

La Calisto:
Francesco Cavalli and 17th Century Opera in Venice

by Carol Crocca

Although you may never have heard of him, Francesco Cavalli was a great composer and *La Calisto*, to be presented by Eastman Opera Theatre in January 2022, is his most popular opera. The story is based on one from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: the god Jove, progenitor of all Don Juans, seduces Calisto, a follower of the goddess Diana. Diana herself succumbs to the charms of the shepherd Endymion despite her vow of chastity. Here gods and goddesses are treated as human, with human frailty and flaws. The intrigues and deceptions of love are also here, just as they will remain a staple of opera for the ensuing centuries. Building on the work of his predecessor, Monteverdi, Cavalli is credited with developing the aria as a particular form, shaping its role as the conveyor of emotion and character. Endymion has beautiful love arias, and Calisto has many lyrical expressions of her varied emotions as she moves through her reluctance and confusion to joy and worship of her divine lover. And it ends with a delightful love duet, another lasting convention established in this period. Although Calisto must suffer the wrath of Jove's wife, Juno, there is a happy ending when Jove exalts her to the skies as the Bear, a constellation prize, so to speak.

This was not quite how opera started out, and the history of the genre in the seventeenth century is a fascinating one. In the latter half of the century opera developed from a form composed to appeal to courtiers, originally conceived as based on text with musical accompaniment, to a lyrical expression emphasizing music as the carrier of the drama. How did this come about?

Although it was born in Florence and traveled to the courts of Mantua and Rome, it wasn't until two impresarios, Ferrari and Manelli, brought opera to Venice in 1637 that it became a popular entertainment. Venice, *La serenissima*, was a republic, which had maintained a political and cultural stability based on its trading wealth since the fifth century. It had no court but many popular festivals, and opera became the staple entertainment of the yearly Carnevale, its audiences composed of all classes of society and thousands of tourists. It was performed in theaters as a commercial venture, responsive to the tastes of the paying public. And here it developed many of the characteristics that would define the genre for centuries to come.

In 1641, opera had its first smash hit, *La finta pazza*, *The Feigned Madwoman*, by Francesco Saccati, which also brought forth the first prima donna, Anna Renzi.

Significantly, it contained a mad scene, which became a fixture in the repertoire as a vehicle for such star sopranos, created by their popularity with the new audiences. This opera was rediscovered in 1984 and its modern premiere took place at the Baroque Opera Project at Yale in 2010.

The popularity of Venetian opera created the demand for good singers and new works, which drove the creation of conventions to enable rapid production. Monteverdi, composer of *Orfeo* in 1600 at Mantua, had moved to Venice in 1613 to become *maestro di cappella* at St. Mark's, and responded to this new environment by composing *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria* in 1640 and *L'incoronazione di Poppea* in 1643. The latter contains lyrical arias, amidst a fluid context of recitative and arioso,* which carried the drama and presaged the development of later baroque opera, including that of his successor as the most popular composer in Venice, Francesco Cavalli.

Cavalli wrote 32 operas, of which 28 scores have been preserved, due to his efforts in having them copied and archived in his own time. He succeeded Monteverdi as *maestro di cappella* of St. Mark's and composed many of his operas with a famous impresario and librettist named Giovanni Faustini. His work was instrumental in the spread of Italian opera both within and beyond Italy. His most popular opera, *Il Giasone*, premiered in 1649 and had its modern American premiere on April 30, 2010, also at Yale. This opera is notable for its often ironic or parodic treatment of the myth on which it is based. Many other contemporary composers took this to an extreme and it was one of the causes of the reform of opera instigated by the academies at the end of the century.

Eighteenth century baroque *opera seria*, of whom Handel is the chief composer heard today, demands a patience, an ability to sit back and enjoy the long aria expositions, because of which contemporary directors have become adept at creating background stage business to keep the audience attentive. (This was unnecessary in the eighteenth century, when audiences were free to mingle, converse, and transact other business during the opera, which many attended several times after the premiere.) But Cavalli and Monteverdi require no such effort, as the music beautifully flows from one scene to another, punctuated appropriately by shorter arias designed to express emotion and character rather than show off the singer's prowess at decoration. In short, we are lucky that these operas have been rediscovered in the 20th century and are available to us at least on DVD, if not often in production. Is the Eastman Opera Theater's presentation a sign that they may be becoming more popular to stage?

One of the main differences between 17th century opera and those of the 18th was the inclusion of comic scenes, often bawdy, designed to appeal to the non-aristocratic segment of the audience. We see this in the one opera Handel wrote on his Italian sojourn (1706-1710), *Agrippina*, produced at the Met in 2019.

Ultimately, the popular appeal of these developments, including said bawdy scenes, caused such demand that, to fulfill it, composers distorted the literary sources of the stories, plagiarized each other's work shamelessly, and submitted to singers' demands, sometimes for as many as 60 arias in a work. The academies eventually responded about the end of the century, by ordaining, among other things, a complete separation of comedy from serious opera. Nevertheless, the *opera seria* and the *opera buffa* of the next century were indelibly marked by the changes wrought in opera's dizzying career in Venice. I cannot remember exactly how I heard of Cavalli. But I am indebted to Alex Ross (below) for a wonderful exposition of the operas and the Yale Baroque Project, and especially for citing Ellen Rosand's book (also below).

***Arioso**: a lyrical manner of setting text sometimes growing out of the recitative, sometimes a small aria; a term in use in Italy from the 1630's. Randel, Don Michael, ed., *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 4th edition, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2003.

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