MUSIC IN 19TH-CENTURY BRITAIN

Opera in the British Isles, 1875–1918

PAUL RODMELL

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OPERA IN THE BRITISH ISLES, 1875–1918

To Sue
In Memoriam

Opera in the British Isles, 1875–1918

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Paul Rodmell

Birmingham, November 2012

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List of Abbreviations

Journals and Newspapers

Published in London unless otherwise stated

BDP	*Birmingham Daily Post* (Birmingham)
DN	*Daily News*
DT	*Daily Telegraph*
FJ	*Freeman's Journal* (Dublin)
HC	*Huddersfield Chronicle* (Huddersfield)
IT	*Irish Times* (Dublin)
MG	*Manchester Guardian* (Manchester)
MH	*Musical Herald*
MoM	*Magazine of Music*
MMR	*Monthly Musical Record*
MN	*Musical News*
MOMTR	*Musical Opinion and Music Trade Review*
MP	*Morning Post*
MS	*Musical Standard*
MT	*Musical Times* [*and Singing-Class Circular*]
MW	*Musical World*
OMR	*Orchestral Music Review*
PMG	*Pall Mall Gazette*
SR	*Saturday Review*
WM	*Western Mail* (Cardiff)

Libraries and Archives

BL	British Library, London
NLI	National Library of Ireland, Dublin, Ireland
NLW	National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth, Wales
RAM	Royal Academy of Music, London
RCM	Royal College of Music, London
ROHA	Royal Opera House Archive, Covent Garden, London
WYAS	West Yorkshire Archive Service (Kirklees), Huddersfield

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General Editor's Series Preface

Music in nineteenth-century Britain has been studied as a topic of musicology for over two hundred years. It was explored widely in the nineteenth century itself, and in the twentieth century grew into research with strong methodological and theoretical import. Today, the topic has burgeoned into a broad, yet incisive, cultural study with critical potential for scholars in a wide range of disciplines. Indeed, it is largely because of its interdisciplinary qualities that music in nineteenth-century Britain has become such a prominent part of the modern musicological landscape.

This series aims to explore the wealth of music and musical culture of Britain in the nineteenth century and surrounding years. It does this by covering an extensive array of music-related topics and situating them within the most up-to-date interpretative frameworks. All books provide relevant contextual background and detailed source investigations, as well as considerable bibliographical material of use for further study. Areas included in the series reflect its widely interdisciplinary aims and, although principally designed for musicologists, the series is also intended to be accessible to scholars working outside of music, in areas such as history, literature, science, philosophy, poetry and performing arts. Topics include criticism and aesthetics; musical genres; music and the church; music education; composers and performers; analysis; concert venues, promoters and organizations; the reception of foreign music in Britain; instrumental repertoire, manufacture and pedagogy; music hall and dance; gender studies; and music in literature, poetry and letters.

Although the nineteenth century has often been viewed as a fallow period in British musical culture, it is clear from the vast extent of current scholarship that this view is entirely erroneous. Far from being a 'land without music', nineteenth-century Britain abounded with musical activity. All society was affected by it, and everyone in that society recognized its importance in some way or other. It remains for us today to trace the significance of music and musical culture in that period, and to bring it alive for scholars to study and interpret. This is the principal aim of the Music in Nineteenth-Century Britain series – to advance scholarship in the area and expand our understanding of its importance in the wider cultural context of the time.

Bennett Zon
Durham University, UK

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Introduction

While the music and musical culture of the British Isles in the ‘long nineteenth-century’ has been a subject of greatly increased academic interest in the last 30 years, opera and operatic culture in the latter part of the period remains largely neglected. Even those determined to rebut the concept that nineteenth-century Britain was ‘das Land ohne Musik’ have been reticent about celebrating the nation’s operatic life, acknowledging certain flurries of activity (for example, the undertakings of the Pyne-Harrison Company around 1860, or the curious case of Sullivan’s *Ivanhoe*) but sadly conceding that, all in all, these are but brief flashes of light in the darkness. Activities up to about 1870 have recently attracted more attention, for example in the work of Rachel Cowgill, George Biddlecombe, Gabrielle Dideriksen, Jennifer Hall-Witt and Roberta Marvin, but the era of the so-called ‘British Musical Renaissance’ has, ironically, been largely ignored. Perceptions of a ‘Renaissance’ have, indeed, been a part of the problem: in the conventional view, Britain’s operatic achievements after 1880 inconveniently failed to equal the improvements and expansion seen in other genres. The domination of London by foreign opera (repertory, conductors, and singers), an elitist audience more interested in protecting its own exclusivity than in culture itself, the rise of operetta and musical comedy, and the lack of trained native musicians who could create and promote an original product have all been cited as reasons for the failure to establish a nation of opera-lovers and canon of British operas.

It is not my intention to debunk all of that narrative, for there is certainly truth within it, but I hope to show two things in particular. Firstly, that British operatic culture in the late nineteenth century was not so forlorn as has often been believed. There was, in fact, a great deal going on, with more opportunities for composers, performers and audiences than ever before, exemplified by the fact that more than 100 serious operas by British composers were premiered between 1875 and 1918. Secondly, and conversely, I want to explore the undoubted challenges faced by participants in this period, and to explain why Britain’s operatic culture failed to develop as much as many observers hoped. The aim of this book is, therefore, to examine the nature of operatic culture in the British Isles between 1875 and 1918, looking at the way in which opera was produced and ‘consumed’ by companies and audiences, social and intellectual attitudes to the genre, the repertory performed, and the position of British composers and their work within this area of activity.

Previous published work in this area has been patchy in coverage. There exists no overarching survey beyond those by White and Burton, both of which are

contained within larger studies.[1] Other, specific, research has included studies of individual composers, performers (especially singers) and the dominant venue, the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. I do not aim in this volume to add to the research of recent scholars on their specific subjects, but rather to put their work into the wider context.

Sources of information are diverse and plentiful though far from comprehensive. I have made extensive use of press coverage throughout this volume: newspapers and periodicals were the primary conveyors of information and public arbiters of taste at this time and the richness of the information contained and the influence they wielded is a central part of the 'story'. The rapid increase in recent years of on-line availability of these sources has been a huge boon. The content has to be treated with caution; rumours and speculation inevitably form a significant part of the material and performance reviews are naturally subjective. Frequently, though, newspaper reviews are the sole records of the performances of new operas, the music itself having been lost, although, perhaps surprisingly, a large number of the native operas premiered were published. Other primary sources are less plentiful: the business records of the opera companies have generally not survived, nor has the personal correspondence of most participants.

