

THE *Bluffer's*[®] GUIDE TO

OPERA

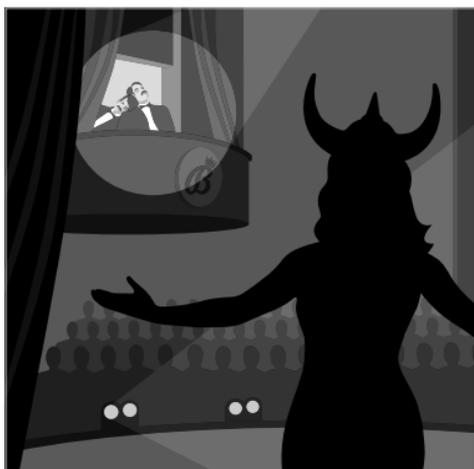
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NEW EDITION

THE *Bluffer's*[®] GUIDE TO

OPERA



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PRE-PERFORMANCE DRINKS

For some people, opera is a religion. Others think it is considerably more important than that. This makes it a field in which the bluffer must tread with particular delicacy to avoid causing offence, or being exposed as the only sane person in the asylum. The object of this short guide is to impart sufficient knowledge to allow the average reader to pass for someone who ‘knows a bit about opera’ should the need or urge arise.

WHY DO YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT OPERA?

A fair question. Perhaps because you risk joining those black-tied punters regularly encountered at grand opera houses, whose body language (fidgeting, sighing and repeated consultations of wristwatches) makes it clear that they would rather be undergoing waterboarding.

They might have found themselves in this unfortunate predicament because opera has become an arm of the ‘corporate hospitality’ industry, along with every major sporting event. And, while it is apparently true that those with no interest in tennis can pass a perfectly pleasant

day at Wimbledon without ever leaving the hospitality suite, you will certainly raise eyebrows at Glyndebourne if you offer to keep an eye on the picnic while everyone else troops off to see the show.

Clearly, those who invite their valued contacts to a night at the opera do so in the belief that they are offering them a treat, not a torture. If, after reading this book, you still feel that opera has nothing to offer, then it will probably be best to try saying a polite 'no' when your next invitation comes along. Either that or prepare yourself by borrowing some exceptionally boring DVDs (steam trains, trolleybuses or boxed sets of *Big Brother* should all do nicely) and practise for your next visit to the opera house by watching them sitting completely still, in perfect silence.

Should you find yourself unable to avoid such an invitation, don't despair. This short but definitive guide will conduct you through the main danger zones encountered in opera discussions and equip you with a vocabulary and an evasive technique that will minimise the risk of being rumbled as a bluffer. It will give you a few easy-to-learn hints and methods that might even allow you to be accepted as an opera lover of rare passion and experience. But it will do more. It will give you the tools to impress legions of marvelling listeners with your knowledge and insight – without anyone discovering that before reading it you didn't know the difference between an Austin Allegro and an *allegro con brio*.

TUNING UP

So let's suppose you're committed to a night at the opera and, for reasons known to anyone who has ever bluffed about anything (that would be all of us), you feel the need to pretend to know more than you do. Here are the answers to some fundamental questions which might help to point you in the right direction.

WHY SHOULD YOU LIKE OPERA?

Where to start? It contains some of the greatest and most memorable music ever written, performed by singers and players of truly staggering virtuosity. Just look at that small woman on the stage (for the traditional fat lady has largely passed into history) and reflect that she is filling the large theatre in which you are sitting with the simple power of her own voice, unaided by amplification. That fact still stuns some cynics after many decades of regular opera-going.

The downside is that it is extremely hard for anyone to perform this trick two nights in a row without doing permanent damage to their vocal cords, so to the intrinsically high cost of opera (large casts, big orchestras, complex sets) is

added the further burden of having to dismantle the whole thing each day and install a completely different production for the following night.

WHY DO THEY BOTHER?

