Monteverdi and Venice

Professor Roger Parker FBA

18 September 2006

My purpose in these six Gresham lectures is to offer a kind of history of Italian opera: a story of that great, gaudy pantechnicon that has driven an erratic course through Western music history over the last four centuries. Many people have told this story before, and—not just for that reason—I need an "angle", a way of looking that will give the pantechnicon the appearance of moving logically (or at least purposefully) from one venue to another. Of course, all historians need this "angle" to some extent. There is no such thing as a simple, unvarnished tale of the past. We historians all look from afar, from a particular place and time; and we all have a particular audience in mind when we construct our stories. We are all constrained to make decisions about what to include and what to ignore, what to stress and what to leave unsaid. And this sense of partiality, of writing "a" history rather than "the" history, is noticeably strong today—a time and place in which we are perhaps less sure than we used to be about the "progress" of mankind. And so we feel encouraged to experiment: to try out new ways in which the past can be recalled and then pondered anew.

My "angle" is easily explained. Each of these six lectures will be based on one of the canonic figures of Italian opera, on a composer who, though he may not always have commanded that status, is today a staple of the repertory in the global industry that has collected around opera. So far, so conventional, one might say; but I want to think about all these six composers in connection with a city: a city for which they wrote at least some of their work, in which they lived, and—crucially—whose cultural fabric may have influenced in important ways what they produced. And so, today, I will talk about Claudio Monteverdi and Venice. Next month it will be the turn of George Frideric Handel and (of course) our own city of London; note immediately that one of the features of the pantechnicon is that it quickly spread abroad, and was quickly adopted by non-Italians—that august authority The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians is proud to remind us that Handel, in spite of his famously eccentric command of the language, was an "English composer of German birth". Our third port of call will find us visiting another non-Italian, Wolfgang Amadé Mozart; and we find him in the city of Vienna, which was his base during the last ten years of his tragically short life. Then, in the spring, we'll follow Gaetano Donizetti to the so-called "capital of the nineteenth century": to Paris, a city whose bright lights and generous fees acted as a siren song to all the greatest Italians of the nineteenth century. Our fifth city is Milan, the cultural home of the greatest Italian of all, Giuseppe Verdi, but a home which he always found discomforting and in some ways alien. And finally we cross the Atlantic with Giacomo Puccini, to marvel with him at the new motor cars and other urban splendours of New York City at the start of the last century.

So: that's my "angle", and I hope that it will lead us to view Italian opera in a slightly different light. I'll concentrate each week on one particular work, and in each case the work will be part of "our" repertory, and thus have membership of that exclusive club of 150-or-so operas that sustain the present-day global industry. The works I will talk about are all, of course, the product of their composers, of individual minds, of unusually compelling musical and dramatic imaginations. But perhaps in the past we have concentrated too much on this part of the story; on the pantheon of great composers, and the accompanying notion of solitary geniuses who talk mostly to each other across the generations—whose individual personalities have stamped themselves onto the repertory we now enjoy. In this context I always think of those wonderful nineteenth-century engravings, with an orderly queue of composers waiting to gain entry to the pantheon: with Handel chatting to Beethoven (perhaps exchanging tips on fugal technique), with Haydn and Schubert sharing a joke (let's hope not too indecent); with Weber and Meyerbeer looking earnest together; and with Wagner to one side, irritated no doubt by the fact that he's not the centre of attention. Imaginary pictures like this make a certain kind of sense, although it's no accident that this particular queue of composers are all speaking

German to each other: the idea of the autonomous musical genius is primarily a German invention, and has always had a weaker hold on composers of other nations. But there's also an alternative story to tell, one in which the "great" composers become who they are because, among their contemporaries, they managed to make a special sense of their time and place: because they achieved an especially fruitful dialogue with the culture surrounding them. And it's part of that dialogue which I want to explore with you in these lectures. If they work, they will, I hope, provide glimpses of a world in which composers are not queuing up for the pantheon, but are real inhabitants of real cities: cities that caused their work to come into being; cities that enabled them to become extraordinary.