It is important to explain and delimit parameters. Firstly, this book is about 'opera in the British Isles' rather than 'British opera': it aspires to examine the broad sweep of public and professional (as opposed to private and/or amateur) operatic activity with a particular focus on organisations and repertories and their reception.[2] Foreign works dominated and native composers were profoundly influenced by continental operatic culture. The United Kingdom of the time included the whole of the island of Ireland, and it is included here, as are the works of Irish composers; I have frequently used the words 'Britain' and 'British' when referring to the whole of the United Kingdom, but only as a short-hand, and no political implications are intended. References to 'English Opera' in the text generally refer to opera performed in the English language, although Victorian and Edwardian commentators frequently used 'English' as a catch-all term for the United Kingdom's entire population. Regarding the operas in Chapter 6, the essential criteria for inclusion were that the composer was British and that the work was premiered between 1875 and 1918. Contrary to popular myth, relatively few British operas were premiered abroad and most of these were performed in the United Kingdom subsequently; all of these have been included, as have, for completeness, the small number of works performed overseas only. A few composers are problematic in terms of nationality; as far as possible I

[1] Eric Walter White, *A History of English Opera* (London, 1983); pp. 303–82; Nigel Burton, in Nicholas Temperley (ed.), *Music in Britain: The Romantic Age 1800–1914* (London, 1981), pp. 330–57.

[2] Given the exclusively commercial nature of Britain's opera companies, I have made many references to their finances; rather than translating these into immediately obsolete modern equivalents, readers are referred to www.measuringworth.com, which converts historic monetary amounts to present-day values.

have used citizenship and contemporary perceptions as the decisive factor and thus Clutsam, D'Erlanger, De Lara, Esposito and Delius are all included, but D'Albert and Emil Bach are not.

My choice of start and end dates requires explanation. While 1815 and 1914 have become 'canonic' in the study of nineteenth-century history, the selection of 1875 and 1918 for this study is not so immediately obvious. Within musicology 1880 became equally canonic as the commencement of the 'British Musical Renaissance', symbolised by the first performance of Hubert Parry's *Prometheus Unbound* at Gloucester. Just as this choice would have been questioned at the time,[3] so recently musicologists have been concerned to view 1880 within a greater continuum.[4] It is, nevertheless, difficult to reject completely emblematic events and in choosing 1875 for my start date I have the advantage of not one, but three such happenings: the first appearance in London by the Carl Rosa company, the inauguration of the project to build a new 'national opera house' on the Victoria Embankment, and the definitive establishment of Wagner's operas in the British operatic repertory (see Chapter 1). In terms of native composition, 1875 is further thrown into relief by the collapse, in 1864, of the Pyne-Harrison Company, which effectively ended the opera-composing activities of a generation of British composers, including Balfe, Wallace, Benedict and Macfarren; the post-1875 period saw the arrival of the new group of 'Renaissance' writers, Cowen, Stanford, Mackenzie and Goring Thomas.

The choice of 1918 arises for different reasons. While 1914 has canonic status as an end date, for Britain's opera companies the outbreak of war represented anything but an end as they determined to carry on 'business as usual', with only Covent Garden suspending activities for the duration of the Great War. New operas appeared every year with the exception of 1917. Consequently I have chosen the end of the Great War as my finishing point.

As regards a definition of 'opera', I draw a distinction between 'grand' or 'serious' opera, and 'operetta' and 'musical comedy', allowing for some flexibility, and examine the former. While a postmodernist view may be wary of such dividing lines, in Victorian and Edwardian Britain there was little uncertainty about them and so, as far as possible, I have embraced the contemporaneous distinctions. The arrival of French *opéra bouffe* in Britain in the late 1860s delineated the division between comic and serious opera more clearly than before, and initiated an audience desire for 'light' or 'comic' opera that Cellier, Clay and the 'Savoy Operas' aimed at developing and satiating. The most useful guide to distinguishing between 'comic' and 'serious' genres as late nineteenth-century audiences perceived them is neither the subject matter nor the musical structure, but the mode of production: in general 'comic'

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[3] See Nicholas Temperley, 'Xenophilia in British Musical History', in Bennett Zon (ed.), *Nineteenth-Century British Music Studies, Volume 1* (Aldershot, 1999), pp. 3–19.

[4] Stradling and Hughes's seminal study takes 1840 as its starting point: Robert Stradling and Meirion Hughes, *The British Musical Renaissance: Construction and Deconstruction* (2nd ed. Manchester, 2001).

works were usually produced in ‘runs’ (performed in the same theatre on successive nights or by single-work touring companies), while ‘serious’ operas were produced on a ‘repertory’ basis. Exceptions were relatively few, notable examples being the productions of Sullivan’s *Ivanhoe* and Stanford’s *Shamus O’Brien*. Consequently, it is on the ‘repertory’ companies and the works they performed (including ‘comedies’ such as *Le nozze di Figaro*) that this study focuses.

Given the diverse issues and subjects, the layout of chapters is not strictly linear. Chapter 1 summarises the state of opera in Britain in 1875. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on London’s West End between 1876 and 1918, using Augustus Harris’s death in 1896 as a dividing line; this area was distinctive in organisation and practice, and the participants – executants and consumers – generally preferred it to be so. Britain’s notoriously capital-centric culture has tended to emphasise the difference – and metaphorical distance – between central London and everywhere else and it would be counter-productive to ignore that distinction here. The West End was the focus of critical comment, composer aspiration, and influenced – for good and ill – operatic culture and practice in the rest of the country. Chapter 4 focuses on opera outside the West End and endeavours to give a summative survey of opera performances in the provinces. Chapters 5 and 6 focus on ‘British opera’; in the former I consider contemporaneous perceptions that there was an ‘operatic problem’ and the solutions proposed, in particular the foundation of a ‘national opera house’, while Chapter 6 is a ‘gazetteer’ providing information on all the traced operas by British composers premiered between 1875 and 1918.

Even a book focused on this relatively short period will, in many respects, only skim the surface of the subject. The British Isles were a hive of operatic activity and London was one of Europe’s main operatic centres; whilst contemporaneous commentators and later advocates of British music may have felt that the country’s operatic life did not measure up to their aspirations or ambitions, there was no shortage of activity and, even if this was not necessarily that which was considered desirable, it had a significant and lasting impact on the nation’s musical culture. Given this, I hope that this volume will prove a source of information and stimulus for future scholars.

Chapter 1
Prologue: Opera in the British Isles in 1875

> That the richest and most productive period in the history of opera coincided in date and length with what is known as the Victorian Era is a fact that must be generally conceded … [D]uring no period … did there ever occur such an amazing concatenation of great works and great performances in the domain of the lyric drama attended with such widespread support from an ever-growing and increasingly responsive public.[1]

Herman Klein's view, expressed in 1933, has often been debunked in more recent years, but serves as a useful reminder that, for many observers of the time, the late Victorian and Edwardian decades, at least so far as the truly 'Grand Operas' of Covent Garden and its West End rivals were concerned, did indeed represent a golden age: a period of high performance standards, innumerable and unrivalled star singers, and unsurpassed social opulence.

A contrary view, that might be termed the 'Land ohne Musik' perspective, would argue that opera in Victorian Britain was in the doldrums. In central London, opera performed in Italian dominated, characterised by a restricted non-native repertory and frequently slack performance standards, while indigenous music was performed in second-rate theatres by itinerant companies, characterised by an equally stagnant repertory and still lower standards of performance. Outside London things were worse still, with only a few of the largest towns enjoying even occasional glimpses of the operas or singers that appeared in the capital, and the remainder of the country resting content with even more paltry fare.

