making a profit than on any concerns over questions of fidelity; scripts for new plays would have aimed at seizing the

¹⁶ Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow, *Reflecting the Audience: London Theatregoing, 1840-1880*, ed. Thomas Postlewait (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001), 5; Jane Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 36.

¹⁷ Davis and Emeljanow, *Reflecting the Audience*, 19.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

audience's attention and holding it. Furthermore, the theatre would likely have been run more efficiently, with fewer staff. Thus, in moving to Covent Garden, Reynoldson would have been moving to a theatre with a different repertoire and management ethos.

It was for the Surrey that Reynoldson adapted his first opera, *The Love Spell* in 1839, a version of Gaetano Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore*.¹⁹ The opera, in which Reynoldson sang the role of Belcore, was generally well received; and the critic of the *Globe* argued that, although this opera was 'not a work of the highest character', the attentiveness of the audience 'augured favourably for the growing musical taste of the country', particularly as it had not been produced with great splendour.²⁰ However, John Parry of the *Morning Post* objected to Reynoldson's colloquial language, particularly the passage at the end of Act I when Belcore ridicules Nemorino and called him 'Thou booby'. (Parry was either unaware or chose to ignore that this could be regarded as a direct translation of the original libretto, 'O babbuino' ('You babboon'), which is also used as an Italian term of abuse.) Parry argued that the coarseness of Reynoldson's English words 'marred the beautiful intonation which clothes the Italian';²¹ he maintained that there must be talented poets who could provide 'true lyrical poetry' for such adaptations. However, Parry accepted the solo that Reynoldson added at the end of the opera for Adina to advertise the next performance, which clearly pleased the audience.²²

Later on, Reynoldson would be employed in a number of other minor theatres including the Grecian and Princess Theatres, where he worked on many pantomimes, dramas and translations for operas, including *Don Pasquale* (Grecian, 1843) and *The Duc d'Olonne* (Princess Theatre, based on Auber, 1845). He also worked on a version of *Gustave III* (Grecian, 1845, and Princess Theatre, 1850).²³ Theatre historians have written about Reynoldson's complex and well-plotted dramas based on Hogarth's *Marriage à-la-Mode* (1839),²⁴ a subject that he revised nine years later as *The Drunkard's Children* (1848), this time based on George Cruikshank's series of drawings, *The Bottle* (1847). Both of these dramas were mounted at the Surrey Theatre. According to these historians, Reynoldson's characters were more nuanced than those of other writers who tackled the same subjects, and they were not the black and white characters of

¹⁹ Published as Felice Romani, *L'elisir d'amore, or, The Elixir of Love: An Opera in Two Acts. Adapted from Donizetti's Celebrated Work by T.H. Reynoldson* (London: T.H. Lacy, n.d.).

²⁰ *Globe*, 30 May 1839.

²¹ *Morning Post*, 30 May 1839.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Allardyce Nicoll, *A History of English Drama, 1660-1900*, Vol. 4, *Early Nineteenth Century Drama, 1800-1850*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: University Press, 1955), 393.

²⁴ Thomas H. Reynoldson, *The Curse of Mammon; Being a Fac-simile Embodiment of Hogarth's Marriage à-la-Mode. A pictorial drama, in five acts [and in prose]* (1839); see Martin Meisel, *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 116-117.

melodrama. Other writers who dramatised *The Bottle* presented the whole of Cruikshank's complicated story through a series of short scenes. By contrast, Reynoldson started his version half way through the tale and after the drunkard had died, thus shortening and simplifying the plot. Although there were seven scenes, each of which ended with a tableau, his adaptation was presented in a single continuous act so that the play preserved 'a sense of the inexorable rhythm in the [drunkard's] march to destruction'.²⁵

As he did with *The Drunkard's Children*, Reynoldson streamlined the plot of *Semiramide* by omitting most of the minor scenes, involving intrigues in the back rooms of the palace and featuring background characters, such as Azema and Mitrane. Whereas Rossi's libretto was divided into numerous scenes (Act I, 13 scenes; Act II, 11 scenes), Reynoldson presents a seamless production with only a few (Act I, 3 scenes; Act II, 4 scenes). The reduction in the number of scenes was probably to allow large numbers of chorus members to make lengthy entrances and exits during the processions, marches, festivities and other crowd scenes, without having gaps or delays caused by time-consuming changes of scenery. The production team were thus able to concentrate on making an 'elaborate picture' on stage. Many spectacular productions of the period cut the text of classic plays, or even rearranged the scenes, for exactly this reason,²⁶ although it would also have helped to strengthen the continuity of the drama.

Reynoldson probably worked in the same way as other adapters in the minor theatres, by starting with a blank sheet and choosing the scenes he wanted to retain, rather than starting with the complete score and cutting it down.²⁷ Although Reynoldson's version was much shorter than Rossi's full libretto, with only a few exceptions, the resultant adaptation was broadly similar to *Semiramide* as it normally was performed in Italy where the opera was almost invariably cut because of its length.²⁸ What were effectively the cuts to Reynoldson's adaptation are shown in Appendix II alongside the cuts made in Venice in 1823, many of which became the norm in Italy, Paris in 1825 and at the King's Theatre in 1837 with Giulia Grisi. This last libretto has been chosen for comparison because in 1842 it was used for a recent London production and would have been the *Semiramide* that audiences would have known and to which they were accustomed.

²⁵ Meisel, *Realizations*, 133-141. See also John W. Frick, *Theatre, Culture and Temperance Reform in Nineteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 107.

²⁶ See Michael R. Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre, 1850-1910* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 23-24.

²⁷ See Christina Fuhrmann, *Foreign Opera at the London Playhouses: From Mozart to Bellini* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 162.

²⁸ See Gossett, 'Prefazione' to *Semiramide: melo-dramma tragico in due atti*, ed. Philip Gossett and Alberto Zedda, Edizione critica delle opere di Gioachino Rossini (Pesaro: Fondazione Rossini, 2001), XLV-XLVI, LIX.

As with productions in Italy, both of Idreno's arias were cut, as was the Act I duettino between Arsace and Semiramide. However, Arsace's Act I aria, 'Eccomi alfine in Babilonia', which was frequently cut, was retained even though the recitative beforehand was shortened; the chorus of magi 'Ergi omai' in the Act I Finale was shortened and then probably cut completely in 1843. The cuts were much more severe in Act II. Unusually, Arsace's aria 'In sì barbara', which was usually included, was shortened and later cut completely, while Assur's mad scene, normally a favourite, was cut. The effect of these cuts was to give a much stronger directional quality to the plot than that given by Rossi; as minor scenes were omitted, episodes involving high drama or emotional content were pushed closer together. Reynoldson stripped the libretto down to something of a political thriller, building up the tension through a series of confrontations between Arsace and Assur, Semiramide and Assur, Semiramide and Arsace. Nothing was superfluous, and particularly in Act II the action led inexorably to the moment when Arsace avenged his father's death.

As can be seen from the first column of Table 1, Gaetano Rossi's original libretto for *Semiramide* was made up of *settenari* with a clear rhyming scheme. Before 1842, the standard translation of *Semiramide* had been the one created by the expatriate Italian poet, Gabriele Rosetti, written when a new production of the opera was launched in 1827. At the time, a feature was made of Rosetti's translation, and it was used in all the libretti published from 1827 by H.N. Millar.²⁹ Rosetti gave an accurate translation into English of the original libretto by Rossi, using blank verse and a particular metre for each movement, although he often used an iambic tri- and tetrameter and, in line with other Victorian translators, an archaic style of English.

Reynoldson put only the main numbers of the opera into blank verse. The recitative was given in prose, even though it was sung. Yet, Reynoldson kept suggesting a more structured form of poetry. In his translation of the opening chorus, 'Belo si celebri', Reynoldson split the text into shorter lines, and then gave it a pulsating rhythm as in a celebratory dance, not unlike Rossi's original. Elsewhere, Reynoldson included occasional couplets to suggest poetry, as he did in his translation of 'Ebbene... a te: ferisci' (see Table 1, column 3), which included rhyming couplets at the beginning and end of the first section. This helped to establish that, despite being blank verse, it was in fact poetry for a duet.³⁰ Reynoldson followed the Victorian practice when writing poetry of using archaic English to suggest the remoteness of antiquity, whether Homer or *Semiramide*. However, given the Victorian fascination with the ancient and monumental, the English professor

²⁹ See cover of Gaetano Rossi, *Semiramide: A Serious Opera in Two Acts, the Music by Rossini; With Critical notes, and Peculiarities of Madam Pasta's voice; the Translation in Easy Verse Line for Line with the Italian; as Performed at the King's Theatre, Haymarket; Revised by Signor Rosetti. A New Edition, Revised and Corrected.* (London: H.N. Millar, 1827). GB-Lu: Music Library Locked Cupboard [Plays] and GB-Lbl: 906.i.1.(2.).

³⁰ See Table 1.

TABLE 1

**Comparison of translations of 'Ebbene... a te: ferisci' in *Semiramide*,
including an indication of the rhyme scheme**

Original Libretto, Gaetano Rossi, 1823 ³¹			Translation, Gabriele Rosetti for H.N. Millar, 1827 ³²			Translation, T.H. Reynoldson , 1842 ³³		
<i>Sem.</i>	Ebbene... a te: ferisci,	A	Well – 'tis for thee – to strike!		'Tis well – my life I tender;	A		
	Compi il voler d'un dio,	b	Fulfil the gods' decrees –		Strike! Here my breast I render;	A		
	spegni nel sangue mio	b	Extinguish in my blood		Thus in my blood extinguish			
	un esecrato amor.	c	An execrable love.		The love I bear my son.			
	La madre rea punisci,	A	Punish the guilty mother,		The guilty mother strike thou;			
	Appaga il genitor,	c	And be the sire reveng'd.		Avenge, avenge thy sire,			
	vendica il genitor	c			He builds thee from above.			
<i>Ars.</i>	Tutto su me gli Dei	D	Oh, rather may the gods		Rather on me, ye angry gods,			
	sfoghino in pria lo sdegno,	e	On me exhaust their rage,		Join all your wrath relentlessly,			
	mai barbaro a tal segno	e	Than e'er my barbarous heart		Or ere this heart consenteth			
	sarà d'un figlio il cor;	c	Consent to such a deed;		To act a deed so ill;	B		
	In odio al ciel tu sei...	D	Hated art thou by heaven –		Tho' heaven may frown on thee in anger,			
	ma sei mia madre ognor.	C	But thou'rt my mother still.		Thou art my mother still!	B		

³¹ Rossini and Rossi, *Semiramide*, critical ed.

³² Rossi, *Semiramide*, trans. Rosetti (1827).

³³ Gaetano Rossi, *Semiramide: A Grand Opera in Two Acts*, trans. Thomas H. Reynoldson (London: Jefferys & Nelson; Cramer, Addison, & Beale, 1842). GB-Lu: Music Library Locked Cupboard [Operas, II].

and opera translator Ronnie Apter suggests that rather than just evoking the ancient past, this archaic English put the past at a ‘glamorous distance’.³⁴

The difference between Rosetti’s and Reynoldson’s translations is not just due to the fact that English was not Rosetti’s mother tongue. Rosetti’s translation was designed to be included in a libretto with a parallel text to help operagoers understand the performances they heard in Italian. The mission statement by the house publisher for the King’s Theatre, H.N. Millar, said that the translation was aimed at being a ‘faithful version, which is as literal as the genius of the two languages will allow’. Their English libretto therefore was aimed at ‘familiarising the reader with that beautiful language’ in which the opera was presented.³⁵ Reynoldson’s text, on the other hand, set out to be a singing translation and one to be performed.

Although Reynoldson retained the spirit of the Italian, his translation was quite free and in places he embroidered and amplified the ideas in Rossi’s text, adding to the dramatic character. For example, in the Act I quartetto, ‘Di tanti regi’ (‘Of many royals’), Reynoldson referred to ‘Kings, princes, nobles ...’. Elsewhere in the ensembles, he gave alternate text for the participants, bringing out the drama on stage. An example is the Act I terzetto, ‘A quei detti’, which takes place after Assur has indicated that he has pretensions to the throne (see Table 2). Apart from one word in the last line, indicating that Assur was full of fury and Oroe and Idreno full of fear, Rossi gave identical text to all three participants of the Act I terzetto.³⁶ By contrast, Reynoldson varied the text between the protagonists in three places rather than just one, thus showing that the

TABLE 2	
Comparison of Reynoldson’s translation of ‘A quei detti’ with Rossi’s original	
Original libretto, 1823	Reynoldson’s 1842 translation
A quei detti, a quell’aspetto fremmer sento il cor nel petto, celo a stento il mio { furore. terror.	Those deep tones – that dark’ning aspect, Fill my breast with { fears } appalling (thoughts) Anger } Terror } every sense enthralling, Fury } Rage } doth shake my inmost soul, Fear } And o’er me reigns without control.

³⁴ Ronnie Apter, *Digging for the Treasure: Translation after Pound* (New York: P. Lang, 1984), 12.

³⁵ Rossi, *Semiramide*, trans. Rosetti (1827), back cover.

³⁶ ‘Celo a stento il mio furor (Assur)/terror’ (Idreno and Oroe).

characters each react as individuals to Assur's declaration; this is less clear in the Italian original. In addition, Reynoldson stretched out Rossi's text, which was originally three lines of verse, into five lines.

There are several other places where Reynoldson added in a couplet or the equivalent at the end of an ensemble, thereby varying the underlay during Rossini's extended cadences. One of these is at the end of the chorus, 'Ah! ti vediamo ancor!', in which the chorus hail Semiramide who has just made her first entrance on stage. Reynoldson added in the equivalent of a couplet of *settenari*, making the chorus end, 'All lowly now ... bend we the knee', thus allowing the crowd to make a theatrical gesture of physically giving obeisance to the queen. In such places it is clear that Reynoldson thought theatrically. He used his imagination to tell a story and bring out the drama of the piece.

Reynoldson generally followed the copious stage directions found in Rossini's autograph. These had been used for the early productions of *Semiramide*, including the first London performance in 1824. However, when a new London production of *Semiramide* was launched in 1827, H.N. Millar followed the shorter stage directions given in Paris, which were used for all libretti published by them after that date. The use of longer stage directions for the 1842 *Semiramide* probably indicated that a greater emphasis was placed on the production side of the opera. In translating these directions, Reynoldson brought out the visual aspects. Thus when 'vivid lightning' extinguishes the sacred flame on the altar, he translated Rossi's 'Thunder: the flame on the altar goes out; surprise, confusion, general terror,'³⁷ so that it becomes, 'The sacred flame on the altar expires; darkness – thunder – lightning – general confusion.'³⁸ Reynoldson emphasised the visual aspects of darkness, thunder and lightning rather than the response of the crowd with its terror and confusion.

The production had scenic transformations at the end of each Act, the second of which was written into Reynoldson's libretto. These came out of the pantomime genre, which appealed to all sections of society and was performed in both the West End and in working class theatres. The immediate ancestor of the genre was created at the beginning of the eighteenth century when French and English actor-dancers arrived from Paris and performed *commedia dell'arte* transposed to the English environment and set to music. In the eighteenth century, the pantomime had a formal structure with an opening of two or four scenes and a plot derived from mythology, folk tales or fairy tales. A benevolent spirit brought the opening to an end by taking the young lovers under her protection and transforming them and the rest of the cast into a harlequinade, which was accompanied by knockabout comedy, dancing and scenic effects. During the career of

³⁷ 'Tuono: si spegne il fuoco sacra dell'ara; sorpresa confusione, terror generale.' (Act I, Scene 3).

³⁸ Rossi, *Semiramide*, trans. Reynoldson (1842), 6.

the clown, Joseph Grimaldi, the first section became merely a pretext for introducing the characters to be transformed, although it became longer again after his retirement in 1823. The harlequinade which followed might last as long as ten or fifteen scenes and took the audience to a variety of locales which ended when the lovers were reunited in a final splendid scene.³⁹

The first of *Semiramide*'s transformations occurs just before the ghost appears and was described in the newspapers. It does not appear in Reynoldson's stage directions, which largely follow Rossi's original. Rossini's music probably gave adequate time for the change of scenery. However, for the second transformation at the end of Act II Reynoldson's text and stage directions are very different from Rossi's libretto; Rossi shows Semiramide's death immediately followed by a passage, occupying 65 bars of Rossini's music, in which the protagonists express their shock, alarm and sense of catastrophe; there are calls to arrest Assur; meanwhile Arsace, who is shaken at having killed his mother, tries to kill himself. Babylon's order has been replaced by chaos and catastrophe. Then with a mere four-bars break, the scene launches into a triumphal chorus calling for Arsace to come to the Palace because the people exult, celebrate and adore their new king. This abrupt change of mood was often found problematic, and as noted in Chapter 2, the ending was changed for the first performance in France.

In Reynoldson's adaptation, Semiramide's death is immediately greeted with thunder and lightning; all of the ensuing dialogue is deleted. Assur is not arrested as in Rossi's libretto but is instead 'stricken [by lightning] and falls'.⁴⁰ This was followed by a scenic transformation in which 'Ninus' tomb is destroyed ... The town of Babylon, with the Temple of Belus, appears.'⁴¹ During the ensuing tableau Azema and Oroë offer Arsace the crown, while the chorus hail the new king and announce Azema as his bride. In this transformation, the two lovers are united.

Reynoldson's text is much more serious than Rossi's. It acknowledges Arsace's 'fruitless grief'. He has fulfilled the 'Gods' dark decree'. He must now take on his father's mantle, restore Assyria and become its 'guardian, King and defender'.⁴² Unlike Rossi's text, the final chorus is clearly divided into two verses. The first verse fits Rossini's music well, the second verse less so, indicating that additional music must have been added at this point, probably by the Musical Director, Julius Benedict.

³⁹ Michael R. Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 198-99; John O'Brien, 'Pantomimic Politics' in *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre, 1737-1832*, ed. Julia Swindells and David Francis Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 690-91; Dennis Kennedy, ed., *Oxford Companion to Theatre and Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) s.v. 'Pantomime, British'.

⁴⁰ Rossi, *Semiramide*, trans. Reynoldson (1842), 24.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

Reynoldson was a better dramatist than musician. Not all the lines fit the music, and some of the words have vowels and diphthongs that would need to be modified when sung. Other words have clusters of consonants which are difficult to articulate clearly. In particular, Reynoldson's use of archaic English results in lyrics that are particularly testing for the singer: for example, the first three lines of 'Trema il tempio' end with the words 'trembleth', 'shaketh', 'quaketh', while the duet 'Bella imago' includes the difficult line 'Sayst thou tremble'. Yet music linked to the production survives, indicating that some of these difficulties may have been ironed out. So, while the libretto says that Arsace has to sing, '... their vile grasp' during his Cavatina, the words have been changed to '... their vile hands' in the music printed by Jefferys & Nelson.⁴³ This is easier to sing, and may well have been changed during the rehearsal period.

Elsewhere, the differences between the libretto and the printed music suggest that changes were made to emphasise the drama. An example is the first section of Assur and Arsace's duet, 'Bella imago' ('Bright lovely image'). Referring to Azema, Arsace sings the first quatrain which ends with, 'I seek Empire but o'er thy [Azema's] heart!' In Reynoldson's libretto, Assur, who also has designs on Azema, replies robustly with a quatrain of his own which ends 'Nor contend with me her heart.' Both these lines are direct translations of Rossi. However, when Jefferys & Nelson published the music, Assur's line was changed to the more overtly challenging 'With me contend not – rash boy depart!'; and on repetition it becomes, 'Mine's the Empire; rash boy depart!', directly challenging Arsace's statement about Azema, while 'Rash boy depart!' refers forwards to the final section, 'Va' superbo', in which Assur sings 'Go, proud boy'. In what we must assume is a later version of the text, we see Assur pushing Arsace more directly than in Rossi's original and increasing the tension between the two protagonists.

Charles Lamb Kenney of *The Times* praised Reynoldson's libretto for not including a rhyming meter:

While [Reynoldson] has selected a blank metre instead of rhyme, he has not only saved himself a world of trouble, but has avoided those distorted sentences which opera writers, who can rarely manage reason and rhyme at the same time, almost invariably fashion.⁴⁴

Yet despite Kenney's remarks, the libretto did have distorted sentences, which Edward Taylor of the *Spectator* made a point of ridiculing, saying that the English *Semiramide* was a burlesque. He objected to the recitative being written in prose and complained of the 'defective rhythm, false accent and limping stanzas' in the songs and concerted numbers. It was, he said, worthy of the

⁴³ Rossi, *Semiramide*, trans. Reynoldson (1842), 8; Gioacchino Rossini, *Ah, that Day I well remember! Cavatina ... translated and adapted from the Italian ... by T. H. Reynoldson* (London: Jefferys & Nelson; Cramer, Addison & Beale, [1843]), bar 20.

⁴⁴ *The Times*, 5 October 1842.

Eagle Tavern.⁴⁵ This was a pub in Shoreditch; over the course of sixty years a series of theatres were built on its land, so that it became a popular entertainment complex. During the 1820s and 1830s the site was used for a range of attractions including wrestling and equestrian demonstrations. The Grecian Pavilion would be built in its grounds in 1832 and it would become a theatre proper in 1841, called the Grecian Saloon. After the property became a theatre, it became a venue for plays and opera, several written or adapted by Reynoldson.⁴⁶ Taylor's references to the Eagle Tavern probably meant that he thought the libretto was low-brow and low-class. Reynoldson's loose translation went against calls for improving the quality of poetry for opera libretti.⁴⁷

Taylor did not just object to Reynoldson's translation, he also took issue with the whole project of translating Italian opera into English. The resulting performance, he maintained, invariably became 'hard, bald and feeble', an 'absurd caricature' where every feature was distorted, and nothing appeared natural or graceful.⁴⁸ A similar view was also expressed by Hogarth, who said that the '*rifacimenti*' of foreign operas contributed to the ruin of our own musical drama:

The fruits of an Italian clime will not bear this transplanting; they lose their native delicacy and richness. Italian melody must be united to Italian speech and action. ... [Even Grisi] could not overcome the disadvantage of declaiming Rossini's recitatives ... in a language they can never assimilate. In making the attempt the music must either be sacrificed to the words, or the words to the music.⁴⁹

Although Hogarth and Taylor might have liked the sonority of the Italian language and recognised that the quality of the translation affected how well it could be sung, their disapproval of foreign opera, either translated into English or otherwise adapted for the middle classes, meant that it was unlikely that any translation, however good, would have satisfied them.

Reynoldson's shortened opera was not appreciably different from how it was performed in Italy, even if the cuts were more severe in Act II. Reynoldson strengthened the story-line by stripping out the minor characters and scenes, such as those with plotting in the back-rooms of the palace. In so doing he removed much of the nuance in Rossi's libretto, while his loose translations of the individual arias emphasised the grandeur of Semiramide's reign and the differences between the characters. In paring back the plot, Reynoldson effectively restructured the opera so as to focus on

⁴⁵ *Spectator*, 8 October 1842, 974.

⁴⁶ Nicoll, *Early Nineteenth Century Drama, 1800-1850*, 225, 393; Suresh Singh, 'In & Out the Eagle Tavern', Spitalfields Life, <http://spitalfieldslife.com/2010/11/12/in-out-the-eagle-tavern/> (last modified 12 November 2010).

⁴⁷ See for example, *Morning Post*, 22 May 1837.

⁴⁸ *Spectator*, 8 October 1842, 974.

⁴⁹ *Evening Chronicle*, 3 October 1842.

the confrontations between the main characters; by incorporating stage directions for two transformations, he gave additional opportunities for spectacle.

***Semiramide* as Melodrama**

Reynoldson's adaptation of *Semiramide*, with its plot involving murder, a ghost and supernatural happenings, conflicts between the protagonists plus transformations with special effects, had elements of early English melodrama. Once the first melodramas were developed at the end of the eighteenth century, the genre spread rapidly across Europe, adapting to the theatrical conditions in the various countries. Its roots went back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Pygmalion*. Originally written in 1762, Horace Coignet prepared instrumental interludes for the text in 1770. Rousseau was inspired by theories of Greek declamation and set out to find a form of expression that was both ancient and modern, and a deliberate alternative to song, opera, pantomime and other theatrical conventions. The work featured frequent, small-scale alternation of speech and music. Rousseau did not want to limit the music by setting text to it; nor the textual expression by setting it to music. As such it was an avant-garde experiment. The constant interruption of the speaker was thought to suit only the most extreme subject matter and points of high emotion, such as life, death or madness.⁵⁰

In Germany, Georg Benda (1722-1795) modelled his melodramas after Rousseau, adapting classical subjects such as *Ariadne auf Naxos* (1775); the heroines descended into manic distress as they struggled to express their consuming emotions which came out in bursts and fragments. Musically Benda's works had bold gestures, sudden changes of direction and prolonged harmonic uncertainty, as well as a constant switching between the orchestra and the speaker. Benda's melodramas were performed at the court theatres and given canonical status in the German musical histories of the time.⁵¹ Yet although Benda's melodramas had copious music, other German melodramas were published without music, or were set to music multiple times.⁵²

Rousseau's *Pygmalion* was also the prototype for melodrama in Paris. René-Charles Guilbert de Pixérécourt (1773-1844), the most famous of the Parisian writers of melodrama, wrote 94 *mélodrames*, which were often adapted from novels – many of them gothic novels – and featured characters such as innocent maidens and evil tyrants. Borrowing practices from pantomime, popular history plays of the boulevards and the theatre of spectacle from the Revolution,

⁵⁰ Katherine Hambridge and Jonathan Hicks, 'The Melodramatic Moment', in *The Melodramatic Moment: Music and Theatrical Culture, 1790-1820*, ed. Katherine Hambridge and Jonathan Hicks (London: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 3.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 3-4, 10.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 8.

Pixerécourt's plays were noted for their complex plots, sensationalism, startling *coups de théâtre* and spectacular scenery.⁵³ Short musical cues were used to accompany the characters' entrances and exits and to emphasise and express key moments of the drama. The plots were structured around moral certainties, historic injustices and climactic tableaux.⁵⁴ One of his early melodramas was *Coelina; ou, L'Enfant du mystère* (1800) which enjoyed unprecedented success; it prompted scores of imitations and secured Pixerécourt's position as the father of a new kind of drama. The *mélodrame* concerns Truguelin who usurped his brother's inheritance and then silenced him by having his tongue torn out. Years later, Truguelin tries to frustrate the marriage of his brother's daughter Coelina so that his son could marry her instead and legitimise his own hold on the family's estates. At the end of the play, Truguelin's crimes are exposed and he is arrested, while Coelina and her lover are reunited.⁵⁵

For the Parisian playwrights, such as Pixerécourt, melodrama, with its archetypal conflicts between high-born villains and simple victims, traumatic situations, such as the loss of family or home, and its polarisation of good and evil, pathos and terror, re-enacted the loss of innocence that took place during the French Revolution. The latter had brought about the dissolution of a cohesive society and violently overturned the imperatives of truth and ethics. Melodrama, with its heightened emotion and appeal to excitement and sensation rather than rationalism, was able to act as a catharsis to the trauma incurred.⁵⁶ As Peter Brooks argued, the goal of the melodramatic plot was for virtue, as represented by the victim's innocence, to be recognised publicly.⁵⁷

Melodrama came to London from Paris. It was Thomas Holcroft's adaptation of Pixerécourt's *Coelina* as *A Tale of Mystery* (Covent Garden, 1802), that was first identified as a 'Melo-Drame'. Reviewers agreed that it did not divert or entertain so much as arouse and transfix, while the musically accompanied emotional interactions exerted an 'uncommon interest and pathos'; the violent action with its musical cues, created an 'irresistible sense of hurry and perturbation' and left the audience in 'continual suspense', riveting them and exercising a 'remarkable influence

⁵³ Matthew S. Buckley, 'The Formation of Melodrama', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre*, 462; Karin Pendle, 'Pixerécourt, René Charles Guilbert de', *Grove Music Online* (Oxford University Press, 2001), <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000047121> (accessed 10 October 2018).

⁵⁴ Hambridge and Hicks, 'The Melodramatic Moment', 5.

⁵⁵ George Taylor, 'The First English Melodrama: Thomas Holcroft's Translation of Pixerécourt', in *The Melodramatic Moment*, 142-43.

⁵⁶ Buckley, 'The Formation of Melodrama', 466; Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 14-15.

⁵⁷ Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 27.

over the human mind'.⁵⁸ Matthew Buckley argues that for contemporary observers, the importance of the new drama was not its methods, but the emotional effect it had on the audience, including the 'intensely enjoyable, disorienting sensation of collective, *shared* emotion in action'.⁵⁹

Brooks maintained that melodrama was not so much a theatrical genre as a mode of excess. The melodramatic universe was inhabited by cosmic ethical forces: evil was seen as a positive force and truth was at stake. The rhetoric of melodrama involved the confrontation of good and evil as personified by the characters they inhabited.⁶⁰ There was no compromise, middle ground or reconciliation: one or other had to be ejected. With the heightened emotion of the genre, characters existed at the moment of crisis and exhibited primal emotions.⁶¹ Many of the early melodramas included mute characters who were innocent victims who had been wronged; yet it also included characters who were not mute but had been silenced by the villain in other ways, for example, by putting them in a dungeon. This repression was overcome during the course of the melodrama. The mute characters expressed their feelings through the primal language of gesture, histrionic acting and scenic signs, holding the audience in a charged emotional medium.

Right from the first there were complaints that melodrama was a hybrid genre which mixed music, mime, comedy and spectacle.⁶² In London, melodramas were particularly eclectic with regard to the music, retaining many of the conventions of ballad opera, together with the musical cues of French and German models; meanwhile, many of the plots were borrowed from novels such as those by Samuel Richardson and Ann Radcliffe.⁶³ In the illegitimate theatres, the use of music as an accompaniment to dialogue and action was a way of circumventing the licencing regulations, while melodrama's visually striking approach to staging and gesture suited the larger auditoria at the patent theatres where the acoustics were poor.

Rossini's opera with its tale of avenging a historic injustice has aspects of melodrama. Indeed, the scenario is not dissimilar to that of Matthew Lewis' proto-melodramatic *The Castle Spectre* (1797), a play which Michael Booth calls a Gothic melodrama even though it was written before Holcroft's *A Tale of Mystery*.⁶⁴ *The Castle Spectre* concerns Osmond who has usurped the

⁵⁸ *The Times*, 15 November 1802; *Sun*, 15 November 1802, quoted by Buckley, 'The Formation of Melodrama', 463-64.

⁵⁹ Buckley, 'The Formation of Melodrama', 464.

⁶⁰ Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 16-17.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁶² Diego Saglia, 'Continental Trouble: The Nationality of Melodrama and the National Stage in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain', in *The Melodramatic Moment*, 43.

⁶³ Buckley, 'The Formation of Melodrama', 463.

⁶⁴ Michael R. Booth, *English Melodrama* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1965), 52, 73.

brother's earldom having, he believes, murdered his brother and the brother's family sixteen years before the beginning of the play. In fact, the brother and his daughter have both survived, although Osmond's sister-in-law Evelina has died. When Osmond discovers that his brother is still alive, he tries again to kill him and is only prevented by the warnings from Evelina's ghost who also prompts her daughter to stab the wicked Osmond.⁶⁵ In parallel to Osmond, Semiramide has seized the throne fifteen years before the start of the opera, having poisoned her husband King Ninus with the help of Assur. The ghost of the dead king warns the culprits that there is guilt to be expiated. At the culmination of the opera, Semiramide's son, whom she thought had been killed, turns out to be alive and unwittingly slays his mother, thus avenging his father's death; Assur is arrested.

Booth considered melodrama as being about the conflict between virtue and vice. As a consequence, he traces its lineage back to the morality plays of the fifteenth century.⁶⁶ For Booth, melodrama appealed directly to the elemental feelings of the audience and their desire for a better and more exciting world. It exploited emotional situations and had rapid transitions from pathos to farce to violence. It had a happy ending and was mounted with a maximum of sensation and scenic effect. On this basis, *The Castle Spectre* could be treated as melodrama.⁶⁷ By contrast, although Jeffrey Cox thought that *The Castle Spectre* came very close to melodrama, he classed it as a Gothic romance arguing that Gothic drama may applaud the lover's escape from a corrupt old order, but melodrama turns all threats or victories into a reaffirmation of the domestic order. Thus Holcroft's play focuses on the daughter's reunion with her father, and that father's attempt to reform the brother who has wronged them both.⁶⁸ Cox also argues that Lewis' *Timour the Tartar: A Grand Romantic Melo-Drama* (1811) is not a melodrama for the same reasons (mentioned above) as *The Castle Spectre*. However, to my mind this is problematic: melodrama developed with different traditions across Europe. In identifying *Timour* as a melodrama, Lewis helped to set the parameters of the English version of the genre. However, Michael Gamer argues, with reference to the changing treatment of Lewis' *The Monk* over the two decades between 1797 and 1817 and Isaac Pocock's *The Miller and his Men* (1813), that what changed Gothic drama into Gothic melodrama was an increasing emphasis on resolving suspense and action, while traditional

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 39-41, 64-65.

⁶⁸ Jeffrey N. Cox, 'The Gothic Drama: Tragedy or Comedy?', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre*, 421-22.

endings such as marriage were dispensed with.⁶⁹ What is clear is that Gothic drama had mutated into Gothic melodrama and was an evolving genre.

Not all features of *Semiramide*'s plot corresponded to melodrama at the time. It does not have the quick transitions from farce to violence, found in English melodrama; indeed there is no comedy. There are many small scenes in the back rooms of the palace, but these do not have the high emotional charge normally associated with melodrama. Rossini's opera only slowly builds up to that moment of crisis when Semiramide recognises Arsace as her son. While this slow development of the plot gives greater nuance to the characters, it has the effect of diluting the intensity of the drama. And yet, some of Rossini's characters have the polarised moral qualities found in melodrama. Assur and Arsace can be seen to be schematically bad and good respectively. Assur is a clear villain, a manipulative bully who will stop at nothing to achieve his ambition to gain hold of the throne; Arsace is straight-forward, honest and honourable. Semiramide, by contrast, is an ambivalent character. Although together with Assur, she has murdered Ninus and was dubbed the 'criminal queen',⁷⁰ we can identify with her as she shows her vulnerability and human longing for love and for her son. She feels fear and guilt – something Assur does not – and shortly before the end she acknowledges her need for forgiveness in the 'Preghiera'. Thus, despite her misdeeds, the audience can relate to Semiramide and find her likeable.

Reynoldson's adaptation focuses on four sets of confrontations, plus the final scene in the tomb. The first of these clashes comes when Semiramide announces her consort. Assur tries to push her into proclaiming him as the intended spouse. Arsace is silenced by Semiramide when she names him instead: she is Arsace's queen and does not listen to his feeble protests; he is apparently of low birth and must obey. Meanwhile, Assur tries to dominate Arsace by calling him a 'low barbarian boy'.⁷¹ The dynamics of this episode set the scene for the other conflicts in the opera: between Arsace and Assur; Semiramide and Assur; and Arsace and Semiramide. Those involving Arsace are similar in both Rossi and Reynoldson's versions. However, when Assur uses Semiramide's fear of the ghost to threaten her, Reynoldson spells out the rawness of Semiramide's agony more sharply and he gives a greater physical presence to the spectre than does Rossi: it stalks around Semiramide's 'regal couch' at night 'banishing slumber'. Once Semiramide has found the strength to face up to Assur's bullying, Reynoldson shows her as angrier and her jibes are more directly personal. Instead of simply saying 'I will know how to

⁶⁹ See Michael Gamer, 'Gothic Melodrama', in *The Cambridge Companion to English Melodrama*, ed. Carolyn Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 39-42.

⁷⁰ *Illustrated London News*, 24 December 1842; *The Times*, 6 January 1843; *Illustrated London News*, 24 December 1842; *The Times*, 6 January 1843.

⁷¹ Rossi, *Semiramide*, trans. Reynoldson (1842), 13.

punish you' (a direct translation of Rossi's 'Punirti saprò'), Reynoldson's *Semiramide* says, 'As woman I scorn thee! / As *Queen I do warn thee!*'⁷² As we shall see in Chapter 6, the critics found this scene with Adelaide Kemble's acting, particularly effective.

Furthermore, Reynoldson sensationalises the end of *Semiramide*. Instead of merely having Assur arrested as in Rossi's libretto, Assur is struck by lightning, an act of God which echoes the supernatural lightning which had earlier extinguished the sacred flame on the altar. Reynoldson does not exaggerate the events surrounding Semiramide's death; yet this too is an act of God. At the end of the grand duet, Reynoldson has Arsace and Semiramide pray that 'heav'n itself doth guide [Arsace's] hand'. Later, in the darkness of Ninus's tomb Arsace kills, not Assur as he thought, but Semiramide. In line with melodrama's moral universe, the deaths of Assur and Semiramide signify that they have been acknowledged as villains. With the transformation, the town of Babylon with the temple of Belus appear, and the honest Arsace is crowned: he is tasked to restore Assyria to splendour, and to be 'her guardian, her King, her defender – / E'en as was [his] great father of yore'.⁷³

So, has *Semiramide* become naturalised either as a melodrama or as a Gothic drama? There are many melodramatic features which do not appear in Reynoldson's adaptation. Being through-composed, the English *Semiramide* does not alternate speech and music; the only spoken section is that written by Rossini, where Arsace reads his father's letter. There is no comedy or farce, nor does it have many quick scene changes: indeed, Reynoldson reduced the number of scene changes so that the opera continues as a seamless whole.

However, Reynoldson does intensify the drama, particularly after the appearance of the ghost at the end of Act I. He does this, not by exaggerating the drama or the emotional impact of the individual numbers, but by cutting the opera so severely that confrontational scenes become butted up against those in which protagonists express their perturbation at events to come, leaving little space for emotional release. With the ever-increasing tension, Act II, especially in comparison with Act I, comes ever closer to Brook's concept of melodrama as a mode of excess. The events lead relentlessly to the dénouement in the tomb, when Arsace will avenge his father's death.