Our first port of call, then, is to Monteverdi and Venice, and this journey takes thus us back to the very earliest years of Italian opera, which means of all opera. A few moments ago, I talked about the art form as a kind of pantechnicon, moving from place to place. Old-fashioned histories of the "birth" of opera tended to be couched in just those terms, imagining the genre's gradual emergence as a kind of majestic grand tour through famous Italian cultural centres. It all started in Florence, they used to tell us: that hotbed of Renaissance energy and invention saw various groups of scholars and musicians get together around 1600 (forming so-called "academies") to imagine ways in which Greek musical drama might be revived. There are early stopping-off points in Mantua and Rome; then a long stay in Venice; then an even longer one in Naples. This, we were told, was how opera was "born", how it started its four-hundred-year progress towards us. As I said, this story has now become old-fashioned, in particular the bit about opera's "birth". True, there were those "academies" of scholars and musicians (most famously the group called the "Camerata") trying to revive Greek drama in Florence and elsewhere; but this was just one small strand of a huge, centuries-old series of experiements devoted to combining drama, dance, song and instrumental music. The reason why the academies and their Greek aspirations became so important to twentieth-century historians had more to do with much later conceptions of opera, not to mention ideas of what opera should aspire to be, than it had with the messy variety of musical drama in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

By the years around 1600, the grandest of these musico-dramatic experiments were extravagant indeed. When the Medici family in 1589 wanted to celebrate a grand dynastic wedding, the festivities lasted three weeks and came to a climax with a succession of entr'actes (calledintermedi) to a comic play called La pellegrina. These intermedi involved lavish stage spectacle, dance, solo song and even complicated madrigals; and it is surely significant that their general theme was the power of music—even though the principal aim was to amaze and above all impress the audience, the plot (such as it was) needed in some way to justify the use of such elaborate music. These fabulous spectacles were, of course, fabulously expensive. What was their purpose? A convenient modern equivalent might be the Nuremberg rallies of the 1930s, in which the latest technology (then lighting and sound reproduction rather than the elaborate stage machines and painted scenery of the sixteenth century) joined hands with music to project an overwhelming sense of power: a power that could impress supporters and put fear into the minds of opponents. And, just as the Nazis had film-makers such as Leni Riefenstahl, ready to record these events by means of further technological feats, so the intermedi were painstakingly recorded, allowing posterity (ourselves included) to wonder at the extent of their scope and ambition. (Incidentally, my comparison between the Nazis and the Medici may seem tasteless or wilful; but we need periodically to recall that the splendours of these courtly extravaganzas were, ultimately, financed through the ruthless exploitation of the majority of the population.)

These experimental court entertainments continued through the first decades of the seventeenth century, never finding anything like a "standard" format. One of them, Jacopo Peri's Euridice, performed in Florence in 1600, was an important landmark, as he and his librettist Rinuccini developed what we now know as "recitative", a kind of musical declamation (they called it recitar cantando) that followed closely the accentuation of the poetry; this was a style that enabled characters to "converse" in music, and it would become essential to opera for centuries to come. Another work everyone mentions is of course Monteverdi'sOrfeo, which was called a favola in musica or "musical fable", and was written for the Gonzaga court in Mantua in 1607. Monteverdi had evidently learned from Peri and others, as his "fable" is sung throughout, and so has a good deal of recitar cantando (perhaps too much for some modern tastes); but it also contained the usual anarchic mix of dances, madrigals, solo songs and instrumental interludes; and it also, as did most of these shows, included music as an important element of the plot, to make sure that the idea of people singing to each other (even if they were gods and goddesses) was not too strange.

These court entertainments had much that resembled what we know as opera. The accoutrements of the modern theatre were mostly in place by the late Renaissance, with a proscenium arch behind which elaborate stage machinery could be hidden, with wings to allow characters to enter and exit, and sometimes even with a curtain. So why not call them "operas"? Some historians still want to, but the entertainments lacked in

particular two crucial aspects. One is that they were all “special events” of one kind or another; they were put together to mark a particular moment and each had its own peculiarities and individual structure. The other is that they were invariably paid for by a rich patron and then shown to an invited (i.e. non-paying) audience (sometime very large, sometimes very select) to underline that patron’s prestige. What all these early experiments had in common, then, is that none of them was what we would call “public”.

