

Alexandra Wilson

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# SOMEONE ELSE'S MUSIC

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Opera and the British



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ALEXANDRA WILSON

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# Abbreviations

In footnotes, the following abbreviations are used for commonly referenced periodicals:

<i>DE</i>	<i>Daily Express</i>
<i>DM</i>	<i>Daily Mail</i>
<i>DMir</i>	<i>Daily Mirror</i>
<i>DT</i>	<i>Daily Telegraph</i>
<i>ES</i>	<i>Evening Standard</i>
<i>FT</i>	<i>Financial Times</i>
<i>ILN</i>	<i>Illustrated London News</i>
<i>M&amp;L</i>	<i>Music and Letters</i>
<i>MM</i>	<i>Musical Mirror</i>
<i>MMF</i>	<i>Musical Mirror and Fanfare</i>
<i>MO</i>	<i>Musical Opinion</i>
<i>MT</i>	<i>Musical Times</i>
<i>OVM</i>	<i>Old Vic Magazine</i>
<i>OVSWM</i>	<i>Old Vic and Sadler's Wells Magazine</i>
<i>SE</i>	<i>Sunday Express</i>
<i>ST</i>	<i>Sunday Times</i>
<i>TLS</i>	<i>Times Literary Supplement</i>
<i>VWA</i>	<i>Vic-Wells Association</i>

The following abbreviations are used for archival holdings:

BBC WAC	BBC Written Archives Centre
BUTC	Bristol University Theatre Collection
CPA	Conservative Party Archive, Bodleian Library Special Collections
JLP	John Lewis Partnership Heritage Centre
QMUL	People's Palace Archive, Queen Mary, University of London
RAH	Royal Albert Hall Archive
ROH	Royal Opera House Archive



# 1

## The Elitism Myth

‘People who have learned to enjoy opera are lucky’, the novelist Noel Streatfeild wrote in 1966. ‘They know that to be present at a really great performance of an opera and to appreciate it is a privilege never to be forgotten.’<sup>1</sup> Best remembered nowadays as the author of *Ballet Shoes*, Streatfeild captured countless young imaginations with her books about the arts. Opera, she told her readers, was something special: it contained some of the most wonderful music in the world and nothing was more capable of rousing emotion than the human voice. At the same time, an opera was something ordinary, simply a play told through music, whose tunes—familiar from weddings or listening to a seaside band—were good for whistling in the kitchen or the bath.

Streatfeild realised what anyone who has caught the opera bug realises: that to watch an opera among other people in the darkened auditorium of a theatre or to listen to one with your eyes closed in your own living room is to open a box of delights. The critic Rodney Milnes understood too, though he expressed the point rather differently. For him, listening to an opera was a transformative experience: nobody was, or should be, the same person after watching *The Ring* or *The Makropulos Case*, and even a good performance of *Carmen* should make you look at whoever you were sleeping with through new eyes.<sup>2</sup>

The ultimate multimedia, interdisciplinary art form, opera brings together music, drama, dance, design, and technology in sophisticated and beguiling ways, marshalling vast human and material forces to tell stories about the full range of human predicaments and emotions. Opera deals with subjects that affect and speak to us all: love, desire, illness, death, power, politics, corruption. There is something in it for everyone, though plenty of people believe it is not for them. Some, however, might find their minds changed if they were prepared to explore further. Opera is at once epic in scale and tenderly

<sup>1</sup> Noel Streatfeild, *Enjoying Opera* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1966), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Rodney Milnes, ‘Ever Decreasing Circles’, *Opera*, 22/11 (November 1971), 945–953, 952.

intimate, addressing global concerns while reflecting our own, very personal, situations and sorrows back at us.

Recently, however, opera has come to be associated with privilege of a different sort from that intended by Streatfeild—not privilege in the sense of having an opportunity to do something special but in the sense of having some sort of unfair social advantage. Despite the many different facets of its appeal, its capacity to make us think about the challenges life throws at us, and the sheer pleasure it gives as a musical, theatrical, and social experience, opera has become an object of profound suspicion and is systematically held up as elitist. Not only that, but it has come to be seen as the *most* elitist of the arts. Opera, we are repeatedly told—at least in the United Kingdom—is expensive and exclusive; ergo, the people who enjoy it must be social and intellectual snobs.

In 2017, a correspondent for *The Daily Express* went so far as to write, ‘Ask the man on the Clapham omnibus and it is quite likely he’d rather stick pins in his eyes than attend a performance. The popular image of opera is that it’s for posh people, exorbitantly expensive, often incomprehensible and seems to drag on for ever.’<sup>3</sup> The very word ‘opera’ has become a form of shorthand in the contemporary public imagination for a mishmash of anxieties about money, class, dress, privilege, and social status. These perceptions have become deeply ingrained. Ask the average person on the street why they think opera is elitist and they are likely to respond ‘because it is’.