Ultimately, the adapted *Semiramide* is about the righting of a historic injustice, the murder of Ninus. The battle between good and evil takes place through the relationships and conflicts between Assur, Arsace and also Semiramide; the drama leads inexorably to the culprits' deaths. By shortening the opera, Reynoldson raised the level of emotional tension found in Rossini's

⁷² Reynoldson's emphasis.

⁷³ Rossi, *Semiramide*, trans. Reynoldson (1842), 24.

opera: there is pathos in the grand duet and the characters express fear. There is sensation and some violence with Assur and Semiramide's deaths. The opera therefore moves towards Booth's conception of English melodrama. The Babylonian empire has rid itself of the corrupt leaders of the old regime, Semiramide and Assur, and is given a new king, the honest Arsace, who has been united with his bride Azema in a pantomimic transformation. Even if the 1842 *Semiramide* did not have the full sensationalism of Gothic melodrama, Reynoldson tilted it in that direction.

In adapting *Semiramide*, Reynoldson shortened an overlong opera, turning it into a manageable length. Reynoldson brought to Covent Garden the skills he learned at the Surrey Theatre: to grab the attention of the audience, tell a story and bring out the drama. He gave himself the liberty to make a free translation which emphasised the different voices in the ensembles, as well as the opera. He therefore acted not just as translator, but took the role of playwright as well. Just as with the *Love Spell* Reynoldson did not stick to Donizetti's script, but instead modernised the language and made it contemporary; he pushed *Semiramide* towards contemporary genres. Yet although Reynoldson did tilt the opera towards melodrama, more specifically he exploited the melodrama already present in Rossi's libretto. In so doing, he took steps to naturalise the opera, something that would be realised in conjunction with the production department, and the singers.

5 Mounting the Spectacle: Puffs, Antiquity and Special Effects

Semiramide was mounted in a spectacular production featuring a large chorus of multinational characters drawn from the different corners of Semiramide's empire. Operatic stage design at the time tended towards a romantic and picturesque style. However, the Grieve family's set for *Semiramide* may have been based on the kind of antiquarian research normally reserved for historical dramas and Shakespeare.¹ As such it opened a window onto the fascinations of the Middle East and the distant past, and stressed Semiramis' position as a character from ancient history. The production was a spectacle which offered popular appeal and antiquarian seriousness. The highlights of the scenic display were the procession at the beginning and the transformation at the end of Act II, when the city of Babylon appeared and took shape on the Covent Garden stage.

This chapter analyses *Semiramide* as spectacle. I start by examining the succession of puffs in the newspapers, together with the playbills, in order to examine how plans for mounting the opera developed; the personnel who were involved; and how the production was sold. I then look at the developments in theatre lighting and scenery at the time. In that context, I shall look at the newspaper accounts and illustrations of the production to see what special effects were used, and where the Grieve family of scenographers might have sourced their ideas for the Babylonian set.

Puffing the Opera

The first intimation that *Semiramide* would be performed at Covent Garden came when the winter programme was announced on 4 August 1842. A notice in the *Musical World* by James Davison stated that Rossini's *Semiramide* would be the 'earliest novelty', or new production, and outlined the key personnel: Mary Shaw would make her *début* on the English stage as Arsace, with Adelaide Kemble as the heroine; T.H. Reynoldson would be the librettist. Davison's article

¹ See Jeffrey Richards, *The Golden Age of Pantomime: Slapstick, Spectacle and Subversion in Victorian England* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 124.

amplified this information, saying that this would be Shaw's début on the English stage and that her 'fine contralto voice [was] reported to have been much improved by her continental practice'; Reynoldson had 'literally translated and adapted the libretto';² Julius Benedict would be the musical director and R. Hughes leader of the band.

Julius Benedict (1804-1885), was a multi-talented musician, composer and conductor, who would have been an asset in building early expectations for the season. Born in Germany, he had studied under Weber and then spent nine years as conductor at the San Carlo and Fondo Theatres, Naples, where he wrote three operas. On the advice of Maria Malibran he had come to London in 1835, where he was engaged as Conductor of Opera Buffa at the Lyceum Theatre. Then, between 1838 and 1848, he worked as musical director at Drury Lane under Alfred Bunn. Despite this, Benedict conducted all the operas with Adelaide Kemble at Covent Garden during the period 1841 to 1842. London would be the focus of the rest of Benedict's career, where he worked as conductor and composer as well as pianist, teacher and editor of piano music. He was to become one of the grand old men of music in Britain and was knighted in 1871. In its obituary of Benedict, the *Musical Times* compared him to Sir Michael Costa, although the writer maintained that Benedict was a good but not a great conductor, arguing that his real strengths lay in composing.³ Yet as a conductor, Benedict played an important role in English music: he worked at Drury Lane and from 1852 at Her Majesty's Theatre; he conducted Jenny Lind on both sides of the Atlantic; and he directed every Norwich Festival between 1845 and 1878.⁴

The other important person in the musical line-up, though not named until the playbills appeared, was the chorus master, James H. Tully (d.1868). He had started off as a child actor and singer, then became a composer-conductor-chorus master at Covent Garden under Vestris and at Drury Lane under Bunn. Later still he worked for the theatre manager, E.T. Smith, for whom he composed operettas and burlesques.⁵ Under Bunn's management, Tully adapted the music of Rossini's *La donna del lago* as *The Lady of the Lake* (1843), in which Shaw appeared as Malcolm.⁶ Later still, Tully worked at the Lyceum and National English Opera Company.⁷ In

² *Musical World*, 4 August 1842, 247.

³ 'Sir Julius Benedict', *Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*, 1 July 1885, 385.

⁴ Nicholas Temperley, 'Benedict, Sir Julius', *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online* (Oxford University Press), <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/02657> (accessed 26 July 2016).

⁵ Richards, *Golden Age of Pantomime*, 184.

⁶ See Gioacchino Rossini, *Dearest, Come in Me Confiding, and The Weary Hours I've Pass'd ... The Words by Mark Lemon, Adapted to the English Stage, by J. H. Tully*. (London: Jefferys & Nelson, 1843).

⁷ See 'Mixed playbill for *La sonnambula, or, The Village Phantom; Blue Beard, or, Hints to the Curious* New Royal Pavilion Theatre, 15, 17 and 18 October 1859', GB-Lv: Prod Oversize Box 10. Facsimile at: <http://www.elta-project.org/browse.html?recordId=2022> (accessed 21 July 2016).

1858, *The Times* described Tully as the ‘most practised and fluent of pantomime musicians’ and commended him for the ‘spirit and precision of his orchestra’.⁸

Further details about Covent Garden’s winter programme emerged during the summer. A notice following a meeting with the company on 20 August revealed that the theatre would open on 3 September with *Norma*, the second night would be *The Marriage of Figaro*, and the third *La sonnambula*, all favourite operas from the previous season and all sung in English. In a change to the earlier announcement, *Richard Coeur de Lion* by Grotto [Grétry] was now to be the first of the new productions; it would open after the musical festival at Worcester in mid-September, followed early in the season by *Semiramide* with Kemble and Shaw.⁹ The article stated that the band and choruses would be ‘very numerous for *Semiramide* and [had] been selected with great care’; it further said that the theatre was undergoing ‘cleansing and repainting’. Almost a third of this short piece, however, relates to *Semiramide*.¹⁰ The large size of the chorus was later confirmed by the playbills. Although the statement that the orchestra was being chosen with ‘great care’ was an advertising slogan, once the production was under way, a number of newspapers noted the precision of the orchestra under Benedict; Ayrton observed an improvement in the orchestra, remarking that the string basses included Mr. Casolani, ‘the best *contra basso* in England’ as well as a Mr. Percival, a ‘young man of first-rate talent’.¹¹

Later puffs about Covent Garden’s winter programme focused on *Semiramide* as the ‘novelty’ of the season, with many concentrating on the personalities of Kemble and Shaw. The focus on *Semiramide* rather than *Richard Coeur de Lion* was probably due to Kemble’s star appeal, which was somewhat greater than that of Elizabeth Rainforth, Mr. Travers and William Harrison, the principals in *Richard Coeur de Lion*.¹² Probably, because Kemble’s ability to attract an audience was already assured, many of the advance notices concentrated on Shaw’s vocal abilities and her achievements on the continent: these included that she had ‘performed at most of the principal theatres in Italy’¹³ where she had won ‘*bouquets* innumerable’,¹⁴ and that her voice was a ‘rich contralto, highly cultivated’.¹⁵ Following the announcement in June that Kemble would retire at

⁸ *The Times*, 28 December 1858, quoted by Richards, *Golden Age of Pantomime*, 184.

⁹ *Morning Advertiser*, 22 August 1842. In the event, the first performance of *Richard Coeur de Lion* took place on 10 October 1842, ten days after *Semiramide*’s première (see *Morning Post*, 11 October 1842).

¹⁰ *Morning Advertiser*, 22 August 1842.

¹¹ *Examiner*, 8 October 1842.

¹² Elizabeth Rainforth, Mr. Travers and William Harrison as Laurette, Richard and Blondel respectively (see *Standard*, 11 October, 1842).

¹³ *Morning Post*, 12 September 1842; see also *Bell’s Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, 28 August 1842.

¹⁴ *Era*, 28 August 1840.

¹⁵ *Morning Post*, 12 September 1842.

Christmas,¹⁶ and referring to her performances in *Norma* and *Elena Uberti*, an English version of Mercadante's *Elena da Feltre*, William Ayrton wrote that Kemble had 'proved that ... she [could] fix the attention ... of English audiences unsupported by an attractive plot'; given the 'intrinsic beauties of Rossini's music'; he was confident that she was 'capable of equal or superior effects' and hoped that the closing engagement of Kemble's 'too short career' would be 'as brilliant as good taste and a feeling of nationality can desire'.¹⁷ Ayrton, who had lambasted *Semiramide* when it first appeared in 1824, now regarded it as a better opera than *Norma*, which had enjoyed a very successful run a year before.

Advertisements for *Semiramide* and its afterpiece, *Deaf as a Post*, started to appear on 24 September;¹⁸ capitalisation and line spacing emphasized that Rossini's grand opera was being performed in an English version. Not all the information was correct: various newspapers suggested that the adaptation of *Semiramide* would be by Planché or Chorley, writers who respectively had adapted the versions of Bellini's *Norma* and Mercadante's *Elena da Feltre* in which Kemble had starred during Covent Garden's 1841-42 season.¹⁹ There is no evidence that either writer had been considered as the translator: such articles, in fact, testified to the keenness of the press to publish stories linked to the popular Adelaide Kemble quickly and without fact-checking.

The playbill for the first performance of *Semiramide* on 1 October 1842 gives the cast list headed by Kemble and Shaw in the roles of Semiramide and Arsace (see Figure 2). Kemble's name is displayed prominently with the announcement that she will retire at Christmas, thus making it clear that this is the last chance to hear her sing. Shaw is described as 'from the Principal Theatres in Italy – her First Appearance on the English Stage'. The playbill lists two additional characters not found in Rossini's opera, the Princes of Egypt and Ethiopia, and names each member of the huge 122-strong chorus, stressing its size and splendour. There may have been yet more people on stage, as Ayrton also referred to 'mute supernumeraries' who bulked out the chorus; whether these were included in the numbers listed on the playbill or additional to them is unclear.²⁰ Either

¹⁶ *Bell's New Weekly Messenger*, 19 June 1842.

¹⁷ *Examiner*, 17 September 1842, 597.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 24 September 1842, 623.

¹⁹ Planché was suggested by *Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser* (Dublin, Ireland), 27 September 1842; *Dublin Morning Register*, 28 September, 1842. Chorley's name was given by *Bell's New Weekly Messenger*, 7 August, 1842.

²⁰ *Examiner*, 8 October 1842.

Theatre Royal, Covent Garden.

MISS ADELAIDE KEMBLE

WILL PERFORM EVERY
Tuesday, Thursday, & Saturday, until Christmas,
WHEN SHE WILL
FINALLY RETIRE FROM THE STAGE.

**The FREE LIST (the Public Press excepted)
will be suspended.**

TO-MORROW, SATURDAY, October 1st, 1842,
Will be produced (FIRST TIME) an English Version
of **ROSSINI's Opera of**

SEMIRAMIDE

MUSICAL DIRECTOR AND CONDUCTOR, Mr. BENEDICT.
Leader of the Band, **Mr. R. HUGHES.**
The Chorusses under the Direction of **Mr. J. H. TULLY.**

The Scenery by **Mr. GRIEVE, Mr. T. GRIEVE, and Mr. W. GRIEVE.**
The Decorations and Appointments, by **Mr. W. BRADWELL.**
The Dresses by **Miss G. LOVER and Miss RAYNER.**
The Machinery by **Mr. H. SLOMAN.** The Action by **Mr. W. WEST, Jun.**

The Character of Semiramide, by **Miss ADELAIDE KEMBLE,**
Arsace, - - - - Mrs. ALFRED SHAW,
(From the Principal Theatres in Italy,—her First Appearance on the English Stage).

Assur, - - - - Mr. GIUBILEI,
Oroo, - - - - - Mr. LEFFLER,
Idreno, Mr. TRAVERS, Mitrane, Mr. HUGHES,
Shade of Ninus, Mr. J. BLAND.

Azema, - - - - - Miss LEE.
PRINCES OF EGYPT AND ETHIOPIA—Messrs. Andrews and Russell,
MAGI—Messrs. Morgue, Boucher, Willoughby, Dalton, Howse, Healey, Butler, Gledhill, Connell, Davis,
Macklin, Page, Cooke, Prosser, Bender, Moore.
SATRAPS—Messrs. Collett, Morgan, Macarthy, Lake, New, Braithwaite, Sharpe, Rakes, Kerridge, Burt,
Jones, Roberts, S. Smith, Melville, Sherwood, Guichard, Hodges, Potter.
ASSYRIAN GUARD—Messrs. Langley, Absalon, Allen, Smith, Webb, Truman, Archer, Gillmore,
Foyster, Adams, Winfield, Tring.
SYRIAN WARRIORS—Messrs. Moore, Ireland, Thomson, Gough, Gardner, Garden, Williams, Heath,
EGYPTIANS—Messrs. Byrae, Wilks, Reynolds, Blake, Pearce, May, Taylor, Farrell, Davis, Martin,
Mott, Kendall.
ETHIOPIANS—Messrs. Sangar, Kirton, Speed, Dytee, Mac Dermot, Wood, Young, Greenwood, Carroll,
Lawson, Usher, Eisdon.
BABYLONIANS—Messrs. Patrick, Waters, Bull, Harris, Tyler, Henley, Baker, Higgins, Combes, Hughes,
Evans, Newman.
HINDOOS—Messrs. Hill, Hopkins, Baggots, Keen, Maclean, Williams.
LADIES OF THE PALACE—Mesdames Jackson, A. Jackson, Hughes, Diether, Lane, Corrie,
Walker, Somerville, Howard, Mortimer, Emden, Morgan, Vidal, Piccaluga, Tully Cross, Floyd, Wood.
INDIAN GIRLS—Mesdames Miller, Hartley, Taylor, Hatton, H. Payne, Kendall, A. Kendall, Payne,
Jones, Diddear, Ridgway, James.

After which, the Farce of

DEAF as a POST

Captain Templeton, Mr. COOPER,
old Walton, Mr. GRANBY, Gallop, Mr. KERRIDGE, Crupper, Mr. COLLETT,
Tristram Sappy, Mr. HARLEY,
Miss LEE, Sophie Walton, Miss LANE
and Company, Mrs. PLUMPLEY, Mrs. TAYLEURE, Sally Maggs, Mrs. ORGER.

ON MONDAY, (9th Time) the New Play (in Five Acts) of
LOVE'S SACRIFICE.
Matthew Aylmer, - - - - Mr. VANDENHOFF, St. Lo, Mr. WALTER LACY,
Paul Lafont, Mr. COOPER, Eugene de Lorne, Mr. CHARLES PITT, Jean Rusé, Mr. MEADOWS,
Morice, Mr. A. WIGAN, Du Viray, Mr. W. H. PAYNE, Friar Dominic, Mr. DIDDEAR,
Margaret Aylmer, - - - - Miss VANDENHOFF,
Hermine de Vermont, Mrs. WALTER LACY, Manou, Mrs. ORGER, Jenny, Mrs. HUMBY.

With **AUBER's Opera (in Three Acts) of**
FRA DIAVOLO: or, The Inn of Terracina.
Fra Diavolo, - Mr. W. HARRISON, Lord Allicash, - Mr. G. HORNCastle,
Lorenzo, Mr. TRAVERS, Matteo, Mr. S. SMITH, Beppo, Mr. J. BLAND, Giacomo, Mr. GIUBILEI,
Lady Allicash, - Miss POOLE, Zerlina, - Miss RAINFORTH.

On TUESDAY, AN OPERA.
With (Twelfth Time) the New Comedy of **GERTRUDE'S CHERRIES.**

THE NEW PLAY, (by the Author of the PROVOST OF BRUGES) entitled
LOVE'S SACRIFICE,
Will be repeated Every MONDAY, WEDNESDAY & FRIDAY.

SHAKSPERE'S PLAY OF THE TEMPEST IS IN PREPARATION.

PRIVATE BOXES to be had at the Box-Office; of Messrs. **ANDREWS**, 167, New Bond Street; **Mr. MITCHELL**, Old Bond Street; and of **Mr. SAUS**, Pall Mall.
Tickets and Places for the Boxes to be taken of **Mr. WHITLOW**, at the Box-Office, from 10 till 4; where Season Tickets may be had.
DRESS BOXES, 7s.—Second Price, 3s. 6d. — FIRST and SECOND CIRCLES, 5s.—Second Price, 2s. 6d.
VIVAT REGINA.] PIT, 3s.—Second Price, 2s. GALLERY, 1s. [No Money returned.
Doors to be opened at Half-past Six, and the Performances to commence at Seven.

Applications respecting the Play Bills, to be addressed (post-paid) to Mr. T. Evans, Sir George Street, [S. G. Fairbridge, Printer, 51, Bow Street, Covent Garden]

Figure 2. 'Semiramide, Covent Garden Playbill, 1 October, 1842', Royal Opera House Archives Playbills 1842, No. 16., ROH Collections. © Royal Opera House.

way, there were very many on stage, something that is confirmed by illustrations of the final tableau.²¹

It was not uncommon for spectacular productions of opera to list the chorus members and the characters they represented, especially for the first night; yet, the size of *Semiramide*'s chorus was particularly large. The playbill for the opening night of the 1833 *Don Juan* at Drury Lane (an English version of *Don Giovanni*) listed 54 chorus members; the playbill for *Cinderella* (Covent Garden) on 14 December 1830 listed 41, even though it was no longer a new production; while the first night of the spectacular *Gustavus the Third* (Covent Garden, 1833) named a mere 28 chorus members, even though the production boasted 250 supernumeraries.²² Much larger was the production of *Norma* with Kemble at Covent Garden in 1841, which featured a chorus of 70.²³ If the chorus of *Norma* was large, that of *Semiramide* was two-thirds the size again and two-and-a-half times the size of *Don Juan* and *Cinderella*. The choruses of all these operas were divided into three or four sections: for example, *Norma* had Gaulish chiefs, druids, bards and druidesses. By contrast, the chorus of *Semiramide* was divided into ten groupings, most of which were clearly identifiable by their nationality, for instance, the Assyrian guard, Ethiopians and 'Hindoos'.

Semiramide's playbill confirms the names of those in charge of the music, and gives the names of those responsible for technical direction: the sets were by the Grieve family, the decorations by Mr. Bradwell and the dresses (costumes) by Misses Glover and Rayner. All of these people had worked on the production of *Norma* starring Kemble a year before, when Covent Garden had been under Vestris' management,²⁴ thus indicating that Charles Kemble had taken over many of Vestris' production personnel when he took over the management of Covent Garden during the summer of 1842.

²¹ 'Last Act of Semiramide', *Illustrated London News*, 22 October 1842, 381; John Brandard music cover for Gioacchino Rossini, *Semiramide: The Grand March*, arr. Stephen Glover (London: Jefferys & Nelson; Cramer, Addison & Beale, [1843]). (See Figures 7 and 10.a.)

²² *Don Juan*: Drury Lane playbill, 5 February 1833, in '[Theatre Royal Drury Lane]: A Collection of c.290 Playbills', Sotheby's, <http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2012/english-literature-history-childrens-books-and-illustrations/lot.108.html> (accessed 20 August 2018); 'Cinderella: Covent Garden Theatre playbill, 14 December 1830', GB-Lv S.117-1997, <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1138556/covent-garden-theatre-playbill-playbill-reynolds-w/> (accessed 20 August 2018); *Gustavus the Third*: Covent Garden playbill, 13 November 1833, in 'Past Images of the Month', Museum of Music History, http://www.momh.org.uk/exhibitions-detail-photo.php?cat_id=5&prod_id=289&type=sub&id=848&pt=all (accessed 20 August 2018); Tamsin Alexander, 'Illuminating *Gustavus the Third* and the Art of Spectacle in 1830s London', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (March 2017), 45.

²³ See 'Norma: Covent Garden Playbill, 4 November 1841', GB-Lam, McCann Collection, Accession No. 2004.1620. Facsimile at: <http://keimages.ram.ac.uk/emuweb/php5/media.php?irn=4202> (accessed 11 August 2017).

²⁴ *Ibid.*

The set designers, John Henderson Grieve and his sons Thomas and William, were among the foremost set designers in London and had a close association with Covent Garden. They were known for their atmospheric scenes of distant landscapes and historic architecture, and for their innovative set designs. They were the first to create a successful moving panorama on the stage and they developed a paint style and scenic glaze that looked good under the strong illumination of gas light, in contrast to the solid distemper normally used for sets. With their broad handling of paint, they were able to create spectacular sets in only a few days, much more quickly than other scenographers: looking at their scenery was often likened to viewing an artwork.²⁵

Although the playbill for *Semiramide* gave prominence to the technical staff, unusually, for a production that was to prove something of a spectacle, it did not make a feature of the new scenery built by the Grieve family and special effects as was customary – the playbills for *Gustavus the Third* and *Cinderella* both listed seven notable scenes, while *Don Juan* had five. Not including *Semiramide*'s new scenes may have been due to a lack of room on the page, as the space had been used up with listing the large cast and their many nationalities.²⁶

Deaf as a Post appeared as the afterpiece on the first night. This was followed by details of future performances and the seat prices. These were significantly cheaper than those of Her Majesty's Theatre, although more expensive than other London theatres.²⁷ At the start of the season, Covent Garden had given tickets to notable individuals; this so-called 'Free List' was suspended for performances of *Semiramide* as it had been for *Norma* a year before, after Kemble had demonstrated that she could draw crowds to the theatre.²⁸ Charles Kemble's suspension of the Free List for *Semiramide* indicates that he expected the opera to have good audiences.

The playbill for *Semiramide*'s 21st performance on 19 November 1842 gives similar information as before, except that there has been a change of emphasis. Kemble's name is now presented in a larger box, and she is shown as appearing four nights a week, rather than three as previously. The production team no longer appears on the playbill, and less importance is given to the production as spectacle. The numbers in the chorus have been reduced by five or six. This may have been

²⁵ Kathryn R. Barush, 'Painting the Scene' in *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre, 1737-1832* ed. Julia Swindells and David Francis Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 279-80; Richards, *Golden Age of Pantomime*, 124.

²⁶ Barush, 'Painting the Scene', 266.

²⁷ See Appendix IV.

²⁸ The Free List was in operation for the second performance of *Norma* on 4 November 1841, but it had been suspended by the time of the fifth performance on 11 November 1841. (See '*Norma*: Covent Garden Playbill, 4 November 1841', GB-Lam; '*Norma*: Covent Garden Playbill, 11 November, 1841', GB-Lam, McCann Collection, Accession No. 2004.1623. Facsimile at: <https://keimages.ram.ac.uk/emuweb/php5/media.php?irn=4204> (accessed 11 August 2017).

because the stage was too crowded, as Ayrton had indicated,²⁹ or as a cost-saving measure. Although the performances with Kemble were very successful, audiences were sparse on the nights when she did not perform, causing financial difficulties.³⁰ Within a week of this latter playbill, Charles Kemble was removed from the management of the theatre because of its losses.³¹ No doubt the ‘mute supernumeraries’ referred to by Ayrton were also reduced or removed completely.³²

The libretto confirms the cast list given on the playbills. However, it does not give space to the production in the way that the playbill does. In contrast to the wide variety of chorus members shown in the 1824 libretto and printed for Benelli, and the later ones published by H.N. Millar, the 1842 libretto lists simply: ‘Magi, Satraps, Soldiers, &c. &c.’; the only reference to the production team is that the scenery is by ‘Messrs. Grieve, W. Grieve, & T. Grieve’. This is a very simple libretto and does not function as a souvenir programme with interesting articles as did the libretti for *Der Freischütz: or the Seventh Bullet* (1824) and *Hofer* (1830),³³ or indeed H.N. Millar’s 1827 libretto for *Semiramide*.³⁴ The minimal nature of the 1842 libretto is probably one reason why it could be priced at 1s., cheaper than the official dual-language libretti at Her Majesty’s Theatre at 1s.6d., although the same price as the unofficial libretti;³⁵ another related explanation was that it could have been marketed to a less affluent audience.

The title page of the libretto makes clear the priority given to the different personnel, as shown by the size of type. Benedict’s name is the most important, with his name larger than Rossini’s. Although the names of Tully and Reynoldson are presented in the same type size, Tully’s name has been spaced more generously, making it stand out and emphasising his importance in the theatre’s hierarchy. The spacing of the names on the title page indicates that the librettist no longer had the high status he had enjoyed at the beginning of the century, or even that Gabriele Rosetti had experienced when he translated the libretto of *Semiramide* for H.N. Millar in 1827.

²⁹ *Examiner*, 8 October 1842.

³⁰ *John Bull*, 29 October 1842, 524; Gabriella Dideriksen, ‘Repertory and Rivalry: Opera at the Second Covent Garden Theatre, 1830 to 1856’ (PhD diss., King’s College London, 1997), 168.

³¹ Charles Kemble was removed from the management on 24 November 1842 (see for example, *Morning Chronicle*, 26 November 1842).

³² See *Examiner*, 8 October 1842.

³³ Walter McGregor Logan, *Der Freischütz: or the Seventh Bullet* (London: Thomas Dolby, 1825); J.R. Planché, *Hoffer, the Tell of the Tyrol* (London: Goulding and D’Almaine, 1830).

³⁴ Gaetano Rossi, *Semiramide: A Serious Opera in Two Acts, the Music by Rossini; With Critical notes, and Peculiarities of Madam Pasta’s voice; the Translation in Easy Verse Line for Line with the Italian; as Performed at the King’s Theatre, Haymarket; Revised by Signor Rosetti. A New Edition, Revised and Corrected* (London: H. N. Millar, 1827).

³⁵ Jennifer Hall-Witt, *Fashionable Acts: Opera and Elite Culture in London, 1780-1880* (Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire Press; Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2007), 256, 364n.

Semiramide was sold on a combination of the drawing power of its singers, and the production as spectacle, as evidenced by the puffs and the playbills. Particular attention was given to Kemble in view of her forthcoming retirement. This advertising strategy intensified during the course of the run, with more space being allotted to Kemble on the playbill and a greater number of performances given each week. In preference to the usual practice of listing new scenery on the playbill, promotion of the spectacle focused on the large size of the chorus and its multinational nature, thereby offering the audience a spectacle which showed peoples from distant lands.

The Taste for Spectacle

Although the puffs do not speak of *Semiramide* as a spectacle, it is clear from the combination of Reynoldson's many stage directions, the prominent placing of the production team on the playbill and the multinational nature of the chorus, that the production was conceived as such. Theatrical spectacles were popular with all sectors of the public, regardless of income, employment or class.³⁶ Resplendent scenic displays were all around in London, from the magnificence and size of London's urban architecture and monuments, to the grandeur of exhibition halls with large-scale paintings by artists such as John Martin and Francis Danby. At night, the brilliance of London's streets 'magically lit by millions of gas lamps' put foreign visitors into a 'state of intoxication';³⁷ superior shops boasted plate glass windows which allowed passers-by to inspect an array of attractive wares, also illuminated by gas, as if looking at the events on a stage framed by the proscenium.³⁸

In the theatre, the mania for visual spectacle became increasingly translated into plays and entertainments dominated by creating a 'picture on stage', with a profusion of colour and rich lighting effects. The public's appetite for spectacle came to a climax mid-century. As E.T. Smith, sometime manager of Drury Lane and Astley's, told a parliamentary committee in 1866, the people will not go to a theatre with 'merely talking drama, without any action in it or sensational effects ... [Instead] they will go where there is scenic effect and mechanical effects to please the eye.'³⁹ This was a widely held view, backed up, for example, by the essayist William Bodham Donne, friend of the Kembles and later Examiner of Plays, who blamed contemporary theatre audiences for being impassive and lacking imagination. He wrote that instead of the 'expressive

³⁶ Michael R. Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre, 1850-1910* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 3.

³⁷ Flora Tristan, quoted by Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 88.

³⁸ Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre*, 4.

³⁹ E.T. Smith, quoted by *Ibid.*, 2.

hints and bold outlines of our elder playwrights' being sufficient to convey the theatrical situation, if a king dies on stage he must be seen to 'writhe anatomically' during his death pangs. 'To touch our emotions, we need not the imaginatively true, but the physically real.... All must be made palpable to sight, no less than to feeling.'⁴⁰ By 1882, a critic for *The Theatre* writing about Drury Lane commented that the 'playgoers of to-day want to see and not to think'.⁴¹

Many of the ideas for spectacular theatre came out of advances made in Paris. During the eighteenth century, set designers had begun to break away from the old conventions of classical scenography in search of greater realism; yet it was the freedom from restraint that came out of the French Revolution that propelled change, allowing the creation of new genres such as *mélodrame* and grand opera.⁴² No longer bound by the unities of time and place, theatre designers became free to transport audiences to past ages and exotic locales, embracing a new aesthetic to 'enthral, elevate and edify'.⁴³ These preferences came to England along with the arrival of French and other continental operas, and were made possible by technological advances in lighting and set design.

In the 1780s, the invention by the Genevan physicist Aimé Argand of his 'Argand' oil lamp, revolutionised theatre lighting, tripling the light intensity of candles and allowing more dramatic chiaroscuro effects. With better illumination, actors could now move upstage behind the proscenium, thus becoming more connected to the scenery. The lamp could also be used behind transparent painted screens to create magical effects mimicking nature, such as the rising sun or a thunderstorm.⁴⁴ The advantages of the Argand lamp were greatly amplified when gas lighting was introduced to the stage, as it was even brighter than candles or oil, as well as being cheaper and more flexible. By regulating the gas supply, it was now possible to alter the brightness from a distance and, by using a 'gas table', in different parts of the theatre. Nevertheless, the Argand lamp continued to be used alongside gas in order to avoid an undue tangle of gas pipes.

Covent Garden became one of the first theatres to install gas lighting in 1815: it was used initially to illuminate the public spaces of the theatre and was only extended to the stage in 1817. The result was immediate: light from the chandelier in the auditorium now shone on the performers' faces, reversing the shadows created previously when the primary light source was near the floor.

⁴⁰ William Bodham Donne, *Essays on the Drama* (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1858), 206; see also Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre*, 2; Alexander, 'Illuminating *Gustavus*', 36.

⁴¹ *Theatre*, Vol. 5, No. 29, May 1882, 314

⁴² Simon Williams, 'The Spectacle of the Past in Grand Opera', in *The Cambridge Companion to Grand Opera*, ed. David Charlton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 58.

⁴³ Sarah Hibberd, 'Scenography, *Spéculomanie* and Spectacle: Pixérécourt's *La citerne* (1809)', in *The Melodramatic Moment: Music and Theatrical Culture, 1790-1820*, ed. Katherine Hambridge and Jonathan Hicks (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 80.

⁴⁴ Shearer West, 'Manufacturing Spectacle', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre*, 302.

By 1829, gas had been established in most of the important London theatres where it was used for the footlights and wing lights. It was also portable: gas jets would be clustered at the top of a standard lamp or along short lengths of pipe concealed behind the stage furniture and scenery and connected to the gas supply by flexible hoses. The light could be coloured by placing changeable coloured glass in front of the footlights and strips of coloured silk or calico over the gas batterns.⁴⁵ Gas illumination over the stage took longer to arrive: an article in the *Penny Cyclopaedia* dated 1841 commented that 'light is now occasionally thrown from above'.⁴⁶ But by 1849, when overhead gas batterns were first used at the Olympic Theatre, it was no longer unusual.⁴⁷

Set design also saw changes, driven by the desire for greater realism on stage. At the end of the eighteenth century, David Garrick recruited Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg, who had trained in Strasbourg and Paris, to bring his skills as a salon painter to Drury Lane. There he created scenery with landscapes, sketching them on-site so that, for example, they portrayed the Derbyshire countryside accurately; he created natural vistas which 'deceived' the eye of the spectator.⁴⁸ In so doing, he paved the way for a shift towards using topographical scenery instead of architectural settings.⁴⁹ Loutherbourg was innovative and brought new techniques to the theatre: he experimented with blending pigments so they were vivid, durable and achieved the best relationship between light and shade; and he created instant transformations by shining a light in front of and then behind a transparency painted with a different scene on each side.⁵⁰

The move for greater naturalism in the theatre brought with it the arrival of the box set, which gave a realistic portrayal of a room with three walls, practicable doors and a ceiling. The concept was originally developed in Paris for melodrama and boulevard farce between 1800 and 1820. Theatre historians disagree about when the box set was first used in London, although they often point to Vestris' productions of *The Conquering Game* (1832) and *London Assurance* (1841) at the Olympic Theatre. William Appleton suggests that the box set may have developed so gradually that no single point can be considered as the first time it was used. At first, furniture

⁴⁵ Michael R. Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 86-87.

⁴⁶ *Penny Cyclopaedia*, quoted by Terence Rees, *Theatre Lighting in the Age of Gas* (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1978), 34.

⁴⁷ See Rees, *Theatre Lighting*, 34-35.

⁴⁸ Barush, 'Painting the Scene', 273.

⁴⁹ Michael Burden, 'The Writing and Staging of Georgian Romantic Opera', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre*, 429.

⁵⁰ Barush, 'Painting the Scene', 273.

was painted on the flats that made up the box set, although later on, real furniture was used instead.⁵¹

The bid for greater verisimilitude led to other innovations. Increasingly free-standing, three-dimensional scenes constructed from wood and canvas replaced painted flats.⁵² Scenery, such as painted backdrops and wings, began to be suspended so it could be lifted off the stage and out of sight, with the result that scene changes could be made without the jerkiness of sliding flats horizontally under the old groove system. In addition, trap doors, an essential part of Victorian stage machinery, were used to bring scenery and actors on stage; they were particularly important for making ghosts appear and disappear, and were used to provide the special effects for melodrama and pantomime in both the patent and minor theatres.⁵³

Already in the eighteenth century, scenery and lighting effects were being used to create spectacular theatrical events. In the 1740s and 1750s, Jean-Nicolas Servandoni combined art and music to add to the narrative and atmosphere.⁵⁴ At the Théâtre Feydeau in the 1790s, the Degotti brothers used their sets to suggest the overwhelming forces of nature, creating for example the conflagration of a castle in Luigi Cherubini's *Lodoïska* (1791) and an avalanche in the same composer's *Eliza* (1794). In these operas, art and music joined to awe, terrify and delight the audience.⁵⁵ Likewise, René-Charles Guilbert de Pixérécourt used disasters in his *mélodrames*, such as the shipwreck and fire in his 1809 *La Citerne*.⁵⁶

In London, such catastrophes were reflected in the two 1829 adaptations of Auber's *La Muette de Portici* at the Coburg and Drury Lane. Both theatres competed to produce the more dramatic scene of Vesuvius erupting. The Coburg made the 'Sublime & Awful ... EXPLOSION OF A VOLCANO' the thrust of their advertising strategy.⁵⁷ Drury Lane for their part showed showers of lava, red tides running down the mountain, illuminated buildings, and people dying beneath the

⁵¹ William Worthen Appleton, *Madame Vestris and the London Stage* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 71-74; Dennis Kennedy, *The Oxford Companion to Theatre and Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), s.v. 'Box Set'.

⁵² Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age*, 74-75.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 75-78.

⁵⁴ Sarah Hibberd, 'Scenography, *Spéculomanie* and Spectacle', 80-81; 'Servandoni, Giovanni (Niccolò) (1695-1766)', in Martin Banham, ed., *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), https://search-credoreference-com.gold.idm.oclc.org/content/entry/cupthea/servandoni_giovanni_niccol%C3%B2_jean_nicolas_servan_1695_1766/0?institutionId=1872 (accessed 11 September 2018).

⁵⁵ Hibberd, 'Scenography, *Spéculomanie* and Spectacle', 81

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 87-92.

⁵⁷ *The Dumb Girl of Portici*, Royal Coburg playbill, 1829, quoted by Christina Fuhrmann, *Foreign Opera at the London Playhouses: From Mozart to Bellini* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 157.

fire bolts. Reviewers were divided as to whether these adaptations represented a descent into illegitimate fare, although the *Dramatic Magazine* wrote about the Coburg version, ‘Opera is a spectacle as wild as it is magnificent.’⁵⁸ Four years later, the Covent Garden *Gustavus the Third* (1833, an adaptation of Auber’s *Gustave III*) became a society event; the elite took part in the masquerade, which became a glittering light show so that the spectacle eclipsed Auber’s music.

Although not French, the spectacle for *Der Freischiütz* (1824) also made a sensation. The Grieve sets for the Covent Garden version included the fluttering of pinions, moving shadows and owls, ravens and other birds and animals designed to inspire horror.⁵⁹ The moon darkened at the commencement of the storm, and rocks crashed.⁶⁰ The spectacle of these many adaptations fitted in with the contemporary enthusiasm for phantasmagoria and the Gothic.