Over a century later, it is easy to regard Klein's view as rose-tinted nostalgia but, equally, the derogatory perspective that prevailed subsequently would be a description unrecognised by many Victorians other than advocates for specific causes or with personal agendas. Inevitably, the truth lies somewhere between these two extremes. This was a period of great diversity: from the elitist and expensive Italian operas in the West End of London to modest touring troupes playing in towns from Penzance to Aberdeen and Limerick to Norwich, opera came within reach of a greater proportion of the population than either before or since, and the culture and practices prevailing in this period have had an influence on Britain's operatic culture which can, in some respects, still be felt.

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[1] Herman Klein, *The Golden Age of Opera* (London, 1933), p. xiii.

'Grand Opera' in Central London

In 1875, in London's West End, activity was dominated by Italian opera, which was, in turn, dominated by two men, Frederick Gye and James Mapleson. English opera, since the collapse of the Pyne-Harrison Company in 1864, had had only an intermittent presence and was wholly without momentum and consistent support.[2] Mapleson and Gye each managed Italian opera companies that attracted audiences of superior social status (including royalty and nobility), and which gave the performances of the highest – albeit sometimes compromised – standard available at the time.

Gye[3] had been a lessee of the Covent Garden Theatre and manager of the Royal Italian Opera since 1850.[4] He was a meticulous, sometimes ruthless and single-minded businessman who confined his operatic activity to London during the annual 'grand season' of late spring and early summer.[5] On retiring in 1877, he handed the business to his sons (see Chapter 2). His long, unbroken period of management secured Covent Garden's status as the leading opera house in London, a perception which has endured to this day.

James Mapleson's circumstances were more precarious.[6] He ran his first opera season at Her Majesty's Theatre, Haymarket, in 1861, although he had been manager in all but name since 1858 of companies nominally run first by Benjamin Lumley and then Edward Tyrrell Smith. Mapleson's marginal but distinctly secondary status arose for several reasons. His interests in opera were more diverse than Gye's, resulting in a periodic lack of focus; Mapleson took companies around the provinces throughout the 1860s and '70s[7] and, from the late 1870s,

[2] The terms 'Italian opera' and 'English opera', were used at the time to refer to the language of performance rather than the origin of the repertory (discussed below).

[3] For further information on Gye, most of whose career lies outside the scope of this book, see his obituary in *MW* (7 December 1878, p. 790); Gabrielle Dideriksen and Matthew Ringel, 'Frederick Gye and "The dreadful business of opera management"', *Nineteenth Century Music*, 19 (1995–96), pp. 3–30; and Harold Rosenthal, *Two Centuries of Opera at Covent Garden* (London, 1958). Gye's diaries are held at the Royal Opera House Archives.

[4] In 1858 Gye opened a new theatre, the third on the site, after fire destroyed its predecessor; this building (with many extensions and modifications) is still in use today.

[5] During the remainder of the year he sublet the theatre. The London 'grand season' was much shorter than those in other European capitals, which tended to run from early Autumn to March, but these dovetailed together since singers across Europe were disengaged as London opened; Gye and Mapleson were able to obtain good singers as they paid well and London engagements were highly valued by performers as status symbols.

[6] See James Mapleson, *The Mapleson Memoirs* (2 vols, London, 1888) for his own anecdotal account. See also his obituary in *The Times*, 15 November 1901, p. 4.

[7] Gye did this only in 1857 when Covent Garden was being rebuilt; his regular singers did undertake provincial tours, often as a company, but Gye himself did not take an active part.

produced opera in the United States (see Chapter 2), as well as sometimes giving short runs of Italian opera in London in late autumn. Most important, however, was the itinerancy forced upon Mapleson after Her Majesty's Theatre burnt down on 7 December 1867. While Gye had been able to secure the lease and swift rebuilding of Covent Garden, Mapleson was less lucky as the leaseholder of Her Majesty's, the Earl of Dudley, proved to be obstructive and stubborn. Mapleson decamped to Drury Lane in 1868 but, although Her Majesty's was rebuilt within a year it remained empty, allegedly due to Dudley's high rental demand.[8] Mapleson continued to look elsewhere and the next three years saw a series of plots and scheming almost worthy of the works he and Gye put on stage.

Both men had felt the financial impact of running rival opera seasons for seven years and, by the end of 1867, a plan was afoot by which Gye would retire from Covent Garden with Mapleson taking his place, but as a salaried manager, not an independent impresario. This idea fell through following the exposure of a rogue investor,[9] and the two men instead joined forces at Covent Garden for the 'coalition' seasons of 1869 and 1870. Their characters, however, were scarcely complementary and the working relationship was never an easy one. In contrast to Gye, Mapleson was raffish and charming, an instinctive rather than methodical businessman who frequently survived by the skin of his teeth and sheer luck rather than by careful planning. This joint endeavour was destabilised in 1870 by the actions of George Wood and Henry Jarrett.[10] After many shenanigans,[11] Wood ran a financially disastrous season of Italian opera at Drury Lane (which did, however, include the first London performance of a Wagner opera (*Der fliegende Holländer*, given as *L'Olandese dannato*, and starring Charles Santley and Ilma di Murska, on 23 July 1870)) while, after teetering on the edge of legal action, Gye and Mapleson agreed to separate their interests.[12] Gye bought Mapleson out, thanks to a loan of £105,000 from Andrew Montagu,[13] and the two impresarios again mounted competing seasons, Gye still at Covent Garden, and Mapleson at Drury Lane, where he remained until 1876.[14] The impression of Mapleson as an

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[8] Frederick Leader quoted in *MW*, 7 March 1874, p. 154. When the Royal Italian Opera company was formed in 1881, the annual ground rent of Covent Garden was £1,216 12s, whereas for Her Majesty's it was £1,934 6s (*MW*, 15 April 1882, p. 232, and Chapter 2, note 9).

[9] Rosenthal, p. 151.

[10] Respectively, employees of the music publishers Cramer and Co., and of Mapleson and also a disaffected former member of the Covent Garden orchestra employed by Gye.

[11] See Mapleson, vol. 1, pp. 129–33, and Rosenthal pp. 167–8.

[12] The original agreement between Gye and Mapleson had been for three years, but it was dissolved, trust between the two men having broken down. See Mapleson, vol. 1, pp. 136–9, and Rosenthal, pp. 172–3.

[13] A wealthy landowner, of High Melton, near Doncaster.

[14] Mapleson secured the services of Sir Michael Costa as conductor at Drury Lane in 1871; Costa had been Gye's conductor from 1847 to 1868 and only departed from Covent

itinerant remained as he gave pre-Christmas seasons at Covent Garden in 1870 and 1871, and his company throughout retained the name 'Her Majesty's Italian Opera', creating the impression that a return to the empty theatre on the Haymarket remained Mapleson's objective.[15]

In 1875, therefore, Gye was at Covent Garden with a season lasting from 30 March to 17 July (83 performances) while Mapleson was once more at Drury Lane from 10 April to 24 July (64 performances). While both companies performed exclusively in the Italian style and language, the repertory was mixed. Works from Italy dominated, but French operas were also given, especially those of Meyerbeer, and Gounod's *Faust*. German opera featured rather less frequently, with only *Fidelio*, *Der Freischütz*, *Die Zauberflöte*, and *Lohengrin* (discussed below) appearing at Covent Garden in 1875. Non-Italian works were translated and, as spoken dialogue was deemed unacceptable, *secco* recitatives were introduced if needed.[16] The presence of any sort of indigenous culture was largely frowned upon: a fundamental part of the ethos of Covent Garden and its rivals throughout this period was that everything was seen to be the best that money could buy, wherever in the world it came from. Consequently, the overt incorporation of either native repertory or performers was typically viewed as parochial and a lowering of standards to be avoided, even to the extent that in the 1870s British singers often took Italian aliases.[17] Another facet of this cosmopolitan culture of

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Garden when the coalition seasons started (Rosenthal, p. 163), as did the orchestra leader, Prosper Sainton, who was also employed by Mapleson in 1871.