Things were not always like this. Once upon a time, not so very long ago, opera was accepted as a form of entertainment anyone could enjoy if they were so minded to go and see one. Opera has always had a close relationship with popular culture—film, advertising, and even popular music—and in many respects still does. But latterly, for all its joyous and consoling qualities, its ability to make us laugh and cry, opera has found itself on the wrong side in a wider national conversation about the politics of exclusion.

In this book I explore the ways in which debates surrounding opera have changed in Britain from 1920, when it was comfortably accommodated as a form of entertainment for all, to the early 2020s, when it is routinely portrayed as the preserve of the wealthy, the intelligentsia, and some sort of imagined social clique. By examining how debates around opera, accessibility, class, and money have changed over the last century, I explore why attitudes towards the art form hardened and representations of it became so

<sup>3</sup> Adrian Lee, ‘World of the Opera Elite’, *DE* (6 December 2017), 19.

relentlessly negative. At what point did people start calling opera ‘elitist’ and why? When did opera come to be seen as, for want of a better word, ‘toxic’?

In tandem, however, this book also tells a second, more celebratory, story. The supposed chasm between opera and ‘ordinary life’ has never been as deep as today’s lazy stereotypes would have us believe. Countless surprising and heart-warming stories of ordinary people’s everyday encounters with opera via performances, recordings, radio broadcasts, film soundtracks, television documentaries, participation in amateur productions, and more will be told here. Many of these defy stereotypes. The book is as much about the shopgirl camping out overnight in the queue for gallery tickets as it is about the jewelled duchess in the stalls. We shall meet working-class people for whom opera performances in South London, the East End, and the industrial cities of the north offered respite from challenging lives. We shall meet people who developed a taste for opera after hearing it at Butlin’s, or in an end-of-pier revue, or when on active service overseas. We shall meet opera-singing coalminers and secretaries, and children who devised their own operas for fun. We shall meet people like you, and people like me.

### Operatic elitism in six myths

What do people mean when they call opera elitist? When asked in 1998 what the word meant to him, the then Culture Secretary Chris Smith replied, ‘If elitism means excluding people from access to things, then we have to fight it very hard.’<sup>4</sup> Few would disagree that elitism, thus defined, is a bad thing. But as we shall see, during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, access to opera—whether in a theatre, or via recordings (often available from public libraries), broadcasting, or latterly the internet—has very rarely been restricted in the United Kingdom. Even in those instances where access to specific operatic performances has been limited by high ticket prices or low seat availability, opera *in general* has always been available to those keen to seek it out. The idea that opera is elitist because it is inaccessible does not make sense: operatic elitism must mean something else.

Is it about the operas themselves? Contrary to widely held perceptions, most operas, at least those in the standard performing canon, deal with universal themes rather than aloof concerns to which ‘the likes of us’ cannot

<sup>4</sup> Petronella Wyatt, ‘Blowing in the Wind’, *The Spectator* (28 March 1998), 19–21, 20.

relate. They do not demand an advanced level of education to be comprehensible. Some plots can be confusing and reading a summary in advance may enrich the viewing and listening experience, provided you don't mind spoilers. But convoluted storylines are by no means limited to opera: I, for one, have rarely felt anything other than baffled by the plot of a James Bond film.

There are certain dramatic and musical conventions in opera, particularly in early opera, which may seem unusual on first acquaintance. But many activities have rules and practices that can seem alien to the newcomer. As Michael Hurd wrote in 1963,

No one in England is dismayed by the rules of cricket. We accept the peculiar conventions and proceed to enjoy the game on its own terms. We do not complain that its pace is infinitely slower than that of football—we adjust our scale of time-values and sit out the warm summer afternoons, perfectly content that cricket has its own speed and thus its own sort of thrills. And so it should be with opera.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, there is little that is 'intellectual' about most operas. Indeed, generations of highbrows have argued that some types of opera are not intellectual enough—that Italian opera, for example, is positively lowbrow because it is too tuneful and popular. And to suggest that the music itself is too complex in some way for so-called 'ordinary people' to understand would be spurious, not to say insulting.

Language is often perceived as a particular barrier to the enjoyment of opera. Before the advent of surtitles in the 1980s, opera in a foreign language did, admittedly, demand some effort on the part of the listener in familiarising themselves with the work in advance. As the author of a 1970s opera guide wrote, there was a strong demand for opera in English because 'few in an audience are ready to follow the good example of the heroine of D. H. Lawrence's novel, *The Trespasser*, and undertake to learn German because they want to "understand Wagner in his own language"'.<sup>6</sup> But this was not a problem, because for most of the twentieth century most opera performed in Britain, except at Covent Garden and Glyndebourne, was indeed sung in English. Since the advent of surtitles, the opera-goer has not needed to know

<sup>5</sup> Michael Hurd, *Young Person's Guide to Opera* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), pp. 4–5.

<sup>6</sup> Hamish F. G. Swanston, *In Defence of Opera* (London: Penguin, 1978), p. 278.

any foreign languages. One might even argue that an opera translation in plain modern English is easier to understand than the unfamiliar language of a Shakespeare play. No, it's not just about the operas themselves.