James Robinson Planché and Vestris made a name with extravaganzas in the 1830s that used the latest technology and were accompanied by a fastidious attention to dress and setting. Their production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1840) at Covent Garden opened with a view of Athens and closed with a vision of ‘countless fairies ascending and descending and waving torches of various coloured lights’.⁶¹ Critical reception was mixed: *The Times* deplored the cult of the scenic designer, while the *Examiner* suggested that the text might as well be totally discarded in favour of unadulterated spectacle. However, the public was enthusiastic, applauding every scene and crowding the theatre for months.⁶²

Spectacles were particularly popular when they showed the magnificence of the ancient, especially when linked to historical truth. The scenographers’ zeal for historical accuracy focused on three main areas: architecture, costume and interest in the Middle East. At the end of the eighteenth century, William Capon, working at Drury Lane for Adelaide’s uncle, John Kemble, was one of the first to apply strict historical research to stage scenery. With ‘all the zeal of an antiquarian’,⁶³ Capon recorded the architectural details, the type of stone and the light effect in particular medieval buildings, which he then reproduced on stage. An example is the massive fourteenth-century cathedral reproduced for Joanna Baillie’s play *De Montfort* at Drury Lane (1800).⁶⁴ In a similar vein, Planché designed historically accurate costumes from ‘indisputable

⁵⁸ *Dramatic Magazine*, quoted by Fuhrmann, *Foreign Opera*, 158.

⁵⁹ Michael Burden, ‘Georgian Romantic Opera’, 437.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Satirist*, quoted by Appleton, *Madame Vestris*, 134.

⁶² Appleton, *Madame Vestris*, 133-34.

⁶³ James Boaden, quoted by Alicia Finkel, *Romantic Stages: Set and Costume Design in Victorian England* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2005), 8.

⁶⁴ See Finkel, *Romantic Stages*, 8-9.

authorities' for a production of *King John* (1823) at Covent Garden, then managed by Adelaide Kemble's father, Charles.⁶⁵

The focus of antiquarian research shifted to the Middle East following the French invasion of Egypt in 1798: Napoleon's forces included several dozen 'savants' whose task was to study the Orient and create a living archive of the expedition. Their work resulted in the publication of the *Description de l'Égypte* (1809-1830), which gave an illustrated description of ancient Egypt, its monuments, geography and natural history.⁶⁶ This book made numerous Egyptian source materials available to Europeans for the first time and marked the beginnings of Egyptology in modern times. Great interest was taken in France, Italy and Britain by Egyptologists such as Jean-François Champollion, Ippolito Rosellini and Karl Richard Lepsius. In London crowds came to see Giovanni Battista Belzoni's exhibition of Egyptian artefacts at the Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly (1821-22): the exhibits included idols, papyri, lion-headed statues of the goddess Sekhmet and a model of the second pyramid.⁶⁷ The English found a renewed interest in the East after the Oriental Crisis of 1840, which culminated with the capture of Acre in November 1840.

Planché's libretto for Weber's *Oberon* (1826) included notes explaining Arabic terms and customs, while the Grieves' set depicted the cities of the East in lavish and ornate detail.⁶⁸ Middle Eastern subjects outside the theatre also attracted large crowds. The public flocked to see the panorama of Jerusalem at Leicester Square, which was based on on-the-spot sketches by Frederick Catherwood (1835), while *The Shrine of the Nativity at Bethlehem* at the Regent's Park Diorama (1840) was deemed by the *New Monthly Belle Assemblée* to be 'grandly sublime and thrillingly interesting'.⁶⁹ Such productions allowed the public to engage in a form of 'vicarious tourism' as they experienced places they had only read about.⁷⁰

Mesopotamia also held a fascination. It was regarded as the 'cradle of civilization' and was a contender for the locus not only of the Garden of Eden, but also looked forward to the

⁶⁵ Donald Roy, 'Planché, James Robinson (1796–1880)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/22351> (accessed 2 November 2014).

⁶⁶ Emperor of the French, Napoleon I et al., *Description de l'Égypte: ou, recueil des observations et des recherches qui ont été faites en Égypte pendant l'expédition de l'armée française* (Paris: Imprimerie impériale, 1809-1830); see also Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, Reprinted with a new preface (London: Penguin, 2003), 81-84.

⁶⁷ Richard Daniel Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1978), 244-46.

⁶⁸ Edward Ziter, *The Orient on the Victorian Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 88-91.

⁶⁹ Exhibition, representing *The Shrine of the Nativity at Bethlehem*, painted by M. Rénoix, from a sketch by David Roberts, Esq., A.R.A., in 1839; *New Monthly Belle Assemblée*, Vol. 14 (May 1841), 312.

⁷⁰ See Barush, 'Painting the Scene', 266.

eschatological City of God.⁷¹ Texts from classical literature and the Bible spoke about the size and magnificence of the legendary Babylon and Nineveh. When Claudius James Rich published his *Memoir on the Ruins of Babylon*,⁷² it brought confirmation of a place known about from antiquity and from the Bible, but it also demonstrated the ruin and devastation of the city, and quite how little of it was left. Widely read in intellectual circles, Rich's book was a source of inspiration for John Martin's series of paintings about ancient Assyria, painted between 1818 and 1828. These paintings were hugely popular: over 50,000 people paid to see *Belshazzar's Feast* when it was displayed at the British Institution during a six-month period in 1821.⁷³ The middle classes took particular interest in Martin's paintings of Biblical dramas, which gave immediacy to the ancient Assyrian world and brought it to life.⁷⁴

However, there was a limit as to what could be shown inside the theatre, as there was a prohibition against any reference to scripture in drama, something that was upheld with particular zeal by George Colman, Examiner of Plays between 1824 and 1836.⁷⁵ More latitude was given for opera to portray sacred sites, even though theatre managers had to change the names of many operas. *Mosè in Egitto*, for instance, became *Pietro l'Eremita* for the King's Theatre (1822) and *Nabucco* became *Nino* at Her Majesty's (1846).⁷⁶ There was greater success with dramas set in Biblical cities as long as they steered clear of a scriptural narrative. Thus, in 1834, Bunn was able to put on Byron's *Sardanapalus* at Drury Lane, set in the Biblical city of Nineveh, despite the fact that it appears in the Book of Nahum. However, Bunn made a point of stressing that the play came out of study and reflection, and was connected to a tradition of theatrical Orientalism.⁷⁷

Nineteenth-century spectacle had an entangled pedigree: the objective of creating theatrical realism plus many of the technical developments, including the box set, the Argand lamp and realistic lighting and scenic design, came from France and other continental countries, brought to London by artists such as Louthembourg and via the spectacular adaptations of foreign opera. The

⁷¹ Magnus Thorkell Bernhardsson, *Reclaiming a Plundered Past: Archaeology and Nation Building in Modern Iraq* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 24.

⁷² Claudius James Rich, *Memoir on the Ruins of Babylon*, 3rd. ed. (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown; J. Murray, 1818); Claudius James Rich, *Second Memoir on Babylon: Containing an Inquiry into the Correspondence between the Ancient Description of Babylon and the Remains Still Visible on the Site* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1818).

⁷³ Robin Hamlyn, 'Martin, John', *Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online* (Oxford University Press), <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T054660> (accessed 19 April 1913).

⁷⁴ See William Feaver, *The Art of John Martin* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 40.

⁷⁵ Ziter, *The Orient on the Victorian Stage*, 133.

⁷⁶ Operas with Biblical links often had difficulties with the censor in Italy as well. An example is the chorus 'Immenso Jeovha' in *Nabucco*, which had to be altered for religious reasons (Philip Gossett, 'Becoming a Citizen: The Chorus in "Risorgimento" Opera', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Mar. 1990), 56).

⁷⁷ Ziter, *The Orient on the Victorian Stage*, 136-37.

practice of scenography therefore crossed national boundaries and, in line with Werner and Zimmermann's *histoire croisée*, became incorporated into the landscape of London theatre and the work of its set designers. As Middle Eastern settings and 'antiquarian accuracy' became fashionable, the origins of theatrical scenery became further complicated as features, known or imagined, from the Orient or the ancient past became assimilated into the set.

The Production

Semiramide met many of the contemporary criteria for a popular yet lavish theatrical spectacle set in the ancient past. The location of Babylon was seen from ancient times as a place of monumental grandeur and fabulous wealth, as well as debauchery and devastation. The fact that the city featured in both classical literature and the Bible gave the opera an historical status;⁷⁸ as the story did not actually appear in the Bible, and *Semiramide* was already an established opera, an English adaptation had a reasonable chance of being passed by the censors. *Semiramide* could therefore become a colourful and picturesque drama with costumes and sets designed with 'antiquarian accuracy', or at least as far as was known at the time. It thus gave the spectacle the prestige of being well researched.

Elements of the spectacle can be discerned from the enthusiastic descriptions in the papers, pictures in the *Illustrated London News* and from John Brandard's lithographs on the covers of sheet music specifically linked to the production and issued by Covent Garden's house publishers, Jefferys & Nelson.⁷⁹ These lithographs were drawn in order to make the music more attractive. Although the scenes may have been romanticized, Brandard's ballet scenes, which were also used for music covers, were reputedly sketched directly from what he saw on the stage, and this probably applied to his depictions of opera as well.⁸⁰ This may explain why the pictures by Brandard and in the *Illustrated London News* show remarkably similar details of the sets and Kemble and Shaw's costumes. This is particularly noticeable in their portrayals of

⁷⁸ Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre*, 21.

⁷⁹ The British Museum identifies three of the lithographs on the music covers as being by John Brandard. However, the notes by the Victoria and Albert Museum identifies its compilation of illustrated music covers published by Jefferys & Nelson plus a woodcut from the *Illustrated London News*, all items related to *Semiramide*, identify them as being by Robert and John Brandard (see H. Beard Print Collection, <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O181957/h-beard-print-collection-print-brandard-robert/> (accessed 12 June, 2017)). I have attributed the lithographs to John Brandard based on a comparison of the signature on the lithographs with known works by him. John Brandard was the brother known for his music covers on opera and ballet subjects whereas Robert was known for his landscapes. Furthermore, John worked closely with M. and N. Hanhart, the printer used by Jefferys & Nelson for the covers.

⁸⁰ Cyril W. Beaumont and Sacheverell Sitwell, *The Romantic Ballet in Lithographs of the Time* (London: Faber, 1938), 64.



Figure 3. John Brandard, lithograph for the music cover of Gioachino Rossini, *'At Length a Brilliant Ray', and 'Delicious Languor'* [*'Bel raggio'*], trans. T.H. Reynoldson, arr. Jules Benedict (London: Jefferys & Nelson, [1843]).

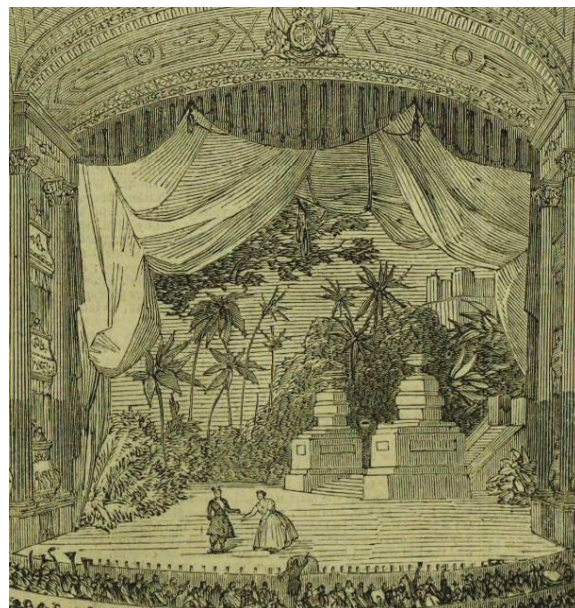


Figure 4. Detail of *'The Interior'* [of Covent Garden] showing *Semiramide* being performed for the opening of the Royal Italian Opera on 6 April 1847 and using the set from the 1842 production (*Illustrated London News*, 10 April 1847, 233). © Mary Evans Picture Library.

Semiramide's death in the last scene, in which the queen is shown surrounded by soldiers, with the city of Babylon behind;⁸¹ it is an ending confirmed by descriptions in the newspapers. Brandard and the *Illustrated London News* also produced matching images of Kemble and Shaw in front of a pergola: this may well be the setting for the grand duet *'Ebbene... a te: ferisci'*, as both pictures can be linked to the *primo tempo*, *'Dark day of horror'* (*'Giorno d'orrore'*).⁸²

Another confirmation of the accuracy of the Brandard lithographs relates to the cover of *'At Length a Brilliant Ray' and 'Delicious Languor'* (*'Bel raggio'*, see Figure 3):⁸³ the picture shows *Semiramide* in front of a grand staircase topped with urns and surrounded by palms and other plants, a locale suggesting the hanging gardens where, according to Rossi's and Reynoldson's stage directions, *Semiramide* sings this aria. As stated by Davison, the sets for the 1842 production were reused when *Semiramide* was performed for the opening of the Royal Italian

⁸¹ Cover of Rossini, *Semiramide: The Grand March*, arr. Glover; *Illustrated London News*, 22 October 1842, 381 (see Figures 7 and 10.a).

⁸² Kemble and Shaw are shown in front of a pergola on the music cover of Gioachino Rossini, *Thy Smile is Joy Indeed! and Dark Day of Horror*, trans. T. H. Reynoldson, arr. Jules Benedict (London: Jefferys & Nelson, [1843]; GB-Lbl H.385.f.(15.)), and in the woodcut, *'Miss Adelaide Kemble and Mrs. Alfred Shaw'*, which is accompanied by an article referring to *'Giorno d'orrore'* (*Illustrated London News*, 24 December 1842, 525).

⁸³ Gioacchino Rossini, *'At Length a Brilliant Ray', and 'Delicious Languor', Cavatina with Chorus 'Again thine Eyes' Dark Radianc'*, trans. T. H. Reynoldson, arr. Jules Benedict (London: Jefferys & Nelson, [1843]).

Opera on 6 April 1847.⁸⁴ A picture in the *Illustrated London News* published a few days later shows the newly reconstructed auditorium at Covent Garden during a performance of *Semiramide*, as identified by a playbill in one of the boxes. The set has a staircase headed by urns and palm trees in the background (see Figure 4),⁸⁵ scenery not dissimilar to Brandard's illustration. The palms have been placed differently, and the illustration shows a man and woman on stage,⁸⁶ thus indicating that the set was not used for the same scene as in 1842, when *Semiramide* sang 'Bel raggio' surrounded by her women. Nevertheless, the two scenes do seem to be based on the same set. The high level of correspondence between the various pairs of pictures from different sources, plus confirmation from the written descriptions in the newspapers, gives support to the notion that these pictures were drawn from what was seen on stage.



Figure 5. Sir Francis Grant, *Adelaide Kemble as Semiramide*, 1842, oil on canvas. Private Collection.

⁸⁴ *The Times*, 7 April 1847.

⁸⁵ *Illustrated London News*, 10 April 1847, 233.

⁸⁶ Judging from the costumes Giulia Grisi and Marietta Alboni wore for the 1847 production, the man and woman are very likely Arsace and Semiramide, (see 'Mdlle. Alboni as "Arsace"' and 'Madame Grisi as "Semiramide"', *Illustrated London News*, 10 April 1847, 237.



Figure 6. Detail of Sir Francis Grant, *Adelaide Kemble as Semiramide*, 1842, oil on canvas. Private collection.

The spectacle began, according to George Hogarth, with a ‘magnificent *scena*’ set in front of the Temple of Belus (Baal), during which the stage became ‘gradually crowded by picturesque groups of pilgrims from all nations’.⁸⁷ From Charles Kenney’s description, the different national groups appear to have been dressed in different colours, so that striking colour combinations were created as the nationalities moved across the stage and mixed. When Semiramide arrived on stage later in the scene, she had what Charles Kenney described as a ‘splendid Assyrian dress’ with a ‘shawl fastened to her waist, hanging loosely down with a dagger attached to it’.⁸⁸ This can be seen in Sir Francis Grant’s life-size portrait of Kemble as Semiramide, which was commissioned by the Marquis of Titchfield (see Figures 5 and 6). The picture has been dated 1842, so was almost certainly painted during the run of *Semiramide*’s performances. It shows Semiramide wearing a red robe and an ornately-embroidered dress, with the neckline and bodice studded with costume jewellery, a practice common at the time because of the way it glittered under the stage

⁸⁷ *Evening Chronicle*, 3 October 1842.

⁸⁸ *The Times*, 3 October 1842.

lighting.⁸⁹ The brocade on the edge of the robe can only just be seen in Grant's portrayal, although it is something that John Hayter detailed in his portraits of Kemble as Semiramide, drawn in the following year 1843 (see Figures 14 and 15). Although there are differences in the way the brocade is drawn in the various pictures, these are no more than might be expected from portrayals of the same design made on separate occasions with different lighting.⁹⁰

A number of scenes in Reynoldson's adaptation presented an opportunity for spectacular stage effects. As noted earlier, the production had two transformations, in addition to the scene in Rossi's text in which lightning extinguished the sacred flame on the altar. Rossini emphasized the drama at this point by writing thunder into the score with forceful chords scored for wind, brass and bass drum, while the strings play rapid semitonal scalic figures suggesting a rushing wind. As theatre audiences delighted in special effects, further sound effects may have been added by rattling an iron sheet, or by rolling cannon balls down a trough, although with Rossini's orchestration there was no need for it.⁹¹

As for the lightning, an important part of many melodramas, the most popular method for staging it, and one which had been in use since the eighteenth century, was to burn lycopodium powder on a metal sheet. Lycopodium, which was made from the spores of the clubmoss *Lycopodium clavatum*, produced a yellow flame; however, powdered resin or magnesium metal powder, which gave a bluish-white light, could be used instead. The lightning flash could be controlled more accurately by blowing the powder through a tin tube into a flame and timed so that it coincided with the music and the events on stage,⁹² such as the sacred flame going out in *Semiramide*. However, the lightning strike could also be shown by cutting a zig-zag strip in the back drop, covering it with varnished calico, and then flashing a light from behind when the time came.⁹³ The drawback with *Semiramide* is that lightning occurs in two scenes: when the flame on the altar is extinguished in Act I and when Assur is struck at the end of Act II. Unless two backdrops were used, both cut with zig-zags, the lightning fork would have been identical. Yet although Reynoldson's stage directions says that lightning strikes Assur in Act II, neither Rossi nor Reynoldson's libretti say that it hits the altar. It may be that the use of zig-zag strips in the backcloth was reserved for that moment when Assur was struck, while a general flash was used for the lightning in Act I. Reynoldson's stage directions in this latter scene say, 'Darkness – thunder – lightning'. With the flexibility of gas allowing both more subtle and dramatic changes

⁸⁹ Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre*, 25.

⁹⁰ Hayter's portraits will be discussed further in the next chapter.

⁹¹ Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age*, 93.

⁹² Rees, *Theatre Lighting*, 144-145.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 144-145.

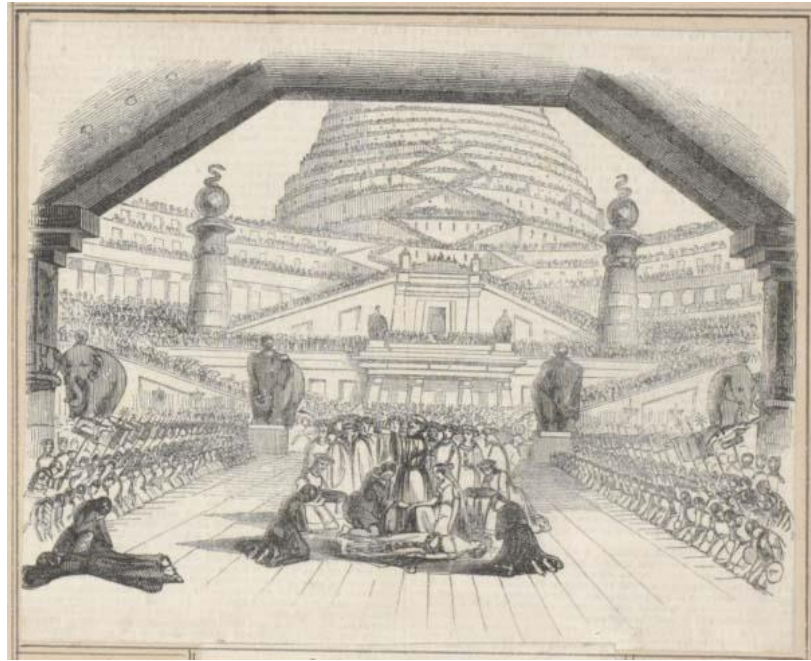


Figure 7. 'Last Act of Semiramide', *Illustrated London News*, 22 October 1842, 381. © Mary Evans Picture Library.

of lighting, these stage directions might have been achieved by initially turning down the gas lighting to show a darkening sky presaging doom as the thunder rolled, which was interrupted by the dazzling glare of lightning from lycopodium, and followed by plunging the stage into darkness as the sacred flame went out. The darkness before and after would have emphasized the brightness of the lightning and would have created a dramatic piece of theatre with its contrast of light and dark.

For many, the transformation at the end of Act II, in which Ninus' mausoleum turned into the city of Babylon, and the ensuing tableau at the end, was a highlight of the spectacle.⁹⁴ Arsace knelt over the corpse of Semiramide, who was surrounded by magi and nobles, while the chorus sang. This scene, placed in front of the Temple of Baal, was designed on a massive scale: both the *Illustrated London News* and Brandard's pictures show regiments of soldiers lined up on either side of the stage; in addition, large numbers of Babylonian townspeople were painted on the back of the set, who seemed to Kenney to be 'crowding to witness the coronation of Arsace' (see Figures 7 and 10.a);⁹⁵ furthermore, as already noted, Ayrton reported that 'mute supernumeraries' added to the size of the chorus.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ *The Times*, 3 October 1842; *Examiner*, 8 October 1842; *Theatrical Journal*, 8 October 1842, 324.

⁹⁵ *The Times*, 3 October 1842.

⁹⁶ *Examiner*, 8 October 1842.

The scene changes for the transformation – Assur being struck by lightning, and hordes of soldiers, slaves and magi, other chorus members and supernumeraries all coming onto the stage – would have taken time to effect. The music that Rossini wrote for the period immediately after Semiramide's death would not have been appropriate for this scenic change. Additional music must therefore have been written for this scene, presumably by Benedict. During the finale, Azema and Oroe offer Arsace the crown while the chorus hail the new king.

The spectacle of the destruction of Ninus' tomb, just before the final tableau, aligned well with the theme of apocalyptic destruction, dissolution and catastrophe often found in early nineteenth-century theatre and art. It fits with the cataclysms of fire and avalanche found in the Degottis' stage designs for Cherubini operas as well as Pixérécourt's *mélodrames*. This climax is also in line with John Martin's apocalyptic paintings such as *The Fall of Babylon* (1831) and *The Fall of Nineveh* (1829), and *The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah* (1852), which showed fire raging, lightning zig-zagging across the canvas, as people flee in panic. There are no descriptions of how this was staged, apart from Kenney's remark that the 'mausoleum ... flies to pieces',⁹⁷ but it may well be that colonnades or brickwork were shown either exploding or tumbling to the ground, similar to the rocks falling in Martin's *The Deluge* (1834) or Francis Danby's *Opening of the Sixth Seal* (1830), while chorus members responded with horror and fear.

While the English *Semiramide* became a magnificent spectacle on a grand scale, the archaeological and antiquarian aspects of the production seem to have been researched with some care. Theatrical research at the time encompassed architecture, costumes, weapons and armour, as well as other artefacts.⁹⁸ Meticulous archaeological research was seen as an integral part of the historical method. In addition, historically accurate costumes and archaeological detail conferred respectability onto a production and, it was argued, reinforced in the educated mind the illusion of good acting – and no doubt singing.⁹⁹

Many features of the sets can be linked to classical texts, contemporary travel writing and artefacts newly arrived in the British Museum. Both Kenney and *John Bull* reported that the sets were based on Persepolis,¹⁰⁰ although whether this was because of what these critics had been told or what they saw on stage is unclear. (Their reviews are very different, so it was not the same person writing.) Generally, little was known about Mesopotamia at the time. Until the impressive ruins were discovered at Khorsabad and Nimrud, in 1843 and 1845 respectively, Mesopotamia was typically regarded as a distant place in the desert; Rich's *Memoirs* had few pictures and the

⁹⁷ *The Times*, 3 October 1842.

⁹⁸ Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre*, 42, 44.

⁹⁹ See *Ibid.*, 21, 53.

¹⁰⁰ *The Times*, 3 October 1842; see also *John Bull*, 8 October 1842.

artefacts collected by him consisted mostly of small tablets and bricks which were unexciting to the theatre designer.¹⁰¹

Much more was known about Persepolis, a place that travellers had been visiting since the late fifteenth century. By 1821, Sir William Ouseley, James Morier and Sir Robert Ker Porter had published well-illustrated books about their travels in Persia and Persepolis,¹⁰² containing pictures of the city's dramatic ruins, notably the Hall of a Hundred Columns, of which 16 were still standing in the 1820s (see Figure 8). Furthermore, six artefacts from Persepolis, which had been donated in 1825 by Sir Gore Ouseley, former Ambassador to Persia, could be seen in the British Museum.¹⁰³ There was little appreciation at the time of the regional differences between Egypt and Persia.¹⁰⁴ In view of the general ignorance of the area, to model the set of the resplendent city of Babylon on what was known of the magnificent ruins at Persepolis, almost 700 miles away, was not unreasonable for the period.



Figure 8. James Morier's painting of Persepolis with the Hall of a Hundred Columns (Morier, *A Journey through Persia*, opp. 139).



Figure 9. Detail of William Ouseley's sketch of the fire temple at Gumbed Gulabi (Ouseley, *Travels*, Vol. 2, Plate XXXVI).

¹⁰¹ Frederick N. Bohrer, 'Inventing Assyria: Exoticism and Reception in Nineteenth-Century England and France', *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 80, No. 2 (1998), 339, 341.

¹⁰² James Morier, *A Journey through Persia, Armenia and Asia Minor to Constantinople in the Years 1808 and 1809* (London: Longman, 1812); James Morier, *A Second Journey through Persia, Armenia, and Asia Minor to Constantinople between the Years 1810 and 1816* (London: Longman, 1818); Sir William Ouseley, *Travels in Various Countries of the East, More Particularly Persia*, 3 vols. (London: Rodwell and Martin, 1819-23); Sir Robert Ker Porter, *Travels in Georgia, Persia, Armenia, Ancient Babylonia, &c. &c. During the Years 1817, 1818, 1819, and 1820* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1821-22).

¹⁰³ The provenance of these artefacts are shown individually under the portal 'British Museum Collections Online' (http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/search.aspx, (accessed 7 September 2018). See for example, 'Stone relief from the Apadana (audience hall) at Persepolis', British Museum, http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=282233&partId=1 (accessed 2 September 2017).

¹⁰⁴ Frederick N. Bohrer, 'Inventing Assyria: Exoticism and Reception in Nineteenth-Century England and France', *Art Bulletin*, Vol. 80, No. 2 (1998), 339, 341.

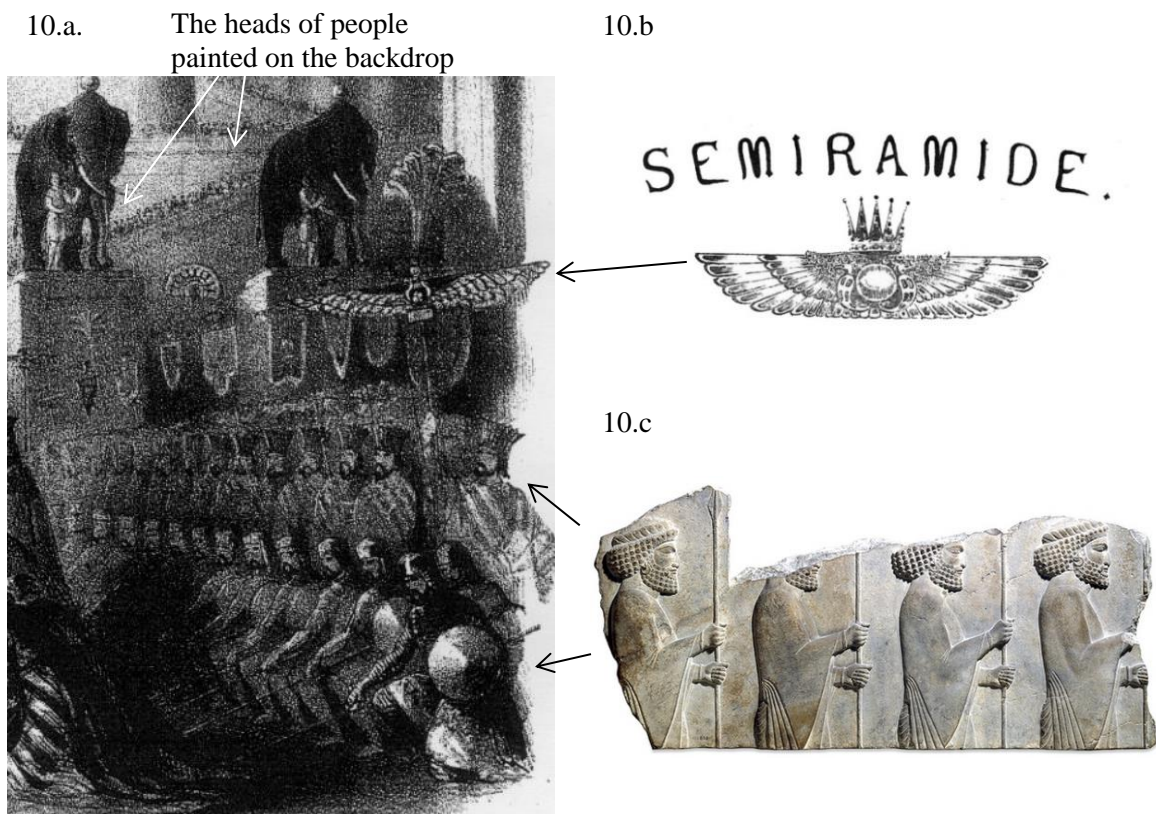


Figure 10.a. Detail of John Brandard’s lithograph of the final tableau showing: heads of people painted on the backdrop; two elephants; a standard with a winged orb; and soldiers lined up (John Brandard, lithograph, in Gioachino Rossini, *Semiramide: The Grand March*, arr. Stephen Glover (London: Jefferys & Nelson; Cramer, Addison & Beale, [1843]), cover). 10.b. Logo printed on all the music covers with Brandard’s illustrations, published by Jefferys & Nelson [1843] and linked to the 1842 *Semiramide*. 10.c. Stone relief from the *Apadana* (audience hall) at Persepolis (Limestone 6thC-5thC BCE), obtained in 1811 and given by Sir Gore Ouseley to the British Museum in 1825.¹⁰⁵

Features from Persepolis and other parts of Persia can be identified in the set for the final tableau (see Figure 7). Assuming the set was indeed based on Persepolis, the two columns on the set of the final scene were very likely intended to reflect the columns of Persepolis, the city’s most celebrated feature (see Figure 8). In addition, the rounded shape of the temple at the back is very similar to Sir William Ouseley’s sketch of the ancient Persian fire temple at Gumbed Gulabi, north west of Darab, Persia, which he described as a ‘circular vaulted edifice ... resembling a beehive’ (see Figure 9).¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, judging from the woodcut in the *Illustrated London News*, the temple in the set appears to be constructed with eight layers or tiers plus something that might be a path on the outside of the building (Figure 7); this structure is in line with Herodotus’

¹⁰⁵ See ‘Stone relief from the Apadana (audience hall) at Persepolis’, British Museum, http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=282233&partId=1 (accessed 2 September 2017). Used under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. See also <https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/asset/stone-relief-from-the-apadana-audience-hall-at-persepolis/aQFz7DMOCxrXHA> (accessed 2 September 2017). See also the frontispiece of Morier, *A Second Journey*, showing a similar relief of a soldier.

¹⁰⁶ Ouseley, *Travels*, Vol. 2, 154 and Plate XXXVI.

description of the ‘Tower of Zeus Belus’ situated at the centre of Babylon, which was made up of eight towers stacked on top of each other and had a spiral path on the outside of the building leading up to a temple on the summit.¹⁰⁷

Other features are seen more clearly in Brandard’s lithograph of the same scene (detail shown in Figure 10.a); this shows rows of identical soldiers lined up in formation, similar to the soldiers on the stone relief found by Sir Gore Ouseley in the Apadana (audience hall), Persepolis, and given by him to the British Museum (Figure 10.c); however, the soldiers shown at the end of Sir Robert Ker Porter’s *Travels in Georgia* could equally have been used as source material.¹⁰⁸ Brandard’s lithograph shows one of the soldiers holding a standard with a winged orb (right-hand side of Figure 10.a); many travellers to Mesopotamia and Persia referred to winged sculptures, including a ‘winged globe’, ‘winged crescent’ or ‘winged snake’, emblems generally thought to be associated with a representation of the divinity.¹⁰⁹ Ouseley refers to a ‘winged crown’;¹¹⁰ a winged orb with a crown on top appears as a logo on all of Brandard’s music covers for *Semiramide* published by Jefferys & Nelson (see Figure 10.b).

Other features in the set seemed to support aspects of the Semiramis myth, even though they were not part of Rossini’s version of the story. Pictures of the last scene show four elephants placed on plinths, two of which can be seen in the detail in Figure 10.a. Elephants had been closely associated with Semiramis ever since she had tried to invade India. Her large empire had extended as far as Bactria in the east, although she was prevented from expanding further in that direction because the Indian forces beyond Bactria were greatly superior to her own. According to Diodorus, Semiramis therefore set about ‘enlarging’ her army with dummy elephants made from ox-hide, each of which was moved by a man plus a camel. From a distance, the elephants looked realistic and Semiramis won the first battle. However, the ruse was discovered when some of her troops changed sides. As a result, she was defeated and lost two-thirds of her empire.¹¹¹

There is no evidence that, in sourcing the different elements for the set, the Grieve family and others involved in the production did any original research as did, for example, Capon when working on the set for *De Montfort*. Instead, the Grieves family hinted at historical and exotic locations through their innovative use of light and illusion.¹¹² When they created the sets for Charles Farley’s *Spirits of the Moon* in 1824, the playbills claimed that the scenery had been

¹⁰⁷ Herodotus, *The Histories*, 1.181.

¹⁰⁸ See for example, Porter, *Travels*, Vol. 1, Plate 34.

¹⁰⁹ See for example, Ouseley, *Travels*, Vol. 2, 268-9, 285.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, 294.

¹¹¹ Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica*, 2.16-19.

¹¹² Barush, ‘Painting the Scene’, 279.

‘taken from the best authorities of ancient Egypt’.¹¹³ It is unclear to what extent that statement is true: they may have derived some of their ideas from Belzoni’s popular exhibition of Egyptian artefacts at the Egyptian Hall, although it is unlikely that they received all their ideas there because the exhibition closed in June 1822, two years before the production. Nevertheless, Edward Ziter has shown how the subterranean chambers and giant idols in the play might well have reminded audiences of entering the replica tomb of Seti I at this exhibition and the idols they saw there. Indeed, Ziter proposes that a sketch for an unnamed play may indicate that the Egyptian Hall itself influenced the Grieves’ depiction of pharaonic interiors.¹¹⁴ Two years later, the Grieves’ sets for Weber’s *Oberon* (1826) suggested imaginary Islamic cities through buildings with onion domes together with a superfluity of minute, intricate and picturesque detail. Although the Oriental locations were only implied, their sets were admired for providing scenes which were ‘rich without being offensive to the eye’ and for their accuracy.¹¹⁵ The critics were probably in no position to judge the set’s accuracy, yet its authenticity was thought to reside in a careful copying of architectural details which were then joined together into a scenic design.¹¹⁶ Again, sources for the Grieves’ sets do not appear to be known. Yet the Grieves were repeatedly praised for their truthfulness; what was possibly more important to the audience was that they managed to create sets which aroused an instinctive and emotional response which made the viewer feel that the scenery was authentic.¹¹⁷

As with *Spirits of the Moon* and *Oberon*, the Grieve family’s portrayal of the city of Babylon in *Semiramide* was probably largely implied. Yet although the costumes and set were commended for their accuracy, viewed from two centuries later, it can be seen that Persian features were grafted onto European scenery. Judging from the iconography by Brandard, Grant and Hayter, what Kenney described as Semiramide’s ‘splendid Assyrian dress’,¹¹⁸ was essentially a mid-nineteenth-century European gown with a bejewelled front, made Assyrian by the addition of a shawl and a dagger. Similarly, the ornamental staircase in the scene located in the Hanging Gardens (see Figure 3) might well have been based on a European locale, such as an Italian Baroque palace; and although Persepolis was known for its columns, the pergola pictured by Brandard and the *Illustrated London News* as the setting for the grand duet (see Figure 19) could likewise have been based on Italy.¹¹⁹ Yet this is to be expected: as the art historian Ernst

¹¹³ Ziter, *The Orient on the Victorian Stage*, 79-80.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 16, 40.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹¹⁸ *The Times*, 3 October 1842.

¹¹⁹ John Brandard, lithograph on cover of Rossini, *Thy Smile is Joy Indeed! and Dark Day of Horror*; *Illustrated London News*, 24 December 1842, 525.