And this is where Venice enters the scene. In 1637 the Teatro San Cassiano in Venice opened its doors to the public during the carnival season to perform a regular series of staged musical works. Within four years, three more Venetian theatres had opened. By mid-century over fifty such works had been performed in the city, twenty-five years later the total was 150. New pieces were constantly required: the successful ones often resembling previous “hits” in order to make them immediately understandable to a paying public. Impresarios (engaged by the theatre’s owners) were responsible for arranging these “seasons” of works: hiring a roster of star singers and a small army of scene painters and machinists and musicians; trying (sometimes vainly) to make the books balance at the end of the run. In other words, and quite suddenly, “opera”, opera as we know it, had arrived. Why did this happen in Venice? What was special about the city that caused this remarkable flowering of a new genre?

Even if we’ve never been there, we all know what a unique place Venice is; and, strangely enough, its attractions as a modern-day tourist centre, as a kind of city-large heritage site, were part of what made it such a fertile place for the emergence of opera. Almost all these strange new works that sprung up after 1637 were performed in the carnival season, which lasted from 26 December until Shove Tuesday; during this period the city became a magnet for visitors and visiting theatrical troupes. Venice’s seventeenth-century population of about 50,000 souls would as much as double during this time of misrule and colourful celebration, thus guaranteeing an audience for those first impresarios. Just as important, though, was the unusual political structure of the city. Unlike almost all other Italian urban centres, Venice was, at least in theory, a republic, in which a relatively large number of noble families had influence over the election of their ruler, and—crucially—in which wealth was more than usually well-distributed. In spite of being in sharp decline as an international power during the seventeenth century (or perhaps evenbecause of this decline) the greatest of these noble families were anxious to compete with each other in their patronage of the arts; and one result of this competition was the unusual proliferation of theatres. However, far from being idle aristocrats, many of these noble families had elevated themselves through trade and other entrepreneurial activity: they were not willing to squander their money merely to impress others, and so the new genre of opera became something of a business—something that could by run by impresarios, and could attract a paying public who might even lease a box for the entire season, consuming the product again and again. To put this another way, opera became a genre in Venice because it could boast a balance sheet.

These circumstances created a new kind of entertainment, one that, as I’ve said, I want to call “opera” for the first time. Of course, one should not exaggerate the differences with previous court entertainments. Sometimes (and certainly more often than they would have liked), the noble families who owned the theatres had to subsidise the season, which thus made the operas performed there closer to the “court entertainment” economic model. Internally, too, there were continuities. In these new Venetian musical dramas there was continued development of the newfangled idea of “recitative” or recitar cantando, as always interspersed with songs, instrumental interludes and dance; and there was still emphasis on crowd-pulling, shock–and-awe-effect scenic spectacle (though, for financial reasons, never on the scale of those Medici intermedi). But the whole genre also took on some of the spirit of Venice’s carnival, of the excess and, importantly, misbehaviour that carnival celebrates. We find plots in which, as well as gods and goddesses languishing against pastoral backdrops, servants make fun of their masters; in which the rich old man don’t always hobble off with the beautiful young girl; in which, to be brief, the whole business of human fallibility can be explored. And it quickly became clear that one of the major attractions, one of the major expressions of this carnival excess, would be found in vocal virtuosity: in the way that the singing voice in full flood can appeal so directly to our emotions. The account books make this plain. The opera industry may have been fuelled by librettists and composers, and decorated by scene painters and scenic engineers; but the top wages went to (and have forever remained with) the star vocal soloist, the person who doesn’t just impersonate a god or goddess, but who becomes one by the sheer force of her or his vocal virtuosity.