Is it about money? This, surely, is the nub of the issue. So costly are opera tickets presumed to be that regular attendance at the opera is routinely used as an indicator of high socio-economic status. In assessing the rate of inflation on luxury goods in 2018, Coutts Bank compiled a 'luxury basket' of high-end goods and services. The contents? Private school fees, bespoke suits, Aston Martins, oysters, and opera tickets.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, the BBC's Great British Class Survey of 2011 found that among those earning over £200,000 per annum, 28.8 per cent claimed to go to see an opera sometimes or often, compared with only 7.4 per cent of those earning below £45,000. But then again, the super-rich also went more regularly to restaurants, gyms, and sporting events: their wealth simply allowed them to do more of *everything*.<sup>8</sup>

It would be futile to deny that there are highly priced opera tickets to be had; some extremely so. There is no getting away from the fact that opera is phenomenally expensive to stage, thanks to the vast number of artistic and administrative personnel who need to be paid and all the material costs of putting on a show. As the critic Francis Toye wrote in *The Listener* in 1933, 'Most of the people who write and talk about opera have usually the haziest idea, to begin with, as to what opera costs.'<sup>9</sup> Time and again across the later twentieth century—as standards of production rose and audiences expected to see ever-more sophisticated sets and costumes—the Royal Opera House's annual reports stressed the need for higher subsidy, since even selling every seat in the house every night could not cover its costs. It is possible for opera to be extremely popular and yet remain uneconomical. The question of how to 'make opera pay', whether through state subsidy, ticket sales, or various forms of patronage or philanthropy, has always been and will always be a vexed one, in the United Kingdom as anywhere else.

Paradoxically, opera's 'extravagance' in certain contexts may be regarded simultaneously as a sign of its supposed 'elitism' and as a selling point. As Nicholas Payne (former Director of the Royal Opera and General Director of English National Opera) observes, opera's 'very lavishness serves as an attraction to the public. From Roman games through opera to modern

<sup>7</sup> Kaya Burgess, 'Big Spenders Hit by Inflation', *The Times* (12 December 2018), 19.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Katharina Hecht, Daniel McArthur, Mike Savage, and Sam Friedman, 'Elites in the UK: Pulling Away?' (The Sutton Trust, 2019), 20.

<sup>9</sup> Francis Toye, 'Covent Garden Opera', *The Listener* (20 December 1933), 944.

musicals or blockbuster movies, a big budget is seen as proof of ambition.<sup>10</sup> But whoever talked about Hollywood films being elitist because they are expensive to make? The problem, for opera, is not so much that it costs a lot to put on a good show as the fact that the public purse is often partially footing the bill.

Country-house opera is often particularly expensive, and its ethos is one of unabashed luxury: this, indeed, is in many ways its appeal to those who attend. Perhaps we might see this as a form of elitism? But the companies involved are usually small, in receipt of no public funding, and could not finance their operations without charging high prices. A positive counterbalance to their perceived exclusivity is the rich employment opportunities they provide for up-and-coming young singers and a broader benefit is that their attractiveness as a social occasion irrespective of the operas being performed gives the companies considerable freedom to revive lesser-known repertory. At Covent Garden, of course, tickets can be eye-wateringly expensive—a practical necessity but a bone of contention for decades at this state-subsidised institution—yet some are available for a price similar to a cinema ticket. Tickets to see a touring opera company at a regional theatre are likely to be little different in price from those on sale at the same venue for a musical.

In fact, studies have shown that going to the opera is, on average, consistently *less* expensive than attending other forms of entertainment such as high-profile rock concerts, the latest West End shows, Premier-League football matches, or Wimbledon.<sup>11</sup> Since nobody would call a concert by the Rolling Stones elitist (top price tickets in 2022 £566, with 'VIP' tickets over £3,000), there must be more to opera's supposed elitism than this.<sup>12</sup> Designer fashion and expensive cars, too, are constructed not as elitist but as aspirational: a whole magazine industry thrives on the premise of people looking at pictures of luxurious things they cannot possibly afford. No, it's not just about the money.

Is it about dress codes? The popular perception of an audience enjoying a night at the opera is one of tuxedos and tiaras. As Robin May wrote in 1977 about an imaginary first-time opera-goer, 'Indoctrination by the invincibly

<sup>10</sup> Nicholas Payne, 'Trends and Innovations in Opera', in Anastasia Belina-Johnson and Derek B. Scott (eds), *The Business of Opera* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 17–29, p. 25.

<sup>11</sup> For a comparative list of prices, see Andrew Mitchell, 'It's Time to Scotch the Cliché That Opera Tickets Are Too Expensive', *The Guardian* (3 November 2015), n.p.

<sup>12</sup> <https://inews.co.uk/culture/music/rolling-stones-2022-tour-tickets-pre-sale-prices-uk-venues-60th-anniversary-shows-1518240> (accessed 19 March 2024).

ignorant will have told him that the theatre will be peopled by the rich in full evening dress (see almost any film or TV play in which there is a “night at the opera” scene).<sup>13</sup> But such formal attire was already falling out of favour at Covent Garden for anything other than gala performances decades ago and is now very much the exception rather than the rule.