[15] Mapleson claimed that he was prevented by Gye from returning to Her Majesty's in 1870 (Mapleson, vol. 1, p. 139); although Gye later fell out with Dudley, Mapleson did not regain possession of Her Majesty's. In 1874 Mapleson made another attempt to access the theatre but Dudley still required an excessive rent (*MW*, 7 March 1874, p. 154, and Mapleson's prospectus for that year, refers to him occupying Drury Lane 'pending more definite arrangements' (ibid, p. 156)). In its own commentary, *MW* declared that 'unquestionably the legitimate home of Her Majesty's Opera is Her Majesty's Theatre; and it is a matter of regret that [Mapleson's] efforts to secure the building which rose out of the ruins of the well-remembered old house have failed' (ibid, p. 149). Although Mapleson wanted to use the new theatre, the retention of the company name had as much to do with claiming an implicit seal of royal approval (as Gye did in the title 'Royal Italian Opera'). Although Queen Victoria had ceased to attend the opera after the death of Prince Albert in 1861, several of her children attended regularly.

[16] For example, those written for *Fidelio* by Balfe for its 1851 production at Her Majesty's were still in use in the 1870s (see *The Times*, 30 March 1874, p. 14); a certain Gelli supplied the recitatives for the performances of Auber's *Les Diamants de la Couronne* (*MW*, 16 May 1874, p. 314).

[17] The companies comprised performers of all European nationalities and, from the 1860s, singers from North America. Aliases were employed especially by British singers (for example Henry Maclean Martin took the stage name Enrico Campobello, and the Irishman Allan James Foley was known as Signor Foli). *The Times* noted that the singers billed as Mdlle Perdi and Signor Talbo in the autumn 1877 season at Her Majesty's had reverted to

'conspicuous consumption' was the employment of 'star' singers which, although regularly derided in the press throughout this period, was an essential part of both companies' fortunes.[18] In 1875 both Italian companies could claim the possession of highly regarded leading ladies: Gye retained the services of both Adelina Patti (since 1861) and the up-and-coming Canadian Emma Albani (since 1872),[19] while Mapleson had the long-serving German Therèse Tietjens, who had first worked for Benjamin Lumley in 1858, and the Swede, Christine Nilsson. Both companies lacked a man of equal status (Gye's best were the tenor Ernest Nicolini and baritone Victor Maurel, while Mapleson had the tenor Italo Campanini) but, while the presence of a *bel canto* tenor who could produce the magical 'ut in poitrine' (a chest voice high C) was a great asset to any opera company, it was the presence of the *prime donne* that was the true essential.

Gye's seasons between 1871 and 1874 indicate the state of his repertory immediately preceding the period under consideration.[20] He gave 316 performances in total, in seasons varying in length between 77 and 82 nights, typically starting just after Easter and lasting into July.[21] The earlier performances were put on by secondary members of the company and provided opportunities for debutantes, while stars were kept in reserve for about a month, in order that momentum was built up gradually. A typical week in both houses comprised four performances (Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday), although extra performances were often added, especially as the season progressed. Subscriptions, which formed about half of the box office income,[22] were sold for 40 nights, with a limited choice

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their own names of Lisa Purdy and Talbot Brennan for the winter English season at the same theatre in 1878 (quoted in *MW*, 9 February 1878, p. 101). Singers of other nationalities were less likely to use aliases: North Americans, such as Minnie Hauk, often performed under their own names and, by introducing a growing proportion of non-Italian names, they initiated a trend amongst British singers also to appear without foreign disguise.

[18] For a frank acknowledgement of the importance of the 'star system' see Walter Maynard [alias of Thomas Willert Beale], *The Entertaining Impresario* (London, 1867), pp. 86–7.

[19] Real name Marie Louise Cécile Lajeunesse; she took 'Albani' as her stage name in 1870. Mapleson claimed that he heard of Albani first, but through a mixture of confusion and sleight of hand, Gye secured her services (Mapleson, vol. 1, pp. 141–4). Albani married Gye's son Ernest in 1878.

[20] That is, excluding the second of the 'coalition' seasons in 1870 so as to consider Gye independent of Mapleson.

[21] Performances during an 'ante-season', typically starting in Lent, died off gradually in the 1850s.

[22] For the first of the 'coalition' seasons, Mapleson stated that £41,000 was received in subscription income with a further £29,000 coming from one-off ticket sales and £10,000 from other sources (Mapleson, vol. 1, p. 127). Although the amounts are doubtless unrepresentative of the usual competitive seasons, it seems probable that the relative proportions of income were not unusual. Subscription income does not mean, however, that the same individuals occupied their boxes for 40 nights: many subscriptions were sold to

Table 1.1 Most frequently performed operas at Covent Garden under Frederick Gye, 1871–74

Composer	Opera	Performances
Gounod	*Faust*	22
Rossini	*Il barbiere di Siviglia*	22
Mozart	*Don Giovanni*	21
Donizetti	*Lucia di Lammermoor*	16
Rossini	*Guillaume Tell*	16
Meyerbeer	*Les Huguenots*	15
Bellini	*La Sonnambula*	15
Meyerbeer	*L'africaine*	13
Meyerbeer	*L'étoile du nord*	13

of dates offered to the subscriber, and it was on subscription nights, when 'society' (see below) was present in its greatest numbers, often with royalty as an added attraction, that the star singers generally appeared. In 1875 the subscription prices ranged from 100 to 240 guineas for boxes, with orchestra and amphitheatre stalls costing 35 and 18 guineas respectively.[23] Gye's diaries usually record the amount of non-subscription box office receipts for each evening: in 1875 his best nights were for *Roméo et Juliette* (£700 on 18 June), *L'étoile du nord* (£644 on 5 July), and *Dinorah* (£632 on 11 May). The British première of *Lohengrin* on 8 May netted on-the-night receipts of £553; 4 June was one of the worst nights, when a performance of *L'Africaine* brought in only £80.[24] Over the five seasons 1871–74

agencies at a discount, which then sold on the subscriptions to individuals or sold tickets for individual performances; this provided Gye and Mapleson with an 'up-front' though reduced income whilst transferring to the agencies the risk of seats remaining unsold.

[23] Assuming four people in a box, an individual seat cost between 13s 2d and £1 11s 6d, orchestra stalls 18s 4d and amphitheatre stalls 9s 5d. Mapleson's subscription rates in 1875 were the same as Gye's.

