

*Opera Audiences in Eighteenth-Century Italy*

The San Carlo opera house, built with astounding speed within seven months in 1737 and still functioning today, was the showplace of Italian opera in the kingdom of Naples. The behavior of Italian opera audiences was a source of wonderment to foreign visitors (see p. 235 for further details); the present description is from a little-known book by Samuel Sharp, a first-rate surgeon (though he was unable to keep Handel from going blind) and, like so many Englishmen of his time, an accomplished amateur musician.

NAPLES, Nov. 1765.

SIR,

A Stranger, upon his arrival in so large and celebrated a city as *Naples*, generally makes the publick spectacles his first pursuit. These consist of the King's Theatre, where the serious Opera is performed, and of two smaller theatres, called *Teatro Nuovo*, and the *Teatro dei Fiorentini*, where they exhibit burlettas [i.e., comic operas] only. There is also a little dirty kind of a play-house, where they perform a comedy every night,

though the Drama has so little encouragement at *Naples*, that their comedies are seldom frequented by any of the gentry.

The King's Theatre, upon the first view, is, perhaps, almost as remarkable an object as any a man sees in his travels: I not only speak from my own feeling, but the declaration of every foreigner here. The amazing extent of the stage, with the prodigious circumference of the boxes, and height of the ceiling, produce a marvellous effect on the mind, for a few moments; but the instant the Opera opens, a spectator laments this striking sight. He immediately perceives this structure does not gratify the ear, how much soever it may the eye. The voices are drowned in this immensity of space, and even the orchestra itself, though a numerous band, lies under a disadvantage: It is true, some of the first singers may be heard, yet, upon the whole, it must be admitted, that the house is better contrived to see, than to hear an Opera.

There are some who contend, that the singers might be very well heard, if the audience was more silent; but it is so much the fashion at *Naples*, and, indeed, through all *Italy*, to consider the Opera as a place of rendezvous and visiting, that they do not seem in the least to attend to the musick, but laugh and talk through the whole performance, without any restraint; and, it may be imagined, that an assembly of so many hundreds conversing together so loudly, must entirely cover the voices of the singers.

Notwithstanding the amazing noisiness of the audience, during the whole performance of the Opera, the moment the dances begin, there is a universal silence, which continues so long as the dances continue. Witty people, therefore, never fail to tell me, the *Neapolitans* go to see, not to hear an Opera. A stranger, who has a little compassion in his breast, feels for the poor singers, who are treated with so much indifference and contempt: He almost wonders that they can submit to so gross an affront; and I find, by their own confession, that however accustomed they be to it, the mortification is always dreadful, and they are eager to declare how happy they are when they sing in a country where more attention is paid to their talents.

The *Neapolitan* quality rarely dine or sup with one another, and many of them hardly ever visit, but at the Opera; on this account they seldom absent themselves, though the Opera be played three nights successively, and it be the same Opera, without any change, during ten or twelve weeks. It is customary for Gentlemen to run about from box to box, betwixt the acts, and even in the midst of the performance; but the Ladies, after they are seated, never quit their box the whole evening. It is the fashion to make appointments for such and such nights. A Lady receives visitors in her box one night, and they remain with her the whole Opera; another night she returns the visit in the same manner. In the intervals of the acts, principally betwixt the first and second, the proprietor of the box regales her company with iced fruits and sweet meats.