Black tie is, of course, still worn at the Glyndebourne Festival and at the various country-house opera festivals that have copied its model. Glyndebourne’s founder John Christie encouraged the wearing of formal dress in the 1930s as a mark of respect to the performers—and what was said to be a recommendation effectively ‘had the force of law’—though was himself reportedly prone to matching evening dress with a pair of old tennis shoes.<sup>14</sup> The Glyndebourne ‘look’ has undoubtedly had a strong influence upon the representation of opera in the public imagination. Today black tie is not stipulated, though the steer towards formality remains implicit, with the company encouraging audiences to treat attendance as a special occasion, like going to a wedding.<sup>15</sup>

Formal dress would, however, seem out of place at the London Coliseum, where English National Opera (ENO) has actively encouraged its patrons to ‘dress down’. In 2017, the company’s then Artistic Director Daniel Kramer stated,

Although the debate about what to wear to the opera has moved on, with almost all of our audience happily turning up wearing whatever they feel most comfortable in, the way opera is presented in a lot of popular culture can be at odds with this. Opera is the most moving art form on Earth. It has the power to challenge, to entertain, to devastate and to inspire, whether its audience is wearing a tiara and ball gown or a T-shirt and jeans.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, many people enjoy dressing up to go to the opera—opera’s popular association with luxury is as alluring to some as it is off-putting to others—but there is certainly no compulsion to do so. Furthermore, nobody cries ‘elitism!’ when people dress up to go to the races, and there is huge public

<sup>13</sup> Robin May, *Opera* (Sevenoaks: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977), p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Cater, ‘Christie, The Grand Old Man of Opera’, *DM* (5 July 1962), 3; Wilfrid Blunt, *John Christie of Glyndebourne* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1968), p. 167.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.glyndebourne.com/your-visit/what-to-wear/> (accessed 21 November 2019).

<sup>16</sup> Kevin Coyd, ‘Decoding the Dress Code: What to Wear to the Opera’, *The Telegraph* (14 June 2017), n.p.

interest in the expensive outfits celebrities wear to film *premières*. No, it's not just about the clothes.

Is it about grand venues? The places where operas are conventionally performed—often historic theatres designed to allow aristocratic opera-goers of ages long-past to display their sartorial elegance—are also habitually depicted as inaccessible spaces. 'High culture's icy palace lets the people in for a drink', announced *The Guardian* in September 2018.<sup>17</sup> The subject of the article was the Royal Opera House's redevelopment of its public spaces, an internal refit that had been given the name 'Open Up'. The author presented the theatre as a 'bastion of exclusivity' with a 'rarefied reputation', closed off to 'hoi polloi'. Cliché piled on cliché as he quoted a project developer as saying, 'You can now look in from the street and see that the operagoers aren't all wearing tuxedos.'

The Royal Opera House is undoubtedly an opulent theatre, but it does not have the prominence within London that opera houses have as civic buildings in major European cities such as Paris or Vienna. Indeed, commentators of the early to mid-twentieth century regularly complained about the 'out-of-the-way-ness' of Covent Garden, situated as it was in a then-shabby part of town next to the fruit and vegetable market and opposite a police station, closer to the fleshpots of Soho than the mansions of Mayfair. There were frequent calls for a more 'centrally located' opera house. Such complaints seem odd—Covent Garden is in the heart of the West End—but evidently some commentators believed that the theatre demanded a setting among London's national artistic or financial institutions rather than popular theatres and shopping emporia.<sup>18</sup> English National Opera, close by, performs in a very large, traditional theatre, the London Coliseum, but it is one that enjoyed a former life as a music hall.

Beyond London, most people who watch live opera do so at theatres that also put on pantomimes, gigs, evenings with stand-up comedians, and so on. Operas are now regularly broadcast to cinemas that also screen blockbuster Hollywood films or performed in imaginative non-theatrical spaces from pubs to railway stations. In 2014, for example, Birmingham Opera Company

<sup>17</sup> Oliver Wainwright, 'The Royal Opera House Opens Up: High Culture's Icy Palace Lets the People in for a Drink', *The Guardian* (19 September 2018), n.p.

<sup>18</sup> See proposals for an opera house on the Embankment (Anon., 'Prices for All. Meeting Future Needs', *DT* (9 January 1930), 11) and near the National Gallery or Royal Exchange (Frederick Woodhouse, *Opera for Amateurs* (London: Dennis Dobson, Ltd, 1951), p. 51).

put on a performance in a Tesco supermarket.<sup>19</sup> In none of these places are there esoteric social codes or customs that are opaque to the uninitiated.