[24] As detailed accounts for Covent Garden no longer exist it is difficult to place these figures in a larger context. In 1876, however, Gye referred to the total nightly income capacity of Covent Garden as being somewhere between £1,200 and £1,400 (see Gye's diary, 11 and 23 June 1876, ROHA). On 11 May, when the Prince of Wales attended the opera on the day he arrived back from a State Visit to India, his attendance, having been trailed by Gye in the press, resulted in £1,150 in total receipts. When the Royal Italian Opera became a limited company in 1881, the prospectus stated that the average annual profits in Gye's last six seasons (1873–78) were 'upwards of £15,500' (see Chapter 2, note 10, and *The Times*, 21 July 1881, p. 12). Assuming a season of 80 performances, this is an average profit of just under £195 per night.

Table 1.2 Performances at Covent Garden under Frederick Gye by composer, 1871–74

Composer	**Number of works**	**Total performances**	**Average number of performances per work**	**% of total performances**
Meyerbeer	5	55	11.0	17.4
Verdi	7	46	6.6	14.6
Rossini	3	43	14.3	13.6
Donizetti	6	42	7.0	13.3
Mozart	3	39	13.0	12.3
Bellini	3	25	8.3	7.9
Gounod	1	22	22.0	7.0

Gye mounted 40 different operas, the most frequently performed of which are shown in Table 1.1.

The obvious omission is Verdi but, although no work of his appears among the most frequently performed at Covent Garden, more of his works (seven) were performed than those of any other composer (see Table 1.2).

Mapleson's seasons tended to be slightly shorter than those of Gye; in the four years under consideration, Mapleson gave 252 performances in seasons varying between 57 and 73 nights.[25] His repertory was more restricted as he gave only 30 operas over this four-year period; the most frequently performed are shown in Table 1.3 and again *Faust* tops the list. Beyond this there are relatively few duplications; the explanation for this is unclear but is most likely influenced by the audience associating certain singers with specific roles and the singers' own preferences – the strong appearance, for example, of *Fidelio* in Mapleson's list is due solely to Therèse Tietjens's interest in it and her portrayal of Leonora.[26]

A comparison of the composers most frequently performed shows few surprises and here the concordances between Gye and Mapleson are much stronger (see Table 1.4) – Mozart at Covent Garden is exchanged for Beethoven at Drury Lane. The order in which the composers are ranked, however, is significantly different and overall suggests a more conservative audience at Drury Lane which preferred the more 'traditional' *bel canto* style of Donizetti and Bellini to composers such as Verdi and Meyerbeer. In both houses, however, it seems likely that had Gounod been able to provide more than one successful opera, he would have held sway.

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[25] For the purposes of direct comparison Mapleson's short autumn seasons are excluded from this analysis.

[26] Leading singers may have avoided duplicating the roles of their competitors for fear of adverse comparison.

Table 1.3 Most frequently performed operas under James Mapleson, 1871–74

Composer	Opera	Performances
Gounod	*Faust*	25
Rossini	*Semiramide*	23
Bellini	*La Sonnambula*	20
Donizetti	*Lucia di Lammermoor*	19
Meyerbeer	*Les Huguenots*	18
Donizetti	*Lucrezia Borgia*	17
Verdi	*Rigoletto*	12
Verdi	*Il Trovatore*	11
Beethoven	*Fidelio*	10
Donizetti	*La fille du Régiment*	10

Table 1.4 Performances by James Mapleson by composer, 1871–74

Composer	Number of works	Total performances	Average number of performances per work	% of total performances
Donizetti	7	63	9.0	25.0
Verdi	3	29	9.7	11.5
Bellini	3	28	9.3	11.1
Rossini	2	25	12.5	9.9
Gounod	1	25	25.0	9.9
Meyerbeer	3	22	7.3	8.7
Beethoven	1	10	10.0	4.0

A significant point not shown by these figures is that neither Gye nor Mapleson were at all interested in commissioning or premiering new works. At best, they gave first British performances of (usually) recently composed operas but typically only after these works had made a successful début elsewhere in Europe; such were the financial risks involved that both men were inclined to caution.[27] During the period 1871–74, Gye gave first British performances of just three operas, none of which

[27] There was the simple commercial risk of producing an unknown work, exacerbated by the various fees that had to be paid to secure the right of representation in Britain, plus the additional costs incurred through extra rehearsals, new scenery etc. Even the risk of producing a new work well-established elsewhere was considerable.

secured regular appearances: Cimarosa's *Le Astuzie Femminili* (composed 1794, performed 15 July 1871), Gomes's *Il Guarany* (13 July 1872) and Poniatowski's *Gelmina* (4 June 1872).[28] Mapleson, meanwhile, gave Cherubini's *Les Deux Journées* (composed 1799, performed 20 May 1872) and, exceptionally, a British work, Balfe's *Il Talismano* (11 June 1874).[29] Thus London's two Italian companies were essentially reactive in their policies to music: the tried and tested dominated (although this was no guarantee of a London success) and it was a central part of the business philosophies of both men to follow rather than innovate. The danger inherent in this policy, which became increasingly a reality in the 1880s, was that, while some parts of the repertory became moribund, popular new works did not appear to replace them (see Chapter 2).

It is very difficult to gain a sense of exactly what operatic performances at this time were like; although contemporaneous press reviews are sometimes critical, they start from an unstated baseline, and very often notices are lengthy but replete with platitudes and generalities. If, however, less complimentary press comments are considered in conjunction with what is known about working practices, it seems certain standards were, at the very least, mixed. Performance schedules were rarely announced by either Mapleson or Gye more than a week in advance, and 'stock' operas (by far the greater part of the repertory) were put on stage with little rehearsal beforehand.[30] The first performance of a new work might be given more notice, but was often postponed if more rehearsals were needed and precise dates of premières were never given more than two weeks in advance.[31] Once announced, the schedule was adhered to as far as possible but, if a leading singer was ill, it could be superseded or the advertised opera played with cuts;[32] there was

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[28] Poniatowski's opera was originally given in Paris, 28 April 1868, as *La Contessina*.

[29] Based on Walter Scott's novel *The Talisman* but entitled *The Knight of the Leopard* by Balfe and unfinished when he died in 1870. The opera was completed by Costa for Her Majesty's and was promised for, but not performed during, the 1873 season, due to the visits to London of the Shah of Persia and the Tsarevich and Tsarevna of Russia; Mapleson stated that, 'the present time is most inopportune for the production of a work of such magnitude and of such historical interest as *Il Talismano* especially recalling the fact that it is the last composition of our countryman Balfe' (*Era*, 13 July 1873, p. 11).

[30] Gye noted that Victor Maurel, Joseph Tagliafico, Clarice Sinico and Sofia Scalchi all failed to attend a rehearsal of *Guillaume Tell* (Gye's diary, 26 March 1875, ROHA), but the performance, on opening night, four days later, was reviewed positively in *The Times* (31 March 1875, p. 8). Performers did not get paid for pre-season rehearsals so some reluctance to participate is understandable; see Maynard, p. 83.