Gombrich and psychologist Richard Gregory have shown, when images are very new, as were the representations of Persepolis, artists at first need to interpret them through the existing schemata in their mind; they will therefore portray novel sights in line with what they are already know.¹²⁰

Yet what is clear, is that the nineteenth-century audience perceived the sets and costumes as having been compiled with ‘antiquarian skill’¹²¹ and that the scenery evoked in them the images and writings available as well as the artefacts at the British Museum. It therefore brought the Middle East closer and lent historical truth to the production. *Semiramide* with its combination of what we shall see was Kemble’s good acting, gorgeous spectacle, and ‘historical accuracy’ therefore became a ‘living lecture on the past’.¹²²

The Reviews

Almost all the newspapers discussed the spectacle in their reviews, with many giving detailed reports. Only Chorley in the *Athenaeum* said nothing at all, concentrating instead on the music,¹²³ the *Penny Satirist* and Davison in the *Musical World* both said very little – for Davison, the opera’s importance was its Englishness.¹²⁴ Almost universally, the remaining 18 critics gave high praise to the scenery and costumes which, as George Hogarth pointed out were ‘free from that tawdry and garish appearance which so often accompanies theatrical splendour’.¹²⁵ In line with Babylon’s legendary opulence, several of the critics wrote about the production’s lavish splendour and cost.¹²⁶ As Ayrton put it:

Neither pains nor expense have been spared ... the scenery is beautiful; and the processions, ballet, grouping and dresses altogether produce that gorgeous effect, of which an Oriental drama is decidedly the most susceptible.¹²⁷

Even Edward Taylor, who was highly critical of both the singers and the whole enterprise of mounting Italian opera in English, talked about the splendour of the production that put Her Majesty’s Theatre ‘completely in the shade’.¹²⁸ Nevertheless, he dismissed the production as a

¹²⁰ Peter Burke, *Cultural Hybridity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 16.

¹²¹ *Illustrated London News*, 22 Oct 1842, 381.

¹²² J.W. Cole, quoted by Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre, 1850-1910*, 45.

¹²³ *Athenaeum*, 8 October 1842, 876-77.

¹²⁴ *Penny Satirist*, 15 October 1842; *Musical World*, 6 October 1842, 322.

¹²⁵ *Evening Chronicle*, 3 October 1842.

¹²⁶ See *John Bull*, 8 October 1842; *Evening Chronicle*, 3 October 1842; *Examiner*, 8 October 1842; *Penny Satirist*, 15 October 1842; *Musical World*, 6 October 1842, 322; *Age*, 9 October 1842; *Theatrical Observer*, 3 October 1842.

¹²⁷ *Examiner*, 8 October 1842.

¹²⁸ *Spectator*, 8 October 1842, 974.

pantomime, adding, ‘To the audience in general it is a mere spectacle and concert.’¹²⁹ Yet most of the reviewers wrote about the spectacle only at the end of their articles and as a part of the operatic event, for as I shall show in the next chapter much of the critical discussion was reserved for Kemble’s acting, Shaw’s singing, and their performances together.

There were criticisms of William West’s direction. The *Age* poked fun at the busyness and ‘never failing movement’ of the crowd scenes, which, it said, took away from ‘the solemnity, the grandeur and the gorgeousness which should distinguish every action connected with the glories of Babylon’.¹³⁰ Yet it was the movement of the different national groupings, as they passed each other and moved on, that brought about the changing mix of their coloured costumes that Kenney so admired.¹³¹ The other criticism came from the reviewer who took the keenest interest in the musicianship of the company: Ayrton complained about the effect of West’s direction on the chorus singers, who were ‘too much jostled by mute supernumeraries and [were] generally placed too far behind the proscenium, to allow of due effect from their vocal efforts’.¹³²

The vocal projection in parts of the opera may indeed have been a problem: pictures of the last scene show the chorus ranged around the sides of the stage in order to give space to the central group positioned around Semiramide. Opera choruses are normally encouraged to move downstage for important choruses as the sound can disappear at the back of the stage, particularly if they are near the fly tower. For the best sonority, the mute supernumeraries should ideally have been placed behind the chorus so that they did not block the sound; yet this may not have happened, especially if they were better actors. It appears that the effort to create a magnificent tableau with a large chorus may have detracted from the sound of *Semiramide* as a musical work. However, these were isolated criticisms among the totality of reviews.

Two scenes particularly impressed. One was the transformation at the end of the opera, ‘accompanied by thunder and lightning’, when the mausoleum of Semiramide’s dead husband was destroyed. The *Illustrated London News* described it as ‘one of the most beautiful scenes that were ever produced upon any stage’.¹³³

The other scene that many writers focused on was Semiramide’s procession in Act I. Not only were the main characters of the opera introduced, but also ‘groups of the various nations of the

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 975.

¹³⁰ *Age*, 9 October 1842.

¹³¹ *The Times*, 3 October 1842; see also *Spectator*, 8 October 1842.

¹³² *Examiner*, 8 October 1842.

¹³³ *Illustrated London News*, 22 October 1842, 381.

vast Assyrian Empire’, with a procession of the ‘inhabitants of these nations which [preceded] the entrance of the Queen Semiramis’.¹³⁴ Taylor also wrote about this scene, saying:

In the first scene the tributary nations of the vast Assyrian empire are represented by successive groups bearing presents to their sovereign, until the stage is thronged with the motley and many-coloured crowd. The dresses are gorgeous, the scenery is splendid.¹³⁵

Taylor’s assessment summed up many of the reviews of the spectacle, with its lavish splendour and multinationalism. The English *Semiramide* had been puffed on the importance of its two prima donnas, yet the production stressed the size, grandeur and magnificence of Babylon at the centre of a mighty empire. It portrayed the Orient as resplendent and colourful, the East from where the sun and other celestial objects rose.¹³⁶ The Persian features that may have been sourced from travel writing and the British Museum gave the Grieves’ scenery the aura of historic truth. The size and stature of the architectural sets, the large chorus and the many peoples clothed in colourful costumes, meant that whereas H.N. Millar’s 1827 libretto described the extent of the queen’s empire, the 1842 production demonstrated visually its vastness, antiquity and splendour.

Yet in combination with the antiquity, the spectacle also gave the thrills of cataclysm, lightning and destruction. Martin had painted *The Fall of Babylon* – that event freeze-framed in a single moment. The 1842 *Semiramide* brought the fall of Babylon, or at least of Ninus’ tomb, to the Covent Garden stage, its destruction vividly animated as the scenery and lighting changed, actors moved, and the chorus sang. Italian opera, continental theatrical techniques, British scenographers and eastern artefacts combined to evoke a Persian setting, bringing the ancient past into the present and enthralling audiences.

¹³⁴ *The Times*, 3 October 1842.

¹³⁵ *Spectator*, 8 October 1842, 974.

¹³⁶ Daniel Martin Varisco, *Reading Orientalism: Said and the Unsaid* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), 64.

6 Singing for England: Womanhood, Acting and a Fusion of Styles

Kemble and Shaw had different performance styles: one was intense and vigorous, whose portrayal of the 'criminal' Semiramide was compelling; the other was serene with a luxurious voice. Together they represented ideas about Italy and England and inspired a tantalising although unrealistic dream of an English corps of native singers.

Audiences took great interest in English singers, such as Kemble and Shaw, who trained and worked on the continent. While they were overseas, regular reports appeared in the English newspapers detailing their successes. Although there were respected Italian singing teachers in London, such as Domenico Crivelli, Kemble and Shaw's training with Italian masters on the continent contributed to their star appeal as well as shaped the quality and timbre of their voices. During her two seasons at Covent Garden, reviews commented on the Italian nature of Kemble's ornamented singing, while part of the advertising strategy for *Semiramide* was to highlight Shaw's successes in the opera houses of North Italy.

Acting styles were changing in the early nineteenth century. Until Kemble's performances in 1842, the dominant interpretation of the role of Semiramide had been Giuditta Pasta's. Kemble, whose idiosyncratic and powerful acting contributed to the success of *Semiramide*, created a new and different interpretation of the eponymous queen, one who was vulnerable and 'womanly'. Fitting in with the Victorian ideals of womanhood was an issue for Kemble and Shaw, who needed to protect their reputations while they were working on the theatre boards. Shaw was performing a *travesti* role, while Kemble was singing the part of a murderer. Individually they needed to negotiate how to fit in with the middle-class Victorian model of the meek and self-sacrificing woman. Yet, their real success was when they sang together, creating a fusion of Italianness and Englishness. Kemble and Shaw were praised for being English prima donnas who were equal to those at Her Majesty's Theatre. The two singers became a touchstone for ideas about opera and English singers. Yet most of the critics who discussed their Englishness wanted them to sing in English opera rather than Italian.

Adelaide Kemble's Training and Early Career

Kemble had been hailed as a star from her first London performance as Norma on 2 November 1841. She had been helped to stardom thanks to the prominence of her family in the theatre world. Both of Adelaide's parents and many of her closest relatives were actors; these included Sarah Siddons and John Philip Kemble, the oldest of her aunts and uncles, who were among the greatest players of their generation. Her father was the actor-manager Charles Kemble, who was closely associated with Covent Garden for over thirty years and became head of its management committee in 1822. Adelaide's sister Fanny was also an actress who in 1829, aged only nineteen, helped to rescue the ailing fortunes of Covent Garden with her compelling performances as Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*. John Parry wrote that a 'respect and reverence hung about the "Kemble name"'¹ and on *Norma*'s first night, the theatre was full of people wanting to see how this member of "the gifted Kembles" would acquit herself.² Physically, Adelaide resembled her parents; before she had sung a note, the public were predisposed to see Adelaide succeed, and to extend the myth of the Kemble family's greatness if at all possible. Charles Lamb Kenney in *The Times* described her first night in *Norma*:

She at once took the position of *prima donna* which she sustained all evening and placed her beyond comparison with any singers on the *English* stage that have been heard for many years.³

Before her appearance in *Norma*, Kemble had spent three years in Paris studying under the respected teacher Marco Bordogni, a man who had trained Henriette Sontag and Laure Cinti-Damoreau, both singers who were known for their agility. On Kemble's return to England, William Ayrton commented that it must have taken work and constant study on her part to mould and render pliable a voice that was not naturally flexible.⁴ His statement implies that it was under Bordogni, that Kemble's voice had become more supple.

Kemble went on to Italy where she studied with Gian Orazio Cartagenova and Saverio Mercadante,⁵ as well as having daily lessons with Pasta. Although Kemble wrote about staying with Pasta,⁶ she says little about the lessons themselves; however, she wrote that Pasta gave her

¹ *Morning Post*, 3 November 1841.

² *Ibid.*

³ *The Times*, 3 November 1841.

⁴ *Examiner*, 8 October 1842.

⁵ Anna Jameson, 'Adelaide Kemble: and the Lyrical Drama in 1841', in *Memoirs and Essays, Illustrative of Art, Literature and Social Morals*, ed. Anna Jameson (New York: Wiley & Putnam, 1846), 51.

⁶ Adelaide Kemble to Therese Maria Anna van Thun (Countess van Thun), 21 September 1838 (Kemble Papers, Garrick Club); Adelaide Sartoris, 'A Recollection of Pasta', in *Past hours*, ed. May E. Gordon, Vol. 1 (London: Richard Bentley and Sons, 1880), 208-214.



Figure 11. Cadenza for 'Bel Raggio' in Kemble's notebook (bars 143-151 in Rossini, *Semiramide*, critical edition).

'many of her own *fioriture*'.⁷ This probably included the ornamentation for *Norma* and *Semiramide* in Kemble's notebook, two operas closely associated with Pasta, which is in handwriting that resembles Pasta's.⁸ By contrast, other embellishments, such as those for *Elena da Feltre*, are clearly in Kemble's own hand. Assuming that the ornamentation for *Norma* and *Semiramide* is indeed in Pasta's handwriting, it indicates that these embellishments may have been actually given by Pasta and used herself, rather than having been merely influenced by Pasta as suggested by Gossett.⁹

Kemble also wrote that Pasta gave her letters of introduction, although she doubted that these had any effect. Yet, within four weeks Kemble had an engagement with Bartolomeo Merelli, manager of La Scala and the Vienna theatres, starting in March 1839.¹⁰ She was accepted by the Trieste Theatre to sing before then, debuting in *Norma* at La Fenice at a performance before the

⁷ Sartoris, 'A Recollection of Pasta', Vol. 1, 211-212.

⁸ The writing in Kemble's notebook has been compared with facsimiles of: a signed autograph letter by Giuditta Pasta to her mother and her daughter Clelia dated 14 August (n.d.) (<https://www.taminoautographs.com/products/pasta-giuditta-autograph-letter-signed> (accessed 24 January 2018)); and a signed autograph letter by Giuditta Pasta dated 4 July 1851 (http://www.icollector.com/Giuditta-Pasta_i14493386 (accessed 24 January 2018)).

⁹ Philip Gossett, *Divas and Scholars: Performing Italian Opera* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 298-99, 573 n.24. The location of the notebook is unknown, but a photocopy exists at the Garrick Club, London, which I have consulted.

¹⁰ AK to Countess van Thun, 16 October 1838.



Figure 12. *Adelaide Kemble* after R.J. Lane, c. 1845, miniature on ivory. Private collection.

Hereditary Grand Duke of Russia that December.¹¹ When news reached England of this presentation, enthusiastic reports detailed the prestige of the occasion and her success.¹²

Her appearance at La Scala as Lucia di Lammermoor was more difficult; she not only sang the final aria badly on the first night, but she also faced a clique of Strepponi's and Tadolini's supporters. Kemble was able to win over audiences by the third night although she was then made to take lessons with Vaccai.¹³ Other roles in Italy included Elena da Feltre, which she sang in Mantua and Padua and which she brought to London in spring 1842.¹⁴ She also spent ten months in Naples where she sang Desdemona (*Otello*), Norma and Amina (*La sonnambula*); again, she brought the last two roles to London.

Kemble returned to London in April 1841 because her father was dangerously ill. After a tour of the Rhineland with Franz Liszt accompanying,¹⁵ Kemble was engaged to sing four roles at Covent Garden. These were Norma, Elena Uberti (an English version of *Elena da Feltre*), Susanna in *The Marriage of Figaro*, and Amina in *La Sonnambula*. She was engaged at £100 per week during an

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 8 November, 'November', 2 & 3 December 1838.

¹² See for example *Morning Post*, 21 December 1838.

¹³ AK to Countess van Thun, [8] May 1839.

¹⁴ Jameson, 'Adelaide Kemble', 51; Fanny Kemble to Harriet St Leger, September 1841, in Frances Anne Kemble, *Records of Later Life*, Vol. 2 (London: R. Bentley and Son, 1882), 124-25.

¹⁵ Kemble, *Records of Later Life*, Vol. 2, 122-32.

eight-week period, with three performances a week.¹⁶ When Ayrton heard Kemble in *Norma*, he thought she would have difficulty making an impression because she was both competing with the magnificent cast at Her Majesty's Theatre, and was up against the 'strong abiding belief of the English public in foreign as opposed to native talent'; furthermore, like her mother, she was inclined to be overweight.¹⁷ Yet, Kemble was immediately proclaimed a star. Her performances were so successful that Vestris, Covent Garden's manager, was forced to change her programming schedule, because Covent Garden was full on the nights when Kemble sang, and empty when she didn't.¹⁸ During the previous two seasons, opera had averaged 10% of the performances; but in the 1841-42 season, this proportion shot up to 40%.¹⁹ Kemble's particular success was as *Norma*, which she sang together with Elizabeth Rainforth as Adalgisa. This was a bigger production than Covent Garden was used to: the orchestra and chorus were enlarged, with the chorus having 70 extra members.²⁰ Julius Benedict was engaged as musical director for all Adelaide Kemble's performances.²¹

During the summer of 1842, Adelaide's father, Charles Kemble took over the lease of Covent Garden. Ostensibly this was because Vestris and her husband Charles Mathews had rent arrears and were unable to continue, having accumulated massive debts from their three years at Covent Garden, exacerbated by all the extra costs of opera production.²² However, Gabriella Dideriksen suggests that this was an excuse and that in reality Charles Kemble was keen to benefit from his daughter's success.²³ In the 1842 winter season, Kemble sang in revivals of *Norma*, *The Marriage of Figaro* and *La Sonnambula* as well as in new productions of *Semiramide* and *The Secret Marriage* (a translation of Cimarosa's *Il matrimonio segreto*), in which Kemble sang the part of

¹⁶ Gabriella Dideriksen, 'Repertory and Rivalry: Opera at the Second Covent Garden Theatre, 1830 to 1856' (PhD diss., King's College London, 1997), 33, 138. See also Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Mary Russell Mitford, 16 December, 1841, in *The Brownings' Correspondence*, Online ed. (Winfield, Kansas: Wedgestone Press, 2014) <http://www.browningscorrespondence.com/correspondence/993/?rsId=34704&returnPage=14> (accessed 28 December 2014).

¹⁷ *Examiner*, 6 November 1841.

¹⁸ Kemble, *Records of Later Life*, Vol. 2, 173.

¹⁹ Dideriksen, 'Repertory and Rivalry', 166, 363-64.

²⁰ See *Ibid.*, 42.

²¹ J. R. Planché, *Recollections and Reflections of J.R. Planché: A Professional Autobiography*, Vol. 2 (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1872), 57; Dideriksen, 'Repertory and Rivalry', 167.

²² Aggregate debts from December 1837 amounted to £27,499 17s 11d., of which losses relating to Vestris' three seasons at Covent Garden came to £13,286 16s. 2d. During the 1841-42 season in which Adelaide Kemble performed, nightly losses averaged at £41 14s. for 165 nights. ('Theatrical Disclosures – Mr. Charles Mathews', *Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser*, 17 May 1842; *Newcastle Courant* 27 May 1842.)

²³ Dideriksen, 'Repertory and Rivalry', 167.

Carolina alongside Elizabeth Rainforth as Elisetta and Mary Shaw as Fidalma.²⁴ Kemble's greatest success of the 1842 winter season, however, was *Semiramide*.

Mary Shaw's Training and Early Career

After six years mostly spent out of the country, Shaw made her operatic *début* in London singing the role of Arsace at Covent Garden. Many of the critics remembered Shaw as a promising concert singer in the mid-1830s. They expressed much interest in seeing how her voice had developed in the intervening period and how she would manage singing opera. Recollecting her beautiful contralto voice, Chorley wrote that he had been nervous about whether she would be able to make the transition from the concert room to the stage. But he says that she took her stand:

On the sound basis of musical science and vocal skill, and supported by conscious power and the experience of her continental career, Mrs. Shaw was firm and self-possessed from the first.²⁵

As well as noting her beautiful voice, Chorley observed that Shaw showed an 'assurance' right from the first line of recitative of her entrance aria:

Her voice has lost none of its melodious sweetness and richness, while she has acquired a power in its management that enables her to execute with perfect ease and faltering steadiness whatever the part demands.²⁶

The young Mary Postans, as she was then, had left for Italy in 1831, accompanied by a Mme Sestini, with a view to studying singing, although the journey was also in part the grand tour.²⁷ Postans' descendent, Frederic Postans recorded that during her time in Italy she was trained in the 'art of singing in Italian' by Giovanni Battista Velluti and that while in Florence she also had the 'companionship and advice' of Angelica Catalani.²⁸ However, Frederic Postans also referred to a letter from John Orlando Parry, who met her in Naples, which said that Shaw was 'at Florence for two years taking lessons from Catalini [*sic*]'.²⁹ So her input from Catalani may have been greater than just 'companionship and advice'. On return to England in 1834, Shaw studied with Sir George Smart, and she began appearing in public concerts, of which one of the most prestigious

²⁴ See for example, *Examiner*, 12 November 1842.

²⁵ *Athenaeum*, 8 October 1842, 876.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Postans, Frederic Holmes, 'The Postans Family and Some Members of it' (Unpublished memoir, 1950), 48. Philip Stott, author of *The Velvet Voice: Mary Postans: A Life in a Prologue and Three Acts*. (Unpublished training booklet for staff and volunteers.) (Ivy Hatch, Sevenoaks: National Trust Ightham Mote: 2016), suggests that Shaw may have had help towards the expenses of going to Italy from the Baring family, for whom her father had worked (Philip Stott conversation with author, 27 January 2017.)

²⁸ Postans, 'The Postans Family', 52.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 67; also referred to in the *Sunday Times*, 9 October 1842.



Figure 13. Hermann Winterhalter, *Mary Postans, Mrs. Alfred Shaw*, c. 1850, oil on canvas. Ivy Hatch, Ightham Mote. © National Trust / Charles Thomas.

was the first English performance of Felix Mendelssohn's *St. Paul* in 1836.³⁰ This was followed by five years on the continent as a concert and oratorio singer, including in twelve concerts in Leipzig with Mendelssohn (1838-39).³¹

It is unclear what made Mary Shaw decide to sing in opera. It may have been enthusiastic reviews about her rich contralto voice and her singing of operatic excerpts in concerts, plus the extra kudos given to opera singers. Nevertheless, she made her operatic début in Italy in March 1839, singing at her benefit under the name of Marietta Shaw, in which she sang the roles of Arsace (*Semiramide*) and Malcolm (*Donna del lago*) at the Teatro Nuovo di Novara, probably one act of each opera.³² Then in November of that year, she was the first Cuniza in Verdi's *Oberto* at La Scala. Shaw was listed as 'prima donna assoluta' when she sang Climene in Pacini's *Saffo* at the

³⁰ *Yorkshire Gazette*, 12 September 1835.

³¹ Postans, 'The Postans Family', 96.

³² *Morning Post*, 23 March 1840.

Grande Teatro, Trieste, in November 1841;³³ she also sang Arsace opposite Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient in Dresden in 1842.³⁴

On her return to England Chorley noted that Shaw's voice now had greater power than before,³⁵ while critics remarked on the mellifluousness of the voice,³⁶ and that it had a 'luxuriously voluptuous quality', which was of 'great depth and softness of tone'.³⁷ Shaw was judged to be a star, but the nature of her stardom was very different from that of Kemble. The richness of her voice plus her 'exquisite' singing made a sensation. Yet it was not just the quality of her voice, it was her manner that critics commented on: her 'always pleasing face', her 'serenity' and the 'complete absence of pretension'.³⁸ Even off the stage, Shaw 'pleased every one with her frankness and good humour'.³⁹ However, there is nothing to suggest that Shaw had a magnetic quality that made people watch her, as Kemble did. Indeed, it was generally agreed that one of Shaw's principal faults was her 'dramatic feebleness' as an actress, for example, judging from Richard Hengist Horne's description, she appears to have smiled repeatedly during her performance as Arsace.⁴⁰

Natural Acting

By contrast, Kemble's performances and particularly her acting were marked by 'great intensity, exuberance of action, and a full appreciation of the dramatic points of the character'.⁴¹

Adelaide Kemble's interpretations of opera characters were not just original but idiosyncratic. Jameson wrote that Kemble thought deeply about the characters, and after consideration of the situation and the momentary feeling, she would try new ways of doing things; she would vary 'certain effects', probably both in her acting and her ornaments, 'by propriety of accentuation and

³³ Jennie Bisset, 'Mrs Alfred Shaw (née Mary Postans) – A Great English Contralto (b. 8 July 1814, Lee, Kent; d. 9 September 1876, Hadleigh, Suffolk)', Museum of Music History, 2014, http://www.momh.org.uk/exhibitions-detail.php?cat_id=5&prod_id=306, (accessed 16 December 2014).

³⁴ *Era*, 20 March 1842.

³⁵ *Athenaeum*, 8 October 1842, 876.

³⁶ *Athenaeum.*, 8 October 1842, 876; *Observer*, 2 October 1842.

³⁷ Letter to *Morning Post*, 6 October 1842.

³⁸ *Morning Post*, 5 October 1842; see also *The Times*, 3 October 1842.

³⁹ William Charles Macready, *The Diaries of William Charles Macready, 1833-1851*, ed. William Toynbee, Vol. 2 (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1912), 199.

⁴⁰ R.H. Horne, 'Madame Pasta and Miss Adelaide Kemble; with Notes on Malibran, Schroeder and Grisi', *The Monthly Magazine*, December 1842, 633.

⁴¹ *Era*, 7 November 1841.

expression, and adjusting to the music every variety of movement and attitude'.⁴² What is more, Kemble's 'vigorous and exaggerated style of attitude',⁴³ as Parry phrased it, was often felt to come at the expense of vocal quality. Jameson named several passages in *Norma* where Kemble sacrificed the 'vocal intonation, to the more emphatic expression of character or passion': these included the whole of the scene with Oroveso, and her lines, 'See the wretch—the wretch thou hast made me' and 'That I am a mother I may forget', in the Act II duet with Pollione, 'In mia man alfin tu sei', all passages which are highly charged emotionally.⁴⁴ Yet judging from the popularity of Kemble's presentations, audiences seemed to forget the wayward intonation and remembered instead the drama and emotional impact of the performance. What Parry referred to as Kemble's 'extraordinary passages', her 'highly injudicious ornaments',⁴⁵ plus the way she threw herself into the characterisation, probably created an element of danger, putting her performances right on the edge between brilliance and failure. This approach, which nightly ran the risk of not working, no doubt made her performances exciting.

The role of Semiramide was judged, as James Davison put it, to be 'one of the most harassing of all Italian opera'.⁴⁶ As he explained in another article written a week later, this was both due to the technical difficulty of the 'elaborate music' and what he saw as the need to portray the main character's 'lofty tragedy'.⁴⁷ Performing the part successfully therefore required 'over and above the highest style of musical cultivation, impassioned declamation, and the tact and grace of a finished actress, a physical power, but rarely falling to the lot of a female vocalist with a delicate organ'.⁴⁸ An additional problem noted by the critics of the *Standard* and *Court Journal*, was that the role of Semiramide 'was not as prominent as Norma and [gave] less opportunity for startling effects',⁴⁹ nor 'thrilling us to our "heart of hearts"'.⁵⁰

Furthermore, as *Bell's New Weekly Messenger* pointed out, Semiramide was associated with memories of 'the greatest and most gifted singers that have graced the Italian Theatre', notably Pasta, whose grandeur, extreme power, and ... dazzling brilliancy' was still 'vivid in the recollections of most musical judges'.⁵¹ Several critics including Parry and Horne compared

⁴² Jameson, 'Adelaide Kemble', 60.

⁴³ *Morning Post*, 4 January 1843.

⁴⁴ Jameson, 'Adelaide Kemble', 60.

⁴⁵ See *Morning Post*, 4 January 1843.

⁴⁶ *Musical World*, 6 October 1842.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 13 October 1842.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 6 October 1842.

⁴⁹ *Standard*, 5 October 1842.

⁵⁰ *Court Journal*, 8 October 1842, 746.

⁵¹ *Bell's New Weekly Messenger*, 9 October 1842.

Kemble with Pasta.⁵² She had been London's first Semiramide and before 1842, and indeed until 1860, only Pasta and Giulia Grisi had performed the role in more than one London season. Pasta had been the finest tragic actress of her day and had brought a new naturalism to acting in opera. Although Grisi was beautiful and her voice 'altogether unrivalled in force, clearness and abandon of execution',⁵³ her acting was limited and Horne accused her of imitating Pasta's performances.⁵⁴ This meant that as far as Londoners were concerned, Pasta's had been the dominant interpretation of the role.

There were many reports in the Press about the effect of Pasta's acting: the *Court Journal* wrote that she combined tragedy with a 'heart-searching pathos' and 'majestic dignity'.⁵⁵ Yet critics remarked that she did not appear to do anything – scarcely a muscle strained or a feature was distorted. Nevertheless, as the *New Monthly Magazine* wrote, 'shade after shade of feeling [passed] over the face, without any appearance of volition'.⁵⁶ Horne wrote that in tragic parts such as Semiramide, Pasta used her short and heavy stature to her advantage by having an 'erect and majestic carriage and bearing, so that it conveyed a certain moral weight of power'.⁵⁷ Chorley's description of Pasta receiving applause from her audience gives an idea of what she might have been like in the 'Giuro' scene from *Semiramide*, when her subjects swear allegiance: she had a 'magnificent, queenly smile ... [She] stood forth like a Sovereign in the midst of her subjects, with a grace and a majesty which put many a born Royalty and Ambassadors to shame.'⁵⁸

Carlo Ritorni wrote that Pasta composed her gestures, creating a 'living picture'.⁵⁹ An example was her performance in the title role of Simon Mayr's *Medea in Corinto* at the King's Theatre in 1826. When Jason asked what he could hope for, she simply replied, 'Io', which was given with great dignity and using the whole power of her voice. At the same instant, according to Richard Mackenzie Bacon, she 'flung wide her arms above head, and her whole figure seemed to dilate

⁵² See *Morning Post*, 3 October 1842; Horne, 'Madame Pasta and Miss Adelaide Kemble', 630-35; *Illustrated London News*, 8 October 1842, 339; *Observer*, 2 October 1842; *Theatrical Journal*, 8, 15 and 22 October 1842.

⁵³ *Athenaeum*, 23 April 1836.

⁵⁴ Although Tom Kaufman says that the first references to Grisi imitating Pasta are dated 1850, Horne talks about Grisi's imitative acting in 1842. However, Kaufman also points out that Grisi never heard either Pasta or Malibran as Semiramide. (See Tom Kaufman, 'A Fresh Look at Giulia Grisi', *Opera Today*, 8 December, 2005, http://www.operatoday.com/content/2005/12/a_fresh_look_at.php, (accessed 12 January, 2017); Horne, 'Madame Pasta and Miss Adelaide Kemble', 632-33.

⁵⁵ R.H. Horne, 'Madame Pasta and Miss Adelaide Kemble', 630.

⁵⁶ *New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal Part III Historical Register*, 1 September 1827, 374.

⁵⁷ Horne, 'Madame Pasta and Miss Adelaide Kemble', 631.

⁵⁸ Henry Fothergill Chorley, *Thirty Years' Musical Recollections*, Vol. 1 (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1862), 127.

⁵⁹ 'Viva pitture', Carlo Ritorni, *Ammaestramenti alla composizione d'ogni poema e d'ogni opera appartenente alla musica* (Milan: 1841), 176.

with a passionate majesty'.⁶⁰ Pasta did not use standard gestures; rather, she found a gesture which embodied both the character of the text and the underlying dramatic action. Bacon reported that it was impossible to convey Pasta's performance without seeing it.⁶¹

Pasta's gestures were drawn from observations of real life; in arriving at the gestures she strove to possess herself of the feeling that would dictate what the character would do.⁶² Chorley wrote that Pasta would work at her interpretations, trying out different possibilities until she arrived at what she felt was the most truthful representation of the scene; once satisfied, she 'never changed her readings, her effects, her ornaments'.⁶³ Although the process was studied and a regular spectator knew what to expect, Chorley declared that 'when the passion broke out, or when the phrase was sung, it seemed as if they were something new, electrical, immediate'.⁶⁴ Unlike earlier singers, Pasta made the audiences feel the action, prompting Carlo Ritorni to dub her 'la cantante delle passioni'.⁶⁵ At the time Pasta's interpretations were deemed to have a new degree of naturalism, although Malibran who came after her was found to be still more natural.

Pasta's *Semiramide*, as described by Jameson, had been 'imperious', a 'magnificent barbaric heroine, who could feel love, hatred, fury [and] scorn but hardly fear or remorse, still less tenderness'.⁶⁶ Although Kemble had studied under Pasta, Kemble's interpretation was very different. According to Jameson, Kemble conceived *Semiramide* as a 'voluptuous and despotic queen, in whom, amid crimes of the darkest die [*sic*], the woman still predominated'.⁶⁷ As friends, Jameson and Kemble would undoubtedly have discussed Kemble's roles, particularly when Jameson was writing notes to accompany the John Hayter series of pastels of Kemble in her recent roles. Jameson argued that because *Semiramide*'s music, unlike Mozart's, had 'little originality, character or solidity', it was precisely the kind of opera upon which an 'accomplished singer could stamp her own conception'.⁶⁸ It is unclear whether this was Jameson's opinion or Kemble's, although Jameson did say that when Kemble sang the role of Susanna she felt obliged to make it poetical. With *Semiramide*, however, Kemble 'felt quite at liberty to interpret the music

⁶⁰ *Quarterly Musical Magazine*, quoted by Susan Rutherford, "'La cantante delle passioni": Giuditta Pasta and the Idea of Operatic Performance', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2007), 114.

⁶¹ Rutherford, "'La cantante delle passioni'", 113-14.

⁶² Susan Rutherford, *The Prima Donna and Opera, 1815-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 235.

⁶³ Chorley, *Thirty Years' Musical Recollections*, Vol. 1, 131.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, 131-32.

⁶⁵ Rutherford, "'La cantante delle passioni'", 113-115.

⁶⁶ Jameson, 'Adelaide Kemble', 67.

⁶⁷ See *Ibid.*, 67-68.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

as she chose'.⁶⁹ The greater freedom Kemble felt in this role may have been one reason why her acting as Semiramide was particularly noted by the critics. During the opera, Kemble was alternately a 'haughty, passionate, tender, and pathetic Assyrian [*sic*] ruler'.⁷⁰

The theatre critics William Hazlitt and George Henry Lewes both wrestled with what made for 'natural acting' and made audiences feel the action. In the eighteenth century, singers had relied on a set of rhetorical gestures, which they used as a code to depict 'universal human properties'.⁷¹ The idea that gestures could act as a 'language more immediate than speech' was carried well into the nineteenth century.⁷² But from the mid-eighteenth century, other approaches became visible: David Garrick's 'natural' acting style influenced European theatre, including the operatic stage; a greater emphasis was being placed on passion and feeling; and the strict separation between the performance modes of *opera buffa* and *opera seria* was disappearing.⁷³

For Lewes, the best drama represented an ideal conception in material form. Natural actors took the tools of the actor's trade, such as gesture, intonation and declamation (the 'material conventions') and used them to convey the 'progress and culmination of some passion, the story of some ideal life'. Thus, they used the material conventions such as gesture to 'externalize and objectify the internal, subjective workings of the characters they impersonate.'⁷⁴ The good actor did not deceive his audience, rather he represented 'the ideal character with such truthfulness that it affects us as real'. For Hazlitt, the 'natural actor' used his imagination to propel his own deeply felt passions about concrete events into the fictitious situations of staged action, so that the audience could feel them too. Hazlett argued that Pasta was so effectively natural because she could reproduce on stage feelings she had experienced offstage, feelings that the audience could then also experience. For the actor to be able to do this, he had to draw on a well-developed and expressive sense of self. It was not enough for the player to act plausibly; certain feelings had to be awakened in the audience and for this the spectators were equally responsible, for they had to 'cultivate both the emotional sensitivity and the sagacious judgement' required. When Pasta

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁷⁰ *Morning Post*, 3 October 1842.

⁷¹ Rutherford, *The Prima Donna*, 254.

⁷² Mary Ann Smart, *Mimomania: Music and Gesture in Nineteenth-Century Opera* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 15.

⁷³ Susan Rutherford, "'Unnatural gesticulation" or "un geste sublime"? Dramatic Performance in Opera', *Arcadia*, Vol. 36 (2001), 244.

⁷⁴ Lynn M. Voskuil, *Acting Naturally: Victorian Theatricality and Authenticity* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 44.

performed the role of Nina she inhabited the part, identifying with it so closely that she almost forgot that she was acting: she *was* the character.⁷⁵

While Lewes and Hazlitt argued that passion was an essential ingredient for natural and persuasive acting, others tried a more ‘scientific’ approach, by identifying the cerebral zones, or organs, responsible for musicianship and acting. Phrenology, which posited that the development of these cerebral zones could be read on the surface of the skull, had spread widely since its invention in the 1790s. The phrenologist tried to work out the direct correspondences between sentiments, faculties and the anatomy of the brain. Both phrenology and physiognomy tried to determine what were the innate characteristics of the subject.⁷⁶ Phrenologists paid particular attention to opera singers, who could be studied from the many pictures of them. They tried to link the performance style with the personality of the singer and theorised about the combinations of ‘tune’, ‘time’ and ‘mimicry’ that were necessary attributes of the opera singer.⁷⁷ Organs such as ‘ideality’ and ‘sublimity’ led to singing with taste, while ‘combativeness’ and ‘destructiveness’ led to singing with passion and ‘social feelings’ led to singing with pathos.⁷⁸

In particular, the organ of ‘tune’ was said by Robert Macnish to be large in all who had a decided musical genius, including Malibran, Pasta and Rossini.⁷⁹ Further to the opera singer’s genius, the physiognomist Dr Luigi Morando de Rizzoni wrote about Pasta and said that she did not derive her talent from a ‘beautiful repertoire of poses and movements imitating the *exterior* signs of passion, but rather from the expressivity and *internal* sensibility readable on the features of her face’.⁸⁰ As for Kemble, she was deemed to have the ‘finest tragic head of the Kembles’. As such she was deemed to have the ‘power of conceiving and expressing ... every shade of feeling and passion.’⁸¹

Judging from descriptions in the newspapers, Kemble’s strength seems to have been in communicating Semiramide’s mixed emotions so that the audience could follow her changing mood and feelings.⁸² Descriptions of Kemble’s acting showed her as intense and John Hayter’s

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 29. (Hazlitt’s emphasis.)

⁷⁶ Céline Frigau Manning, ‘Phrenologizing Opera Singers: The Scientific “Proofs of Musical Genius”’, *19th-Century Music*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (2015), 129, 134.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 134-35.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁸⁰ Dr. Luigi Morando de Rizzoni, quoted in *Ibid.*, 135. (My emphasis.)

⁸¹ *Evening Chronicle*, 3 October 1842.

⁸² See Jameson, ‘Adelaide Kemble’, 68-69; *The Times*, 3 October 1842; *Standard*, 5 October 1842.

portraits of her as Semiramide reflect this in the strong expressions depicted on her face and in her eyes.

Hayter was commissioned by the Marquis of Titchfield, later Fifth Duke of Portland to draw a series of 34 portraits of Kemble, dated 1842 and 1847. Titchfield had fallen in love with Kemble, tried to give her diamonds and even proposed marriage. However, Kemble turned down the proposal because she was already married.⁸³ Quite when the Marquis approached her is unclear as few of his letters survive; nevertheless, it was probably during Kemble's final season at Covent Garden: Kemble had married Edward Sartoris on 1 August 1842⁸⁴, although the marriage was only publicised after her retirement in December that year; after this time, the Marquis would have known that she was not available. Titchfield never married and became a recluse, although he remained on good terms with Kemble and her family.⁸⁵

Of the Hayter's pastels, two are of Kemble's head and shoulders and dated 24 and 26 December 1842, the first being drawn the day after Kemble's final performance; these may have been studies for the remaining 32 pastels, all of which are -length portraits of Kemble in roles from her final season. Nine of these pastels show her as Semiramide. Sophie Littlewood, Assistant Curator at Welbeck Abbey considers it unlikely that Kemble sat for all 34 portraits because of the time involved, even though she may have sat for some of them; alternatively, Hayter may have sketched expressions and poses from the opera.⁸⁶ The fact that the two head-and-shoulder portraits are specifically dated may indicate that those were portraits she sat for. It was in both Titchfield and Hayter's interest that Kemble was portrayed as accurately as possible. The fact that Hayter appears to have started working on the pastels immediately after her first performances makes it highly likely that he would have made a point of attending one or more of Kemble's final performances; indeed, Titchfield might have even paid for him to attend. Nevertheless, even if Hayter drew sketches at the time, unless Kemble sat for some of the portraits, any later portraits would have been drawn from memory.