Even when it is lavish, need the architecture of opera necessarily be off-putting? It is surely patronising to suggest that ‘ordinary people’ will feel intimidated or excluded in a building that features classical columns, red carpets, gold paint, or smart facilities. Indeed, a similar monumental or, as the urban historian Rohan McWilliam puts it, ‘populist palatial’ style was used in the nineteenth century for countless West End theatres, music halls, and department stores precisely in order to attract the aspirational middle classes and even working classes, flattering them into believing that they were honoured, refined guests.<sup>20</sup>

There is plentiful historical evidence of people longing to go to the opera *because* it was staged in glamorous surroundings, and the desire for this relatively affordable taste of luxury still exists. Nicholas Payne writes, ‘It would be wrong to conclude that the flexible small-scale models are set to supplant the traditional opera houses. The public continues to seek out the spectacular experience which grand opera can provide.’<sup>21</sup> Likewise, while country-house opera is often at the more expensive end of the operatic market, it surely makes no sense to label it elitist simply for its setting amid elegantly manicured gardens when millions of people visit stately homes annually as a leisure activity. No, it’s not just about the venues.

Is it about the audience? Perhaps elitism is merely a synonym for a snooty clientèle, the sort of snobs Helen Fielding pokes fun at in *Bridget Jones’s Diary*. (“They should have refused to let anyone listen to the World Cup tune”, hooted Arabella, “until they could prove they’d listened to *Turandot* all the way through.”<sup>22</sup>) Of all the topics discussed thus far, audience demographics and attitudes are the hardest about which to generalise. Speculating about whether people who go to the opera are posh or condescending takes us into the realm of the anecdotal. Every seasoned opera-goer would probably have a story to tell about an encounter with an objectionable fellow audience member, and we shall undoubtedly meet some in this book.

There have certainly always been snobs at the opera. First there are the social snobs. Take, for example, the women who wrote to *The Daily Mail*

<sup>19</sup> Belina-Johnson and Scott, *The Business of Opera*, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Rohan McWilliam, *London’s West End: Creating the Pleasure District, 1800–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 4–5.

<sup>21</sup> Payne, ‘Trends and Innovations in Opera’, p. 27.

<sup>22</sup> Helen Fielding, *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (London: Picador, 1996), p. 102.

in 1964 to demand that people who bought cheap tickets at Covent Garden be excluded from the bars in the more expensive part of the house.<sup>23</sup> Then there are the intellectual snobs: those who pride themselves on favouring challenging Modernist operas over populist Puccini; those who mock 'traditional' stagings and the audiences who prefer them; those who like to give the impression of being party to privileged information. In a beginner's guide to opera from 1977, Robin May wrote that cliques at the opera could make 'even the sophisticated feel uneasy', huddling in groups sharing insider gossip about singers, conductors, and productions and noisily showing off their knowledge, 'which may make our newcomer feel not only an outsider, but that he is surrounded by that dread tribe, the élitists'.<sup>24</sup>

But does even this make opera, per se, elitist? Cliques can be found in all sorts of walks of life and to presume that everyone who goes to the opera is a snob is as unfair as to presume that everyone who attends a football match is a hooligan. A glance around the foyer at any opera performance, or a brief survey of social media conversations about opera would reveal diverse constituencies simply engaged in lively discussion about an art form they love. In this book, we shall see that opera in Britain has historically attracted many different types of listener, mixed in age and social background, which shows that it is unwise to make generalisations about who opera is 'for'. No, it's not just about the audience.

Is it about the singers? The association between opera singers and glamour is long-standing. The stars of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were paid astronomical fees. A stereotype emerged, and developed international currency, about prima donnas and their jewels, as parodied playfully in the character Bianca Castafiore in the *Tintin* comic strips. Maria Callas, with her lavish jewel collection and shipping magnate lover, perpetuated the stereotype in the mid-twentieth century. Even today, a select few star singers are paid large sums to sing and even larger sums to endorse luxury products. And yet nobody ever objects to the colossal wealth of the stars of popular music, who are far richer and greater in number.

Today's few truly wealthy opera singers—the Anna Netrebkos and Jonas Kaufmanns—are very much the exception to the rule. Most jobbing singers earn little more than the national average wage; many earn far less.<sup>25</sup> Singers typically pursue portfolio careers, combining opera with concerts and

<sup>23</sup> Mrs P. and Miss M. Wilson, 'Intruders', letter to *DM* (24 April 1964), 12.

<sup>24</sup> May, *Opera*, p. 7.

<sup>25</sup> Antony Feeny, 'The Cost of Singing', *Opera*, 71/10 (October 2020), 1180–1190, 1182, 1189.

teaching, just as many in the past sang in musical theatre, operetta, and even pantomime and music hall. When the Covid crisis struck in March 2020, many opera singers found themselves in dire financial straits.