[31] Season prospectuses often announced new works conditionally, that is, in the terms that at least two out of the four works promised would appear; subscribers and critics were expected to accept that the impresario had fulfilled his obligation by producing the minimum rather than maximum number. Thus, although Gye promised *Lohengrin* in 1872 (Rosenthal, p. 179), it was not performed at Covent Garden until 1875 (see below).

[32] For example, a mutilated performance of *Guillaume Tell* was given at Covent Garden on 28 March 1876 (the opening night of the season) due to the illness of Ignazio Marini,

no systematic organisation of understudies and the billed opera could only go on if another member of the company was able to step into the breach.[33] Some singers, such as Mathilde Bauermeister and Anna d'Angeri were especially valued due to their ability to be of service in this way.[34] The American soprano Minnie Hauk recalled the lack of preparation:

> [*Le nozze di Figaro*] was produced at short notice, giving me no time to get a costume as Cherubino. So I had to borrow a bit here and a bit there. Madame Therese Tietjens … offered me a pair of long boots for the last act … She sang the Comtesse, and as I had never even heard the opera, she obligingly showed me some stage business, and helped at the only stage rehearsal we had. Although I had to learn the part in two days, the performance was praised in the papers.[35]

Although this was apparently an exceptional event rather than a commonplace, it illustrates the priority to keep the theatre open at all costs: closure for any reason led to losses of both money and reputation (nor did any performers get paid if the theatre was closed, hence the appreciation of the flexibility noted above[36]) and consequently almost any step might be taken in order to ensure that the show (any show!) did indeed go on.

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who was playing Arnold; the duet with Mathilde in Act II was omitted, as was the whole of Act IV, and a premature curtain was brought down on Act III (*MW*, 1 April, p. 235). In the same season the promised performance of *Lucrezia Borgia* by Her Majesty's on 15 May was replaced with *La Sonnambula* due to the illness of Therèse Tietjens (*MW*, 20 May, p. 351).

[33] Elena Varesi, for example, successfully played Rosina in *Il barbiere di Siviglia* on 3 June 1876 for Her Majesty's when substituting at short notice for Mlle Chapuy (*The Times*, 5 June 1876, p. 10); Varesi replaced her in several other roles during this season.

[34] For example, 'In consequence of the indisposition of Mdme Pezotta, Mdlle d'Angeri, who was cast for Donna Anna [in *Don Giovanni*], undertook … to represent Donna Elvira instead, Mdme Saar assuming the character of Donna Anna. There is no more generally useful member of Mr Gye's company than Mdlle d'Angeri. She can play, at the shortest notice, almost any part in the repertory that comes within her line, or near to it; and, what is more, plays whatever she agrees to accept right well' (*MW*, 8 April 1876, p. 251, of the performance on 1 April; the role of Don Giovanni was played by Antonio Cotogni despite Victor Maurel having been billed to take the part). Similarly, Mathilde Bauermeister took the role of Oscar in *Un ballo in maschera* in place of an indisposed Mila Rodani at Her Majesty's on 7 November 1877; *MW* much later commented that 'Mdlle Bauermeister has often rendered service of this kind to her manager for, no matter what the opera, she seems to have it somewhere in her memory, ready for production on the instant' (*MW*, 23 Oct 1880, p. 673, of a performance of *Faust* on 18 October).

[35] Minnie Hauk [Baroness de Wartegg], *Memories of a Singer* (London, 1925), p. 54, probably of the performance by Mapleson's company at Covent Garden on 24 November 1868.

[36] Maynard, p. 82.

According to Emma Albani, these and all manner of other alterations or mishaps did not compromise the standard of performance:

> Naturally in Italy … I had been associated with artistes who were either beginners or whose talents or voices had not enabled them to rise to the first rank; but [in London] I found opera given with such a combination of the highest artistic talent as probably had never existed before … The orchestra was the finest in Europe, and the chorus and ensemble generally far beyond anything I had ever known.[37]

Notwithstanding these comments, both Gye and Mapleson often put singers on stage who had little experience. Sometimes this paid off – Gye's diaries show the progress of sixteen-year-old Zaré Thalberg:

> [8 April 1875] Zaré Thalberg rehearsed for the first time with the other artistes. Zerlina in *Don Giovanni* … all the artistes were pleased with her and prophesied a great career for her.
> [9 April] Band rehearsal of *Don Giovanni*; Zaré Thalberg sang with an orchestra for the first time in her life. She sang and acted well and did not appear the least nervous or frightened.
> [10 April] It was *Don Giovanni* with little Zaré Thalberg as Zerlina her first appearance on any stage; she had a great success. The Prince and Princess of Wales were there, Lord and Lady Dudley, the Duchess of Sutherland … everyone very pleased … Zaré was encored in the Duet 'Là ci darem', 'Batti, batti' and 'Vedrai carino'.
> [12 April] All the newspapers of today are most enthusiastic about Zaré's performance on Saturday, as well as that of the opera in general.
> [13 April] Zaré Thalberg's second appearance; she sang and acted even better than on Saturday … I thought the house would have been crammed seeing the unanimous favourable report of all the papers, but the public seem to have no reliance on their musical reports for there was only £240 in the house.[38]

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[37] Emma Albani, *Forty Years of Song* (London, 1911), p. 56; as Albani was Ernest Gye's wife an unbiased view is unlikely.

[38] Gye's diary, ROHA. *The Times* commented that, 'it was scarcely credible that a girl in her 17th year, who had never trod the boards and never sung with the accompaniment of an orchestra until now, could be so entirely at ease, exercise so unrestricted a control over her voice, round off her phrases with such apparent art, and preserve an intonation so irreproachable' (12 April 1875, p. 12). Her next roles were another Zerlina, in Auber's *Fra Diavolo* (*The Times* 17 May, p. 7), and Cherubino in *Le nozze di Figaro* (*The Times*, 29 June, p. 8). For further information on Thalberg, whose real name was Ethel Western and who was not, contrary to contemporaneous belief, the daughter of the famous pianist, see Rosenthal, p. 189.

Gye was also successful with Gilbert Campbell (stage name Gilberto Ghilberti) who first appeared as Sarastro in *Die Zauberflöte*, and whose voice was praised in *The Times* as being 'of genuine quality and ample compass, only wanting just now more depth and solidity of tone in the lower notes to be unexceptional. He uses it too, with judgment, his phrasing being well-balanced and his style devoid of exaggeration'.[39]

On other occasions, debutantes experienced severe attacks of nerves, but placing untested singers on the stage was clearly part of the operatic ritual and nerves were, indeed, expected: audiences were indulgent on a first appearance and critics generally held back, giving the benefit of the doubt until having heard a singer in two or three different roles. For example, the first appearance of a Mr Perkins (an American, who took the stage name Costa) at Her Majesty's attracted the comments 'his appearance is manly and dignified and his voice of considerable power and sonority. As an actor, also, Signor Costa displays real power. On Tuesday night, however, [as Oroveso in *Norma*] the vocalist evinced a tendency to flatness which was apparently unconquerable'.[40] The performance was sufficiently convincing, however, to secure Perkins sub-principal roles in *Rigoletto*, *La Favorita*, and *Die Zauberflöte* during the course of the season and opinions improved.[41] Most of these debutantes, however, disappeared after one or two performances; very few managed to establish themselves in either of the London companies.[42]

From a modern perspective it is hard to avoid concluding that performances were often slapdash, and it is notable that adverse press comment on all aspects of operatic performances became much more common in the 1880s, due to some real crises in the Italian companies, and to seasons given by both Carl Rosa and some German companies undoubtedly being of a much higher standard (see Chapter 2).