However, what is noticeable is that Hayter's portrayal of Kemble as Semiramide, together with her costume, resemble Brandard's pictures very closely indeed, particularly with respect to the decoration on her bodice, the brocade on her cape and the shawl around her waist; yet, her facial expression tends to be more forceful and fits more closely to the written descriptions of the intensity of her performances. The two portraits with Assur are also broadly similar to what we

⁸³ Gallery Label, John Hayter, *Portraits of Adelaide Kemble, 1843-44*, Portland Collection, Welbeck Abbey, Worksop, 19 October 2017.

⁸⁴ *Morning Advertiser*, 4 August 1842.

⁸⁵ Derek Adlam, *Tunnel Vision: The Enigmatic 5th Duke of Portland*, New ed. (Welbeck, Worksop: The Harley Gallery, 2013), 36.

⁸⁶ Sophie Littlewood, email communication to author, 17 August 2018.

know both of the costume and the singer; by contrast, the costume and beard that Hayter gave to Arsace are somewhat different from what we know from other sources. Similarly, although they are both architectural in nature, the background to the pictures are generally different from those by Brandard and the *Illustrated London News*; it looks as if Hayter may have simply filled in the architectural background to the pictures. If Hayter drew sketches at the time, his focus was on Kemble rather than Shaw.

Two of Kemble's scenes were repeatedly described by the critics. One concerned Semiramide's response to the appearance of the ghost of her husband that she and Assur had murdered. The scene began with Semiramide making a public announcement that Arsace would be her consort. As the assembly come to terms with the proclamation, a 'hollow subterranean sound' is heard from Ninus' tomb. Semiramide starts singing in A flat about the 'dismal death-like wail' coming from the tomb, and she is joined by Idreno who sings in canon half a bar ahead of her. As the tomb starts shaking, the assembled company break out in a chorus in A flat with a dotted rhythm. When the ghost of Ninus appears, Semiramide cries out 'God's immortal! Shield me', while the populace expresses its terror in a dotted rhythm. Semiramide, singing in F minor, charges Ninus to speak. Then over a tremolo accompaniment in the orchestra, increasingly made up of diminished sevenths and augmented chords, Ninus addresses the assembled company in B flat minor, declaring that Arsace will reign, but first there are crimes to be expiated.

Several newspaper reviews said that in the extremity of sudden terror, Semiramide clung to Assur's arm for support, although only Jameson said that 'the next moment [she shrank] from him in disgust'.⁸⁷ She then sank into what Kenney described as a 'quailing' posture,⁸⁸ using her cloak to veil her face, by which he probably meant that that Semiramide was bent, cringing with fear.

Hayter appears to have caught the moment when Semiramide clutched Assur's arm (Figure 14). Yet, both the mount of Hayter's picture (Figure 14) and Jameson's manuscript memoir make it clear that his pastel portrays the moment when the sacred flame expires, the first uncanny event in the opera and substantially earlier on in the first act.⁸⁹ Indeed, at the back of the scene, white lightning appears to strike the altar while magi and satraps look on aghast. But if this picture does refer to this earlier scene, then it is unclear what Semiramide was looking at so intently if, as shown in the picture, the altar was placed behind her. The reviews make it clear that this action took place when Semiramide saw the ghost. So has the scene been mislabelled? It seems unlikely that a gesture that several chose to describe would have happened twice, in which case it implies

⁸⁷ Jameson, 'Adelaide Kemble', 68.

⁸⁸ *The Times*, 3 October 1842.

⁸⁹ Anna Jameson, *Adelaide Kemble: A Memoir to Accompany and Illustrate a Series of Drawings by Mr. John Hayter, 7 August 1844* (Manuscript, Portland Collection).



Figure 14. John Hayter, *Semiramide and Assur: 'The sacred flame on the alter expires'*, 1843, pastel. Private collection.



Figure 15. John Hayter, *Semiramide and Assur: 'Must I recall to thee that night of horror!'*, 1843, pastel. Private collection.

that Hayter may have fused the two scenes into one. On this basis, Hayter has Assur, who feels no guilt, looking away from the ghost and possibly instead up to the lightning in the sky, while Semiramide holds on to him and, half-crouched, defends herself as she leans her back into him, while keeping her eyes fixed on the ghost. Although her position is stable, Semiramide's bent posture indicates that she is already beginning to drop to her knees. Indeed, Hayter also drew another picture with Semiramide in the presence of the ghost which shows Kemble kneeling on the floor. Jameson writes that at this point Pasta had shown horror and defiance.⁹⁰

The critics described this scene fully. What appears to have impressed them, was not just the melodramatic situation, but the detail and imagination with which Kemble had plotted her action and interpretation. In the presence of the ghost, Kemble did not just use a stooping posture to show her 'shame and horror' (see Figure 14), but throughout this scene her voice quivered and whole body trembled.⁹¹ As much of this scene is sung in ensemble, Semiramide's shaking voice would not have stood out. Yet it would have been heard during her two solo entries: when she first cried out at the appearance of the ghost and later when she tells him to speak. Just before the

⁹⁰ Jameson, 'Adelaide Kemble', 68.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

ghost departs, Semiramide appeals to him: her entry in Italian – the language in which Kemble first learned the role – begins with a dying phrase landing on the supertonic, ‘Io tremo!’ (‘I tremble!’); it is repeated after the ghost has left with the lines, ‘Io manco, io moro ...’ (‘I am failing, I am dying ...’). In fact, Reynoldson’s text does not refer to trembling in the first of these entries, although the interjection may have been left out. However, at both these entries, it would have been appropriate for Kemble, who understood the nuances of Rossi’s libretto, to make her voice tremble.

Finally, at the end of the scene, Semiramide recovered herself and despite her repugnance approached the spectre. This may have been before the ghost’s second entry when he tells Semiramide not to follow him, in a passage with stentorian lines reminiscent of *Don Giovanni*. When the phantom spoke, Kemble seemed to ‘shrink into herself’, while ‘every word penetrated into her soul’.⁹² For George Hogarth, writing in the *Chronicle*, this scene was ‘in every respect the finest in the opera’.⁹³

The other notable scene was Semiramide’s duet with Assur, ‘Se la vita’, in which the two singers battled for control in what the *Observer* called, a ‘musical Peachum and Lockit’:⁹⁴ like these characters in *The Threepenny Opera*, Semiramide and Assur have been in league with each other, but now blame each other for Ninus’ death; they threaten to reveal all and bring the other down. This scene is structured as a three-movement duet. In the first movement in B flat, Semiramide and Assur attack each other in a highly ornamented verbal duel as they try and intimidate each other. The mood changed when Assur reminded Semiramide of the night of Ninus’ murder. According to the *Standard*, at first Semiramide appears ‘supplicating, as if she would beg him to pause’,⁹⁵ but then ‘horror overpowers every other feeling, and she shrinks before him as he constantly pursues her.’⁹⁶ Kenney also describes Semiramide’s ‘withering horror’ at this point,⁹⁷ ‘her form receding and her face thrown back and rigid’⁹⁸ From these descriptions, it appears that Semiramide was paralysed with fear and shrank away from Assur.

Hayter’s picture of this argument (Figure 15) shows a bullying Assur, towering over the bent Semiramide. Their bodies do not look stable, as though Assur is on the point of pushing Semiramide over physically as well as politically. It shows his violence about to erupt, while she

⁹² See *Athenaeum*, 8 October 1842, 780.

⁹³ *Evening Chronicle*, 3 October 1842.

⁹⁴ *Observer*, 2 October 1842.

⁹⁵ *Standard*, 5 October 1842.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *The Times*, 6 October 1843.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3 October 1842; *Standard*, 5 October 1842.

tries to push him away and maintain her balance. It reflects Jameson's description of one moment in this scene in which Kemble grasped 'her poignard as though she would have struck it to the traitor's heart; the next she cowered, writhing under his threats and reproaches, her bowed head and clasped hand seeming to implore his forbearance'.⁹⁹

Another particularly striking moment in this same scene, and described by both Jameson and the *Standard*, was when Kemble took up the verse, 'Since that appalling night'. Although Assur has been addressing Semiramide in G major, Semiramide replies in the less confident G minor. For the *Standard*, it seemed as if the ghost had appeared in the room while Semiramide was singing; as Semiramide recoiled, she had a 'wild air, her eyes fixed on vacancy'.¹⁰⁰ Jameson on the other hand wrote about her 'look of horror' as she glanced around, 'as if the very air was filled with avenging furies'.¹⁰¹ As Jameson's essay was published four years later and she knew Kemble personally, she may well have discussed her impression with Kemble. Yet, Jameson writes that Semiramide's look was 'as if' the air was filled with furies. It is therefore likely that this is Jameson's own interpretation of the scene, rather than one recounted by Kemble. In Rossi's libretto, during this duet both Assur and Semiramide refer to the ghost being present in the darkness ('infra le tenebre'), but in Reynoldson's libretto the presence of the ghost is filled out: he nightly stalks Semiramide's regal couch, 'banishing slumber'. Although it is not clear from the descriptions exactly what took place, it seems that Kemble made Semiramide be pursued not just by Assur but also by Ninus' ghost – and in a psychological drama, possibly also by avenging furies. The fact that this scene was described so often indicates the powerful nature of the drama between the two characters. Giubilei's Assur has the upper hand for most of this argument. He has all but succeeded in blackmailing Kemble's Semiramide, who is presented as vulnerable, weakened by Assur's intimidation. She no longer displays the majestic dignity expected of queens on the operatic stage.¹⁰² Kemble's Semiramide is in the process of losing her regal authority, and in real danger of ceding her position to Assur. Finally, in the cabaletta Semiramide recovers herself with the words, 'As woman I scorn thee ...' (see Ex. 1).¹⁰³ With her new-found confidence, Semiramide returns to threaten Assur, but each character tries to make the other back down.

The progression of different moods in this scene suggests that Kemble's acting may have been less static than that of Pasta, who moved primarily during the recitative passages and only used

⁹⁹ Jameson, 'Adelaide Kemble', 68-69.

¹⁰⁰ *Standard*, 5 October 1842.S

¹⁰¹ Jameson, 'Adelaide Kemble', 69.

¹⁰² See Rutherford, *The Prima Donna*, 232.

¹⁰³ *Standard*, 5 October 1842.

Ex. 1. 'As woman I scorn thee' from 'Se la vita'.

As wo - man I scorn thee! As Queen I do

4 warn thee! Then trem - - ble thou

6 *ff* tra - tor As both I'm thy foe! *p*

limited gestures during the arias and other passages which required sustained singing.¹⁰⁴ For Parry, the way Kemble gave 'vent to resentments and threats' in this scene and communicated what she was feeling and experiencing, reminded him of 'more than one cantatrice of Her Majesty's Theatre'.¹⁰⁵

Although English theatre critics frequently wrote about how singers moved their bodies on stage, there was a preoccupation with how subjectivity could be embodied.¹⁰⁶ In the nineteenth century, the Enlightenment assumption of universality was gradually replaced with a new belief in individuality. The physiognomist Morando de Rizzoni argued that each being was unique and had

¹⁰⁴ Rutherford, *The Prima Donna*, 234.

¹⁰⁵ *Morning Post*, 3 October 1842.

¹⁰⁶ Laura Protano-Biggs, 'An Earnest Meyerbeer: *Le Prophète* at London's Royal Italian Opera', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (2017), 63.

its own particular character; its exterior world was also matched by its inner world.¹⁰⁷ Actors and singers therefore sought to express a person's inner world, and the interior world of the individual, actor or singer was accompanied by a corresponding interior world, a belief system that went hand in hand with a new-found belief in authenticity. Although Kemble used gestures, such as her stooping posture in the presence of the ghost, she expressed the emotional drama of the situation; and like Pasta before her, Kemble's talent lay in the 'expressivity and internal sensibility readable on the features of her face'.¹⁰⁸

In this context, not all of Hayter's portraits of Kemble as Semiramide are melodramatic. Two of them present powerful images of Semiramide on her own in moments of stillness, when the drama is internal. In one, Hayter shows the moment of Semiramide's hesitation when Assur is trying to force her to announce her consort (see Figure 16). She leans on the pillar, and although she looks down her eyes express determination as she decides what to do and gathers strength to face her adversary. The other is during the 'Preghiera' (see Figure 17). Unlike Brandard's picture, in which

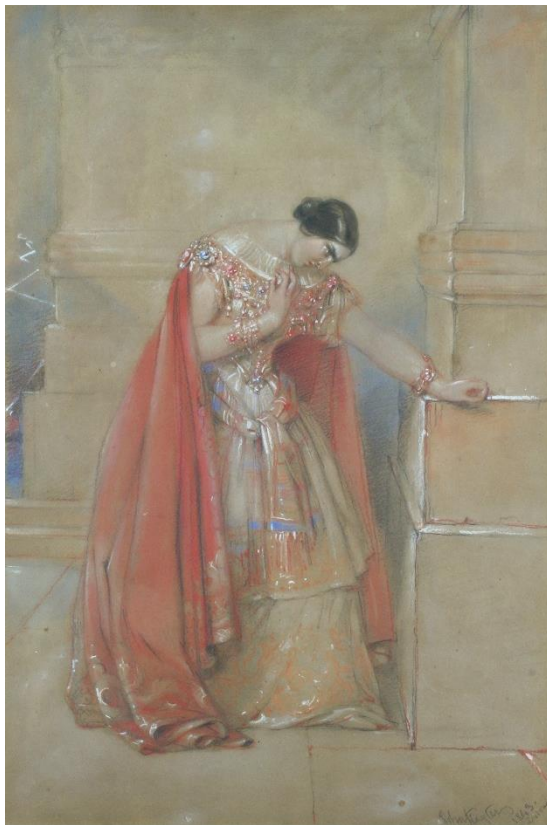


Figure 16. John Hayter. *Semiramide*, 1843, pastel. Private collection.

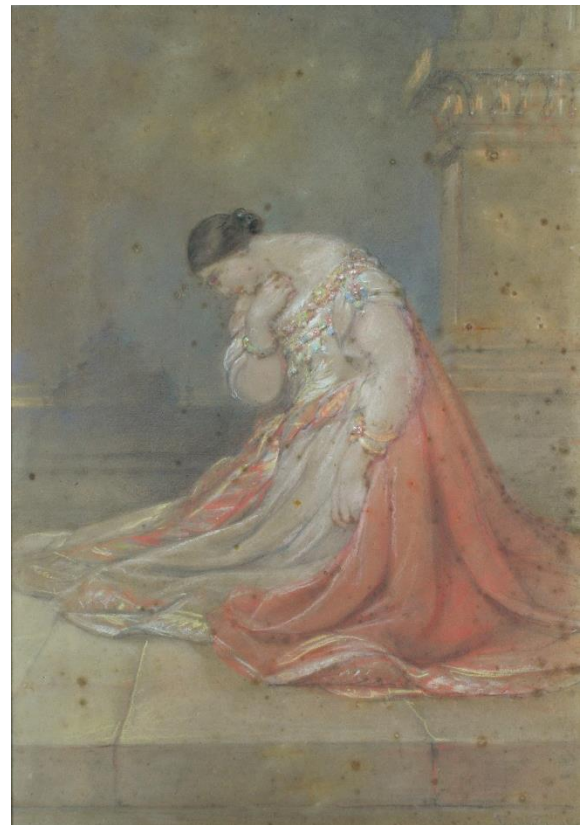


Figure 17. John Hayter, *Semiramide*, 1844, pastel. Private collection.

¹⁰⁷ Frigau Manning, 'Phrenologizing Opera Singers', 135.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

Semiramide gazes demurely up to heaven, in Hayter's version Semiramide's hand clutches her throat and she hangs her head in a gesture that Gilbert Austin says denotes shame and grief.¹⁰⁹ Although Gilbert Austin's *Chironomia* (1806) was the last of the new treatises about gesture, an awareness of gesture persisted well into the nineteenth century. Carlo Blasis's dance manual *The Code of Terpsichore* (1828) was aimed at the professional market, although other manuals of gesture may have been aimed at the market of amateur actors and singers; in addition, they tended to repeat eighteenth-century orthodoxies.¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, it is likely that audiences had some awareness of the meaning of Austin's gestures in 1842.

In Hayter's picture (Figure 17), Semiramide is crumpled, knowing the time has come when she has to atone for her crime. In the stillness and on her own, she faces her conscience. The overlapping principles of earnestness, sincerity, authenticity were moral imperatives of the time. But although being sincere demanded an awareness of the interior self, Lionel Trilling argued that it did not of itself require that the person sincerely disclosed his/her inner self to others. Trilling therefore regarded authenticity as a more exigent moral experience because the authentic self is not attenuated or compromised by making itself presentable to others.¹¹¹ Instead it engaged a commitment to that private, primeval self, which resides in a place 'where all movement ends, and begins'.¹¹² Beginning with 'Giorno d'orrore' and later on her own and in the stillness in front of Ninus' tomb, Semiramide becomes in touch with the 'deepest, innermost reaches of the self',¹¹³ and she starts to become sincere.

Although Kemble used gestures, such as her stooping posture in the presence of the ghost, she was able to communicate the underlying drama of the situation. Like Pasta before her, Kemble's talent resided in the 'expressivity and internal sensibility readable on the features of her face'.¹¹⁴ As such, she was therefore able to convey her terror of imaginary ghosts in her mind. Given that *Semiramide* was not by as revered a composer as Mozart, Kemble felt able to interpret the title role freely and give her own personal stamp to the part; she made the queen alternately forceful, girlish and vulnerable – an identifiable person with human frailties. And when faced by her misdeeds, she conveyed the queen's acknowledgement of the true person inside.

¹⁰⁹ Gilbert Austin, *Chironomia; or, A Treatise on Rhetorical Delivery* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1806), 482.

¹¹⁰ Smart, *Mimomania*, 15-16.

¹¹¹ Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 11.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 12; see also Voskuil, *Acting Naturally*, 5.

¹¹³ Voskuil, *Acting Naturally*, 25.

¹¹⁴ Frigau Manning, 'Phrenologizing Opera Singers', 135.

Womanliness

Virtue and sincerity were hallmarks of the ideal Victorian woman. There had been a reaction to the extravagance, womanising, drinking and gambling of the Prince Regent, and the coterie around him. Gerald Newman argues that from the second half of the eighteenth century, sincerity became increasingly seen as a peculiarly English ideal and the 'badge of a superior culture'.¹¹⁵ Sincerity embraced a collection of different values, including artlessness or innocence, honesty, originality and inspired creativity, frankness, as well as moral and spiritual independence.¹¹⁶ Yet as a character trait, sincerity described first and foremost a 'certain purity, an absence of artfulness or deception'.¹¹⁷ By the beginning of the nineteenth-century the concept had grown so that it now suggested a virtue at the head of all others, for 'sincerity, once introduced into the manners of mankind, would necessarily bring every other virtue in its train'.¹¹⁸

The ideal woman, the 'Angel in the House',¹¹⁹ was therefore perceived as well-mannered, self-effacing, demure and devoid of passion. Implicit in the idea was the blushing youth, the virginal maiden and the tender mother, rather than the older woman.¹²⁰ Many of these values had started in the eighteenth century, and not just in Britain. Rousseau thought that timidity, chasteness and modesty were qualities proper to women and something to be cultivated.¹²¹ The woman's strength lay in her virtue, and she became the spiritual guardian of the household. The middle-class woman of the Victorian age was to be unobtrusive yet central, unperceived yet all-seeing, and on top of this 'considerate', a concept encompassing benevolence and deliberation, feeling and thought. She gave kind attention to others, as well as due regard to her own interests.¹²² Marriage was presented as an ideal of personal fulfilment and the home was seen as a moral haven from economic and political storms, to which the husband could return at the end of the working day.¹²³ According to the philosophy that men and woman should occupy separate spheres, the home with its household was a private sphere presided over and ordered by the woman.¹²⁴ By contrast the

¹¹⁵ Gerald Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism: A Cultural History, 1740-1830*, New rev. ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 128.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 129-133.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹¹⁸ William Godwin quoted in *Ibid.*, 130.

¹¹⁹ Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House* (London and Cambridge: Macmillan, 1863).

¹²⁰ Elizabeth Langland, *Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 120.

¹²¹ Marlene LeGates, 'The Cult of Womanhood in Eighteenth-Century Thought', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Autumn 1976), 39.

¹²² Langland, *Nobody's Angels*, 72-73.

¹²³ LeGates, 'Cult of Womanhood', 22; Langland, *Nobody's Angels*, 8.

¹²⁴ Langland, *Nobody's Angels*, 8.

man occupied the public sphere of work and politics, a position which John Ruskin and others argued protected women from the ‘perils and trial’ of the worlds of commerce, politics, law and the military.¹²⁵ The woman was obedient to the man, and the man obedient to divine providence.

Yet these were middle-class ideals which marked out a woman’s social station. While the middle-class woman was deemed to be chaste, the lower classes were regarded as sexually potentially dangerous. Meanwhile the middle classes seemed sexless.¹²⁶ Similarly, while the woman should not work, it was acceptable for female servants to do so.

Shaw was pretty with a fair complexion.¹²⁷ There were consequently many discussions in the press about her figure, which was ‘slight’¹²⁸ and of ‘great symmetry’,¹²⁹ although having had two children since she had last appeared as a concert singer in 1836, she no longer had the same girlish looks and *Bell’s New Weekly Messenger* noted that she now had ‘more *en bon point*’.¹³⁰ In addition to her good looks, Shaw also had a likeable personality, both attributes that could tip the balance for or against a singer’s fortunes. Although it was generally agreed that her acting ability was weak, her ‘luxurious’ voice,¹³¹ combined with her open personality and ‘half-laughing face’ meant she was adored.¹³² Thus, the many descriptions of her voice, such as its ‘wondrous beauty and equability throughout its compass’,¹³³ were metaphors for her personality.

And yet it is curious that reviewers extolled Shaw’s voice in the way they did, for the English were ambivalent about the androgyny of the contralto voice. The mannish quality of both Rosa Mariani and Rosmunda Pisaroni had been criticised, with Mariani’s voice described as ‘loud, rude, unfeminine, and, to us, most disagreeable’.¹³⁴ Rutherford suggests that there may have been lower class associations with the *voce di petto*, which Peter Lichtenthal described as ‘strident and disgusting’¹³⁵ and was ‘presumably regarded as inappropriate in the idealised environment of the operatic stage’,¹³⁶ even though the chest voice was regularly used by popular singers, at least later

¹²⁵ Cheri Lin Larsen Hoeckley, ‘Anna Jameson’, in *Great Shakespearians*, Vol. 7, Jameson, Cowden Clarke, Kemble, Cushman, ed. Gail Marshall (London: Continuum, 2011), 23.

¹²⁶ Langland, *Nobody’s Angels*, 71.

¹²⁷ *The Times*, 3 October 1842.

¹²⁸ *Theatrical Journal*, 8 October 1842.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ *Bell’s New Weekly Messenger*, 9 October 1842.

¹³¹ *Morning Post*, 2 November 1842.

¹³² Horne, ‘Madame Pasta and Miss Adelaide Kemble’, 633.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 28 December 1842.

¹³⁴ *Harmonicon*, 10/6 June 1832, 144, quoted by Rutherford, *The Prima Donna*, 244.

¹³⁵ Peter Lichtenthal, quoted by Rutherford, *The Prima Donna*, 224.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

in the century.¹³⁷ Shaw's good looks, open personality and her Englishness, together with the luxuriousness of her voice, which Chorley described as 'black velvet', may have contributed to her being perceived as feminine.¹³⁸

Shaw was known for her amiable nature and serenity, qualities which epitomised many of the ideals of the Victorian Woman and were widely believed at the time to reflect an inner beauty and to be the result of acquired habits. The woman's personal beauty would be affected by her moral rectitude, for the 'habitual state of the soul estamps itself upon the expression of the features'.¹³⁹ These views cropped up in commentaries about singers in the *Illustrated London News*.¹⁴⁰ What several critics, including the *Illustrated London News*, regarded as Shaw's 'chaste' ornaments and singing therefore surely indicated not only her personal modesty,¹⁴¹ but a young woman well mannered, self-effacing, demure, and one that male devotees could imagine might provide a haven from the buffeting of the working week. Yet, Shaw was on the theatre boards, a place where some stars were known for their unorthodox sexual mores; when performing in a *musico* role such as Arsace, she wore trousers which might have titillated the men in the audience. Despite that, the press reviews give no hint of impropriety.

Shaw's femininity combined with her 'dramatic feebleness',¹⁴² meant that her Arsace lacked the forcefulness that a performer such as Pisaroni gave to the role. Shaw's Arsace was beautifully sung and 'tender'.¹⁴³ Although Pisaroni made a name for her mannish performance as Arsace, Heather Hadlock sees Arsace's character as androgynous. Not only is he a contralto in *vestito*, but he has feminine qualities of reflection and is marked by tender emotions of doubt and guilt.¹⁴⁴

Shaw was like Pisaroni in that she had a 'deep, rich voice' and was repeatedly complimented for the way she gave each word its full meaning, particularly in the recitatives. However, unlike Pisaroni, Shaw was always very feminine. With the exception of Ayrton, London critics wrote approvingly about Shaw's charming demeanour and her femininity, and her performance of

¹³⁷ See *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ Chorley, *Thirty Years' Musical Recollections*, Vol. 1, 222n.

¹³⁹ Quoted by Roberta Montemorra Marvin, 'Idealizing the Prima Donna in Mid-Victorian London', in *The Arts of the Prima Donna in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. Rachel Cowgill and Hilary Poriss (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 28.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ See *Illustrated London News*, 8 October 1842; *Morning Post*, 3 October 1842; *Theatrical Journal*, 15 October 1842.

¹⁴² *Morning Post*, 5 October 1842.

¹⁴³ *Observer*, 2 October 1842; *Standard*, 3 October 1842; *Theatrical Journal*, 8 October 1842.

¹⁴⁴ Heather Hadlock, 'Tancredi and Semiramide', in *The Cambridge companion to Rossini*, ed. Emanuele Senici (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 148.

‘Eccomi al fine in Babilonia!’ was praised as ‘exquisite’.¹⁴⁵ If audiences had a problem with her performance as Arsace, it was the ‘hideous dress’ she was made to wear, which had not been ‘adapted to her figure’.¹⁴⁶ The critics generally agreed that Shaw lacked histrionic abilities, although Horne judged her as merely ‘the regular operatic’.¹⁴⁷ The real problem may have been Shaw’s inability to perform tragedy, for as Horne put it:

A tragic emotion seems as impossible to her nature, as its expression would be to her half-laughing and always pleasing face.¹⁴⁸

Hadlock has argued that the performers of breeches parts were trapped in a double bind: if a *musico* was appropriately masculine then she betrayed her female nature, but if she was feminine she fell short of the demands of drama.¹⁴⁹ If this is correct then it may be that Shaw’s inability to act tragedy was in fact an advantage, as her performance was undoubtedly feminine and, with her pleasant nature, the audiences loved her.

As for Kemble, her performance style, and indeed the role she was playing, went head to head with notions of the ideal Victorian woman. Kemble’s performances were passionate and forceful in an age when women were supposed to be passive and devoid of passion. Similarly, her unpredictable ornaments and, on occasion, wayward intonation were hardly emblematic of Ruskin’s ‘sweet order’.¹⁵⁰ When the physiognomist Charles Place wrote about Kemble he wished to legitimise her as an actress and as a woman. Place made a point of noting Kemble’s spiritual integrity, saying that ‘The benevolence at the top of [Kemble’s] forehead ... has added to her character the Christian charity that she puts into practice each day, and the tenderness of heart that has made her the idol of those close to her, and brought such joy to her husband.’¹⁵¹ Yet at the time Place was writing in 1842, Kemble’s marriage to Edward Sartoris was kept a close secret, so whether he actually knew about the marriage or had simply interpreted it from her facial expression is unclear. What is known is that Kemble was very careful to keep her reputation. In Italy she had been chaperoned by her father and when he had to leave for health reasons, her aunt took over.¹⁵² When her sister Fanny had performed on stage a decade earlier, she had not been

¹⁴⁵ *The Times*, 3 October 1842; *Standard*, 3 October 1842.

¹⁴⁶ *Morning Post*, 28 December 1842.

¹⁴⁷ Horne, ‘Madame Pasta and Miss Adelaide Kemble’, 633.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ Heather Hadlock, ‘Women Playing Men in Italian Opera, 1810-1835’, in *Women’s Voices Across Musical Worlds*, ed. Jane A. Bernstein (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 296.

¹⁵⁰ See Langland, *Nobody’s Angels*, 78-79.

¹⁵¹ Frigau Manning, ‘Phrenologizing Opera Singers’, 139.

¹⁵² AK to Countess van Thun, 8 November 1839.

allowed to stay in the green room, in order to protect her reputation,¹⁵³ and there is no reason to think it was any different with Adelaide. For both Kemble and Shaw, preserving their reputation was particularly important given that Kemble was playing the role of a criminal queen, and they were both performing in the theatre, reputedly a place of doubtful morals with performers, such as Vestris, known for her saucy trouser roles, and stars like Malibran with unorthodox relationships.

As for the role of Semiramide, she was a virago. Although Rossini's opera refers to murder and has a hint of incest, it does not show the full extent of Semiramide's warrior nature, cross-dressing and the dangerous sexuality found in some of the darker versions of the story. Semiramis' sexuality was worthy of the lower orders rather than a queen.¹⁵⁴ Yet this 'man-queen'¹⁵⁵ would have been familiar to those with a classical education and would have coloured how both Rossini's anti-heroine and Kemble herself were perceived.¹⁵⁶

As noted above, Jameson saw Pasta's Semiramide as a 'magnificent barbaric heroine'.¹⁵⁷ Susan Rutherford writes that with low-born singers often portraying high-born characters in *opera seria*, there was much concern that they should be presented with suitably aristocratic attributes, and in particular that they had a 'majestic character and royal dignity'.¹⁵⁸ So it was almost inevitable that Pasta should portray the queen either with 'majestic dignity' as Horne describes her tragic roles,¹⁵⁹ or, given Semiramide's Oriental nature and wicked past, as 'magnificent' and 'barbaric' as Jameson does.¹⁶⁰ But while Jameson suggests that Pasta's imperious queen 'predominated over the woman', Kemble broke this tradition by creating a Queen who, despite the iniquity of her crimes, was 'first and foremost a woman'.¹⁶¹ Kemble's queen was a character with a greater number of layers to the role and who was tragic yet capable of being wounded.

The description of the womanliness of Kemble's Semiramide must be seen in the context of Jameson's role as a social critic. The latter acted as mentor to the next generation of women who formed the Married Women's Property Committee and lobbied parliament in 1855 and 1856 for

¹⁵³ Fanny Kemble, *Records of a Girlhood*, 2nd ed. (New York: Henry Holt, 1883), 225-26.

¹⁵⁴ Most of the darkest versions of the story are due to Orosius and other Christian writers who needed to prove the superiority of the Christians and therefore blackened Semiramis' character, because they could not portray her as a successful pagan queen with a mighty empire. (See Paulus Orosius, *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans*, 1.4.7.)

¹⁵⁵ George Gordon Byron, 'Sardanapalus', in *Sardanapalus; The Two Foscari; Cain* (London: John Murray, 1821), Act 1, Sc. 1, 43.

¹⁵⁶ See Marvin, 'Idealizing the Prima Donna', 26-27.

¹⁵⁷ Jameson, 'Adelaide Kemble', 67.

¹⁵⁸ See Rutherford, *The Prima Donna*, 232.

¹⁵⁹ Horne, 'Madame Pasta and Miss Adelaide Kemble', 630.

¹⁶⁰ Jameson, 'Adelaide Kemble', 67.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 66-67.

marriage law reform and for increased employment opportunities for women. As a result, the *Saturday Review* criticised Jameson for leading a ‘petticoat rebellion of discontented women who stepped out of their proper domestic places and into political activism’.¹⁶²

Jameson resisted the binary opposition of masculine and feminine traits which drove the separate-spheres ideology of Ruskin and Sarah Stickney Ellis. In fact, she thought there were many roles to be shared by all.¹⁶³ In this context she refused to accept that there should be a barrier to public roles for women, and because men and women’s characteristics were different, she thought that no organisation could function completely without both.¹⁶⁴ Jameson did not see all women having the same characteristics, nor did she consider their roles to be necessarily seen in terms of their male relatives, as understood by Ellis. Instead Jameson saw women having rounded personalities with characteristics that she outlined in her best-seller about Shakespeare’s female characters, *Characteristics of Women*.¹⁶⁵ She saw women as having gifts of the intellect; passion and imagination; and the affections or what we would now call empathy. These attributes would be combined in different proportions thus creating a variety of temperaments. Jameson saw the most important of these as the intellect, which was epitomised by the character of Portia, from *The Merchant of Venice*, with her persuasive and logical abilities, plus her sense of justice paired with emotional depth.¹⁶⁶ When *Characteristics of Women* was first published, it was reviewed by some as a conduct book.¹⁶⁷ Indeed Jameson thought that historical and Shakespearean characters could act as a moral guide to young women who could experience their full range of passions vicariously and, within the rigid confines of Victorian society, learn from them without endangering their reputation.¹⁶⁸ Jameson also took a similar approach with her earlier book, *Memoirs of Celebrated Female Sovereigns*, the first chapter of which is about Semiramis.¹⁶⁹ Rather than concentrating on the queen’s misdeeds, Jameson stressed Semiramis’ role as a builder of cities and a ruler, and the memorials testifying to her power and benevolence. Implicit in Jameson’s writing was that these were qualities to emulate, and that one could choose to use qualities like ingenuity, one of Semiramis’ attributes, for good.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶² *Saturday Review*, 24 May 1856, quoted by Hoeckley, ‘Anna Jameson’, 18-19.

¹⁶³ Hoeckley, ‘Anna Jameson’, 20-21.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁶⁵ Anna Jameson, *Characteristics of Women: Moral, Political, and Historical* (London: Saunders and Otley, 1837).

¹⁶⁶ See *Ibid.*, 39-63; Hoeckley, ‘Anna Jameson’, 30-35.

¹⁶⁷ Hoeckley, ‘Anna Jameson’, 22.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁶⁹ Anna Jameson, *Memoirs of Celebrated Female Sovereigns* (London: Henry Colburn & Richard Bentley, 1831). See also Hoeckley, ‘Anna Jameson’, 54.

¹⁷⁰ Jameson, *Celebrated Sovereigns*, Vol.1, 1-10.

Jameson wrote that when Sarah Siddons performed *Lady Macbeth*, she took deeply moral decisions about the character so that she could perform the cruel queen sympathetically.¹⁷¹ In saying that Kemble's *Semiramide* was womanly, Jameson may have been implying that Kemble took a similar approach, so that the queen could be portrayed sympathetically, and possibly, like Jameson's conduct books, act as a moral example. As such, Kemble showed *Semiramide* conquering her fear and, during the 'Preghiera', facing the consequences of her actions.

A Fusion of Italian and English Singing

While there were many popular English singers on the stages of the patent and minor theatres, only a very few English singers had managed to have successful careers on the Italian stage. The idea of English singers competing as equals with the prima donnas of Her Majesty's Theatre was very attractive to those who wanted to promote English music and musicians. As Chorley put it, since the days of Billington 'no female artist belonging to this country has been able to maintain anything approaching to first position at the Italian Opera in London',¹⁷² let alone managed a permanent career there. Kemble and Shaw had Italian trained voices, and both had star status.

In the 1840s, people looked back nostalgically to Billington's success on the Italian stage. She had a 'delightful fresh voice' and great agility.¹⁷³ She had worked in Italy and worked at the King's Theatre from 1803 to 1807, singing *Vitellia* in *La clemenza di Tito*. However, once Angelica Catalani arrived in London, Billington was forced to retire from the King's Theatre, even though she went on singing in concerts and in English opera.¹⁷⁴ Fanny Ayton, who also sang at the King's Theatre, had a similar experience when she found herself replaced by Giuditta Pasta. There had been hopes that Emma Albertazzi, who sang *Pippo* in *La gazza ladra* (1830) might be successful, but opinion was divided about her, and she too ended singing in English opera.

English singers who had trained on the continent were often caught between the Italian and English styles. Mount Edgcumbe complained that although John Braham had a voice of the 'finest quality', he could be 'two distinct singers', adopting at times 'the over-florid and frittered Italian manner; at others, to fall into the coarseness and vulgarity of the English'.¹⁷⁵ For the English singer returning from the continent, finding work at Her Majesty's Theatre could be very

¹⁷¹ Hoeckley, 'Anna Jameson', 56.

¹⁷² Chorley, *Thirty Years' Musical Recollections*, Vol. 1, 240.

¹⁷³ Richard, Earl of Mount Edgcumbe, *Musical Reminiscences: Containing an Account of the Italian Opera in England, from 1773: Continued to the Present Time, and Including the Festival in Westminster Abbey*, 4th ed. (London: John Andrews and F.H. Wall, 1834), 90.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.

difficult. In order to overcome this barrier a number of singers including Emma Albertazzi (née Howson) and Theodore Victor Giubilei¹⁷⁶ (née Davaux) had found reasons for adopting Italian names.