Singers have also not traditionally come from the high social echelons one might expect. As Dave Russell notes, in a study of British singers' backgrounds up to the 1960s, 'very few emerged from elite social backgrounds and a significant minority were born into the manual working class, their path into opera made possible . . . by innumerable acts of individual and collective philanthropy and, eventually, by the benefits of a state-funded higher education system.'<sup>26</sup> None of the singers in his study emerged from the aristocracy, and few from the upper-middle classes, because singing on the stage was still considered vaguely immoral well into the twentieth century; those further down the social scale did not have the luxury of worrying about such considerations. It was, in fact, the lower middle classes who dominated the British singing community in the earlier part of our period—the children of shopkeepers, low-grade office workers, and clerks—many of whose families had only recently achieved social mobility and whose home lives were still essentially working-class.<sup>27</sup>

A surprising number of British opera singers have come from working-class backgrounds proper, and the press—always on the lookout for a rags-to-riches story—has often cheered them on, making a big splash of singers from humble parentage or deprived industrial regions. Poor areas of Wales and the North West, indeed, have produced disproportionately large numbers of British opera singers relative to their population size, thanks to strong traditions in choral singing among Lancashire weavers and in chapel and community singing in the mining villages of South Wales.<sup>28</sup> Although some British singers have been propelled up the social-mobility ladder by their talent, they looked like very ordinary people at the outset.

All that said, it is undoubtedly harder to become an opera singer in Britain today. State funding for training is less generous than it was at mid-century, and the earlier twentieth-century tendency for communities to club together to fund a talented member's musical training (or for employers to pay for it, as the National Coal Board did for the Scottish bass William McCue in

<sup>26</sup> Dave Russell, 'Reaching the Operatic Stage: The Geographical and Social Origins of British and Irish Opera Singers, c.1850–c.1960', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 29/3 (November 2017), 312–352, 335.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 329–330.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 322–325.

the 1950s) has declined.<sup>29</sup> The high cost of course fees is certainly a matter for concern, and something the opera industry must urgently address. More broadly, some of the diverse routes into the profession from other types of singing now appear to have closed, and the recent 'crossover' movement has not offered the path into opera singing we might have expected. Furthermore, the general lack of exposure to opera among the population means young people are less likely to consider singing as a career. All that said, we will continue to encounter singers from unexpected backgrounds in the later chapters of this book.

Is it perhaps *foreign* singers who are presumed to be elitist? For many decades, commentators claimed the British would never take opera to their hearts until it was sung by British singers. But even when Britain had succeeded in producing top-level singers who were respected the world over, the idea that opera was sung by foreigners persisted. Conservative MP Terry Dicks said in a parliamentary debate in 1988, 'I do not believe that an overweight Italian singing in his own language is part of my heritage', leading a reporter for *The Sunday Times* to conclude that, 'for him and for many others, opera is an alien and élitist taste'.<sup>30</sup> And yet a glance at the diverse international make-up of any Premier League football team today surely makes a mockery of the argument that the British cannot embrace forms of culture that are 'performed' by foreigners. No, it's not just about the singers. So what is it about?

### No opera please, we're British

All the stereotypes above play into the negative perceptions of opera that circulate in Britain today, but they are only part of the picture. Underpinning them is something else: namely, a form of identity politics. The further one digs into the history of the elitism trope in Britain—including in the decades before the term was used explicitly—the more one realises that it is a multi-faceted concept, imbued with specific British anxieties about class and a certain peculiarly British anti-intellectualism: ideas that have long and complex historical roots. Underpinning the opera/elitism debate is a conversation

<sup>29</sup> Feeny, 'The Cost of Singing', 1189; Russell, 'Reaching the Operatic Stage', 333–334; <http://www.billmccue.com/about/> (accessed 3 February 2021).

<sup>30</sup> Mark Fisher, 'Opera Needs a Stronger Voice', *ST* (3 July 1988), 31.

about national identity, a sense of self—all played out through the prism of culture.

Ever since it arrived in Britain some three centuries ago, opera has prompted apprehension. Britain has an ‘opera problem’, which never seems to go away, and which has metamorphosed over time. This problem was and is, in large part, bound up with questions of national and class identities. Even at times when opera has been viewed more benevolently there has still been a constant refrain in the background: the idea that opera is an ‘imported’ art form to which the British are somehow constitutionally immune, which has never become part of civic life here or a permanent institution. Opera has been widely characterised as, to borrow a phrase from Oscar Wilde, ‘someone else’s music’: a form of entertainment for foreigners, aristocrats, intellectuals, and eccentrics. Horticultural analogies have been many and various: opera, in the theatre director Tyrone Guthrie’s words, ‘has never taken very kindly to British soil. It has never become an indigenous plant, but has remained a delicate, waxy, hothouse exotic.’<sup>31</sup> Yet, as another commentator observed in 1946, to say that the British people didn’t like opera was rather like saying they didn’t like the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel—many had simply never had the opportunity to experience it.<sup>32</sup>

Opera’s perceived connection to the upper classes has coloured its reception in Britain. It originally arrived in early eighteenth-century London as a form of aristocratic entertainment: then and for around a century and a half after, it would be correct to call opera an elite art form, in the sense of playing to a privileged audience, though it would be anachronistic to use the word ‘elitist’ in its present-day sense. Wealthy Georgians, Victorians, and Edwardians went to the opera to see and be seen. Covent Garden in the nineteenth century was ‘fashionable and exclusive’ and ‘a place for wearing all one’s diamonds, and meeting all one’s friends’, the foreign languages reminding the aristocracy of their prolonged travels around Europe.<sup>33</sup>

The international opera seasons at Covent Garden that were as much a fixture in the aristocratic summer ‘Season’ as going to Ascot or the Henley Regatta continued in one form or another until World War Two. Even in the late 1950s, Lionel Salter, Head of Music Productions for BBC TV, observed that ‘something of this “social” attitude still exists, though to a lesser degree in

<sup>31</sup> Tyrone Guthrie, *A Life in the Theatre* (London: Columbus Books, 1987), p. 196.