Besides the indulgence of a loud conversation, they sometimes form

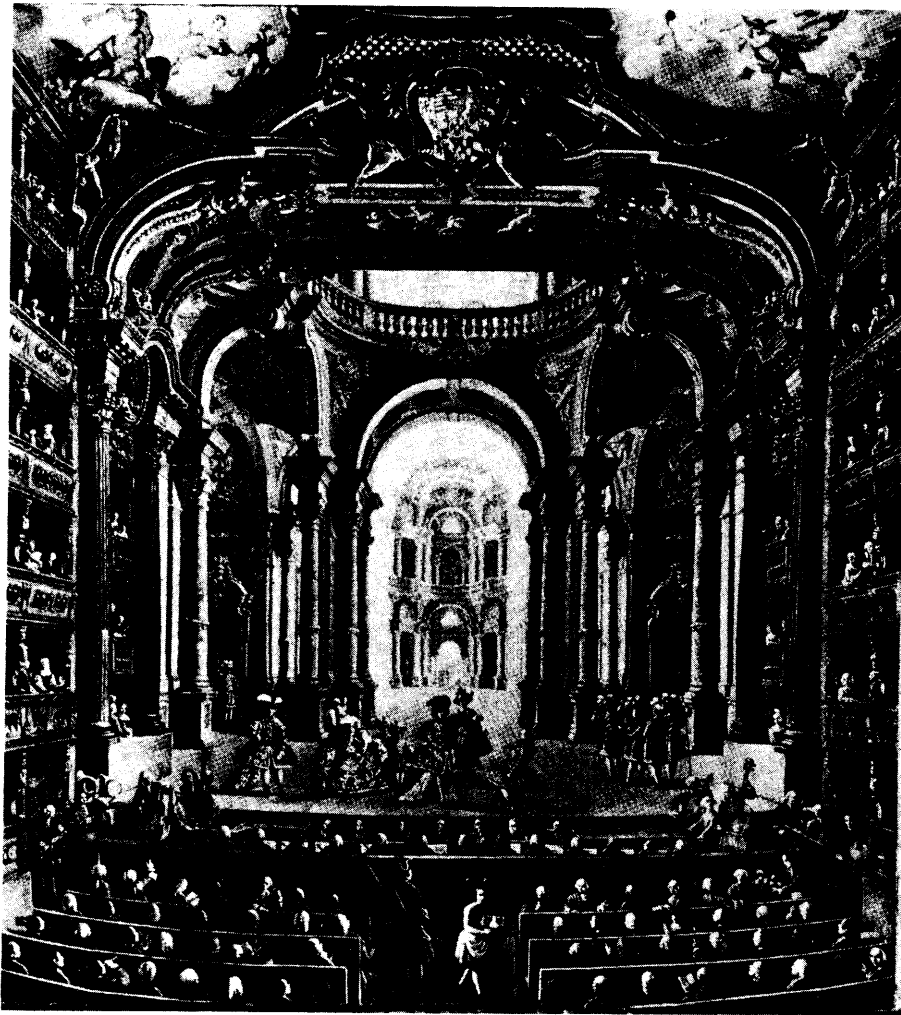
themselves into card parties; but, I believe, this custom does not prevail so much at present, as it did formerly, for I have never seen ~~more than~~ two or three boxes so occupied, in the same night.

The men in the pit do not, upon the whole, make a good figure; for though there are many officers, who are well drest, yet they and the Gentlemen are much the smaller portion of the company there. There is a vulgar set of men who frequent the pit, and another set still more vulgar, who pay nothing for their entrance, such as the upper servants of the Ladies who have boxes, the upper servants of ambassadors, and sometimes, for a small fee to the door-keepers, those servants introduce their friends. It is not to be omitted, amongst the objections to the immense largeness of the house and stage, that, in windy weather, you would imagine yourself in the streets, the wind blows so hard both in the pit and boxes; and this seldom happens without causing colds and fevers.

The impressario, or manager, is bound to very bad terms, so that his profits are inconsiderable, and sometimes he is a loser.

You will wonder how I became possessed of these particulars; accident threw them in my way, and you may depend on their authenticity.

Samuel Sharp, *Letters from Italy*, 3rd ed. (London, 1767), 77-79, 82-84, 92-93.



*An Opera Seria in Progress.* The theater is the Teatro Regio in Turin, the date 1740, but the situation is characteristic of any large opera house in eighteenth-century Italy. On stage, some of the principal singers: the heroine weeping (her train held by two pages), the hero (guarded by four soldiers) kneeling and about to sing an "aria in chains" (one of the standard types of aria) to his captor, who dominates the scene. The costumes are operatic "Roman." In the pit, two harpsichordists: at the left the composer (in the picture, Francesco Feo), his eyes on the singers, whom it is his function to direct; at the right, the local "maestro al cembalo," coordinating the instrumental playing (note the thorough bass contingents grouped around both harpsichords, and, at the far left, the two French horn players brought in for this scene). The members of the audience are just as busy as the performers, though in a myriad different ways that deserve close examination. Through all this, oranges and liquid refreshment are being offered for sale. (Oil painting by Pietro Domenico Olivero. The opera being performed is Feo's *Arsace*.) Turin, Museo Civico