Who were these singers, and how did they make a living? The two most popular types at this early stage, and for some time to come, were both high voices: one was female, the other, notoriously, a surgically altered male. A great deal of myth, not to mention much horrified fascination, has collected around the phenomenon of the castrato, and there’s no time to go into the subject in depth here. Briefly, though, the practice of castrating young boys with promising voices before they reached puberty, thus preserving their high voices

into adulthood, was almost exclusive to Italy. It was primarily geared towards providing high voices for church singing (where no women were allowed); it flourished in opera only secondarily, and for a much shorter time. The acceptance of castrati in Venetian opera (often as the virile male lead) is certainly another example of what I earlier called “carnival misrule”, but we should also bear in mind that seventeenth-century audiences were generally less concerned than we are about “realism” in the modern sense; cross-dressing was readily accepted in serious as well as comic situations, and often women would alternate with castrati in playing the male roles.

Given the newness of the genre, the “profession” of opera singer was clearly not yet possible: in spite of high wages for the most sought-after performers, no-one could hope to make her or his living merely by singing opera in Venice during carnival. Thus almost all the singers had alternative employment: the castrati could often find work in the multitude of church choirs in the city and elsewhere, but both they and the women also needed to find a noble “protector”—a sponsor who would provide shelter and employment in an aristocratic household. As the market for opera increased, though, there could be tension between these two forms of occupation (one ancient and intimately involved with aristocratic privilege, the other the product of a modern market economy). Small wonder that conflicts of interest could sometimes get nasty. When in 1667 the Duke of Savoy summoned back two of his singers who had decamped to sing opera in the Venice carnival season, he threatened one of them (a castrato) with “the effects of our rightful indignation”, adding with sinister overtones that “princes like us have long arms”.

The actual voices of these singers are, alas, impossible to recreate or perhaps even imagine. More surprising, though, even the music they sang is for the most part fugitive. What we can know of this new Venetian genre called “opera” is limited to a few works from among the literally hundreds of titles that were created: many are lost, even those by the most famous and successful of composers. Of course, this should not really surprise us: the musical scores of this period were much closer to theatrical or (better) film “scripts”, constantly being changed or replaced to adapt to new and changing circumstances; it is doubtful that many imagined them as “works” in the contemporary sense, let alone thought them worth careful preservation. There is, though, one partial exception: one work of the period that has managed a place in our modern museum of musical works (and that not a long one, having been for centuries buried in the deepest obscurity). It is Monteverdi’s L’incoronazione di Poppea, (The Coronation of Poppaea), an opera to which I now want to turn. The experts tell us it is not entirely typical of genre; but at least it has a toehold in our own world, and for that reason it will have to stand today for the rest.

The chief reason why this opera is unusual has to do with its composer. We have already come across Claudio Monteverdi as the composer of the “music fable” Orfeo in Mantua in 1607, and even by then he was a famous composer of religious music and innovative madrigals, ones in which he had experimented with what he called a “second practice” (seconda pratica) of musical writing, a style much influenced by the “recitative” experimented with in those Florentine works around 1600. In 1613 he left Mantua to become maestro di cappella at Venice’s most famous church, the San Marco, which proudly stands to this day in Venice’s grandest square, and which was home to a magnificent and centuries-old musical tradition. During his long career in Venice Monteverdi further established himself, writing music in many genres, and adding several more theatrical pieces, most of which are now lost. By the time “public opera” hit Venice in the late 1630s he was in his 70s: a distinguished elder statesman of Italian music. All the more remarkable, then, that he enthusiastically embraced the new genre, writing three operas (one lost) for Venetian theatres. The last of these is L’incoronazione di Poppea, which was first performed during the carnival season of 1842-1843 at the Teatro SS Giovanni e Paolo. This theatre had been built and was owned by the famous Grimani family, one of the noblest in Venice; it was only the second venue to stage opera in Venice, and was described as the city’s most magnificent. It boasted 77 boxes in four rows, most of them leased to wealthy patrons by the season: a fitting place for such a renowned composer.