In the face of this prejudice, James Davison inveighed against ‘the sin of exclusive patronage to whatever is Foreign in the Art’, declaring that it was ‘the sorest point upon our national conscience’. Instead of having the ‘assemblage of the best performers for the execution of the best Works’, performances were dictated by ambition, and the ‘aristocratic doings of our fashion fevered times’.¹⁷⁷

The way that Italian and English singing styles met and impacted each other can be examined, in line with Homi Bhabha’s Third Space, through the performances of Kemble and Shaw singing together with their Italian trained voices. Just as the two singers expressed their womanliness very differently, their performance styles were diametrically opposite. Kemble was energetic, intense and used extravagant ornamentation. Shaw meanwhile conveyed ‘serenity’ and performed with a ‘masterly simplicity’, which avoided the ‘licentious use of ornament’.¹⁷⁸

Kemble’s voice was described by George Hogarth as being a ‘*soprano* of extraordinary compass – full and voluminous in its lower notes, and in the higher, of ethereal sweetness and purity’.¹⁷⁹ This was filled out by the poet Richard Hengist Horne, who said her voice was a

high *soprano* of fine tone and great flexibility. Her lower notes are acquired, and have not, at present the degree of power or quality which the profound tragic expression of her singing at times requires; but a few years [would] probably supply this.¹⁸⁰

Different critics described Kemble’s voice as ‘beautiful’, ‘full and clear’ and ‘in so fine a school, that the middle notes have held their original excellence, while the acquired compass is true in tone, and pure in quality’.¹⁸¹ When Kemble appeared in *Norma*, writers rhapsodised about the way she sustained the ‘A in alt’ at the end of ‘Casta Diva’, which gave ‘ample proof of great sweetness combined with much firmness’,¹⁸² while Horne described Kemble’s ability

¹⁷⁶ Russell Burdekin, ‘Theodore Victor Giubilei together with brief sketches of the lives of his wife, Augustine’, *Victorian English Opera* (2014), [1], http://www.victorianenglishopera.org/singers/Giubilei_web_article.pdf, (accessed 29 December, 2014).

¹⁷⁷ *Musical World*, 30 September 1841, 209.

¹⁷⁸ *Morning Post*, 5 October 1842.

¹⁷⁹ *Evening Chronicle*, 3 October 1842.

¹⁸⁰ R. H. Horne, ‘Madame Pasta and Miss Adelaide Kemble’, 633.

¹⁸¹ *Era*, 7 November 1841.

¹⁸² See for example *Morning Post*, 3 November 1841; *Era*, 7 November 1841.

to draw a long note, sustain, soften and refine it until it seems to issue from an aërial distance; when it assumes a fine subtle vibratory tone, which is like something more than a human voice, and might be imagined to come from the heavenly spheres.¹⁸³

While Kemble used exaggerated ornaments and had problems with her intonation, particularly when she entered into dramatic situations,¹⁸⁴ Shaw was commended for her musical accuracy and the purity of her intonation. As the *Standard* wrote, ‘There is no defective intonation, there are no imperfect notes.’¹⁸⁵ References to her pure intonation probably referred both to the sonority of her voice and to her tuning. While some remarks about her musical accuracy might have indicated a certain rigidity in her performance, they were probably not intended in that way, as that would not have sat well with the warmth of the many accounts of the ‘melodious sweetness’ of her voice and reports that the audience ‘seemed ravished by the mellifluous accents that fell upon the ear’.¹⁸⁶ As described by Parry, Shaw sang with a simplicity that was:

Dictated by the most refined of tastes, and as utterly removed from that bold bareness which distinguishes too many of its votaries, as it is from the extreme and licentious use of ornament.¹⁸⁷

Although she avoided showy ornaments, their ‘profusion’ indicates that the ornamentation was always just present and yet highly nuanced. Reports on the expressiveness of her singing and the clarity of her diction imply that there was much detail to her performance. Shaw was particularly commended for her recitative, ‘that severest trial to English Singers’,¹⁸⁸ which was particularly expressive. Charles Lamb Kenney wrote:

Mrs. A. Shaw seems to be the only English singer who thoroughly understands the use to be made of recitative, which is so often little more than mere speaking. She grasped it thoroughly, made it thoroughly musical, avoiding without an effort coarseness on the one hand and feebleness on the other, and giving every sentiment its proper force.¹⁸⁹

The praise heaped on Shaw’s recitative came from all sides. Even Edward Taylor, who regarded the ‘exhibitions of Italian operas in an English dress’ as ‘vulgar and distasteful’ and would dismiss the 1842 *Semiramide* as a ‘burlesque’,¹⁹⁰ found that he had to write appreciatively about Shaw’s singing:

¹⁸³ Horne, ‘Madame Pasta and Miss Adelaide Kemble’, 633.

¹⁸⁴ See *The Morning Post*, 4 January 1843.

¹⁸⁵ *Standard*, 5 October 1842. See also letter to the Editor from ‘An Amateur’, *Morning Post*, 6 October 1842; *Musical World*, 6 October 1842, 322-23; *The Times*, 3 October 1842; *Sunday Times*, 9 October 1842.

¹⁸⁶ *Athenaeum*, 8 October 1842, 876.

¹⁸⁷ *Morning Post*, 5 October 1842.

¹⁸⁸ *Athenaeum*, 8 October 1842, 876.

¹⁸⁹ *The Times*, October 3 1842; *Theatrical Journal*, 15 October 1842, 324.

¹⁹⁰ *Spectator*, 5 November 1842.

Her recitative is the most perfect of any English singer's – not a syllable was lost; her sostenuto is equally excellent, and all her fioriture were in the best possible taste—that is, they were in strict accordance with the style of the cantilena, and executed with ease and accuracy.¹⁹¹

These remarks contrast with the sentiments expressed by the *Champion* three years before about the difficulty of performing recitative effectively:

'Artaxerxes' is the only English opera in which recitative has been successfully introduced, and there are few singers who do not find a difficulty in so harmonising the dialogue with the music that one or the other do not suffer in the attempt.¹⁹²

Yet Shaw made her recitative both meaningful and distinctive by varying 'every sentence with so much delicacy, [touching] it so lightly, and with such perfect truth'.¹⁹³ She gave 'every note its full force' and she had the technical ability to make 'such fine gradations' of her voice, that she was able to produce the 'greatest effect without the appearance of effort'.¹⁹⁴ It was therefore 'easy', 'flowing' and 'perfect'. It is clear from all the reviews that Shaw made her recitative understandable with her clear 'enunciation': 'Every word told – yet not a word was theatrical.'¹⁹⁵ This was very different from Kemble who overexaggerated the words.¹⁹⁶

Shaw had an extensive compass, and reached the 'highest notes with ease and suavity'.¹⁹⁷ There are differing reports about quite how wide Shaw's compass was, with the critic of the *Sunday Times* saying that her range was 'from low F to A flat above',¹⁹⁸ while Hogarth reported that she 'executed difficult divisions extending from B below the line of the treble clef to G sharp above them with the utmost facility and clearness of articulation'.¹⁹⁹ As a contralto, Shaw probably did get down to the low F as stated by the *Sunday Times*. In addition, although singers of the period changed the key according to their voice, in principle the role of Arsace descends to low G, which is not a low note for a contralto.²⁰⁰

Mary Shaw was judged to be a star, but the nature of her stardom was very different to that of Kemble. The simplicity of Shaw's performance and the way she gave musical meaning to each

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 8 October 1842.

¹⁹² *Champion and Weekly Herald*, 20 October 1839.

¹⁹³ Chorley, *Thirty Years' Musical Recollections*, Vol. 1, 221-22n.

¹⁹⁴ *The Times*, 5 October 1842.

¹⁹⁵ Chorley, *Thirty Years' Musical Recollections*, Vol. 1, 221-22n.

¹⁹⁶ *Era*, 7 November 1841.

¹⁹⁷ *Illustrated London News*, 8 October 1842, 339.

¹⁹⁸ *Sunday Times*, 9 October 1842.

¹⁹⁹ *Evening Chronicle*, 3 October 1842.

²⁰⁰ See Gioacchino Rossini and Gaetano Rossi, *Semiramide: melo-dramma tragico in due atti*, ed. Philip Gossett and Alberto Zedda, 'Prefazione' by Philip Gossett, Edizione critica delle opere di Gioacchino Rossini (Pesaro: Fondazione Rossini, 2001), Vol. 1, LXXIX.

word in the recitatives, contrasted with Kemble's intensity and her over-exaggeration of the text. The richness of her voice plus her exquisite singing made a sensation. But it was not just the quality of her voice, it was her manner, her always pleasing face, her serenity and complete absence of pretension.

When Kemble was welcomed onto the Covent Garden stage in 1841, several newspapers noted her Italianness, romantically fusing her performances with the singer: during her time on the continent, Kemble appeared to have 'become' Italian. Her Italianness affected the sonority of her voice, her ornamentation and the way she held the stage. As the *Era* put it,

Her singing, acting, and pronunciation are strictly Italian ... and the effect was novel as though a prima donna from her Majesty's Theatre had been transplanted to the stage of Covent-garden.²⁰¹

Kemble was not only Italian in manner, but in the stature of her voice and training.

Miss Kemble differs not only in degree but in kind from the English singers that have lately appeared – she is an Italian vocalist introduced to the English theatre. The cultivation of her voice, the command she has acquired over it, the power of subduing it, are Italian; in her very tones there is a sound of Italy.²⁰²

The sonority of Kemble's singing, the way she used her voice and her manner had become fused with her persona and her identity as a singer. While on the continent, she had become 'foreign', like the singers of Her Majesty's Theatre and other star singers from the continent who increasingly took the principal roles on the English stage, putting them out of reach of the English singers. However, being Italian was not necessarily an attribute. Kemble's diction was generally agreed to be poor. Hogarth argued that when she sang the language was 'distorted and disguised' with Italian accents and inflections,²⁰³ adding that the words were barely distinguishable in the arias:

She made no attempt to articulate at all, passing over the words so slightly that we never for a moment received the idea of her singing in English.²⁰⁴

The result, according to the critic of the *Era*, was that 'our native English sounded as the language of another clime'.²⁰⁵ Jameson explained that having learned roles such as Norma in the Italian language, Kemble had difficulty adapting to sing them in English. Meanwhile the *Era* said that in

²⁰¹ *Era*, 7 November 1841.

²⁰² *The Times*, 3 November 1841.

²⁰³ *Morning Chronicle*, 3 November 1841.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁵ *Era*, 7 November 1841.

the recitatives, Kemble over-pronounced, ‘pressing on the consonants’,²⁰⁶ and articulating the words with the ‘manner and accent of an Italian, not an English woman’.²⁰⁷

As far as *Bell’s Weekly Messenger* was concerned, Kemble’s ‘style is too purely Italian for us, and wants passion and just feeling; it has nothing of the English cadence and variety or fascination’.²⁰⁸ In contrast to Kemble’s ‘exaggerated’ (‘Italian’) style, the *Court Journal* saw Shaw’s singing as ‘rife of simplicity and appropriateness’.²⁰⁹ When she sang her opening recitative, *The Times* said she sang with ‘truth and firmness, with such perfect tranquillity’; it was ‘simple and touching’.²¹⁰ Parry referred to the ‘profusion of [Shaw’s] most chaste and graceful ornaments’.²¹¹ I consider that this statement, that the ornaments were ‘profuse’ and yet ‘chaste’, means that they were always present but never overstated. As the *Bell’s Weekly Messenger* said, comparing her with Kemble’s brilliancy and scientific powers, Shaw possessed

more nature, grace and more of the rudiments of the English school of music. It is not a singing like Miss Kemble’s foreign both in its structure and pretensions; it retains much of the true English school, it is more unsophisticated and pure, and will harmonise better with our national melody and popular harmony.²¹²

Although this article did not comment on the rich velvety quality of Shaw’s voice, *Bell’s Weekly Messenger* saw the way she used her voice as ‘unsophisticated and pure’, and that as such it fitted in with the English ideal of being ‘artless’ or unpretentious. The critic saw Shaw’s singing as completely different from Kemble’s, which it saw as foreign and had foreign pretensions.

Furthermore, compared to Kemble with her dark hair, Shaw with her fair hair and complexion was visibly English. As Kenney noted, her complexion was fair and the ‘expression of her countenance particularly interesting’.²¹³ This description is borne out by the portrait that the twenty-year-old Mary Postans gave to her fiancé in Naples (see Figure 18). Even after allowing for the luminescence of a portrait painted on ivory and the artist having painted a fashionably white skin, the portrait shows her as very young and pretty, with fair hair and pink cheeks. Visually, Mary Shaw was an English rose. I consider that despite her unusually rich contralto voice plus her ability to sing elaborate divisions and project in the Italian manner, next to Kemble with her dark hair and Italianate manner, Shaw spoke for many of the qualities that the English

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁷ *Evening Chronicle*, 3 October 1842.

²⁰⁸ *Bell’s Weekly Messenger*, 8 October 1842.

²⁰⁹ *Court Journal*, 8 October 1842, 746. Parry also referred to Shaw’s simplicity (see *Morning Post*, 5 October 1842).

²¹⁰ *The Times*, 3 October 1842

²¹¹ *Morning Post*, 3 October 1842; *Illustrated London News*, 8 October 1842, 339.

²¹² *Bell’s Weekly Messenger*, 8 October 1842.

²¹³ *The Times*, 3 October 1842.



Figure 18. Michele Albanesi attrib., Mary Postans aged twenty and dedicated to her fiancé, Alfred Shaw. March 1834. Miniature on ivory.²¹⁵

valued: she was the idealised girl next door with the beautiful voice, who fitted the ideal of the angel in the house and whose English rose looks represented Englishness. For *John Bull*, Shaw was ‘to perfection – an English singer’.²¹⁴

The singing together of Kemble and Shaw can be considered in terms of Homi Bhabha’s Third Space, to show how the Italian and English cultures meet. Kemble may have been English and a member of one of the foremost English acting families, yet her performance was regarded as Italian. Shaw had a rich voice trained in the ‘Italian method’, yet she was visibly English. When the two singers sang together the voices not only balanced each other, but the resultant performance of the two voices sounding together presented a combination of Italianness and Englishness in terms of their sonority, their manner and their looks. Kemble and Shaw’s duet singing epitomised the cultural entanglement of Italian and English singing and performance

²¹⁴ *John Bull*, 8 October 1842.

²¹⁵ ‘Mary Shaw (contralto)’ ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Shaw_\(contralto\)#/media/File:Mary_Shaw_Postans.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Shaw_(contralto)#/media/File:Mary_Shaw_Postans.jpg) (accessed 5 December 2017). Used under CC BY-SA 3.0. Jennie Bisset, who was present when this painting was sold by the Postans family at Chiswick Auctions, on 11 January 2011, has confirmed that this painting is indeed of Mary Shaw. (Jennie Bisset, telephone conversation and email communication to author, 19 January 2018.)

styles, and with the singers' star status their Anglo-Italianness may have become fused with the audience's perceptions of the singers' identities.

The very difference in the quality of Kemble and Shaw's voices and performance style may have helped to shape the performance as a whole, as indicated by the following description of them:

The energy and brilliancy of the one, the soft, full, melodious articulation of the other, and the correctness of her musical incantation, really make up as charming a harmony of excellence as we remember to have heard on an English theatre.²¹⁶

Writing about Shaw's performance, Davison urged Shaw to 'imbibe a little of the energy and vitality of her gifted sister songstress [Kemble]',²¹⁷ while the *Observer* wrote that Shaw's success with the public had the 'natural effect of stimulating her competitor [Kemble] ... to increased exertions'.²¹⁸ And yet as the *Observer* commented, the combination of the two singers together was characterised by 'harmoniousness' and 'tenderness'.²¹⁹

I would argue that when Kemble and Shaw sang together in duet, Kemble provided a dynamism and daring to the resultant ensemble, something that Shaw lacked, while Shaw helped to ensure its musical accuracy and tonal quality, aspects that with Kemble sometimes went awry. Shaw's stillness in performance combined with her luxurious voice meant that she was able to act as a foil to Kemble's intensity. Although she was also known for her simplicity, Shaw must have had a considerable stage presence so that the two singers, although very different, balanced each other as a duo.

In the Covent Garden production, the grand duet, 'Ebbene... a te: ferisci' ('Tis well – my life I tender') became the one duet that Kemble and Shaw sang together. Always a favourite number in the opera, Kemble and Shaw's performance was often encored, and regularly cited as the highlight of the opera. 'Ebbene... a te: ferisci' is structured as a conventional four-movement duet. In the *tempo d'attacco* Semiramide, who has just learned that Arsace is her long-lost son Ninia, challenges him to kill her and avenge his father. Kemble's energy and intensity would have fuelled the angry challenge to Arsace and contrasted with Shaw's rich yet gentle contralto as he refuses to let himself be pushed into a path of vengeance.

The mood changes in the *primo tempo*, 'Giorno d'orrore' ('Dark Day of Horror'), after Arsace tells Semiramide that he will not kill his mother. The two singers mutually acknowledge their pain and sing together in thirds. At this point, Rossi's stage directions say, 'Arsace ... la stringe con

²¹⁶ *Era*, 9 October 1842.

²¹⁷ *Musical World*, 6 October 1842, 323.

²¹⁸ *Observer*, 2 October 1842.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*



Figure 19. John Brandard, lithograph for the music cover of Gioachino Rossini, *Thy Smile is Joy Indeed!* ('Giorno d'orrore'), trans. T.H. Reynoldson (London: Jefferys & Nelson, [1843]).²²⁰

trasporto' ('Arsace ... holds her [Semiramide] rapturously'). Reynoldson's English libretto does not have stage directions here, although John Brandard's lithograph on the music cover of one edition of this aria shows Semiramide and Arsace clearly in each other's arms (see Figure 19). There is much to suggest that Brandard drew the music covers for *Semiramide* from life,²²¹ and even if this was not the case, he might well have talked to others who attended the opera. Brandard's lithograph therefore suggests that Kemble and Shaw did embrace at this point, and in any case, musically Semiramide and Arsace have been embracing throughout the slow movement by singing together in thirds as they follow each other's lines until the final cadenza, which ends when their voices settle on a sixth.

'Ebbene... a te: ferisci', and particularly the slow movement, 'Giorno d'orrore', was a favourite part of the opera and often encored. Although Rossini wrote a cadenza into the autograph at the end of the second verse of the slow movement, this was a place where singers sang their own cadenzas, notably Sontag and Malibran in 1829, and Carlotta and Barbara Marchisio around

²²⁰ The English title is taken from the last two lines of Reynoldson's translation of 'Giorno d'orrore': 'The smile of filial love, / Gives joy indeed'.

²²¹ Cyril W. Beaumont and Sacheverell Sitwell, *The Romantic Ballet in Lithographs of the Time* (London: Faber, 1938), 64.

Ex. 2. Cadenza at the end of allegretto section, ‘Giorno d’orrore’ in Rossini’s autograph and the Ricordi 1825 edition of *Semiramide*.

a) Rossini’s autograph, 1823

Sem
[pie-] tà, pie - tà, pie - - - - - tà.

Ars
[pie-] tà, pie - tà, pie - - - - - tà.

b) Ricordi edition, 1825

Sem
[pie-] tà, pie - tà, tro - - - - - varpie - tà.

Ars
[pie-] tà, pie - tà tro - - - - - var pie-tà.

1860.²²² Thus when Kemble and Shaw sang the slow movement together they fitted into a tradition of how the slow movement and its cadenza were performed.

The cadenza in Rossini’s autograph and the slightly different cadenza found in Ricordi’s 1825 vocal edition, based on Ricordi’s 1823 pirate edition,²²³ both show *Semiramide* singing alone while *Arsace* holds a pedal note below (see Ex. 2). Most of the errors in the 1825 edition are found in the accompaniment. However, the piano part of ‘Ebbene... a te: ferisci’ in the 1825 edition is very close to Rossini’s autograph, even though there are several differences in the vocal line. It is therefore thought that for this number, those compiling the pirate edition may have had access to Rossini’s score, but that the vocal line was the product of aural transmission, the result of a Ricordi employee notating from memory what he had heard in the theatre. Thus, the cadenza

²²² See Gioacchino Rossini, *Ebben a te ferisci, the Celebrated Duett, sung by Madlle. Sontag, and Madame Malibran, in Rossini’s Opera, Semiramide*, arr. William Watts (London: J.B. Cramer, Addison & Beale, 1829); Ignaz Moscheles, *Gems à la Malibran: A Dramatic Fantasia for the Piano Forte in which are Introduced the Favorite Subjects, with the Admired Embellishments & Cadences as Sung by Made. Malibran*, Vol. 1 (London: Mori & Lavenu, 1830), 7; Barbara Marchisio, ‘Cadenze e varianti composte ed eseguite dalle Sorrelle Marchisio’, The Morgan Library and Museum, <http://www.themorgan.org/music/manuscript/115226>, Two-voice ‘Cadenze e varianti’, 3-11 (accessed 23 May 2014).

²²³ Gioacchino Rossini, *Semiramide, grand opera del celebre Rossini; per forte piano e canto ridotta dal Sigr. Luigi Truzzi*, Edizione completa. (Milan: Gio. Ricordi; Florence: Ricordi Grua e Co., 1825).

Ex. 3. Ignaz Moscheles' piano transcription of Malibran's cadenza, 1830 (Ignaz Moscheles, *Gems à la Malibran*, Vol. 1, 'Giorno d'orrore').



in the 1825 Ricordi edition may reflect what Isabella Colbran actually sang at the first Venice performances.²²⁴ This latter cadenza was widely copied in other printed editions of the time, including those by Janet et Cotelle (1823) and Birchall (1824).²²⁵

At the end of the 1820s, Maria Malibran and Henriette Sontag created a furore with their performances of *Semiramide*'s grand duet. Reputedly, there was an intense rivalry between the two singers, although this may have been part of the constructed identity of the singers in order to create an ambience of electricity when they performed.²²⁶ Paris audiences were also divided between those who supported Malibran and those who favoured Sontag.²²⁷ There are two piano transcriptions of Malibran's cadenzas. William Watts wrote a four-hand transcription which specifies that this was how Maria Malibran and Henriette Sontag performed the grand duet.²²⁸ Watts' score shows two completely separate cadenzas, one for each singer to be sung immediately after each other. One of these cadenzas is arpeggiated, the second largely scalar, and both are virtuosic. During these cadenzas, the two singers do not interact with each other.

²²⁴ Philip Gossett, 'Piracy in Venice: The Selling of *Semiramide*', in *Words on Music: Essays in Honor of Andrew Porter on the Occasion of His 75th Birthday*, ed. David Rosen and Claire Brook (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2003), 132; Rossini and Rossi, *Semiramide*, Critical ed., Vol 5, 37-38, 180.

²²⁵ Gioacchino Rossini and Gaetano Rossi, *Semiramide: melodramma tragico in due atti* (Paris: Janet et Cotelle, 1823); Gioacchino Rossini, *Ebben a te ferisci, Duetto, etc* (London: Birchall & Co, 1824); see also Gioacchino Rossini and Gaetano Rossi, *Semiramide: Opera in Three Acts*, ed. Arthur Sullivan and J. Pittman, trans. Charles Lamb Kenney (London; New York: Boosey, [1872]).

²²⁶ J. Q. Davies, *Romantic Anatomies of Performance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 70-71, 78-79.

²²⁷ *The Times*, 14 September 1829.

²²⁸ Gioacchino Rossini, *Ebben a te ferisci*, arr. William Watts.

Another cadenza sung by Malibran is found in Ignaz Moscheles' *Gems à la Malibran*, a collection of piano pieces based on operatic arias sung by Malibran and including her 'Admired Embellishments and Cadences'.²²⁹ Volume 1 includes a transcription of 'Ebbene... a te: ferisci' (see Ex. 3). Although it does not specify who the other singer is, James Davies suggests that this arrangement was modelled on Sontag and Malibran's very first performance together of the duet, which Moscheles accompanied when they sang for Giovanni Battista Velluti's benefit concert at the Argyll Rooms on 9 June 1829.²³⁰ Yet Malibran sang the roles of both Arsace and Semiramide, so the cadenza could equally have been made up from a compilation of cadenzas that Malibran sang in the two roles. Unlike the Rossini, much of this cadenza, like the verse that precedes it, is written in thirds. As such it has the effect of extending the verse, although the cadenza does give soloistic moments for each singer to shine.

In respect of the 1842 production of *Semiramide*, Kemble's notebook does not provide ornamentation for 'Giorno d'orrore', even though it does give ornamentation for the *tempo d'attacco* and the *cabaletta* of 'Ebbene... a te: ferisci'. So we cannot find out from this, what Kemble might have sung as a cadenza at this point. However, Covent Garden's house publishers, Jefferys & Nelson and Cramer, Addison & Beale, published two different editions of 'Giorno d'orrore' as 'sung by Miss Adelaide Kemble and Mrs. Alfred Shaw', with different cadenzas. One of them is the Ricordi 1825 cadenza. The other, in an edition which appears to have been published slightly later,²³¹ is markedly different and carries a note saying 'This is the Cadence sung by Miss Adelaide Kemble and Mrs. Alfred Shaw' (see Ex. 4).²³² As it was published by Covent Garden's house publishers, and in the absence of a cadenza in the notebook, it is reasonable to assume that this may have indeed been what Kemble and Shaw sang.

This cadenza is written almost entirely in thirds and thus seamlessly continues the texture of thirds used in the *primo tempo*. This is very different from the two Rossini cadenzas, which are only sung by Semiramide (Ex. 2); but it is also more consistently written in thirds than the Malibran cadenza which, although largely written in thirds, does have some soloistic elements (Ex. 3). The cadenza is also unusual because of the chromatic inflections in the sequence in the cadenza proper, which are not found in either the Malibran or Rossini cadenzas. Instead the two lines follow each other wherever the voice meanders. No singer predominates and there are no

²²⁹ Moscheles, *Gems à la Malibran*, Vol.1.

²³⁰ James Quail Davies, 'A Musical Souvenir: London in 1829' (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2005), 164-69.

²³¹ The edition was probably published later because the music cover features a Brandard lithograph of the scene which was probably drawn after the production was under way (see Figure 19).

²³² Published as Gioacchino Rossini, *Thy Smile is Joy Indeed! and Dark Day of Horror*, trans. T.H. Reynoldson, Adapted to the English stage by Jules Benedict (London: Jefferys & Nelson, [1843], foot of page 4. (GB-Lbl H.385.f.(15.)).

Ex. 4. The cadenza which may have been used by Adelaide Kemble and Mary Shaw, 1842

The image displays three systems of musical notation for a vocal duet. Each system consists of two staves: the top staff is for Semiramide and the bottom staff is for Arsace. The music is in a key with one sharp (F#) and a common time signature. The lyrics are written below the notes, with some words underlined. The first system shows the lyrics: Semiramide: joy in - deed 'tis joy 'tis; Arsace: joy in - deed 'tis joy 'tis. The second system shows: Semiramide: joy in - - deed! 'tis; Arsace: joy in - - deed! 'tis. The third system shows: Semiramide: sweet 'tis joy 'tis joy 'tis joy in - deed.; Arsace: sweet 'tis joy 'tis joy 'tis joy in - deed.

soloistic elements. Of the above cadenzas, this is the one that shows the closest relationship between the two singers. In this duet, Semiramide and Arsace embrace and become one, just as the two separate voices of Kemble and Shaw, Italian and English, English and Italian, are fused together into a single Anglo-Italian sound. Their voices are not just entangled, but they have become something novel, produced by the cultural intercrossing of their Anglo-Italian singing.²³³

English Stars

Although what was seen as Kemble's Italian singing and performance style became fused with her persona, these elements separated again when it came to championing the position of native born English singers in opposition the foreign ones at Her Majesty's Theatre. The status of high quality English singers was a source of national pride, and in this context, Kemble like the rest of her family was unquestionably and entirely English. The fact that two English stars sang together

²³³ See Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, 'Beyond Comparison: *Histoire Croisée* and the Challenge of Reflexivity', *History and Theory*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (Feb. 2006), 38.

added to the potency of their performance and what they represented as English singers. A particular focus for the reviews therefore was the high standard of the two native cantatrices. As the *Theatrical Journal* put it, Miss Kemble and Mrs. Shaw were

two of the most accomplished singers that have ever yet done honour to the English school. They may fairly compete with the prima donnas of the Italian stage, and as English vocalists, are unquestionably the greatest of our times.²³⁴

It was therefore against this background that Davison, referring to the Englishness of the production and its singers, called the production a ‘great national musical triumph’.²³⁵ Meanwhile the *Theatrical Journal* wrote hyperbole about the two English singers:

Never in our recollection has an opera been so strongly supported on the English Boards, and even the days of Pasta on the legitimate boards of the foreign opera will fade from our memory if we indulge a few nights more in listening to the extraordinary powers of the twin prima donnas of the Garden – Miss Adelaide Kemble and Mrs. Alfred Shaw.²³⁶

This article, with its reference to ‘Pasta on the legitimate boards of the foreign opera’ and the suggestion made a week before, by the same critic, that Kemble and Shaw might ‘fairly compete with the prima donnas of the Italian stage’,²³⁷ makes it clear that the critic of the *Theatrical Journal* saw the English *Semiramide* in terms of and set against Her Majesty’s Theatre, rather than any of the other productions of foreign opera on the English stage. In addition, the idea of Kemble and Shaw making Pasta fade from the memory offered the satisfaction of pay-back for all the English singers, such as Billington and Ayton, who did not have the success they deserved at the King’s Theatre, while its reference to the legitimate boards of the foreign opera implied that if the production and singers of the English *Semiramide* were of such a high standard, then it helped to legitimise Covent Garden as a venue for opera.

For the *Era*, with two such gifted singers, *Semiramide* was a ‘splendid triumph for indigenous talent and managerial enterprise, and ... may be stated to have formed an era for the cultivation of foreign, if not our native, opera on the British stage’,²³⁸ while the *Observer* put the ‘ovation’ given to Mrs. Shaw down to the predisposition of the audience to applaud ‘their country-woman as much for the honour she had done the character of English music in distant lands as for the talent she possesses’.²³⁹

²³⁴ *Theatrical Journal*, 8 October 1842, 323.

²³⁵ *Musical World*, 6 October 1842, 322.

²³⁶ *Theatrical Journal*, 15 October 1842, 331.

²³⁷ *Theatrical Journal*, 8 October 1842, 323.

²³⁸ *Era*, 2 October 1842.

²³⁹ *Observer*, 2 October 1842.

The focus of all these remarks was Kemble and Shaw's Englishness and the high standard and quality of their singing which was unusual in England. For example, the *Observer* judged that the pathos and fervour that Kemble gave to 'Trema il tempio' was 'little known, and less practised, by English vocalists', while it stated that Shaw enunciated 'every line, every word [and] every letter' of 'Eccomi alfine in Babilonia' with 'a grace, a tenderness, a feeling, and a finish, that have no parallel in English art at the present moment'.²⁴⁰ The same critic also claimed that the *stretta* sung by the chorus at the end of Act I, 'Ah! Sconvolta', was 'executed in a manner to draw down the warmest approbation of the audience, and to excite a feeling of triumph in respect to the resources of art in this country'.²⁴¹ Some of the remarks are overstated. With a degree of jingoism, the *Observer* declared that Shaw's recitative and aria also had 'perhaps no equal in the musical capabilities of any other country in the world'.²⁴²

Yet, while the *Observer's* statement was somewhat optimistic, it was important for the critics to show the two singers as standing out against the world. In addition, as Davison pointed out, the English did need to find a belief in themselves if they were to hold their own in the musical world.²⁴³ Behind the reviews praising Kemble and Shaw was the assumption that their success bestowed honour on the English, and on England.

Singing for England

As a duo, Kemble and Shaw pointed to a future of high quality English musicianship. Davison praised the 'awakened spirit and enlarged views of management' to put on an opera such as *Semiramide*, which was 'achievable thanks to the irrepressible talent of the country and the growing taste for music amongst the many'.²⁴⁴ He added:

We have long felt and known that there was plenty of executorial stuff amongst us for the adequate support of an operatic establishment on a grand scale, if that material could be garnered up, and fashioned, and mechanised for the purpose.²⁴⁵

The English, the article continued, were 'now enabled to rebut the sarcasms' about their 'presumed unmusical capability'.²⁴⁶ If there was a regret, it was that 'so much talent and cost [had] not been devoted to some native production, more in keeping with the feelings and domestic

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*

²⁴² *Ibid.*

²⁴³ See *Musical World*, 6 October 1842, 322.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

natures of Englishmen'. The reviewer hoped Kemble might still be permitted to perform in 'at least one production of indigenous growth, ere we are doomed to lose her for ever'.²⁴⁷ Although this panegyric to *Semiramide* which pointed to a future of English Opera was the most fulsome, Davison was by no means alone. The *Era* wrote:

We confess that we could have wished that some work of a native composer had been selected for the joint appearance of our native vocalists; let us hope that the time be not far distant when a purely English work may be given with the affluent means with which this work of a foreign artist has been produced.²⁴⁸

Here the use of 'affluent' meant both the expense of the lavish production and the performances of two high quality star singers. Other critics also wanted Kemble and Shaw to perform in English opera. Of the six reviews which discussed the Englishness of the singers, in varying degrees four took the line that they wished that Kemble and Shaw could appear in native English opera,²⁴⁹ while *John Bull* argued that the problem of Kemble devoting her great talents to the naturalisation of foreign music was that the country was 'already superfetated with it'.²⁵⁰

The metaphor of superfetation – two foetuses conceived at different times developing in the same womb – was particularly pertinent to Italian opera, which had found a home in London at the King's Theatre before it was later introduced in translation on the English stage. However, the London playhouses were in fact being filled not so much by Italian opera as by numerous adaptations of French and German opera, for which this image of two entities taking life and growing to maturity did not fit so closely.

George Hogarth took the harshest view, saying that *Semiramide* would 'never be considered as an acquisition of any value to the English musical stage'. He insisted that Shaw 'return to her own country's music',²⁵¹ while *John Bull* called on Shaw to 'be ... an English singer'.²⁵² Meanwhile, Hogarth reminded both Shaw and its readership that Billington had 'availed herself of her Italian experience in becoming the greatest of *English* vocalists',²⁵³ intimating that for Shaw to do otherwise represented disloyalty to her country.

But Chorley took a more sober view:

The triumphant debut of Mrs. Alfred Shaw ... [was] a second step in the slow and difficult progress of forming ... a native corps of dramatic vocalists, trained in that best

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 6 October 1842, 323.

²⁴⁸ *Era*, 2 October 1842.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*; *Evening Chronicle*, 3 October 1842; *Musical World*, 6 October 1842, 323; *John Bull*, 8 October 1842.

²⁵⁰ *John Bull*, 8 October 1842.

²⁵¹ *Evening Chronicle*, 3 October 1842.

²⁵² *John Bull*, 8 October 1842.

²⁵³ *Evening Chronicle*, 3 October 1842. (Hogarth's emphasis.)

school of vocal training, the Italian: the first being the success of Miss Adelaide Kemble.²⁵⁴

Yet Chorley pointed out that although Clara Novello was ‘in the distance, the prospect [was] dim and uncertain’. Novello was known as a concert singer and as Chorley commented, the ‘transition from the concert-room to the stage [was] so formidable’. In addition and critically, England did not have male singers who could match the level of the women.

In fact, Novello had already sung the role of Semiramide in Padua in 1841 and she would sing the role of Saffo at Drury Lane in April 1843.²⁵⁵ However, she too became unavailable when she married later that same year and retired. Without a company of men of a high standard, a native corps of vocalists as called for by Davison was an unrealistic dream. Furthermore, while Davison wished such an opera company to be seen as on a par with the productions and the singers at Her Majesty’s Theatre, he also wanted it to be linked closely to English opera, a prospect that many of the devotees of Her Majesty’s Theatre might have disparaged.

A month later there was a riposte to those who argued for Kemble and Shaw to perform in English opera, when Ayrton reviewed *The Secret Marriage*, an English version of *Il matrimonio segreto*. This production had three ‘native cantatrices’, Kemble, Shaw and Rainforth.²⁵⁶

Some of our contemporaries have objected to translations and would have the attention of managers confined to English compositions. Now, while we are quite ready to congratulate the success of a native composer, we cannot but feel that an intimate acquaintance with the works of great foreign masters is the best way to create perfection in our school, and to give a proper direction to the taste of our public.²⁵⁷

The article went on to say that Britain had ‘clever native musicians’. Yet referring to Bishop’s adaptations of *The Marriage of Figaro* and *Il barbiere*, Ayrton said that ‘the production of complete operas such as *Norma* and *Semiramide* may well be a reproach’ to him.²⁵⁸ Although the adaptations referred to in the article had been heavily altered, they both dated from over twenty years before and had been adapted to what Bishop thought English audiences could accept. Since then, English audiences had become used to foreign operas and a new principle of fidelity was being developed. Therefore, when Bishop made an arrangement of *Don Giovanni* in 1833, he was scrupulously faithful to Mozart’s music and had more of it than any of the other London

²⁵⁴ *Athenaeum*, 8 October 1842, 876.

²⁵⁵ See Rosemary Hughes and Fiona M. Palmer, ‘Novello family’, *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online* (Oxford University Press, 2013), §3, <https://0-doi-org.catalogue.libraries.london.ac.uk/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.20145> (accessed 10 January 2019); *Morning Post*, 1 April 1843.

²⁵⁶ *The Secret Marriage* opened on 1 November 1842 with Kemble as Carolina, Rainforth as Elisetta and Shaw as Fidalma. There were seven performances.

²⁵⁷ *Examiner*, 12 November 1842.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

productions of the time, including at the King's Theatre.²⁵⁹ In addition, all the 'clever native musicians' mentioned in the article were from a previous generation of composers and ignored the Irishman, Michael Balfe, who had had a series of successful and well-composed operas in the 1830s.

The remarks by the critics must be seen in the light of the belief that English music and musicians needed both nurturing and encouragement, a view which Davison took upon himself to promote. Protecting the interests of English music was pursued with increasing militancy by the *Society for British Musicians*. In the world of opera, there had been several attempts to set up an English opera house, starting with Samuel Arnold, Snr, in 1794, although these had mixed fortunes, partly because of financial insecurity on the part of the impresarios and the variable quality of the operas. In 1841, just a year before, Balfe had taken over running the English Opera House at the Lyceum Theatre, launching his management of the theatre with his own opera, *Këölanthé*.