As far as audiences of the 1870s were concerned, such shortcomings were often of relatively little consequence other than when a severe alteration took place, or when a star singer was prevented from appearing. Rather, critical and audience attention focused on the nuances of the abilities and interpretations of the leading singers, in particular vocal quality. This is reflected in reviews, with many references to tone, intonation, flexibility, dynamic range and tessitura:

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[39] *The Times*, 24 April 1876, p. 7, of the performance on 22 April. Gye's diaries show that Campbell had auditioned for him on 7 April and accepted an engagement three days later.

[40] *MW*, 4 April 1874, p. 216 (see also p. 209).

[41] See *MW* 11 April 1874, p. 233; 18 April, p. 250; 18 July, p. 471.

[42] Another American, appearing under the stage name Imogene Orelli, did not receive universal acclaim as Violetta in *La Traviata*: 'The part was decidedly ill-chosen for this lady's debut, and we do not think the mistake will be repeated' (*MW*, 9 May 1874, p. 296, of the performance on 5 May). Although *The Times* was more charitable (11 May, p. 14) it does not appear that Orelli appeared in any further solo roles during the season.

> Once more *La Sonnambula*! This time, however, with a new Amina, our only excuse for dwelling upon it again, however briefly. Mdlle Sarda … might … have selected a less ambitious [role] for her first appearance on the stage of such a theatre as the Royal Italian Opera … [She has] a voice which, by aid of persevering application, may achieve good things, the tones of which, moreover, in level passages, are nearly always sympathetic, and the range [is] extensive. Her command of *mezza voce*, the liquid and penetrating quality of her higher notes, and her power of sustaining and fining [*sic*] them off gradually from loud to soft, while persevering [*sic*] strict tonality, were on several occasions remarked and appreciated … She did quite enough, unequal as was her performance regarded as a whole, to show decided promise.[43]

The primary focus was upon the skills of the *prima donna* to such an extent that faults in other singers were easily forgiven or sidelined; established singers such as Patti or Albani could carry an audience with them almost regardless of the actions of those surrounding them (although audiences greeted good sub-principals enthusiastically) and reviews tend to contain little more than padding.[44] For some, this intense concentration on leading ladies proved frustrating. Henry Lunn wrote:

> The recent performances of works new to this country, and the excellent revivals of almost forgotten old ones, seem looked upon as quite secondary matters in comparison with the announcement that Madame Patti or Madame Nilsson appeared in a character her assumption of which is known to be one of the regular occurrences of the season. Should it happen that one of our petted Queens of Song has not been heard in a part for some time, an additional excitement is manufactured, and the exact date of her last performance of it is hunted up was as much care as it were a matter of vast artistic importance.[45]

Lunn's prose reflects the resentment felt by a growing portion of the musical establishment and a perception that London's operatic scene was stale, monotonous and averse to innovation. A more general shift in aesthetic norms underlies this attitude, notably an increasing value placed on the musical score as the artwork, rather than the performance as presented by its executants.[46] As Susan Rutherford

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[43] *The Times*, 29 April 1878, quoted in *MW*, 4 May, p. 293, of the performance on 23 April.

[44] See, for example, reviews in *MW*, 22 May 1875, p. 342 (Patti in *Il barbiere di Siviglia* on 20 May), 29 May, p. 361 (Albani's first performance as Marguerite in *Faust* on 22 May), and 31 July, pp. 524–5 (Nilsson in *Les Huguenots* (19 July) and Tietjens in *Lucrezia Borgia* (20 July)).

[45] Henry Lunn, 'The London Musical Season', *MT*, 1 September 1873, pp. 203–5 (p. 203).

[46] It is impossible here to do other than note the gradual shift in the views of British critics demonstrable in the nineteenth century which, in broad terms, placed increasing weight

outlines, the concept of theatrical direction was only just taking root in the 1870s; audiences did not expect, for example, subtle interactions between characters, complex stage business or a 'naturalistic' style of acting.[47] Rather, interaction was between the singer and the audience and the former's success in communicating directly with the latter (rather than with other members of the cast) was prized.

Reviews frequently mentioned acting skills, but in coded terms. For contemporaneous audiences and critics only the exceptional needed to be mentioned as the archetypal was taken as given. This review of Christine Nilsson in *Les Huguenots* is typical:

> From a dramatic point of view her impersonation was admirable. Her command of pathos … was never more powerfully manifested than in her rendering of Valentine; and her ability to depict the highest tragic emotions was no less conspicuous. In the great scene with Raoul her acting was so terrible in its reality that the illusion was complete, and the breathless attention paid by the audience showed how entirely she had enlisted her sympathies. Her attitudes and gestures in the closing passages of this scene were sometimes statuesque, sometimes impetuous – always spontaneous and graceful.[48]

Notably, 'reality' was regarded as shocking, but Nilsson's good judgment in her acting is complimented in the final sentence; for *prime donne* this was a particularly difficult task as they negotiated a compromise between the increasing need to be 'realistic' and the requirement to preserve a Victorian sense of idealised femininity.[49] The art of operatic acting was, however, entering a period of change and while many similarly laudatory reviews may be found the anecdotes contained in some singers'

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on the works of German-speaking composers and the genres most frequently associated with them. Italian opera, with the exception of the mature compositions of Verdi, was more frequently viewed as a lesser art form. For further discussion see Chapters 2 and 3.

[47] See Susan Rutherford, *The Prima Donna and Opera* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 205–13. In the 1870s principal singers arranged their own costumes, and most gestures and stage business; the role of Director largely did not exist. With this degree of freedom and the absence of a unified conceptual view of how an opera should appear on stage, the need for rehearsal of stock operas was considerably reduced. In the second half of the nineteenth century interest in this aspect of opera production increased greatly: Wagner had already taken on some aspects of the role of Director and Verdi did likewise. Closer to home, W.S. Gilbert took on the same responsibilities in the production of the 'Savoy' operas of the 1880s, the military precision of his organisation being almost revolutionary in Victorian theatre.

[48] *Observer*, quoted in *MW*, 31 July 1875, p. 525, of the performance by Mapleson's company on 19 July.

