The Birth of Opera


The mystery of why opera as we know it emerged in 17th-century Venice might make a best-selling Dan Brown novel. The answer, says Edward Muir, a Northwestern University humanities professor, owes everything to the city’s unique position as a locus of resistance to papal power, a hotbed of libertinism (given full flower in its carnival tradition), and a home to a supportive Italian nobility that sustained, among other things, a notorious secret society.

Opera was not invented in Venice. That distinction belongs to the 16th-century Medici courts of Florence, but operas produced there were one-time entertainments for special royal occasions. Venice opened its first permanent opera theater in 1637, and by 1678, says Muir, “all the elements of a flourishing enterprise were in place: competition among opera houses, the cult of the diva, . . . season-ticket holders, sold-out performances, . . . and tourists who came to Venice just to hear operas.”

That opera might catch on would scarcely have been thought possible as the 17th century dawned, with Venice chafing under the dictates of the resident Jesuit order, empowered by Rome to enforce stern moral codes regarding public entertainment. The most common shows were satirical productions by commedia dell’arte troupes, allowed only during the less-constrained carnival season leading up to Lent. But renegade Venetian writers were beginning to openly challenge church authority, which provoked a papal interdict in 1606 withholding the most fundamental sacraments from Venetians for almost a year. The city fathers responded by expelling the Jesuits from the city, making Venice, for the next two generations, “the one place in Italy open to criticisms of Counter Reformation papal politics.”

Many of these critics found their voice within a secretive society known as the Incogniti, whose ranks included, says Muir, “nearly every important Venetian intellectual of the mid-17th century and many prominent foreigners.” A number of the Incogniti were also notorious libertines of the

This elaborate stage design was for a production of Giacomo Torelli’s *Venere Gelosa*, performed in 1643 at Venice’s Teatro Novissimo.
IN ESSENCE

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An outpouring of popular support for democracy in the late 1980s forced the king to accept a constitutional monarchy in 1990, but since then democracy has foundered. Now, tensions among the autocratic King Gyanendra, fractious political parties, and brutal Maoist guerrillas threaten the country’s stability, warns Barbara Crossette, former New York Times chief correspondent in South Asia. The buffer mountain kingdom could easily become a source of trouble for the entire region.

Crossette says that travel warnings “give little hint of the depth of the country’s political collapse and the despair, confusion, and powerlessness of its people.” In 2001 King Birendra and nine members of the royal family were shot dead at a royal dinner, allegedly by the crown prince, who is said to have then committed suicide. Birendra’s brother Gyanendra assumed the throne, and since then has placed restrictions on civil liberties and freedom of speech, dismissed several prime ministers, and, in February 2005, arrested political leaders and dissolved the government.

Gyanendra’s actions have strengthened connections between the now-impotent political parties and the Maoist insurgency. The Maoists, formerly the Communist Party of Nepal, have grown in strength since the mid-1990s and are now estimated to have 10,000 members. They face an “inept and lawless” army. The armed Maoists draw recruits from isolated, impoverished mountain villages by “playing on the hopelessness and weariness of the poorest people,” says Crossette, and they “have amply demonstrated their contempt for democracy.”

In the international community there is growing alarm about the rise of Maoism, but “there is no focal point around which to build a solution” to Nepal’s governance crisis. Even before Gyanendra’s royal coup, leaders of the dominant Congress Party “let the country down, comprehensively,” indulging in corruption and infighting and producing legislative gridlock.

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OTHER NATIONS

Nepal’s Backward Trek


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