Kemble was missed after her retirement. Her penultimate performance on 22 December 1842 was as Semiramide. On her final night, Kemble sang the role with which she had made her name in both London and North Italy: Norma. The *Illustrated London News* and the *Athenaeum* both published articles to celebrate her career, and to mark her passing.

After a long interregnum of poverty, the English stage ... [was] once more becoming affluent in song. Since the days of Mara and Billington 'few and far between' were the 'visits' of those whose merits rose beyond mediocrity.²⁶⁰

The article in the *Illustrated London News*, elements of which read almost like an obituary, focused on Kemble's performance in *Semiramide* and the duet, 'Giorno d'orrore'. This number, it pointed out, marked the moment of 'crisis' when the 'fatal and criminal love of Babylon's Queen breaks in upon her first the first time'.²⁶¹ It was a 'charming' duet which allowed Kemble and Shaw's voices to mingle in 'sweetness long drawn out', but its character was not 'strictly in keeping with the feelings of the situation'.²⁶² The *Illustrated London News* regretted the departure of Kemble, for it wished 'to hear the three first female vocalists of the day [Kemble, Rainforth and Shaw] together in our national opera'.²⁶³

Although not overtly stated, the article in the *Illustrated London News* implied that that the mixed sweetness of 'Giorno d'orrore' spoke not just about events on stage, but also for the moment when the reality of Kemble's passing sank in for the audience, for the 'feeling of the situation' was one

²⁵⁹ Fuhrmann, *Foreign Opera*, 173.

²⁶⁰ *Illustrated London News*, 24 December 1842, 525.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*

²⁶² *Ibid.*

²⁶³ *Ibid.*

of loss, both for a mesmeric star and a singer of a high standard as well as the loss of potential for opera on England's national stage. During the 1842 season, Kemble, Shaw and Rainforth had sung together in *The Secret Marriage*. Yet the sad truth was that they would never perform together again.

For Chorley, writing in the *Athenaeum*, 'the retirement of Miss Kemble [called] for a few words of respect as well as of farewell'.²⁶⁴ As well as carrying the good wishes of thousands whom she had delighted, Kemble's departure was also 'followed by the regrets of those who look upon the past history and future prospects of Music in England, and who see in her departure a loss hardly to be replaced'. Kemble had performed in a wide range of operas during her twelve months on the English stage and had 'habituated our play-goers, not merely to admit and enjoy the expression of passion in music ... but to require of the artist impassioned action as well as musical feeling', adding that 'before her appearance, with the solitary exception of "Artaxeres", no recitative opera had ever succeeded on the English stage'.²⁶⁵

As Kemble's singing of recitative was generally regarded as weak, this last statement probably indicates that Chorley was not referring to Kemble's own performance of recitative, but instead that he thought it was her influence with Covent Garden's managers and Benedict as musical director, that was responsible for sung recitative to be included in the operas in which she appeared. Chorley continued:

Judged even by the standard of Pasta, Malibran, Schroeder, Grisi, Miss Kemble must maintain her own high place, whether as a singer or as an actress; but measured against her English predecessors she stands alone and supreme.²⁶⁶

Shaw with her beautiful voice and Kemble with her powerful acting became a focus for ideas about English singing and English music. The fact of having two native prima donnas of a high standard had presented a vision of a glorious, if unrealistic, future for English music with English stars. But while Kemble wanted to 'naturalise the Italian lyrical drama', many of the critics wanted singers of this calibre to perform in English rather than Italian opera.

²⁶⁴ *Athenaeum*, 24 December 1842, 1115.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

7 Postlude: After Kemble

Kemble sang her last operatic performance on 23 December 1842; she retired because of her marriage to Edward Sartoris in Glasgow on 1 August 1842.¹ Although the marriage had been reported in the newspapers at the time, it was not widely announced until after Kemble had left the stage. By the end of the run of *Semiramide*, she was pregnant with her first child, who was expected for the following July.²

Within a year and a half Shaw too had retired and the Covent Garden Theatre would be dark. After Kemble's retirement, *Semiramide* continued to be performed at Covent Garden in January 1843, with Elizabeth Rainforth in the title role. Giulia Grisi also reprised the role of Semiramide at Her Majesty's Theatre in April 1843. However, without Kemble in the title role, the performances were not successful.

Shaw

Shaw's next role after *Semiramide* was as Artaxerxes, singing opposite Rainforth as Mandane. Alfred Bunn had taken over as Covent Garden's manager in December 1842. Possibly because he was influenced by the success of the two Kemble seasons and also had the use of excellent singers including Shaw, Rainforth and Clara Novello, Bunn mounted two operas new to the English stage during the spring of 1843. One was a production of the *Lady of the Lake* (*La donna del lago*) adapted by J.H. Tully,³ which opened at Covent Garden on 31 January 1843; it had Rainforth as Elena and Shaw as Malcolm, and it ran for 43 performances. Then on 1 April 1843, a production of Giovanni Pacini's *Sappho* (*Saffo*) opened at Drury Lane, with Clara Novello in the title role opposite Shaw as Climene. Although Chorley wrote highly of the cast,⁴ the production was not

¹ *Morning Advertiser*, 4 August 1842.

² Adelaide Kemble to Josephine Elisabeth van Thun-Hohenstein-Tetschen, May 1843 (Kemble Papers, Garrick Club).

³ An unstaged version of *La donna del lago* had in fact been performed as part of the Lenten oratorios in 1823 (Fuhrmann, *Foreign Opera*, 128).

⁴ Chorley, *Thirty Years' Musical Recollections*, Vol. 1, 222n.

successful with only five performances. Within a year there would be yet another new adaptation in English of a Rossini opera, this time at the Princess Theatre, when a Mr Allen performed the role of Otello for his benefit on 21 March 1844; he was supported by Eugenia García and a Sig. Burdini as Iago. Allen had been employed as a tenor at Drury Lane, but his voice was too small to fill the house there. However, his voice was suited to the smaller auditorium of the Princess Theatre. *Otello* was well reviewed and the critics were surprised at how well Allen sang.⁵ Thus the fact of having three able singers available, plus the success of Kemble's two seasons, may have encouraged these performances of Italian opera in English.

By the time Shaw appeared in *Saffo* in April 1843, she was beginning to have problems with her voice. Chorley wrote that the quality of her notes was already impaired during the run of *Semiramide*, although no one else mentions this.⁶ Whether losing her voice was due to singing big roles before her voice had matured, overwork or stress is unclear. Shaw was 25 when she débuted on the opera stage and was therefore not especially young. However, the winter and spring of 1842-43 were hard work as well as stressful. During November 1842, both Kemble and Shaw gave four operatic performances a week, giving little time for the voice to recover. Then in March 1843, Shaw lost her seven-month-old baby.⁷ In addition, around that time the mental condition of her husband deteriorated such that he needed to be restrained. He was admitted to a private asylum in Hoxton where he remained until his death in 1847.⁸ Shaw's last opera performances were in Benedict's *The Bride of Venice*, an opera written specially for her. By the time she retired on 30 May 1844, her notes were uneven and the intonation gone. In her prime, Shaw had captivated audiences with her luxurious voice and her absence of pretension. She had also shown how recitative could both have meaning and be musical. When she left the stage, she was not yet 30 years old.

The other factor was that the Theatres Act 1843 removed the licencing laws that protected the major theatres. The minor theatres were no longer limited as to what kind of entertainment they mounted. They used fewer staff and were therefore able to put on spectacular productions much more cheaply than the major theatres, which had been making regular losses. With their special status and protection gone, the financial structure of the major theatres was destabilised. In this difficult situation, Bunn had to withdraw from managing Covent Garden in May 1843. The result

⁵ See for example, *Musical World*, 28 March 1844; *Morning Post*, 22 March 1844; *Morning Chronicle*, 22 March 1844.

⁶ Chorley, *Thirty Years' Musical Recollections*, Vol. 1, 222n.

⁷ Alfred Thomas Shaw, jnr., died 23 March 1843.

⁸ Frederic Holmes Postans, 'The Postans Family and Some Members of it' (Unpublished memoir, 1950), 124. These events are confirmed by Alfred Shaw's death certificate dated 23 November 1847, which says that Shaw had been ill for five years.

was that the theatre became dark until it reopened in 1847 under the auspices of the Royal Italian Opera (RIO), a company committed to mounting opera in Italian rather than English. The theatre opened with a prestigious production of *Semiramide* which helped to confirm Marietta Alboni's career and starred Grisi and Tamburini, who until then had been based at Her Majesty's Theatre. Yet although the opening of the RIO was a glittering event, the real spectacle was not so much the performance of *Semiramide* but the newly rebuilt interior of the auditorium, with its increased number of boxes for the affluent and fewer seats for those with modest incomes. Thus, while the RIO provided a second venue for Italian opera, it did not further the outreach of foreign opera in the English language or for the less well off.

Rainforth

Ten days after Kemble's retirement, on 3 January 1843, Elizabeth Rainforth took over the role of *Semiramide* with five more performances. *Semiramide* was now given the same prominence on the playbill as the pantomime *Harlequin King John* and the chorus had been further reduced.⁹ Three additional cuts had been made to the libretto,¹⁰ although it is unclear whether these changes were made after Rainforth took over the role in January 1843, during the course of the autumn run when Kemble had still been performing, or whether they were made for reasons of economy once Charles Kemble realised he was in financial difficulties.

Before singing in *Semiramide*, Rainforth had studied with Domenico Crivelli, a well-respected teacher in London and author of the *Art of Singing*, which was based on bel canto principles.¹¹ She had made her stage debut in 1836 singing Mandane in *Artaxerxes* at St James's Theatre, and had slowly worked her way up, singing in comic operas, burlettas and afterpieces. Her biggest role to date was as Adalgisa in *Norma*, singing opposite Kemble. Reviews of the time spoke favourably about Rainforth's performance and said that she had performed better than before. However, compared to the column inches given to Kemble's debut, many critics only gave Rainforth a brief mention;¹² these shorter notices may be in part explained because, unlike Kemble, Rainforth was already known to the London stage.

⁹ See '*Semiramide* – Covent Garden Playbill, 3 January 1843', GB-Lam, McCann Collection, Accession No. 2004.1606. (Facsimile at <http://keimages.ram.ac.uk/emuweb/php5/media.php?irn=4199> (accessed 20 June, 2017).)

¹⁰ Thomas H. Reynoldson and Gaetano Rossi, *Semiramide: A Grand Opera, in two Acts*, trans. T.H. Reynoldson (London: Jeffreys & Nelson, 1843). Further cuts to the libretto are shown in Appendix II.

¹¹ D. Crivelli, *Progressive Exercises, in the Art of Singing: to which are added Twelve Solfeggios* (London: J.B. Cramer, Addison & Beale, 1840).

¹² See for example, *Morning Post*, 3 November 1841.

In singing the role of Semiramide, Rainforth had the disadvantage of following immediately after a favourite star. In addition, Rainforth had a light voice¹³ and none of her previous roles had demanded the large voice, flexibility or prominence of Semiramide. She was therefore compared negatively with Kemble: George Hogarth wrote that Kemble's admirers were 'not slow to pronounce it boldness, if not absolute presumption' that she had been replaced by 'a less brilliant celebrity'.¹⁴

Hogarth described how when Rainforth first appeared on stage, she was 'evidently timid, and weighted down by a sense of the comparison she felt conscious would be instituted'. Even though she was greeted by 'warm and prolonged applause, ... Her first efforts were [therefore] feeble, and fell from her ineffectively'.¹⁵ However during the course of the first act 'her spirit overpowered her fears', and long before the end of the act she 'made the audience her own'.¹⁶

Reviews were divided. On the one hand, Charles Lamb Kenney, Hogarth and the *Theatrical Journal* all gave good reviews to Rainforth's performance, Kenney and *Theatrical Journal* underlining how much Rainforth had improved from her previous performances.¹⁷ Hogarth wrote that it was a 'decided triumph', adding:

There is a chasteness and a finish in the style of this young lady, a justness of taste, and a delicacy of expression, which irresistibly win upon her auditors, and which while delighting their senses, seldom fail also to satisfy their judgement.¹⁸

However, while other critics, including Parry, Chorley and the *Era* generally commended the 'refinement' and 'great sweetness' of Rainforth's singing,¹⁹ they also agreed that she lacked the 'physical requisites' for the part.²⁰ Both her singing and general performance were simply not forceful enough. The *Era* wrote that 'in music which does not call for the vast energy and high dramatic declamation' she would always afford 'satisfaction and pleasure', but singing 'on the most exalted pinnacle of lyrical tragedy' would not add to her reputation. The *Era* declared that Semiramide's 'unhallowed impulses, and eastern dignity, and tragic *abandon*' were unfit for Rainforth's 'bird-like voice, [and] gentle manner'.²¹

¹³ See *Morning Post*, 4 January 1843.

¹⁴ *Morning Chronicle*, 4 January 1843.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *The Times*, 6 January 1843; *Morning Chronicle*, 4 January 1843; *Theatrical Journal*, 7 January 1843.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Morning Post*, 4 January 1843; *Athenaeum*, 7 January 1843, 21; *Era*, 8 January 1843.

²⁰ *Athenaeum*, 7 January 1843, 21.

²¹ *Era*, 8 January 1843 (writer's emphasis).

Eight years before Annette Finklohr had had the same problem when she had appeared as Semiramide at the King's Theatre in 1835. Although she was 'lady-like and prepossessing in her appearance', with a beautiful soprano voice and perfect intonation, the critic of the *Morning Advertiser* wrote that 'she desiderates that brilliancy of style, and that expressive and powerful vocalization to which we have been accustomed in this part from [Pasta and Grisi]'.²² Similarly, the *Kentish Independent* writing about Rainforth's performance judged that, rather than refined singing, the part of Semiramide required 'fire and spirit'. Referring to Laure Cinti-Damoreau, a soprano famed for the purity of her light voice and stylish ornamentation, the same critic commented that she would

fail in *Semiramide*, simply because her finished, yet light style, is so very different to the feeling to be imparted to the music, which requires breadth of passion and strongly marked character.²³

Although Cinti-Damoreau was known for her Rossinian singing, she lacked emotional and dramatic power.²⁴ In like fashion, even though Rainforth had a sweet voice, Parry, Chorley and the *Era* all thought that the latter – and by extension Fincklohr – did not manage to convey the brilliance and full-blooded drama of the Assyrian Queen: these singers did not have the right voice type and performance style for the part.

The other problem was that Rainforth's performance was thought to copy Kemble. Even Kenney, who gave Rainforth a good review, admitted that her gestures imitated Kemble's and that she was 'not free from stiffness and constraint'.²⁵ Despite this Kenney said that Rainforth's was a different conception from Kemble's.²⁶ By contrast, the *Era* talked about Rainforth reproducing Kemble's 'gross departures from good taste, ... [her] exaggerated action, and the stooping form'. Parry had also commented on Kemble's 'injudicious ornaments'.

Rainforth's 'departures from good taste' were undoubtedly musical departures,²⁷ while in copying the acting, Rainforth reproduced the way Kemble had cowered in front of the ghost and Assur. Rainforth had replicated the gestures rather than let the action flow naturally from the person inside. Although some of Rainforth's imitation probably came from her insecurity in a new part, there had been a tradition of learning both musical ornamentation and gestural action from those

²² *Morning Advertiser*, 29 April 1839.

²³ *Kentish Independent*, 7 January 1843.

²⁴ H. Robinson Philip, 'Cinti-Damoreau [née Montalant], Laure', *Grove Music Online* (Oxford University Press, 2001), <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-5000009959> (accessed 1 January 2019).

²⁵ *The Times*, 6 January 1843.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Morning Post*, 4 January 1843; R.H. Horne, 'Madame Pasta and Miss Adelaide Kemble; with Notes on Malibran, Schroeder and Grisi', *The Monthly Magazine*, December 1842, 634.

who came before. Kemble had been criticised for not imitating Grisi's performance as Norma enough, but Rainforth was criticised for 'wanting originality'.²⁸

Rainforth's problems were not just that she followed immediately after a favourite singer, nor that she lacked confidence, nor even that she did not have the kudos and experience of training and performing on the continent. Rainforth, with her light voice, was running into new ideas about the differentiation of multiple voice types, as well as a taste for bigger voices to sing over larger nineteenth-century orchestral accompaniment, such as found in Rossini's rich scoring for *Semiramide*. Singing had now become the expression of passion and laying one's feelings bare; the static poses had given way to natural acting. As the century progressed, there was an increasing separation between the warm sound of the lyric soprano on the one hand and the sonority of the dramatic soprano with its emphasis on power rather than prettiness; and with heavier roles now requiring declamatory singing, voices were becoming darker.²⁹ Adelaide Kemble was able to combine her powerful voice with natural acting and lay bare the intensity of emotion. Rainforth, with her bird-like voice and delicate features, could not provide the same passionate performances.

Her Majesty's Theatre

In 1842 and early 1843, the music publishers were active, selling sheet music related to *Semiramide* 'as sung by Adelaide Kemble and Mrs. Alfred Shaw', in addition to new compositions and reprints from the 1820s and 1830s. As a result and despite the failure of Rainforth in the title role, several months later in April, 'the ears of everybody [were] still ringing with "*Giorno d'orrore*", with "*La Sforza prima*", [and] with the *stretto* at the end of the first act'.³⁰

The success of the Covent Garden production should have invigorated interest in *Semiramide*. The opera was put on again at Her Majesty's Theatre, opening on 20 April in an extra night not included in the subscription.³¹ The decision to mount the production may have been an attempt to benefit from the new-found interest in the opera or to curb competition from Covent Garden. However, judging from the determined advertising campaign on the part of the theatre, it is clear that the programming decision to put on *Semiramide* was not just due to its being part of Her Majesty's regular repertoire. The production was particularly heavily puffed and danced by

²⁸ *Era*, 8 January 1843.

²⁹ See Rutherford, *The Prima Donna*, 218.

³⁰ *The Times*, 21 April 1843.

³¹ See *Morning Chronicle*, 18 April 1843.

Fanny Elssler was announced for the opening night.³² Parry even gave a review of the dress rehearsal.³³ Her Majesty's Theatre pitched its publicity around the fact that it had a company of the finest singers, saying: 'It is beyond a doubt that the opera has never before had such a "cast" in this, or in any other country. ... The lovers of the lyrical drama will have a treat, rarely or never afforded them'.³⁴ Giulia Grisi took the title role, as she had done before in 1837 and 1841. It was a role that she knew well: at Her Majesty's Theatre, Grisi's *Semiramide* was regarded as 'majestic and commanding';³⁵ while in Paris Castil-Blaze described her as a 'superb, brilliant and strong Semiramis'.³⁶

As Kenney reported, the audience on the first night was packed:

Tremendous was the rush to the iron gate, and loud was the disappointment of those who were unable to obtain an entrance ... Boxes – good, bad, and indifferent, were occupied, and the galleries presented a fine inclined plane formed of human countenances. A happy man must a manager be who can gaze on such a prospect.³⁷

The performance had been sold on the quality of the company of singers. Certainly, both Ayrton and Parry praised the 'immensely strong cast'³⁸ and the fact that Her Majesty's had 'the only soprano left in all of Europe capable of performing the part of *Semiramide* as the votaries of the Italian Opera demand that it should be sung and enacted'.³⁹

But although Grisi's singing was 'as beautiful, and her action as full of energy and passion as ever',⁴⁰ the company of singers was not what it had been cracked up to be. At the first performance there were notices craving indulgence for Lablache who would sing the part of Oroë despite being indisposed. But when Giubilei sang the part instead of him, the audience hissed.⁴¹

Marietta Brambilla sang the part of Arsace. She had not sung on the stage of Her Majesty's Theatre for some years,⁴² and her performance in *Semiramide* might have been considered a

³² See for example, *Era*, 16 April, 1843.

³³ *Morning Post*, 20 April 1843.

³⁴ *Era*, 16 April 1843.

³⁵ *Morning Post*, 7 June 1837.

³⁶ 'Superbe, brillante et solide Sémiramis'; Castil-Blaze, *L'Opéra-italien de 1548 à 1856* (Paris: Castil-Blaze, 1856), 425.

³⁷ *The Times*, 21 April 1843.

³⁸ *Examiner*, 22 April 1843; see also *Morning Post*, 21 April 1843.

³⁹ *Morning Post*, 21 April 1843.

⁴⁰ *Evening Chronicle*, 21 April 1843.

⁴¹ *The Times*, 21 April 1843.

⁴² The newspapers were united in saying that Brambilla had last sung at Her Majesty's Theatre either four or five years before (see for example *Morning Post*, 21 April 1843); however, I cannot find any evidence that she had sung there since 1835, when she sang the part of Arsace opposite Finklohr's *Semiramide* (*Morning Advertiser*, 29 April 1835).

début. But even though Kenney reported that she sang ‘beautifully, running over her notes with the utmost rapidity and lightness’ and was recognised as an ‘accomplished artist’ who would ‘probably revive many operas that for want of a *contralto* have laid on the shelf’, her performance was eclipsed by Mary Shaw, for Brambilla did not have the ‘sustained equal voice which so completely established Mrs. Alfred Shaw’.⁴³ Ayrton agreed that Brambilla’s voice bore no comparison to Shaw’s and was ‘neither so clear nor so even’.⁴⁴ However, Henry Smart of the *Atlas*, which judged voices against Pisoni’s, thought Brambilla unrivalled.⁴⁵ At the height of her career, Brambilla had a beautiful voice as well as good looks and ‘magnificent dark eyes,’ but by the end of her career, her voice was feeble and very uneven. Although it would be another five years before she retired, it may be that what Ayrton and Kenney noticed was that Brambilla’s voice was already beginning to lose its quality.⁴⁶

Not everyone had been able to get tickets on the first night; they had to return on another night. Accordingly, after a delay caused by Fornasari being ill, the first two performances were a week apart: the first night on 20 April, and the next on 29 April. But despite the heavy advertising, the crowded audience on the first night and the superior cast, judging from the fact that it would be six weeks before the opera was performed again, the theatre must have been far from full for the performance on 29 April. By the third night (6 June), the spectators were ‘*distrain*’ and no longer especially interested in either the performance or the magnificent cast. Instead the *dilettanti* talked about the immediate arrival of Rossini in Paris and Gilbert Duprez in London, while the ‘fair members of the aristocracy’ discussed ‘several fancy balls’ currently being prepared.⁴⁷ All told, *Semiramide* had a total of five performances at Her Majesty’s Theatre that season, spread out over five months. It was a poor reception for Grisi in one of her signature roles, and particularly when compared with Kemble.

The advertising and superior cast had not succeeded to fill the theatre. Admittedly, there had been illness in the cast. Yet, despite having one of the best sopranos in all Europe, this production failed to catch the public imagination. Instead, the opera that did catch the public’s attention was the 1842 Covent Garden production, a crossover version that introduced elements of popular theatre.

⁴³ *The Times*, 21 April 1843.

⁴⁴ *Examiner*, 22 April 1843.

⁴⁵ *Atlas*, 22 April 1843.

⁴⁶ See Chorley, *Thirty Years’ Musical Recollections*, Vol.1, 94.

⁴⁷ *Morning Post*, 7 June 1843. In the event, Duprez did not come to London in 1843 (see *Ibid.*, 12 June 1843).

Kemble, with her powerful performances, had eclipsed both Rainforth and Grisi. Neither singer could compete with Kemble's exaggerated wildness, intense acting and originality. Even after her retirement, Kemble continued to exert an influence on the operatic stage.

Shaw with her masterful simplicity had been able to act as a foil to Kemble's forcefulness. The loss of the two singers in quick succession emphasised the fragility of the vision for a corps of native singers.

8 Conclusion

The adaptation of *Semiramide*, an Italian opera, as an English language spectacle, with elements of melodrama and pantomime, resulted from the intersection of several cultures. Cultural transfer theory examines how items from one culture are imported into another, while *histoire croisée* shows how the items become interwoven with the product in the host community. From this, something novel arises. Werner and Zimmermann examine the interactions and interweaving that take place between two cultures. What we know about the hybridity of *Semiramide* is mostly derived from the English side of these encounters. This means that we are not able to analyse easily the Italian, French and Persian sides of these relationships.

This chapter examines the 1842 *Semiramide* as an example of multi-cultural encounter. It will test how well Werner and Zimmermann's theories about *histoire croisée* can be applied and whether Bhabha's analysis of ambivalence can add to what we already know about it.

***Semiramide* as Cultural Encounter**

The Covent Garden *Semiramide* encompassed elements from Italian opera, melodrama, transformations from pantomime, Persian sets and featured English singers who had trained and worked on the continent. The 1842 *Semiramide* therefore resulted from a series of cultural encounters.

By performing an English opera in the English language, the values of the Italianate Her Majesty's Theatre, were pitted against the practices of the English language stage at Covent Garden. At Her Majesty's Theatre, where the opera had been regularly performed during the previous 18 years, the purity of the opera was deemed to be retained by performing it in the Italian language by foreign, and preferably Italian, singers and with sung recitative. As Covent Garden did not have a licence to perform opera in Italian, the 1842 *Semiramide* was performed in English with English singers. Yet unusually for English adaptations of foreign opera, *Semiramide* was performed with sung recitative, rather than being replaced by spoken dialogue. Surprisingly, the recitative was well received, thanks in large measure to Shaw's musicianship and interpretive

skill. Its favourable reception also indicated a greater acceptance of the genre on the English language stage.

The meeting between the Italians and English could also be seen through the singers. The high standard of Kemble and Shaw's performances were compared with the Italian singers at Her Majesty's Theatre. The practices of Italian and English theatre therefore met in the 1842 *Semiramide*, and indeed with respect to the recitative they overlapped.

In turning *Semiramide* into an operatic spectacle which incorporated elements of melodrama and pantomime, the traditions of Italian opera, where the quality of the singing was paramount, combined with popular culture. Operatic spectacle, complete with special effects, had been made popular by the arrival during the 1820s and 1830s of French grand opera in the patent and minor theatres ; many of the scenic and lighting innovations that made these productions possible had also been brought over from the continent. Similarly, melodrama and pantomime, although well-established in England, also had their roots in France and Italy. In *Semiramide*, the traditions of popular theatre, with the heightened emotion of melodrama, transformations and special effects, plus the spectacle of French grand opera, intersected with the practices of Her Majesty's Theatre, where the focus was on the high quality of the singing.

As the Grieve family constructed the magnificent sets based on Persepolis, they brought what they knew of the East onto the Covent Garden stage. Yet, although the costumes and scenery were praised for their antiquarian accuracy, the Babylon presented on the Covent Garden stage was a hybrid version which grafted Persian features onto European sets. This was probably in part due to the fact that the Grieves had never witnessed anything similar to the Persepolitan ruins, and did not have the necessary schemata in their minds to process the new images and to reproduce them faithfully. Thus, there was a meeting of East and West in the Grieves' psyche before they could even build the sets. For Londoners, who believed in their accuracy, there was also a perceived meeting between East and West, as well as between the present and the ancient past.

Nevertheless, even though they were inaccurate, the sets gave audiences a glimpse of something beyond the confines of Britain. For the audiences, what was understood as the educational value of the Persepolitan sets balanced the populism of the spectacle.

The 1842 *Semiramide* was formed at the intersection of all these cultural meetings. And yet, the opera became an entity that no longer belonged to any of its original cultures. The production, with its combination of spectacle, the heightened emotion of melodrama, English singers and Kemble's compelling acting, meant that it was not the Italian opera of Her Majesty's Theatre.

Symbolising Culture

What these cultural encounters signified depended on how it was interpreted in the minds of the recipients and their cultural experience. The meaning of the interaction of a particular encounter is determined not by particular cultural signs, such as the spoken word or pointing finger, but on the context and framework of that sign. As Charles Sanders Peirce has shown, there is a separation between the signifier, or sign, and what it represents, the object.¹ The signifier is interpreted in the mind of the interpretants, who in the case of *Semiramide* included the audience, the critics and the people reading this thesis. While some signs have a clear likeness (a picture) or an obvious association (smoke indicating fire) to the signified, other signs are symbolic and are interpreted either arbitrarily or by convention.

Thus, a process of translation takes place in the space between the signifier and the object, whereby the sign is interpreted in the minds of the audience, by reference to its cultural experience and history. How the audience interpreted the events on stage or Kemble's voice (the sign), was dependent on their previous social and operatic experience and taste. Yet, meaning is also socially constructed: although the individual audience members may have had conflicting interests and identities and interpreted signs differently, as social beings within a cultural system the members will have interacted with each other, shared their experiences and negotiated with each other. The spectators, for example, may therefore have discussed with each other exactly what they thought Kemble saw when she looked out vacantly during 'Se la vita'. While they may not have agreed, they will have probably had a similar even if different set of experiences. As a result, they will have come to a group of common conclusions, out of which norms developed.

The separation between the sign and the object is much greater when interpreted by cultures which have little in common, for example between Persia and England, than when the cultures are similar, such as Italy and England. Although there was a dislocation between the Italian and English musicians, they came from a common European culture. In addition, many Italian musicians had been living in London for the previous century and therefore had a grasp of the English language and culture, while many of the aristocracy and some English musicians, notably the singers, spoke Italian. Despite the differences on both sides, they might therefore have had an idea of what the other expected and been able to find common ground. They could therefore negotiate with each other accordingly. Persia, on the other hand was culturally much more distant from Britain. Although it was on the overland route to India, there was little exchange between the two countries; they had different religions and the languages are only distantly related. As the

¹ Christopher Hookway, 'Peirce, Charles Sanders (1839-1914)', *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Taylor and Francis, 1998), §8, <https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/biographical/peirce-charles-sanders-1839-1914/v-1/sections/signs-and-interpretations> (accessed 3 January 2019).

countries had very dissimilar cultural traditions; it was easy for both sides to misinterpret the signs of the other because they tried to relate events and practices to their own rather than the other's culture.

In the mind of London's fashionable society, foreign musicians, and particularly Italian singers, represented cultivation and the best musicians money could buy; for the Italians, London paid well and was a stepping stone to Paris, the operatic capital of Europe. The relationship between the fashionable and the Italian musicians could therefore be said to be symbiotic.

However, for the English musician, the foreign musician represented people who were overpaid; took work away from the 'hard-working' English musician; and performed foreign music which eclipsed English music and English opera. Meanwhile, many critics including Davison and Hogarth saw foreign musicians as performing frivolous and superficial Italian music, rather than the serious music by the German masters they promoted.

Yet despite this, the high standard of Kemble and Shaw was seen by many theatre critics as a symbol of the aspiration that the English would have singers who were equal to their Italian and continental counterparts who performed at Her Majesty's Theatre and who were increasingly given starring roles in English Opera. As such Kemble and Shaw represented a future for English musicians as equals on the British, if not the world stage.

Melodrama was both popular and known for its distinctive ability to 'fix the attention, rouse the passions and hold the faculties in anxious and impatient suspense'.² Incorporating melodrama into *Semiramide* made it enjoyable and disorienting, while the spectacle gave the enchantment of scenic illusion combined with technical innovation. Like other plays with an exotic locale, for London audiences the Persian sets probably represented the opportunity to experience places they had only read about.

The Power Structure in *Semiramide*

Although Werner and Zimmermann write about societies in cooperative relationships and with equal power relationships, Bhabha writes about post-colonial cultures which are characterised by an unequal power relationship between the dominant coloniser and the colonised.³ Peter Burke writes that cultures with unequal power relationships hybridise differently from those where the structure is more equal. In equal societies there can be a form of 'code-switching' between

² Thomas Holcroft, quoted by Matthew S. Buckley, 'The Formation of Melodrama', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre, 1737-1832*, ed. Julia Swindells and David Francis Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 464.

³ Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, 'Beyond Comparison: *Histoire Croisée* and the Challenge of Reflexivity', *History and Theory*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (February 2006), 30-50; Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004).

different languages and practices at the borders. Bilingual people will not only shift languages in different situations, but they are also generally unable to make a complete segregation between their two languages: the languages therefore contaminate each other. Similarly, in Brazil, most of the adherents of the Candomblé religion regard themselves as good Catholics; their beliefs and practices switch effortlessly between the two belief-systems. By contrast, in unequal societies, the weaker society has to appear to adapt outwardly. For example, during the first generations of slavery in the Americas, slaves outwardly conformed to the Christianity of their masters while retaining their traditional beliefs.⁴

With respect to *Semiramide*, a series of power relationships were exerted in respect of the supremacy of opera as sung by Italians, the commercial importance of including spectacle in theatre productions, and the imperial implications of using Persian sets.

Italian opera sung by Italian singers in the Italian language was perceived as authentic. This view set a norm for how Italian opera should be performed, and it was reinforced by being advocated by the elite audiences of Her Majesty's Theatre. As a result, Italian opera sung in Italian by Italian singers was given a cultural hegemony. Little consideration was given to the question of whether this was the most appropriate way of reaching audiences used to English or French opera.

Given the preference on the part of the elite for Italian and other foreign musicians, English musicians felt powerless to improve their lot. They saw the Italians as overpaid people who took away their jobs. From the point of view of the English musician, the unequal relationship between the English and foreign musicians can be likened to Bhabha's foreign colonisers who dominated the indigenous people. However, like many colonisers through the centuries, the Italians and the fashionable they were probably only partially aware of the resentment on the part of English musicians.

The press reaction to Kemble and Shaw as English singers must be seen in the context of the way that Italian singers were lionised by the fashionable and also dominated London performances. With the combination of their English nationality and their Italian musical training and experience, Kemble and Shaw were placed outside the binary opposition of Italian versus English musicians and their supporters.

Semiramide also exerted power through its spectacle. Magnificent productions of melodrama, pantomime and opera were very popular at the time and had the power to draw audiences. Theatre managers were therefore willing to pay high fees to the best designers and theatrical technicians, who in turn were keen to adopt the latest techniques in lighting and set design developed on the continent. Although they were expensive to mount, it was hoped that the spectacles would

⁴ Peter Burke, *Cultural Hybridity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 67-70.

generate enough income to cover costs. The theatre managers, audiences and continental designers were in a symbiotic relationship, although ultimately it was the preferences of the spectators that shaped programming decisions.

Spectacles based on Middle Eastern subjects and compiled with ‘antiquarian accuracy’ had a particular appeal. The Grieve sets, which had ostensibly been researched, and were based on Persepolis, fed this audience demand. The acquisition of the Persian images that the Grieves used for their sets may have involved a set of power relations. Some of the artists who drew or painted these pictures were diplomats and therefore indirectly involved in reinforcing India’s frontiers from the Persian side. Yet for them painting the magnificent ruins at Persepolis, a place travellers had been visiting since the middle ages, was probably little different from someone nowadays taking holiday snaps on their iPhone.

Without knowing more about the circumstances in which Sir Gore Ouseley acquired the limestone relief shown in Figure 10c., it is open to question whether he used his dominant position either as a Westerner or as ambassador to Persia to underpay for the relief; or alternatively whether removing it counted as an act of vandalism, or even simple theft. There was little appreciation at the beginning of the nineteenth century of the significant amount of information lost to posterity when archaeological remains were removed from a site without recording how they were placed in relation to other nearby artefacts. In addition, Magnus Thorkell Bernhardsson has shown that Iraqis in the early nineteenth-century had little sense of proprietorship over Mesopotamian antiquities or of their value, in part because Islam condemned the ancient past before the time of Mohammed as an age of ignorance. The archaeologists were able to obtain artefacts from the Iraqis very cheaply; this may also have applied to Persia as well. While these transactions did give the European a privileged position, they resulted in part from a disjunct between the European and Iraqi religious value systems, rather than because of their colonial position.⁵

Since the publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* and attempts to protect the intellectual property of indigenous people,⁶ the use of oriental and exotic images, such as for the Persepolitan sets, has been criticised for its cultural appropriation and imperialism. Although the Grieve sets fitted the audience’s enthusiasm for Middle Eastern locations, viewed from a twenty-first century perspective, a number of arguments have been put forward against using images of exotic locales: using such images involved cultural appropriation; circulating these images might provide a mix

⁵ Magnus Thorkell Bernhardsson, *Reclaiming a Plundered Past: Archaeology and Nation Building in Modern Iraq* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 30-31.

⁶ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, Reprinted with a new preface (London: Penguin, 2003); see Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (London: Penguin, 2007), 128.

of fragmentary or distorted images of the country and create defamatory stereotypes; it might exoticise the indigenous people and make them seen as extraordinary; or otherwise do harm, for example, by limiting employment possibilities. In addition, it is argued that ultimately a nation should have control of its own culture and how it is disseminated. Yet I would argue that none of these reasons apply to *Semiramide*. All the images referred to in Chapter 5 had been available for all to see in published books for the previous 20 years. However, the Grieves' sets were hybridised versions of Persia and a European locale such as Italy. The fact that the representations were inaccurate was due to the Grieves having to rely on the pictures of others and having never seen the original they did not have the schemata in their brain which allowed them to process the images they saw or portray them accurately. They were therefore erroneous for the same reasons that Albrecht Dürer's *The Rhinoceros* does not actually look like a rhinoceros.⁷ Persia had a very different culture from Britain, and items might have been understood differently. Yet none of the images used by the Grieves related to people, who might have been identifiable; instead they were of architecture, making the city look impressive as befitted, so they thought, the Queen of Babylon. Given that the Grieves may have based their sets on images that had been available for the previous 20 years, and that it is somewhat unlikely that any Persians actually saw the production, I would argue that it is doubtful that the sets did any harm.

***Semiramide* within the Third Space**

There is much overlap between cultural transfer, *histoire croisée* and Bhabha's examination of ambivalence within cultures and when cultures meet each other. Cultural transfer examines how cultural products move across borders and cultural spaces and how products from diverse cultures intersect with each other. Bhabha talks about the hybridisation that occurs when cultures come into contact with each other. Werner and Zimmermann come up with a similar notion; however, they stress that the people and products that become intertwined in any intercrossing may change, and that novel and original elements are produced out of this intercrossing which go beyond the constitutive entities of this convergence, even though the original elements are assumed to be still identifiable.⁸

In *Semiramide*, the English heritage and Italian training of the singers were united with Italian opera, just as the perceived accuracy of the Persian sets gave an authority to the melodrama, transformations and special effects. The various genres also intersected and became entangled with each other, so that Kemble's intense acting combined with melodrama as she encountered the ghost and conveyed the invisible spectres that she saw during 'Se la vita'. Melodrama also

⁷ Albrecht Dürer, *The Rhinoceros*, 1515, woodcut, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.