Put simply, opera is one of the highest pinnacles of human civilisation. Questioning its worth is a bit like asking why St Peter's, Hagia Sophia or Angkor Wat were built. You are entitled to prefer a night in with *Coronation Street* to a night out at *The Marriage of Figaro*, but the first premise of successful bluffing about opera must be to accept that it is a stunning achievement. Taking the opposite view is the first step on the road that leads to smashing stained glass windows, defacing icons or directing artillery at 1,500-year-old giant Buddhas.

These religious parallels are not coincidental. Opera mirrors the church in deploying great music and performers to underline its message and draw in believers, and it occupies some of the grandest unconsecrated spaces on the planet. Indeed, it has been remarked that the main difference between an operatic performance and a sung mass is that the opera's collection is taken beforehand – and what a collection it tends to be! If only the church could raise its sights so high, every parish priest in Britain could be housed in the splendour of his or her own Vatican – or massively increase the church's support for the deserving poor, according to taste.

On the other hand, opera delivers no sermons (beyond initial warnings about the use of mobile phones, cameras

and recording equipment). It imposes no obligation to exchange an embarrassed handshake with other members of the congregation, or share a plastic cup of instant coffee with them after the performance. And it also positively encourages the expression of emotion at its close in the form of a hearty round of applause (accompanied, if appropriate, by the stamping of feet and the hurling of floral tributes). One rarely enjoys these pleasures in church, even at the louche of funerals, making opera well worth the additional cost of admission. And, as if it needed to be pointed out, church services generally don't have intermissions with easy access to a bar.

WHERE ARE ITS ROOTS?

Opera not only resembles a religious service, but it is also rooted in the Christian church's desire to reach out to the public and engage them with its message. Pedants may claim that opera's roots go back as far as ancient Greece, with the singing or chanting by the chorus in classical drama. We know with some certainty, though, that 1,000 years ago Western Europe developed a tradition of liturgical plays that included musical components to increase their appeal. No surprise there: just consider the preponderance of musicals in the West End or on Broadway today. Adding music to a 'straight' play clearly increases its pulling power exponentially. Anyone who contends that they 'hate opera but love musicals' has not understood the transference from one to the other, or the hazy and porous dividing line between the two. Enlightenment on this point will follow a bit later.

BUT WHY DO THEY NEED TO SING?

The story of any opera could be enacted without anyone singing or playing a note, just as the plot of a ballet could be conveyed without a lot of people dressing up in tights and tutus and hopping around on blood-drenched tippy-toes. But if you are of a mind to object on these grounds, you are missing the point.



If you have chosen the performance
wisely and fail to enjoy yourself,
you are either tone deaf
or an irredeemable Philistine.

A good opera, performed well, can and should capture all the audience's senses and allow them, for three hours or so (five or more in the case of Wagner), to dismiss their everyday cares completely from their minds. It can successfully mix elation at the quality of the performance with genuine sorrow at the turn of events on stage. Even strong men are often seen furtively reaching for a handkerchief at the end of *Madama Butterfly*. Truly, no one has yet devised a better balm for the soul. Which is why even the most committed sceptic should be prepared to cast aside his or her prejudices and give it a try – preferably through total immersion rather than with one hand still clinging grimly to the side of the pool. Ignore

the quirks (though this book will explain some of them) and accept the form as it is. If you have chosen the performance wisely and fail to enjoy yourself, you are either tone deaf or an irredeemable Philistine.

DO YOU NEED TO LEARN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE TO APPRECIATE OPERA?

No, you don't. However, the origins of opera are Italian, so that is the language in which its technical terms are couched and in which the majority of operas are performed. It will greatly increase your chances of being mistaken for an expert if you can absorb a handful of these key terms into your everyday vocabulary.

For example, the words of the opera are contained in a *libretto* (little book), the big number is an *aria* (air), the lady singing it is probably a *soprano* (higher voice), and if she adds some ornamental flourishes they are most likely *coloratura* (colouring) rather than an early sign of dementia (see 'Glossary', page 102). If you subsequently run into the man you have seen waving a stick in the orchestra pit (and he is often to be found in the nearest pub after the performance, along with at least half his players, including the entire brass section), he will appreciate being addressed as *maestro* (master), though not half as much as he will enjoy that being prefaced with the emphatically non-Italian phrase: 'What can I get you?'