[49] Rutherford, pp. 266–70. For further discussion see Rachel Cowgill and Hilary Poriss (eds), *The Arts of the Prima Donna in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 2012), especially Chapter 2 (Roberta Montemorra-Marvin, 'Idealizing the Prima Donna in mid-Victorian London', pp. 21–40).

memoirs make it clear that the old practices were increasingly disparaged.[50] Minnie Hauk, who played a much-lauded Carmen in 1878 (see Chapter 2), wrote:

> The real reason for [the refusal of some Italian singers to sing at the London premiere] was that they had been singing mostly purely Italian music in front of the footlights, without making any effort to act the parts. To deviate from the traditional windmill acting, to the average Italian singer, would surely mean disaster … They looked as though they were being drilled for optic telegraphy or railroad switching. They stood, to all appearances, nailed to the boards, the soloists in a straight line right in front, the choristers in two or more lines behind, the men on one side, the women on the other, and every high note was accomplished by the raising of their right arms![51]

An anecdote related in an account of Zelia Trebelli reinforces the lack of concern for consistent acting among performers:

> When Ambroise Thomas's *Hamlet* was first brought out at Covent Garden [19 June 1869], with Christine Nilsson and Santley in the leading parts, the English baritone took a great interest in the production, and at rehearsal he would share the work of stage-management with Augustus Harris (the elder). He noticed that Signor Bagagiolo (the king) during the performance of the murder of Gonzago, remained perfectly calm and indifferent.
> 'Why don't you look frightened?' said the Englishman.
> 'Frightened,' answered the Italian, 'surely it would be most undignified for a king to be afraid of anything.'
> 'But don't you know this represents the murder you have committed on your own brother?'
> 'How should I know?'
> 'Perhaps you have not read the play?' (This ironically.)
> 'Certainly not. Do you think I bother myself about such things? I learn my part and read my cues, and that is quite sufficient *I* think!'[52]

This indifference was of relatively little concern to audiences of the 1870s, who placed the greatest stress on vocal ability; while there was interest in individual character (and, especially in the case of female singers, appropriate physical appearance), dramatic pacing and overall *mise-en-scène* were considered relatively insignificant. The prolonged applause given to the *prima donna*'s first entrance and to appreciated musical items, when singers were expected to step out of character and acknowledge the approbation, exemplify this. Requests for

[50] See also comments made by Francis Neilson quoted in Chapter 3.

[51] Hauk, pp. 160–61.

[52] Marie de Mensiaux, *Trebelli: A Biographical Sketch and Reminiscences of Her Life* (London, 1890), pp. 16–17.

encores were still frequent (though falling) and often complied with, despite the inevitable disruption of dramatic narrative; one of the changes wrought by the establishment of Wagner's work in London was a decline in these habits (see below and Chapter 2). Similarly, the insertion of arias from other operas (especially as encores) was also increasingly rare, as were transpositions and cuts.[53]

At the commencement of this period the London opera season was of significant social consequence and undoubtedly, in the case of a great many habitués of the two theatres, the social function was of as great an importance as the musical one. Klein gave a neat account of the situation at Covent Garden in 1872:

> As high up as the amphitheatre stalls every tier contained, on the old continental plan, only private boxes … [The theatre] was illuminated, of course, by gas, this being some twenty years before electricity for lighting theatres came into use … Young as we were, my sister and I could fully appreciate the rare elegance of the ladies' gowns, the profusion and beauty of their glittering jewels, and the glint of their gorgeous tiaras. Neither in boxes or [*sic*] stalls did these dignified dames stir from their places during the entire evening. During the *entr'acte* scarcely a single lady was seen in the foyer … Thus the whole attraction of the opera house as a centre of social intercourse for the highest folk in the land was concentrated in and around the auditorium. If the ladies did not move, the gentlemen made up for it by visiting box after box whilst the curtain was down or gathering in groups to chat in the corridors. Nor did they constitute an altogether silent assemblage when the curtain was up. One could hear them chatting freely and passing critical comments even whilst the music was in progress. Their noisy 'bravos' would rattle out like a *feu de joie* even before the Rosina had finished her ultimate note or Violetta had run off trilling her final shake. In these respects they were certainly not the restrained, well-behaved audience that listens to good music nowadays. But they did, on the other hand, go regularly and constantly to the opera; and in their way they loved it with a profound, sincere and genuine affection.[54]

It is important to be clear about what Klein meant by 'the highest folk in the land': extensive research by Jennifer Hall-Witt has shown that, by the 1870s, the Italian opera seasons were no longer the exclusive preserve of the aristocracy or

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[53] Transpositions are difficult to document as they were rarely commented upon in reviews, but the move away from the strict separation of numbers by secco recitative made transposition less practical than hitherto. In the case of both transpositions and cuts the trend towards valuing the score as a document to which performers remained faithful reduced incidences although, as Costa's performances of *Lohengrin* demonstrate, extensive alterations might still be made (see below) and cut versions of operas were still in use by all companies beyond the Great War.

[54] Klein, pp. 20–22. His comment regarding lighting is slightly misleading: electricity was installed at Her Majesty's in 1881 (*MW*, 14 May 1881, p. 308) but not at Covent Garden until 1892.

the landed gentry, whose members frequently took boxes for the whole season and attended most of the performances.[55] Compared to 50 years previously, the audience base had broadened but, as a percentage of the population, it remained minute; 'standards' were maintained by the requirement for evening dress at all performances in the grand season,[56] high prices, and a late starting time (8.30 pm) which made the journey home impossible without private transport.[57] In the second half of the nineteenth century, in order to reinforce the perception that they were socially respectable institutions, most West End theatres overtly sought to attract audiences from the middle classes and above; the opera houses were at the apex of this pyramid.[58]

Despite this slight broadening of the audience base, the social dimension was always important (and grew in the Edwardian years): Gye's diaries contain frequent references to the royalty and record their attendances. The Prince of Wales sometimes exploited his position by asking for certain operas on specific days, often putting Gye to considerable inconvenience.[59] Interest in royalty extended to the press and audience; when the Prince of Wales and his party appeared unexpectedly at Her Majesty's part-way through *La Traviata*:

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[55] See Jennifer Hall-Witt, *Fashionable Acts: Opera and élite culture in London 1780–1880* (Durham (New Hampshire), 2007).

[56] Mapleson in particular relaxed this requirement after the official end of the grand season when additional performances at 'popular prices' were often given; nor was evening dress required at his autumn and winter seasons.

[57] This starting time was standard until 1914. Performances frequently ended after midnight which led George Bernard Shaw to complain that this was unfair on anyone needing to catch last trains to the suburbs; at the same time many members of the affluent section of the audience still arrived late and Shaw regretted that they 'also insist on long waits between the acts, in order to get through the rounds of visits to one another's boxes, conversations in the crushrooms, promenades round the corridors, and cigarettes on the balcony over the portico' (see George Bernard Shaw, *London Music in 1888–89 as heard by Corno di Bassetto* (New York, 1973), pp. 141–3, first published in *The Star*, 7 June 1889).

[58] For further discussion see Michael Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge, 1991), especially pp. 21–6.

[59] Gye wrote: 'The Prince of Wales came. Francis Knollys [the Prince's Private Secretary] had written to me to change the opera next Friday and Saturday and the Prince asked me to do it. *Lucrezia* is announced for Friday [23rd] and *Fra Diavolo* for Saturday the 24th and he wanted me to change the days to give *Fra Diavolo*, which he wanted to see, on Friday as he was engaged on Saturday. I pointed out to him that the whole week's operas had already been announced every day for 10 days, that country people had taken their tickets and that great disappointment … would be caused by a change … [but] HRH would not take "no" for an answer and he pressed me to make the change!! At last I said I would do what I could' (Gye's diary, 16 April 1875, ROHA). The Prince made a similar request a few weeks later (see Gye's diary, 20 May, ROHA). See also note 24 above.