⁸ Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, 'Beyond Comparison: *Histoire Croisée* and the Challenge of Reflexivity', *History and Theory*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (February 2006), 38.

combined with the Persian sets and special effects to show the destruction of Nino's tomb, so that the result hinted at the wider British culture of John Martin and Francis Danby's cataclysmic paintings. The transformations, pantomime, Persian sets and Italian music were brought together to show the city of Babylon appearing on the Covent Garden stage. Meanwhile, ranks of Babylonian soldiers surrounding the dying Semiramide sang the final chorus, part of it written by the German Julius Benedict.

So, did *Semiramide* represent something novel? Semiramide became a colourful operatic drama where the visual and musical elements integrated with each other and were of equal importance. In this opera, the grandeur of the sets, the scenic changes and elements of melodrama, reinforced by Kemble's acting, overwhelmed the senses. Furthermore, the magnificent scenery which had been researched plus the many costumes representing Semiramide's subject peoples created what audiences perceived as a 'living lecture' on the empire of the historical Semiramis. By incorporating elements of melodrama and pantomime into the production, meant that *Semiramide* had ceased to be the Italian opera of Her Majesty's Theatre. The opera had changed and become new.

Yet, London had many operatic spectacles, even if not for Italian opera. *La Muette de Portici* was one such operatic spectacle which incorporated melodrama. Plays with tableaux and transformations were also commonplace. While *Semiramide*'s spectacle was particularly splendid, what was completely unknown was to have two English singers of such a high standard performing together in an Italian opera on the English stage, as was having an English singer Shaw who made recitative expressive for an English audience. The fact of having a pair of English prima donnas plus the eloquent recitative crossed cultural boundaries of what was expected from English singers on the English language stage as opposed to Her Majesty's Theatre.

As opera singers, Kemble and Shaw were hybrid subjects: although English, they had both studied with Italian masters and had worked in the Italian opera houses. It was precisely because of their hybrid identities that the press could compare these singers with the prima donnas of the Italian Opera House.

Although Shaw was praised for her beautiful contralto voice, no doubt developed during her singing lessons in both England and Italy, it was the meaning that she gave to recitative that made her stand out from other English singers. As the *Standard* put it, she 'seems to be the only English singer who thoroughly understands the use to be made of recitative'.⁹ 'Understands' is the key word here: living and working alongside those using recitative during her six years in Italy, Shaw

⁹ *Standard*, 3 October 1842.

had developed the schemata in her brain which allowed her to comprehend the purpose of recitative and assimilate it into her performance practice, so that she could ‘harmonise’ the music and the dialogue in a way that contrasted with other English singers, including Kemble. As Shaw undertook the process of understanding, she had become to a certain degree changed, confirming Werner and Zimmermann’s view that people involved in the crossing process of cultural exchange ‘do not necessarily remain ... identical in form’.¹⁰

Kemble was a different kind of hybrid performer. Given her dark hair and the sonority of her voice, she looked and sounded Italian, while her exaggerated ornaments were un-English. Yet, it was the combination of these ‘Italian’ features together with her intense acting abilities, derived from her English parentage, which made her performances unique. Kemble’s poor diction was also considered Italian. If Jameson is to be believed, this was something she had learned in Italy, for having learned the roles in Italy, she had difficulty performing them in English.

Cultural transfer also tries to identify the agents who enable new cultural products, in this case *Semiramide*, to be brought to another culture. In the 1820s and 30s, far less Italian opera was performed on the English language stages than French. Reasons for this included the fact that the King’s Theatre was deemed to have a monopoly of Italian opera, and only a few singers, including Maria Dickons, Mary Ann Paton and Maria Malibran, had the technical ability to sing the roles. However, both Kemble and Shaw did have the requisite skill. Furthermore, the power of Kemble’s performances drew audiences to the operas in which she performed: of the six roles she sang during her 14 months on the Covent Garden stage, four had either not been performed before on the English language stage or had been a failure. So, did Kemble act as an agent to bring Italian opera to new audiences?

Certainly, Kemble may well have used her influence with Vestris and her father as to the choice of operas to be mounted at Covent Garden and in which she performed. Yet one of the tests for an agent must surely relate to whether audiences continue to attend the opera after the agent is gone. After Kemble’s retirement, and inspired by the Covent Garden *Semiramide*, in May 1843, audiences flocked to hear Grisi sing one of her signature roles, the part of Semiramide. Yet although Grisi was a highly sought-after singer with a beautiful voice and the evening’s entertainment included dancing by Fanny Elssler, Grisi and the production could not hold the audiences, at least in the short term. It was not until the opening of the Royal Italian Opera, in April 1847, that she was able to regain her following as Semiramide. However, even if Kemble was the main attraction in the operas in which she performed, she may also have helped to habituate new audiences to opera with lengthy ensembles and sung recitative and packaged in a

¹⁰ Werner and Zimmermann, ‘Beyond Comparison’, 38.

way that made them exciting. To that extent, Kemble probably did act as an agent to bring Italian opera to new audiences.

Can we add more to what we know of *Semiramide*, by examining the areas of ambivalence related to the opera? Contradictions within a society arise from the fact that people within it have opposing perceptions and dimensions. There are therefore areas of disagreement and contradiction within that culture. These can be identified in the strategies used to negotiate those inconsistencies. While some of these differences were expressed overtly, other divergences, such as those relating to the qualities of the singers, Kemble and Shaw, were overstated.

An example is found in the press reviews of the 1842 *Semiramide*. Given that Italian opera, sung in Italian, was embraced by the fashionable and deemed to be authentic, the public were ambivalent about the hybridity of Italian opera performed in the English language. Depending on whom the critics were addressing, their support for the performance of Italian opera in English meant potentially backing an unpopular view. Such a position either needed to be hidden or stated very strongly. As a result, the press engaged in a series of hyperboles: they overstated their case about Italian opera and the high standard of Kemble and Shaw.

Exaggerated praise about the singers pointed, for example, to England having the singers to support an operatic establishment on a grand scale;¹¹ that Shaw's grace, tenderness and feeling had no parallel in English art;¹² and that listening to the twin prima donnas would make Pasta fade from the memory.¹³ Although exaggerated, these statements also contained an element of truth, for many of the critics saw Kemble and Shaw as substantially better performers than their fellow English singers. Bhabha talks about the stereotype as a strategy used by the coloniser to dominate the colonised. In London, the use of hyperboles became an 'inverted' stereotype to promote the position of the less-dominant English singers – and by extension, English singers generally – vis-à-vis the Italians. They represented a hope that English music would be taken seriously. However, while Bhabha's stereotypes were used by the coloniser himself, these inflated statements were used by some of the press on behalf of Kemble and Shaw. The fact that they used hyperboles in this way indicated how strongly they felt it necessary to promote the English singer and English music in the face of Italian domination; the fact that the exaggerations needed to be repeated revealed that the aspirations were distant in terms of achievement.

Similarly, the way in which the press projected rival identities onto Kemble and Shaw, as Italian and English, underlined how much they wanted the singers to be considered both like the Italians,

¹¹ *Musical World*, 6 October 1842.

¹² *Observer*, 2 October 1842.

¹³ *Theatrical Journal*, 15 October 1842, 331.

and to have equal status in opposition to the Italians. Giving the singers these contradictory identities, which may have been heard as Kemble and Shaw sang together during the grand duet, was only possible because of the singers' hybrid nature which combined their English parentage with their Italian trained voices, high standard and Kemble's Italianate looks, because of her dark hair. The way the press tried to give Kemble and Shaw the aura of Italian singers fitted in with the press campaigns conducted by Davison and others to promote English musicians and to object to the Italians being overpaid. In projecting Italianness onto the singers, the press found another way to pursue the same campaign. The emphasis given by the press to the singers' Anglo-Italianness, paralleled Bhabha's description of the manner in which the colonial subject split his identity in order to occupy two incompatible positions. It also relates to his ideas about the colonial subject's use of mimicry, whereby the colonial subject makes a point of being like but different from the colonial Other. Re-examining the perceived Anglo-Italianness of Kemble and Shaw as part of a press campaign to promote the validity of English musicians in the face of the Italian Other puts a new gloss on the discussion about Kemble being Italian and Shaw being English. Yet this projection would not have been possible, if Kemble with her dark hair, intensity and exaggerated ornamentation, had not been like an Italian. Similarly, Shaw with her fair complexion, beautiful voice together the simplicity of her performance style, represented an ideal for English singing. I would argue that Kemble and Shaw did actually appear Italian and English, but that some of the press used this fact to pursue their agendas to promote English musicians.

Yet while the some of the press made exaggerated statements about Kemble and Shaw and stressed their Anglo-Italian identity, Hogarth and Taylor wrote disagreeing with the whole project of mounting opera in translation.¹⁴ Italian music, Hogarth argued, should not be united with English speech.¹⁵ Other critics insisted that Kemble and Shaw should be singing in English opera, as opposed to Italian. The most extreme version of this attitude was that Shaw was told that not doing so represented disloyalty to her country.¹⁶ It may be that the press did wish Kemble and Shaw to sing in English opera, and operas with poor translations can both be difficult to sing and result in libretti with awkward lyrics. Yet the insistent disavowal of operas in translation by Hogarth and Taylor, plus calls by other members of the press for Kemble and Shaw to give greater support to English opera, signalled both a resistance to *Semiramide* as an Anglo-Italian production and a desire to keep Italian and English opera completely separate. It reflects statements by Bhabha, Werner and Zimmermann, that resistance to hybridisation, in this case the

¹⁴ *Bell's Weekly Messenger* also disagreed with putting on English language adaptations of opera. However, judging from similarities in the reviews, the article in *Bell's Weekly Messenger* may have been written by Hogarth.

¹⁵ *Evening Chronicle*, 3 October 1842.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

1842 *Semiramide*, can be an indicator that it is actually taking place, for otherwise there is no point in objecting to it.

The discourse about the English singers as compared with the Italians is revealed in the press reception to the 1842 *Semiramide*. Thus, an examination of the ambivalence relating to *Semiramide* highlights the press's strategies to promote the English singers as equal and different to the Italians and their need to promote the validity of the English singers. This discourse might have come out of a study of the cultural transfer, or though *histoire croisée* with its emphasis on the tangled cultural relationships. Yet the deliberate search for areas of ambivalence focuses attention on tensions within the society, in this case on the tensions between English and Italian musicians, and adds to the picture, not so much of *Semiramide* itself, but to attitudes of operatic adaptations.

The splendour of the 1842 *Semiramide*, in which serious and popular genres were integrated, confirms Werner and Zimmermann's theory that out of hybridity novel elements are produced. Even more unusual, was the fact of having two English prima donnas plus Shaw's meaningful recitative. The probability that while in Italy Shaw adopted schemata in her mind which enabled her to perform recitative as she did also confirms Werner and Zimmermann's hypothesis that people entwined in the process of hybridity also change. Yet the analysis of the ambivalence relating to the production adds further layers to what we know through *histoire croisée* about the production and the press response to the singers.

Bhabha's analysis of ambivalence is usually linked to unequal societies, and the relationship between the Italian and English performers was similarly unequal. Yet the above analysis was made possible not primarily because of the inequality between the Italian and English musicians, even though that existed, but rather because there was a discourse in the press. There was no similar discourse that could be unpicked about the British and Persian relationships vis-à-vis the sets, even though the relationship between Britain and Persia in 1842 was also unequal. This implies that the critical issue when using Bhabha's analysis of ambivalence is not so much whether there is an unequal power relationship, but whether some sort of discourse is available for examination which reflects the tensions and cultural differences, either within the community, or between it and another culture. Further inspection of ambivalence within the discourses of other equal societies should be analysed in order to test out whether this deduction is correct, but that is beyond the scope of this study.

Naturalising *Semiramide*: The Value of Hybridity

According to Anna Jameson, Kemble wished to 'naturalize the Italian lyrical drama'. As we saw in Chapter 4, during the nineteenth century the word 'naturalize' had additional meanings which

were applied to productions, scores and singers. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives one of the meanings of the transitive verb to ‘naturalize’ as to ‘make a thing ... common, or fitting; to put (something foreign) on a level with what is native’, which was used between 1586 and 1911. However, another now obsolete meaning, although used up to 1860, is to ‘convert (something) *to* or *into* something else by custom or habit’.¹⁷ As we also saw in Chapter 4, the altered *Lucia di Lammermoor* was ‘fitted’ to meet French expectations at the Théâtre de la Renaissance; this would be covered by the first meaning. I suggest that it may be this use of the word that Jameson had in mind. This meaning includes the idea of the object being ‘fitting’ – appropriate and suitable – for the particular situation and it may have been ‘fitted’ in order for this to be so. With this definition, the object can be naturalised even though it remains foreign. Therefore, ‘naturalization’ depends not on sales or popularity, but rather how well it fits the local circumstances and is seen as on a level with what is regarded as native by the host community.

‘Fitting’ does not normally mean major alterations. Rather, the object is adjusted so that it is properly adapted for the particular circumstances. In respect of the 1842 *Semiramide*, it was generally the outer elements – the spectacle, including the melodramatic cataclysm, the transformations and the streamlined plot – that were altered or hybridised. By contrast, the music was little changed apart from the omission of Assur’s mad scene and the altered chorus at the end, which in any case had already been changed for Paris by Rossini. Thus, the score in 1842 was similar to that performed in Italy and was not simplified for the English; it also included sung recitative.

It was not just the opera that needed to be modified for ‘naturalization’. The process of becoming familiar also takes place incrementally in the mind of the recipients, as they accommodate new music and fit it into the schemata in their brain. This is a gradual process and does not happen all at once. An example is Shaw’s recitative which was widely praised by the critics, and their remarks imply that the practice was accepted by the audiences. Nationally, recitative was far from naturalised, and other adaptations, such as the production of *La donna del lago* the following January, used spoken dialogue instead. Yet when Shaw sang, she made it musical and gave it ‘truth’. In so doing, and within the production of *Semiramide*, Shaw helped to create a context in which recitative was accepted; indeed, the audience may even have found it ‘fitting’. Thus, Shaw gave the auditors a new experience of recitative, and may have helped to take the practice one very small step forward on the way to it becoming naturalised more widely. On a larger scale,

¹⁷ The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the second meaning of ‘naturalize, v.’ as: ‘More generally: to make a thing native, common, or fitting; to put (something foreign) on a level with what is native.’ The sixth meaning includes ‘to convert (something) *to* or *into* something else by custom or habit; to make (a thing) natural or familiar *to* a person’. (‘naturalize, v.’, OED Online, December 2018 (Oxford University Press), <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/125343?redirectedFrom=naturalize> (accessed 8 December 2018). (OED’s emphasis.)

although *Semiramide*'s music had not been simplified for English audiences, by giving audiences an entertaining and spirited performance, the production provided a framework in which they could become accustomed to the difficult music.

From this we may infer that naturalisation does not just depend on the reception of the cultural product, but that the context also plays a part: for it is to this setting that the cultural product must be fitted. Given that people need schemata in their brain to process new concepts and experiences, if they can identify with the particular context or milieu, it may even help to provide them with the framework to understand the unfamiliar, such as the musical language of *Semiramide*, from which they can begin to develop new connections.

Like 'naturalization', hybridisation is the ongoing process of changing and adapting as cultures meet and intersect with each other. The hybrid is created as each culture borrows from and adapts to the other, just as creative artists on the borderlines between cultures adapt and incorporate ideas and techniques from others into their work. Yet because it is positioned between two cultures and has elements of both, the hybrid product reflects both the recipient and original cultures, and is more likely to be understood by both. It can therefore act as a bridge. Thus for audiences attending the adapted *Semiramide*, the opera was not completely new; they could use the opera as a stepping stone to understand and explore similar works, including the original opera. In this way the hybrid product can aid the process of naturalisation. Similarly, because the hybrid product presents old works differently, it allows the original product to be seen afresh. It thus allowed those familiar with *Semiramide* from Her Majesty's Theatre to see Rossini's opera in new ways, to reinterpret the familiar and gain new insights.

There is a fear that the hybrid product will contaminate or even eclipse the original. This may well have lain behind Hogarth and Taylor's objections to the adaptation of *Semiramide*. Cultures have a tendency to change and hybridise as they come into contact with each other. It therefore requires people who are committed to preserving the purity of works in the canon, such as those at Her Majesty's Theatre or Michael Costa at the Royal Italian Opera. Yet even this is an impossible task, for the mere fact of changing the *mise en scène* or having a different combination of singers will change the nature of the opera and create different operatic events.

The 1842 *Semiramide*, with its spectacle and Kemble's powerful acting, did briefly eclipse Rainforth and Grisi's performances. Yet the 1842 *Semiramide* was a single production which ultimately neither replaced nor contaminated more 'authentic' performances. The best hybrid objects – those of high-quality and artistic integrity, such as *Semiramide* – must be seen as complementary cultural products which are equal but different.

Because hybridisation is the result of a continuous cycle, there are many products at different stages of hybridisation, and the elements from two or more cultures may be combined in different

proportions. Not all of these hybrid products function well or will survive, nor do all hybrid art forms have artistic merit. Yet the best art, whether hybrid or not, reflects the concerns and feelings of the culture(s) in which it was created. It says something that cannot be expressed in any other fashion and speaks to the heart of the recipient community.

The hybrid *Semiramide* resulted from the confluence in London of Italian opera, audience demand for spectacles with special effects, the popularity of Middle Eastern plots, pantomime and melodrama, plus the singers with the ability to carry the opera. Moreover, the opera must be judged for its artistic merit. Although it drew on populist elements, the detail with which the Grieve sets and the visual spectacle were constructed was marked by high production standards and an attention to detail. Yet although the spectacle was magnificent, it was the performances of Kemble and Shaw that carried the production. Despite her intonation problems and unorthodox ornaments, Kemble's energy and idiosyncratic acting were exciting and enabled her to bring the eponymous queen to life, reinterpreting the role so that *Semiramide* became both powerful and vulnerable. Shaw's beautiful voice and perfect musicianship was often praised, yet it was her still calm presence that enabled her to act as a foil for Kemble. The singers therefore worked well together. Together with their high standard, they personified English hopes for their music and musicianship to be taken seriously.

Just as good quality art reflects the culture in which it is born and speaks to and for the culture, the hybrid *Semiramide* offered colour and magnificence; it reflected London's enthusiasm for 'knowledge' of the ancient past and the geographically distant; it gave a new opera to the English language stage; and it spoke to the nation, offering a vision that Britain might be taken seriously for its music. The 1842 *Semiramide* had the perfect mix of Italian opera, 'erudite sets', elements of popular culture and compelling stars, so that it made a satisfying evening and allowed Rossini's opera to be seen in new ways.

APPENDIX I

Cast lists of the early performances

Cast of *Semiramide* at the La Fenice, Venice, 3 February 1823

Semiramide	Isabella Colbran
Arsace	Rosa Mariani
Assur	Filippo Galli
Idreno	John Sinclair
Oroe	Luciano Mariani
Azema	Matilde Spagna
Mitrane	Gaetano Rambaldi
L'ombra di Nino	Natale Ciolli

Cast of *Semiramide* at the King's Theatre, London, 15 July 1824

Semiramis	Giuditta Pasta
Arsaces	Elizabeth Vestris
Assur	Remorini
Idrenus	Manuel García
Azema	Mme Graziani
Oroe	Benetti
Mithranes	Gaetano Crivelli
Ombra	Atkins

Cast of *Semiramide* at the Théâtre Italien, Paris, 8 December 1825

Semiramis	Joséphine Mainvielle-Fodor
Arsace	Adelaide Schiasseti
Assur	Filippo Galli
Idreno	Marco Bordogni
Azema	Mlle Amigo
Oroe	Nicolas-Prosper Levasseur
Mithranes	Mr Giovanola
L'Ombre de Ninus	Mr. Profetti

APPENDIX II

Cuts made to the English *Semiramide*

Cuts are taken from the relevant libretti and from the preface to the critical edition of *Semiramide*.¹ Bar numbers referring to the critical edition give an approximate indication of how the cuts would fit to the music. Repeats and interjections were often omitted from libretti for reasons of space and these have not been noted.

Cuts to the 1843 libretto that are additional to the 1842 one are shown in bold.

No.		English <i>Semiramide</i> 1842 with Kemble	English <i>Semiramide</i> 1843 with Rainforth	Venice 1823	Paris 1825	King's Theatre, 1837, with Grisi
1	Introduzione					
	'Sì gran nume' (Oroe)					
	'Belo ci celebri' (chorus)					
	Terzetto: 'Là dal Gange' (Idreno, Oroe, Assur)					
	Coro: 'Di plausi qual clamor'					
	Chorus: 'Ah! ti vediamo ancor!'		Cut [NB Stage directions for Semiramide's procession remain, which thus introduces the Quartetto]			
	Quartetto: (Semiramide, Idreno, Oroe, Assur)					
	'Di tanti Regi'					
	'Regini all'ara'					
	'Trema il tempo'					

¹ As outlined in Philip Gossett, 'Prefazione' to *Semiramide: melo-dramma tragico in due atti. Edizione critica delle opere di Gioachino Rossini*, by Gioachino Rossini and Gaetano Rossi, ed. Philip Gossett and Alberto Zedda (Pesaro: Fondazione Rossini, 2001), XLV-XLVI.

No.	English <i>Semiramide</i> 1842 with Kemble	English <i>Semiramide</i> 1843 with Rainforth	Venice 1823	Paris 1825	King's Theatre 1837 with Grisi
	Recit : 'Oh tu de Magi'				Oroe's entry 'Gli Dei son giusti' (Scena IV) bars 68- probably 82 cut
2	Scena & Cavatina Arsace: 'Eccomi alfine in Babilonia'	Recit shortened ('Quale nel seno ... che può voler?' omitted, bars 64-77)	Recit shortened ('Quale nel seno ... che può voler?' omitted, bars 64-77)	Cut early on in the run and not reinstated	Recit shortened ('Qual silenzi ... amore' omitted, bars 56-92)
	'Ah quel giorno ognor ramento'			Cut early on in the run and not reinstated	Cut
	Recit: 'Ministri, al gran Pontefice'				
3	Duetto Arsace & Assur: 'È dunque vero?' 'Bella imago'				
	Recit: 'Oh me felice!'	Cut	Cut		Part of recit cut ('Assur! Ei solo il mio rival ... potresto tu amarlo?', bars 32-36)
4	Aria Idreno: 'Ah dov'è il cimento?'	Cut	Cut	Not performed	Cut
	Recit: 'Se non avesse, e meritasse Arsace'	Cut	Cut		Cut
5	Chorus of ladies: 'Serena i vaghi rai'				'Quest'ombre ... amore e voluttà' cut, bars 40-57
	Cavatina Semiramide: 'Bel raggio'				End of chorus cut ('Qui tutto spirerà ... amore e voluttà', approx. bars 54-57)
	Recit: 'Né viene ancor'	Cut	Cut	Cut almost immediately	Cut from 'Placati al fin vi siete! ... affetti miei', 39-108)

No.		English <i>Semiramide</i> 1842 with Kemble	English <i>Semiramide</i> 1843 with Rainforth	Venice 1823	Paris 1825	King's Theatre, 1837, with Grisi
6	Duettino Semiramide & Arsarce: 'Serbami ognor sì fido il cor'	Cut	Cut	Cut almost immediately, probably because of vocal difficulties.		Cut
	Recit: 'Oroe, dal tempio nella Reggia?'	Cut	Cut	Cut almost immediately	Cut	
7	Finale Act 1: Coro: 'Ergi omai'	Chorus of Magi cut.	Both Choruses of the People <u>and</u> of the Magi cut completely (bars 1/46–179)			
	Recit: 'I vostri voti'					
	Quintetto: (Semiramide, Arsace, Idreno, Oroe & Assur) 'Giuri ognuno'					
	'L'alto Eroe'					
	'Qual mesto gemito'					
	'D'un Semidio'	Idreno's entry given to Assur	Idreno's entry given to Assur			Some interjections omitted.
	Stretta: 'Ah sconvolta'					
	ACT II					
	Recit: 'Alla Reggia d'intorno'	Cut	Cut			
	Recit: 'Assur, i cenni miei'	Extract cut: 'S'egli vivesse ... uccise il genitore' (bars 97–107)	Extract cut: 'S'egli vivesse ... uccise il genitore' (bars 97–107)			
8	Duet: Semiramde & Assur: 'Se la vita ancor t'è cara'			Audiences expected it, but often cut because the singers were tired		
	'Quella, ricordati'					
	'Ma implacabile'	'Ma Arsace' omitted from libretto, bar 182, though it was probably left in as it gives a perfect cadence.	'Ma Arsace' omitted from libretto, bar 182, though it was probably left in as it gives a perfect cadence.			

No.		English <i>Semiramide</i> 1842 with Kemble	English <i>Semiramide</i> 1843 with Rainforth
9	Chorus: ‘In questo augusto’		
	Scena: ‘Ebben compiassi omai’	Cuts bars 145–165	Cuts bars 145–165
	Aria Arsace: ‘In sì barbara sciagura’	Cut ‘Su ti scuoti ... perdonarle ancor vorrà’ (bars 218 (or 216–) and some reordering of ‘Al gran cimento’ at the end	Aria cut completely
	Recit: ‘Calmati, Principessa’	Cut	Cut
10	Aria Idreno: ‘La speranza più soave’	Cut	Cut
	Recit: ‘No, non ti lascio’	Cut until ‘Deh! Arsace ...’ (bar 1/bar 15–60)	Cut until ‘Deh! Arsace ...’ (bar 1 or 15–60)
11	Duet: Semiramide & Arsace: ‘Ebbene... a te: ferisci’ ‘Giorno d’orrore’ ‘Madre addio!’		
12	Scena Assur: ‘Il dì già cade’	Cut	Cut
	Chorus: ‘Ah ! la sorte ci tradi’	Cut	Cut
	Aria Assur: ‘Deh! Ti ferma’	Cut	Cut
	Recit: ‘O nero accesso’	Cut	Cut
13	Finale Act II: Chorus: ‘Un traditor, con empio ardir’		
	Recit: ‘Qual densa notte’		
	Già il perfido discende		
	Semiramide’s prayer: Al mio pregar		
	Dei! qual sospiro		

Venice 1823	Paris 1825	King’s Theatre, 1837, with Grisi
Sometimes cut		
	‘Calmati ... In tal di’ cut, bars 1 or 11–17	
		Phrases cut: ‘Io raccapriccio ... ma piango’ (bars 147-153) and ‘E la tomba’, bar 173
This was cut during the course of the run		

No.		English <i>Semiramide</i> 1842 with Kemble	English <i>Semiramide</i> 1843 with Rainforth	Venice 1823	Paris 1825	King's Theatre, 1837, with Grisi
	Terzetto: 'L'usato ardir'					
	Recit: 'Ninia, ferisci'	End of Scene cut ('Padre mio ... mori!'), bars 309–315, and 'Magi. Guardie ... T'arresta', bars 320–382.).	End of Scene cut ('Padre mio ... mori!'), bars 309–315, and 'Magi. Guardie ... T'arresta', bars 320–382.).			
		Spectacle: Thunder, lightning and town of Babylon and temple of Belus appears.	Spectacle: Thunder, lightning and town of Babylon and temple of Belus appears.			
	Chorus: 'Vieni Arsace!'	Final chorus altered	Final chorus altered			

APPENDIX III

London Performances of *Semiramide* together with Cast Lists

(Cast members are given where known. Alternate cast members in different performances are shown separated by a slash.)

	<u>1824</u>	<u>1825</u>	<u>1827</u>	<u>1828</u>	<u>3 July 1828</u> Benefit for Laporte (2nd Act)	<u>1829</u>	<u>Jan 1830</u>	<u>May-July</u> <u>1830</u>	<u>1831</u>
	King's Theatre	King's Theatre	King's Theatre	King's Theatre	King's Theatre	King's Theatre	King's Theatre	King's Theatre	King's Theatre
Semiramide	Pasta	Pasta	Pasta	Pasta	Pasta	Sontag/ Malibran/ Blasis	Blasis	Meric- Lalande	Lalinde
Arsace	Vestris	Vestris	Brambilla	Schutz	Velluti	Pisaroni	Petralia	Malibran	Beck
Assur	Remorini		Galli	Zuchelli		Zuchelli	Curioni	Lablache	Curioni
Idreno	García	García	Curioni/ Giovanola	Curioni		Bordogni	Santini	Curioni	Santini
Azema	Graziani		Willis						
Oroe	Benetti		Giubilei	Porto		Levasseur		Ambrogi	
Mitrane			Deville	Deville					
Ombra	Atkins		D'Angelli						
Conductor	Rossini	Ayrton							

	<u>1831</u> Benefit for Messrs. Chambers & Son	<u>1832</u>	<u>1833</u> (Compressed into one Act)	<u>1834</u>	<u>1835</u>	<u>1837</u>	<u>1841</u>	<u>1842</u>	<u>1843</u>
	King's Theatre	King's Theatre	King's Theatre	King's Theatre	King's Theatre	King's Theatre	Her Majesty's Theatre	Covent Garden	Her Majesty's Theatre
Semiramide	Pasta	Giuditta Grisi	Pasta	Giulia Grisi	Finklohr	Giulia Grisi	Giulia Grisi	Kemble	Giulia Grisi
Arsace	Castelli	Mariani	Malibrán	Salvi	Brambilla	Albertazzi	Viardot	Shaw	Brambilla
Assur	Curioni	Tamburini	Tamburini	Tamburini	Tamburini	Tamburini	Tamburini	Giubelei	Fornasari
Idreno					Curioni	Ivanoff	Flavio	Travers	Conti
Azema						Castelli		Lee	
Oroe						Di Angron		Leffler	Lablache
Mitrane								Hughes	
Ombra						Di Angeli			
Conductor								Benedict	

	<u>1844</u>	<u>1845</u>	<u>1847</u>	<u>1848</u>	<u>1849</u>	<u>1849</u>	<u>1851</u>	<u>1852</u>	<u>1860</u>
	Her Majesty's Theatre	Her Majesty's Theatre	Covent Garden	Covent Garden	Her Majesty's	Covent Garden	Covent Garden	Her Majesty's Theatre (Puzzi's benefit)	Her Majesty's Theatre
Semiramide	Giulia Grisi	Giulia Grisi	Giulia Grisi	Giulia Grisi	Parodi	Giulia Grisi	Giulia Grisi	De la Grange	Tietjens
Arsace	Favanti	Brambilla	Alboni	Alboni	Alboni	Angri	Angri	Angri	Alboni
Assur	Fornasari	Fornasari	Tamburini	Tamburini	Coletti	Tamburini	Salvatore		Everardi
Idreno	Corelli	Corelli	Lavià	Lavià	Bartolini	Lavia	Luigi Mei		Belart
Azema						Tagliafico			
Oroe	Lablache	Lablache			Lablache				Vialetti
Mitrane									
Ombra									
Conductor			Costa						Arditi

	<u>1862</u>	<u>1865</u>	<u>1866</u>	<u>1870</u>	<u>1871</u>	<u>1874</u>	<u>1875</u>	<u>1875</u>	<u>1876</u>
	Her Majesty's	Her Majesty's	Her Majesty's	Covent Garden Mapleson	Covent Garden Mapleson	Drury Lane	Covent Garden Gye	Drury Lane	Drury Lane
Semiramide	Carlotta Marchisio	Tietjens	Tietjens	Tietjens	Tietjens	Tietiensi	Vilda	Tietjens	Tietiensi
Arsace	Barbara Marchisio	Trebelli-Bettini	Trebelli-Bettini	Trebelli-Bettini	Trebelli-Bettini	Trebelli-Bettini	Scalchi	Trebelli-Bettini	Trebelli-Bettini
Assur		Agnesi	Gassier	Foli	Agnesi	Agnesi	Faure	Rota	Rota
Idreno	Bettini Gassier	Stagno	Stagno	Bettini	Bentham	Rinaldini	Pavani	Rinaldini	Rinaldini
Azema		Marcello	Foli						
Oroe	Laterza			Antonucci	Foli	Campobello	Capponi	Behrens	Behrens
Mitrane									
Ombra		Casaboni						Costa	Costa
Conductor	Arditi	Arditi	Arditi	Bevinani					Bevignani

	<u>1878</u>	<u>1879</u>	<u>1880</u>	<u>1881</u>	<u>1882</u>	<u>1883</u>	<u>1884</u>	<u>1885</u>	<u>1887</u>
	Covent Garden Gye	Covent Garden Gye	Covent Garden Gye	Covent Garden Gye	Covent Garden	Covent Garden	Covent Garden	Covent Garden	Covent Garden
Semiramide	Patti	Patti	Patti	Patti	Patti	Patti	Patti	Patti	De Cepeda
Arsace	Scalchi	Scalchi	Scalchi	Scalchi	Tremelli	Scalchi	Scalchi	Scalchi	Scalchi
Assur	Maurel	Gailhard	Gailhard	Gailhard	Gailhard	Gailhard	De Reszke	Del Puente	Lorrain
Idreno	Pavani	Iginio Corsi	Iginio Corsi	Iginio Corsi	Iginio Corsi	Iginio Corsi	Iginio Corsi	Rinaldini	Corsi
Azema									
Oroe	Capponi	Capponi	Capponi	Silvestri	Dufriche/ Gresse	Monti	Monti	Cherubini	Campello
Mitrane									
Ombra	Raguer		Raguer	Scolara	Scolara	Scolara		De Vaschetti	Ughetti
Conductor	Bevignani	Bevignani	Bevignani	Bevignani	Bevignani	Bevignani	Bevignani	Arditi	

APPENDIX IV

London Theatre Seat Prices in 1842²

	Covent Garden	Theatre Royal Haymarket	English Opera House, Adelphi and Strand	Olympic Theatre	Surrey Theatre, Sadler's Wells, Queen's Theatre & City of London Theatre	Her Majesty's Theatre <u>1839</u>
Private Boxes				£1 1s.6d.		
Dress Boxes	7s.					
Boxes		5s.	4s.	2s.6d.	2s.	
First & Second Circles	5s.					
Pit	3s.	3s.	2s.	1s.0d.	1s.	10s.6d.
Gallery	1s.	2s.	1s.	6d.	6d.	5s.
Upper Gallery		1s.				3s.

Seats mostly bought on subscription – £300 for a box in 1840

² Playbill for *Semiramide*, Covent Garden, 1 October, 1842 Her Majesty's Theatre: Jennifer Hall-Witt, *Fashionable Acts : Opera and Elite Culture in London, 1780-1880* (Durham; Hanover: University of New Hampshire Press; University Press of New England, 2007), 282; *Era*, 11 September and 9 October 1842.

APPENDIX V

Comparison of Covent Garden seat prices by the night in 1842 with those in 1847³

	Covent Garden <u>1842</u>	Covent Garden <u>1847</u>	Covent Garden <u>1848</u>	Covent Garden <u>1849</u>	Her Majesty's Theatre <u>1839</u>
Dress Boxes	7s.	8s.	8s.	8s.	
Amphitheatre stalls		7s.–15s.	5s.	7s.	
1 st Amphitheatre		7s.–8s.			
2 nd Amphitheatre		5s.			
First & Second Circles	5s.				
Pit	3s.	8s.			10s.6d.
Gallery	1s.	3s.	2s.6d.	2s.6d.	5s.
Upper Gallery					3s.

Many seats sold on subscription

Seats mostly bought on subscription
£300 for a box in 1840

³ Covent Garden 1842: Playbill for *Semiramide*, Covent Garden, 1 October, 1842. Her Majesty's Theatre, 1839, and Covent Garden 1847-49: Hall-Witt, *Fashionable Acts*, 282, 286-87.

APPENDIX VI

Omnibuses that could be used to get home after a performance at Covent Garden and Her Majesty's Theatre, 1844, showing last departure time⁴

<u>Destination</u>	<u>Her Majesty's Theatre</u> Pick-up location	<u>Covent Garden</u> Pick-up location
Blackwall	Black Horse, Coventry Street till 11 p.m.	Red Lion, Strand till 12 a.m.
Brentford	Coventry Street till 11.45 p.m.	
Brighton Railway Stn (now London Bridge)		Golden Cross, Charing Cross, to meet down train
Brixton		Ship, Charing Cross till 11 p.m.
Chelsea	Coventry Street till 1 a.m.	
Bethnal Green	Coventry Street till 11p.m.	
Chiswick	Black Horse, Coventry Street till 10.20 p.m.	
Dover Railway Station (now London Bridge)		Golden Cross, Charing Cross, to meet down train
Eastern Counties Railway (now Bishopsgate)	Black Horse, Coventry Street, till 10.30 p.m.	
Fulham	Black Horse Coventry Street till 11p.m.	
Greenwich		Ship, Charing Cross till 12a.m.
Hackney		Cockspur Street till 10p.m.
Hammersmith	Black Horse Coventry Street till 11.45p.m.	
Hornsey Road		Silver Cross, Charing Cross, till 10.15 p.m.
Mile End Gate	Black Horse, Coventry Street till 11.30 p.m.	
North End, Fulham	Black Horse, Coventry Street till 10 p.m.	
Pimlico	Black Horse, Coventry Street till 11p.m.	
St John's Wood, Eyre Arms		Silver Cross, Charing Cross, 10.06p.m.
St John's Wood, Nightingale, Lisson Grove		Silver Cross, Charing Cross, 10.15p.m.
Southampton Railway Station (now Nine Elms)		Golden Cross, Charing Cross , to meet the down trains, last train at 10p.m.

⁴ Edward Mogg, *Mogg's Omnibus Guide, and Metropolitan Carriage Time Table* (London: E. Mogg, 1844), 5-37.

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