From the dawn of opera until almost the end of the twentieth century, it was essential to buy a programme and spend a frantic 10 minutes before the performance mugging

up on the synopsis in order to have the faintest clue as to what was about to happen on stage. This allowed the dedicated bluffer to gain an important tactical advantage by laughing knowingly at the delivery of certain key lines, confident that 99% of the audience would not have a clue whether or not they were supposed to be funny. Modest bets could be placed with oneself as to how many fellow patrons might be bluffed into joining in.

Sadly, this potential source of amusement has been destroyed by the advent of almost universal surtitles, which provide a simultaneous (if sometimes approximate) translation of the words being uttered on stage. The best the bluffer can manage now is to express contempt for the *sopratitoli* (which, of course, you will know is the Italian for surtitles) on taking his or her seat, and look pointedly at the stage rather than the little screen above it (which is actually pretty good general advice for all members of the audience).

If moved by a particularly fine or affecting performance of an aria, one may be moved to shout *bravo* (well done, old chap) at its conclusion. (Though only if one is absolutely sure that it has indeed ended, as it is social death to make any sound mid-performance.) But do remember that this is a foreign word, and that one should be yelling *brava* (well done, madam) to female performers or *bravi* (jolly good show, all of you) if addressing a group. You may also throw in the occasional *bravissimo* or *bravissimi* (exceptionally good show) but do not move on to the likes of *magnifico* unless you are prepared for the court of public opinion to find you guilty of showing off.

The other major operatic languages are German, Russian, French, English and Czech. Pause for a moment to consider the delightful absurdity of *Carmen*, an opera set in a Spanish cigarette factory and bullring, being sung in French adorned with English surtitles. If you yearn to hear foreign operas sung in English, English National Opera (ENO) at the London Coliseum is the place for you. Though you should consider that some of the beauty of the vocal line may be lost in translation, and that non-native performers may still not deliver the words in intelligible form. (The impenetrable utterances of an Austrian *soprano* attempting to sing *Turandot* in English still stick in the mind, many years on.) The clinching argument for the victory of surtitles over translation is surely the fact that ENO itself now uses them at every performance, even of works originally written in English.

IS IT WORTH IT?

The most expensive seats at Covent Garden's Royal Opera House (ROH) cost around £225 each in 2012; at Glyndebourne around £230. (If this were the airline business, the Office of Fair Trading would surely be suspicious of collusion.) At ENO, they are a less eye-watering £95, which is entering the realm of comparability with the cost of a top musical or a Premiership football match. The true madness of the economics of opera production only becomes evident when one considers that the ROH receives little more than 50% of its income from ticket sales, with the remainder coming from government

subsidies and charitable donations, while ENO is said to receive about double the money in grants that it takes at the box office.

As with railways, so with opera: the continentals seem to do it somewhat better, with top ticket prices of around €187 (£162) at Milan's La Scala, €197 (£171) at the Vienna Staatsoper and €220 (£191) at the Berlin Staatsoper, all similarly supported by generous subsidies. But then, if you are British, you do have to factor in the additional costs of travel and accommodation.

All this may make opera seem a hobby only for the rich and privileged, and as a self-respecting bluffer recounting your many experiences of the ROH, you should certainly never betray even a hint of having sat anywhere other than the grand tier or orchestra stalls. But you can find a seat or a standing place for an opera at the ROH for as little as £8 (though those who suffer from vertigo would be well advised to take a rope to lash themselves to some nearby ironwork to preserve their peace of mind).

A mere £8 to reach the highest peak of civilisation – who could possibly begrudge that? Abandon your inhibitions and dip your toe in the comforting and largely shark-free water of grand opera. There is every chance that you will be clamouring for full immersion before too long.