So let’s look into Poppea, and first (after taking a suitably deep breath) let me try first to introduce you to the plot, which is not for the fainthearted. What’s immediately significant is that the libretto, by Giovanni Francesco Busenello, doesn’t deal with the usual mythological characters of the earlier court entertainments (or at least not much); instead, historical figures tread the stage. We are in Rome, AD 65; Nero is Emperor and scheming to have his beloved Poppea join him on the throne. The fact that we are dealing with “real” historical characters is likely to have been Monteverdi’s choice, and has profound implications for the kind of drama we are to witness. In a letter to fellow composer Alessandro Striggio in 1611, Monteverdi made his feelings clear about what he valued in the way of musical characterisation: “I cannot [he wrote] imitate the language of the winds because they do not speak; how should I arouse sympathy there? […] Orfeo thrilled the listeners because he was a human being and not the wind”. This is remarkably modern-sounding, and

immediately makes us aware of that Monteverdi wanted to write operas that, as well as amazing us with scenic splendours, also have as their project an attempt to “arouse sympathy”—to make us, through the power of music, feel some emotional kinship with the characters who stride the stage.

And so to the plot. The opera is laid out over three acts, each act a stage in the drama. Act I does little more than introduce us to the tangled web of emotional and dynastic ties. Nero is Emperor, is married to Ottavia, but loves Poppea and wants to make her Empress. These three are the principal characters, and all are sopranos (Nero being in all likelihood a castrato role). The plot is thickened, though, by a further couple: Ottone, who also loves Poppea, and Drusilla, who (you’ve guess it) loves Ottone. Drusilla is also a soprano; Ottone breaks the pattern by being a mezzo soprano. There’s a substantial subplot involving the philosopher Seneca (who is, you’ll be relieved to know, a bass), who disapproves of Nero’s behaviour, and tells him so. In Act II things get moving. Seneca is condemned to death by Nero, and has a long farewell scene before calling for his bath and committing suicide (he thus, incidentally, started a long and distinguished line of people who have died in the bathroom, a line including such luminaries as George II of England, Jean-Paul Marat, Evelyn Waugh, Judy Garland and, of course, most famous of all, The King, Elvis Presley). Ottavia plans with Ottone the murder of Poppea: Ottone will disguise himself as a woman, enter Poppea’s garden and do the deed. He borrows his disguise from Drusilla, and is about to dispatch a sleeping Poppea when he is prevented by Cupid. He flees, but is recognised as “Drusilla”. End of Act II. In Act III the plot unravels quite quickly. Drusilla is condemned to death by Nero. Ottone feels he must save her, and so confesses his plot with Ottavia. This gives Nero the opportunity he needs: he exiles all three of them and crowns Poppea empress. The two lovers end the opera in blissful union.

This is the “bare bones” of the plot, and you can immediately see that “virtue triumphant” would be a less than apt subtitle. In this opera, the bad guy gets the girl and lives happily ever after; more serious, though, there aren’t any good guys or girls (apart from old Seneca, and he’s is not devoid of sententiousness). But what this strangely amoral farrago permits is a vast range of human emotions, particularly the kind that make the best music: love, hate, jealousy, fear and (last but by no means least) naked sexual desire. Equally important, though, is that in this “bare bones” retelling I’ve in fact left out about half the characters. The tussles of the noble principals are periodically commented upon, often ridiculed, by a layer of lower-class comic characters; these are, if you’d like, the “carnival” element of the plot. As well as a good selection of sleepy soldiers and cheeky pages, this alternative angle is magnificently represented by Arnalta, Poppea’s ancient nurse, who never fails to see the grotesque side of the amorous encounters of her betters.