<sup>32</sup> Desmond Shawe, ‘Opera at the Seaside’, *ES* (1 October 1946), 9.

<sup>33</sup> J. Daniel Chamier, *Percy Pitt of Covent Garden and the B.B.C.* (London: Edward Arnold and Co., 1938), pp. 19–20.

England than in some countries, and certainly less nowadays than fifty years ago, when not to have one's box at the opera was to be out of the swim.<sup>34</sup> The practice finds its modern equivalent in corporate entertainment at Covent Garden.

The British didn't understand opera, so they ridiculed it. The same objections to opera have been reiterated, decade after decade, century after century: that opera is absurd because characters sing rather than speak; that singers don't always look right for their roles; that the art form can never be taken to the nation's heart when it is sung in another language or even when it is translated from another language. Stephen Williams, who presented programmes about opera on the BBC's Light Programme, summed this up in 1952: 'The average Englishman, rightly or wrongly, finds enough in grand opera to arouse his mockery—ridiculous plots, sawdust heroes, maidens with matronly figures—without the additional stimulus of a silly English libretto.'<sup>35</sup> And although one beginner's guide after another patiently explained that these were merely conventions and that we are perfectly capable of accepting other conventions, the British have shown themselves, when it comes to opera, supremely incapable of suspending disbelief.

The clash between supposedly 'posh' opera and down-to-earth 'real life' has long been fixed in the public imagination as the stuff of comedy. The operatic burlesques of the Victorian era parodied well-known operas, highlighting their perceived absurdities, yet also popularising them among distinctly non-elite audiences. That tradition would continue into the twentieth century in the guise of music-hall and variety skits. And in countless films, television dramas, and adverts, a taste for opera has become shorthand for wealth or pretension. Such clichés are ages-old and, although reductive, often good-natured, affectionate even. Recent charges of 'elitism', by contrast—and it must be stressed that the current notion of opera as elitist *is* recent—are distinctly harder-edged. There is nothing warm or humorous about elitism.

It is one thing to call opera silly, quite another to call it elitist, but over time the two strands of rhetoric have converged. As a correspondent for *The Times* reported in 1959, 'Opera is a difficult candidate for any publicity campaign for it provokes resistance both as a minority culture and as a badge of class; and thanks to cartoonists and the music-hall it takes its place with the desert

<sup>34</sup> Lionel Salter, *Going to the Opera* (London: Penguin Books, 1958), p. 91.

<sup>35</sup> Stephen Williams, *In the Opera House* (London: Stratford Place, 1952), pp. 71–72.

island and the mother-in-law as a stereotype of absurdity.<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, in 1968, a correspondent for *The Illustrated London News* wrote: 'Opera is fantastically expensive. It is the most lavish, the most spectacular, the most extravagant form of art. And in a sense it is also ludicrous.'<sup>37</sup> These statements could have been made by the British press at any point over the last century. There is plentiful evidence to disprove these arguments, but once stereotypes take hold, they are almost impossible to shake off. As a correspondent for *The Daily Express* remarked of the British public in 2000, 'Tell 'em "it's elitist" often enough and, sadly, they'll soon begin to believe it.'<sup>38</sup>

The road to elitism, as we might characterise it, did not progress in linear fashion but would take many twists and turns as the decades progressed, spawning countless unlikely ideological alliances along the way. Those who have characterised opera as elitist (either explicitly or in as many words) have included the following eclectic characters. 1930s Conservative MPs who believed sugar beet and allotments more worthy of subsidy than opera and their Labour contemporaries who feared public money might be 'used for the purposes of boosting long-haired foreign artistes'.<sup>39</sup> A populist press that has asked repeatedly why opera needs financial support when football and cinema don't. 1980s left-wing councils who favoured community art and saw opera as for yuppies. Cool-Britannia-obsessed New Labour, which adopted 'anti-elitism' as official government policy. Twenty-first-century Conservatives who bundled up opera with a contempt for metropolitan elites. Contemporary academics who denounce opera for historic associations with power structures.

These are strange bedfellows indeed, and they all bear responsibility for turning a form of entertainment that brings joy to many into a socio-political problem. Trendsetters (or 'influencers' as we might call them today) also play a role in shaping behaviours and opinions: some such people have, historically, helped the cause of opera in Britain, whilst others have hindered it. Even the opera industry itself is not without blame in the way in which it presents itself to potential audience members, and there have been occasions when singers, directors, and opera administrators have shot themselves in the foot by perpetuating the elitism stereotype. But above all, the principal

<sup>36</sup> Anon., 'Popularizing Opera with the Television Audience', *The Times* (1 January 1959), 6.

