

# The Attentive Listener

*Three Centuries of Music Criticism*

Edited by

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*faber and faber*

LONDON · BOSTON

## Joseph Addison, [On Italian Opera]

*Spectator*, no. 18 (21 March 1711)

Addison (1672–1719) was England's first great music journalist, though few reputations rest upon a slenderer foundation: the bulk of his music criticism appeared in the *Spectator* in 1711 and 1712. Addison satirized the weaknesses and absurdities of contemporary operas and stagecraft, reserving his sharpest barbs for the Italian operas that had lately taken England by storm. He exerted a strong influence on Continental critics such as Scheibe and Mattheson (who translated many of Addison's essays in his magazine *Die Vernünffter* in 1713), and his call for the creation of national schools of opera was echoed by critics down the ages.

... *Equitis quoque jam migravit ab aure voluptas*  
*Omnis ad incertos oculos & gaudia vana.*

Hor.<sup>1</sup>

It is my Design in this Paper to deliver down to Posterity a faithful Account of the *Italian* Opera, and of the gradual Progress which it has made upon the *English* Stage: For there is no Question but our great Grand-children will be very curious to know the Reason why their Forefathers used to sit together like an Audience of Foreigners in their own Country, and to hear whole Plays acted before them in a Tongue which they did not understand.

*Arsinoe* was the first Opera that gave us a Taste of *Italian* Musick.<sup>2</sup> The great Success this Opera met with, produced some Attempts of forming Pieces upon *Italian* Plans, which should give a more natural and reasonable Entertainment than what can be met with in the elaborate Trifles of that Nation. This alarm'd the Poetasters and Fiddlers of the Town, who were used to deal in a more ordinary Kind of Ware; and therefore laid down an establish'd Rule, which is receiv'd as such to this Day, *That nothing is capable of being well set to Musick, that is not Nonsense.*

This Maxim was no sooner receiv'd, but we immediately fell to

translating the *Italian* Operas; and as there was no great Danger of hurting the Sense of those extraordinary Pieces, our Authors would often make Words of their own which were entirely foreign to the Meaning of the Passages they pretended to translate; their chief Care being to make the Numbers of the *English* Verse answer to those of the *Italian*, that both of them might go to the same Tune. Thus the famous Song in *Camilla*,<sup>3</sup>

*Barbara si t'intendo, &c.*

Barbarous Woman, yes, I know your Meaning,

which expresses the Resentments of an angry Lover, was translated into that *English* Lamentation

Frail are a Lover's Hopes, &c.

And it was pleasant enough to see the most refined Persons of the *British* Nation dying away and languishing to Notes that were filled with a Spirit of Rage and Indignation. It happen'd also very frequently, where the Sense was rightly translated, the necessary Transposition of Words which were drawn out of the Phrase of one tongue into that of another, made the Musick appear very absurd in one tongue that was very natural in the other. I remember an *Italian* Verse that ran thus Word for Word,

And turn'd my Rage into Pity;

which the *English* for Rhime sake translated,

And into Pity turn'd my rage.

By this Means the soft Notes that were adapted to *Pity* in the *Italian*, fell upon the Word *Rage* in the *English*; and the angry Sounds that were tuned to *Rage* in the Original, were made to express *Pity* in the Translation. It oftentimes happen'd likewise, that the finest Notes in the Air fell upon the most insignificant Words in the Sentence. I have known the Word *And* pursu'd through the whole Gamut, have been entertain'd with many a melodious *The*, and have heard the most beautiful Graces, Quavers and Divisions bestow'd upon *Then*, *For*, and *From*; to the eternal Honour of our *English* Particles.

The next Step to our Refinement, was the introducing of *Italian* Actors into our Opera; who sung their Parts in their own Language, at the same Time that our Countrymen perform'd theirs in our native tongue. The King or Hero of the Play generally spoke in *Italian*, and his Slaves answer'd him in *English*: The Lover frequently made his Court, and gained the Heart of his Princess in a Language which she did not understand. One would have thought it very difficult to have carry'd on Dialogues after this Manner, without an Interpreter between the Persons that convers'd together; but this was the State of the *English* Stage for about three Years.

At length the Audience grew tir'd of understanding Half the Opera, and therefore to ease themselves intirely of the Fatigue of Thinking, have so order'd it at Present that the whole Opera is perform'd in an unknown Tongue.<sup>4</sup> We no longer understand the Language of our own Stage; insomuch that I have often been afraid, when I have seen our *Italian* Performers chattering in the Vehemence of Action, that they have been calling us Names, and abusing us among themselves; but I hope, since we do put such an entire Confidence in them, they will not talk against us before our Faces, though they may do it with the same Safety as if it were behind our Backs. In the mean Time I cannot forbear thinking how naturally an Historian, who writes Two or Three hundred Years hence, and does not know the Taste of his wise Fore-fathers, will make the following Reflection, *In the Beginning of the Eighteenth Century the Italian Tongue was so well understood in England, that Opera's were acted on the publick Stage in that Language.*

One scarce knows how to be serious in the Confutation of an Absurdity that shews itself at the first Sight. It does not want any great Measure of Sense to see the Ridicule of this monstrous Practice; but what makes it the more astonishing, it is not the Taste of the Rabble, but of Persons of the greatest Politeness, which has establish'd it.

If the *Italians* have a Genius for Musick above the *English*, the *English* have a Genius for other Performances of a much higher Nature, and capable of giving the Mind a much nobler Entertainment. Would one think it was possible (at a Time when an Author lived that was able to write the *Phaedra* and *Hippolitus*)<sup>5</sup> for a People to be so stupidly fond of the *Italian* Opera, as scarce to give a Third Days Hearing to that admirable Tragedy? Musick is

certainly a very agreeable Entertainment, but if it would take the entire Possession of our Ears, if it would make us incapable of hearing Sense, if it would exclude Arts that have a much greater Tendency to the Refinement of humane Nature: I must confess I would allow it no better Quarter than *Plato* has done, who banishes it out of his Commonwealth.

At present, our Notions of Musick are so very uncertain, that we do not know what it is we like; only, in general, we are transported with any thing that is not *English*: So it be of a foreign Growth, let it be *Italian*, *French* or *High-Dutch*, it is the same thing. In short, our *English* Musick is quite rooted out, and nothing yet planted in its stead.

When a Royal Palace is burnt to the Ground, every Man is at Liberty to present his Plan for a new one; and tho' it be but indifferently put together, it may furnish several Hints that may be of Use to a good Architect. I shall take the same Liberty in a following Paper, of giving my Opinion upon the Subject of Musick, which I shall lay down only in a problematical Manner to be considered by those who are Masters in the Art.

1 'Now even the knights have ceased to take their pleasure through the ears, but have switched their whole allegiance to the unsure eyes and empty joys.' Horace, *Epistles*, 2, 1, 187-8.

2 Thomas Clayton's *Arsinoe, Queen of Cyprus* (1705) was the first all-sung opera in the Italian manner staged in England.

3 Bononcini's opera, first produced in Naples in 1696, enjoyed a run of sixty-three performances in London between 1706 and 1709. The libretto was translated and adapted by Owen Swiney.

4 According to Burney, *Almahide* (1710) was the first opera performed in England wholly in Italian and by Italian singers. Italian and English texts were printed side by side in the libretto books.

5 *Phaedra and Hippolytus* by Edmund Smith (1707).