

ARTS & LETTERS

The Birth of Opera

THE SOURCE: "Why Venice? Venetian Society and the Success of Early Opera" by Edward Muir, in *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Winter 2006.

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.

patrician class, and the operas they staged often strained the bounds of decency as well as political rhetoric. Yet so long as they “refrained from criticizing the Venetian government they were reasonably safe from governmental prosecution, even if many of them ran afoul of the Holy Office.”

What was happening on stage was not the only scandalous aspect of Venetian opera. A prominent and novel feature of the new opera theaters, such as the Teatro S. Cassiano, built in 1637, was theater boxes, which Venetians quickly learned to use, writes one historian, “as if they were modern motel

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rooms.” With opera season coinciding with carnival and many in the audience masked, the scene was set for audiences to take “full advantage of the collective anonymity.”

But as time passed, says Muir, commercial opera gradually became “just a subset of a whole new literary economy during the 17th century,” which

helped connect the city “to the broader intellectual and political developments of Europe.” Venice’s loss of the spice trade to other European shipping rivals actually boosted investment in commercial entertainment, and Venetian opera began importing talent from other cities, becoming, Muir writes, “less of a self-contained genre and more of a stop on the burgeoning opera circuit.” Opera offered audiences a welcome escape from their daily lives, which were wracked by economic concerns and worries about war and disease. Once it caught on in the other great cities of Europe, opera was there to stay.

OTHER NATIONS

Nepal’s Backward Trek

THE SOURCE: “Nepal: The Politics of Failure” by Barbara Crossette, in *World Policy Journal*, Winter 2005–06.

NESTLED IN THE HIMALAYAS BETWEEN China and India, the Hindu kingdom of Nepal has a reputation among foreigners as a prime destination for exotic adventure. Less widely known to the outside world are the tempests of its political life.

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 guerillas 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 strength-

ened 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.

As Nepalis abandon hope in the promise of democracy and embrace extremism, the Nepalese experience is