Let’s continue with a sudden immersion into the sound world of Poppea. And the best place to begin is surely at its gaudy heart: in a scene between Nero and his mistress Poppea. I’m going to play you the last five minutes (half the entire length) of their scene together; as well as introducing them, it will give you an economical introduction to the enormously varied and quickly changing musical surface of the opera. There’s a good deal of Peri’s “recitative”, his recitar cantando, as the basic thread, but this is constantly interrupted by snatches of melody and/or instrumental interludes. What you’ll also hear immediately is that this mix of musical styles is intimately tied to musical characterisation—to the unfolding relationship between the two lovers. The words they sing are throughout of the most conventional: simply two lovers who must part but cannot bear to. First comes Poppea (flanked by an instrumental ritornello) with a lively, flirtatious melody which, as it comes to an end, slows into languishing chromatic notes; Nero replies, but seems almost overcome; Poppea answers with yet more chromatic language. Nero tries to reassert himself (perhaps with a hint of desperation). Then the scene ends with a remarkable long passage of recitar cantando: Poppea keeps repeating the teasing question “tornerai?” (will you return?); Nerone again seems almost desperate in trying to answer her. And then, at the end, comes first a more rapid dialogue of little fragments, which ends with a sequence of very slow, langorous exchanges of the word “addio”, interspersed by breathless little repetitions of the beloved’s name: ”Nerone, Nerone”, “Poppea, Poppea”; simple musical cadences loaded with erotic charge, expressed with a directness that, even today, is somehow shocking. What comes out of this scene is a clear sense that, while Nero may have the outer trappings of power, he is like putty in the hands of Poppea. The recording you’re going to hear is conducted by Nikolaus Harnoncourt. Helen Donath is Poppea and Elisabeth Söderström is Nero.

It’s typical of the opera that, immediately after this intimate scene comes an extended dialogue between Poppea and her nurse Arnalta (who was probably played by a high tenor in drag), in which all this earnest wooing is mercilessly lampooned. Indeed, sometimes it’s rather difficult, at this distance of time, precisely to gauge the “tone” of some of the scenes inPoppea, so relentlessly does the “comic”, the “carnivaleque”, intermingle with the “serious”. The philosopher Seneca is a good case in point. Mostly he offers sententious advice (I suppose that’s what philosophers are meant to do in most operas: a thoroughly “philosophical

opera" certainly doesn't sound like too much fun). A high point of this seriousness comes later in Act I, when he has a tremendous confrontation with Nero, one whose level of librettistic abstraction (they argue about power versus pleasure in the ruler's life) reminds me of the dialogue between King Philip and the Grand Inquisitor in Verdi's Don Carlos (the music, I hasten to add, is quite different: Verdi, I think, would not have had much use for a harpsichord in his orchestral battery). But just before this, Seneca has been comically caricatured by one of those cheeky pages, who even makes musical fun of his rather ponderous diction.

Mostly, as I said earlier, we can treat this as yet another example of carnival misrule, of the opera ideally suiting the venue and period in which it was performed. But there are moments when we may be confused. Seneca's death scene in Act II is a case in point, one that I can play you an extract from. The opening recitative, which addresses his "familiars", seems to have a comfortingly plain relationship between words and music. "Breve angoscia è la morte" (Death is but a brief torment), he sings, and obligingly sinks to his lowest register; "E se ne vola all'Olimpo" (and then we fly to Olympus), and on the word "vola" (fly) the vocal line has a long flight of rising ornamentation. The ensuing chorus of "familiars" (just three of them) takes up this solemn tone in earnest. In what must have seemed an "old-fashioned" (and perhaps for that reason particularly sombre) musical style, that of the contrapuntal madrigal, the friends intone in a painful chromatic line "Non morir, non morir Seneca" (don't die, don't die, Seneca). A powerful sense of tragedy is, it seems, being created. But then, for us, something extraordinary happens. The middle part of the friends' chorus completely changes tone, both verbally and musically. To a nonchalant, very "modern-sounding" musical figure, they confide to their beloved sage: "I certainly wouldn't want to die; life is too sweet, the sky is too clear; every bitterness, every poison, is, in the end, rather slight". Then, after this interlude, the "tragic" madrigal music returns, and the scenes with more portentous recitative from Seneca. What are we to make of the chorus? I suppose we could imagine the middle section set musically in a way that would make the contrast moving; but in Monteverdi's setting (which is long and lovingly developed) it seems like another lampoon, another sending up of the serious, another carnival gesture, this time uncomfortably in the middle of the "tragic". To me, it's a reminder of the fact that we should never take for granted the "emotional charge" of music so far away from us in time. The Seneca on this recording is Giancarlo Luccardi, and one of the "familiars" is the great British tenor Philip Langridge.