<sup>37</sup> A. K. Panni, 'The Opera Industry', *ILN* (25 May 1968), 46–47.

<sup>38</sup> Mark Pappenheim, 'Opera', *DE* (24 November 2000), 71.

<sup>39</sup> Adam McKinlay (Labour MP for Glasgow), House of Commons debate, 15 September 1931: 'British Broadcasting Corporation (Grand Opera)', Hansard, Vol. 256.

culprit for disseminating and recycling misleading clichés about opera has been the media.

Words, as well as attitudes, have changed over time. 'Elitism' is a modern term, not entering wide circulation until the 1980s, at which point it swiftly became a fashionable buzzword that peppered casual conversations about the arts up and down the land. An early dictionary appearance for the word (1982) defines 'elitism' as 'advocacy or reliance on leadership or dominance by a select group'.<sup>40</sup> There was no overt implication that this was a bad thing, because that 'select group'—the elite—was defined as something good: 'the choice part, the best.' Though 'elitism' was commonly used negatively by the late 1990s, dictionary definitions remained equivocal as to whether the word was necessarily pejorative: it remained 'the belief that society should be governed by a select group of gifted and highly educated individuals', or 'pride in or awareness of being one of an elite group'.<sup>41</sup>

By the turn of the twenty-first century, however, elitism had become something about which every right-thinking person was worried. In 2005, *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary of Current English* suggested as an example, 'The cosy elitism that weakened our education system for a century'.<sup>42</sup> Five years later *The Oxford Dictionary of English's* example was 'he accused her of racism and white elitism'.<sup>43</sup> Elitism's thoroughly malign, exclusive nature was now made crystal clear, and it was no longer connected to 'elite', a positive term when used adjectivally (though not as a noun) that denotes something of high quality, still often used today as a way of praising those who reach the highest levels in sport.

Latterly, 'elitism' has taken on new nuance. In a period of populist politics, the right refers witheringly to 'metropolitan elites', characterising their political enemies as privileged and aloof from so-called ordinary society and disparaging the arts as a trivial luxury. The left, on the other hand, flings around the word 'elitism' as a way of demonstrating its opposition to everything it sees as bound up with supposed historic privilege. In an age of cultural relativism, a pronounced squeamishness has developed around the so-called 'high arts'. Opera, alas, has become caught in the crossfire of a deepening

<sup>40</sup> J. B. Sykes (ed.), *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (7th edn) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 312.

<sup>41</sup> Anon., *Collins English Dictionary* (4th edn) (Glasgow: Harper Collins, 1998), p. 503.

<sup>42</sup> Catherine Soanes and Sara Hawker (eds), *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary of Current English* (3rd edn) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 322.

<sup>43</sup> Angus Stevenson (ed.), *Oxford Dictionary of English* (3rd edn) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 569.

culture war and is disparaged and held to account from both ends. This, as I shall argue in the conclusion, has actively harmed the cause of artistic accessibility: told that opera is ‘not for the likes of them’, potential new audience members are likely to be put off giving it a try.

### Opera’s hidden history

To find a positive model for the future of opera in Britain, we need to look to the past. To characterise the British as resolutely antagonistic towards and dismissive of opera would be to misrepresent matters entirely. Since the later nineteenth century, another type of opera-going developed in Britain alongside the glittering scene at Covent Garden. By the late Victorian era, opera had become very popular among both the middle and even the working classes, who encountered it through rough-and-ready productions of opera in English that were put on by touring companies in the London suburbs or provincial towns and cities. An early pioneer of this model was the troupe set up by Carl Rosa, who began his operations in Liverpool in 1869. He established what a later commentator called ‘a sort of operatic Woolworth’s, a vast company which could give opera to the nation cheap before the nation was aware that it wanted it.’<sup>44</sup> More people still got to know operatic tunes by listening to brass bands in their local park (Italian operatic numbers a speciality), or hearing barrel-organists on the corner of the street as they walked to work, or watching an operatic skit in the music hall. Opera could even be heard in pubs and working men’s clubs.<sup>45</sup>

By the 1920s, it would be no exaggeration to say that opera had become a genuinely popular form of entertainment, its democratisation hastened by the wireless, gramophone records and the initiatives of enterprising opera evangelists such as Lilian Baylis, who built up a loyal audience of working-class opera lovers at the Old Vic in south London. Opera functioned as an integral part of an emerging middlebrow culture—audiences treated a night at the opera little differently from a night at the cinema and were happy to incorporate opera-going into a broader mixed diet of entertainment.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Chamier, *Percy Pitt of Covent Garden*, p. 129.

<sup>45</sup> Russell, ‘Reaching the Operatic Stage’, 318.

<sup>46</sup> See Alexandra Wilson, *Opera in the Jazz Age: Cultural Politics in 1920s Britain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).