That was Seneca and his unreliably tragic, his over-familiar "familiars", reminding us that we should not be too confident about gauging the tone of an opera written so long ago. But this talk of what we don't know about an opera such as Monteverdi Poppea could, I'm afraid, go on rather a long time, and could stretch to matters far more basic that the intended relationship between words, music and dramatic situation. As I mentioned earlier, no-one had any idea how permanent the genre that now began to be called "opera" might be in Venice in the carnival season 1642-3. There was, indeed, no such thing as a musical "repertory": almost all music was new and easily discarded, and opera was perhaps particularly dispensable; they were rather like yesterday's television shows before the days of video and DVD. It is mostly for this reason that, even though Monteverdi was commonly regarded as Italian's most famous living composer, no-one at the time considered it important to make a permanent record of his Poppea. If it weren't for the fact that the opera was revived in Naples in the 1650s, we would have no score at all—the only two manuscripts that contain the music of the opera are both connected to that period. It may also surprise you to know that all the delightful orchestral combinations you've heard on the two recorded excerpts so far were made up by the modern performers; the manuscript scores give no sign of which instruments should play which line, mostly reporting merely a melody and bass. We know from various documents that Venetian theatres of the period contained numerous so-called "continuo" instruments (harpsichords and large lutes in particular), and we certainly need variety in that department given the preponderance ofrecitar cantando throughout the opera. But which instruments are supposed to play the solo lines is anyone's guess, although violins are very likely to have been part of the mix.

The most serious doubt of all, however, hovers over the whole business of authorship. I've been referring to Poppea as "by" Monteverdi, but actually the evidence for him as composer is very thin indeed. The experts have managed to convince themselves, mostly on internal evidence (that is, on the style of the music and certain notational quirks), that the great man was responsible; but it is not impossible that, one day, contrary evidence will emerge, thus confounding us all and making this lecture (together with all writing about Monteverdi) no more than a quaint relic of a mistaken age. What is now almost certain is that the most famous single number in the opera, the wonderful final duet between Poppea and Nero, celebrating their union, is not by Monteverdi but by one of his younger contemporaries, possibly Francesco Sacrati. It's easy to see why this ending got substituted for whatever Monteverdi wrote. As the author of the best book on Venetian opera, Ellen Rosand, has pointed out, closing love duets became a popular way to end Venetian

operas of the period, and for very practical reasons. With, as ever, economy an important factor, these operas rarely have choruses, so to end with a duet was the most logical way to finish with some kind of sonic climax. The vogue for finishing with two lovers was also, though, surely to do with the sheer pleasure of hearing two high voices weave in and out of each other and end in blissful union. Lovers, particularly operatic lovers, frequently sing about “melting into each other”, and here in this closing duet is the most precise musical depiction of that ultimate loss of identity to which lovers aspire.

Let’s wind towards the close of this first lecture by hearing this final duet. We don’t know who wrote it, or even whether it was intended to end this particular opera; we don’t know what instruments should accompany it or how it was first staged or by whom it was first sung. But still, there’s something in it that will communicate to most of us the essential thrill that makes us return to opera, something we might call the erotics of the voice—the sheer sensuous delight that vocal virtuosity can provide. And in spite of all the unknowns, the one thing which we can be pretty sure of, and which may comfort us, is that the very first lovers of opera, that paying public in the seventeenth-century carnivals of Venice, felt something similar when they heard music like this and demanded that it become a standard feature of the emerging genre.

With that final, eerily beautiful unison still sounding in our ears, it’s sad to recall that Venice did not long retain its special place in the history of opera. The city’s gradual economic decline, which (as I said earlier) may paradoxically have contributed to the fact that opera began there, meant that it lost its special place. Very soon, though, the genre was on the move, carried forth to other Italian towns by travelling troupes, eventually crossing borders into France and England and further afield, finding its most famous homes in other, larger, wealthier cities. By the time we meet it again, in that great eighteenth-century urban centre called London, it will have changed in many ways; but it will also have retained some of those characteristics that first caused Venetian noble families to experiment with a new art form, and which caused the paying public, then as now, to lose themselves in a carnival world.