

VICE AND PLEASURE IN IMPERIAL ROME





“This Poppea had every asset but goodness. From her mother, she inherited distinction and beauty... She seemed respectable. But her life was depraved. To her, married or bachelor bedfellows were alike. She was indifferent to her reputation – yet insensible to men’s love, and herself unloving. Advantage dictated the bestowal of her favour”

Tacitus, *Annals*, 13:45

With these words the first-century Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus described Poppea Sabina, mistress and later wife of the emperor Nero, and the eponymous heroine of Claudio Monteverdi’s final opera, *L’incoronazione di Poppea* (1643). Ever critical of empire, Tacitus was eager not only to condemn the evils of Nero and the other Julio-Claudian emperors, but also to place the blame on the women who surrounded them: the promiscuous Messalina, unfaithful wife of the emperor Claudius and mother of the empress Ottavia; the ambitious Agrippina, second wife to Claudius and mother of Nero; and Poppea, who used her seductive powers and eloquence to persuade Nero to rid himself of Ottavia so that she might be crowned empress of Rome.

In imbuing recent Roman history with sexual intrigues and scandal, Tacitus could scarcely have imagined that he was providing the inspiration for the first historical opera, or that his own cynical views about empire and women would provide such a unique way of celebrating the political wisdom and glory of the Venetian Republic. Indeed, for librettist Giovanni Francesco Busenello, lawyer, poet, and member of the libertine literary academy, the Venetian *Accademia degli Incogniti*, Tacitus’ tale of Poppea’s ascent to the throne likely had a double appeal. By playfully distorting Tacitus’ narrative – portraying the unrestrained passion between Nero and Poppea, the vengeance of Ottavia and Ottone, and an ambivalent view of Seneca’s brand of Stoicism – he captured Venice’s well-documented anxiety about female power and disdain for monarchy, while celebrating the sensual freedoms for which the Republic and its famous carnival were so renowned.

It may also have been the moral flaws of virtually every character in the opera – the triumph of vice over virtue – that so inspired Claudio Monteverdi in his final years. By this time, Monteverdi had proven his mastery over every musical genre and nuance of musical and dramatic expression, and he brought to his last operas a sophisticated insight into human nature, and an ability to plumb the depths of human passion and spirituality that he had so masterfully demonstrated in his *Madrigali guerrieri et amorosi* (1638) and the introspective *Selva morale e spirituale* (1641). While *Il ritorno d’Ulisse* (1640) had presented Venetian audiences with a quite faithful representation of the final books of Homer’s *Odyssey*, endorsing masculine heroism and presenting the sensual pleasure of music as a force to be resisted by the virtuous Penelope, the moral ambiguity of Tacitus’ historical narrative provided the composer with characters and situations that inspired a broader palette of affects. Monteverdi vividly portrays Poppea’s sensuality and her ability to feign virtue in her duet with Nero (Act I scene 3, “My lord, do not leave me”), as she seduces the emperor with chromatically inflected recitative and bursts of coloratura, persuading the emperor to repudiate his wife Ottavia and make her empress instead. “Love and Fortune are fighting for me,” Poppea proclaims triumphantly in warlike vocal fanfares. Indeed, Poppea’s vocalism throughout the opera contrasts markedly with the chilling austerity of the laments of the “rejected empress” – the ostensibly frigid Ottavia, who differs so from the innocent girl described by Tacitus. At once sympathetic and forbidding, Ottavia’s explosions of anger, condemnation of the fate of women, and thwarted desire for vengeance that culminate in Act III with a tearful farewell to Rome (“Addio Roma”) are expressed musically not with the grand lyric gesture, but with the strangled, inarticulate sobs of a woman defeated. ➤

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The moral ambivalence of the male characters is no less musically intriguing. Indeed, while the opera may concern Nero (the opera was titled *Il Nerone* for Naples), Ottone, Poppea’s lover, spends the most time on the stage, and it is through his eyes that the drama seems to unfold. Ottone is the first character to appear after the prophetic power struggle between Amor, Fortune, and Virtue in the Prologue (in which Love claims victory). We are certainly moved by his lyricism and sincerity in the opening scene (“Once more I’m drawn here”) and his tender serenade (“Open, open your window Poppea”). We empathise with Ottone’s pain at his discovery of Poppea’s infidelity, and yet are shocked at his willingness not only to murder Poppea at Ottavia’s insistence, but the fact that he would attempt to do so in female clothing – thus implicating his former lover Drusilla. Indeed, it is his masculine failings – his debilitating desire for Poppea, outbursts of jealousy, indecision, self-hatred, and inability to control his emotions – which Monteverdi seems to have captured with such accuracy. The composer was no less inspired by Nero’s petulance (as in his confrontation with Seneca) and his capacity for erotic excess, as in Act I, scene 10 when – barely recovered from a night of lovemaking – Nero admires his lover’s breasts.

Even the Stoic philosopher Seneca, whose imminent suicide is mourned with such passionate chromaticism by his followers (“Do not die, Seneca”), inspired an ambivalent response from Monteverdi. Is he truly the insensitive peddler of platitudes that he appears to be in Act I, insensitive to Ottavia’s genuine sorrow? Or does he serve as the upholder of moral truths, as suggested by his willingness to face death and the extraordinarily moving chromatic farewell sung by his followers (“Do not die, Seneca”) in Act II scene 3. Indeed, with Seneca’s suicide, the passing of this ostensible guardian of morality arguably becomes the impetus for music’s triumph. It is no coincidence that the suicide is followed immediately by two of Monteverdi’s most marvellously erotic duets, only the second sung this evening. First, the young servant Page Boy and Lady-in-Waiting celebrate their sexual awakening in “Sento un certo non so che” (I feel something I can’t describe). Then, Nero gleefully announces the death of Seneca to his companion the poet Lucan (“Hor, che Seneca è morto”). The two young men, exulting in the sheer pleasure of singing, abandon themselves to an obsessive,

erotically charged ostinato bass, meditating upon Poppea’s beauty, as Monteverdi’s music builds to a climax that is not without at least some homoerotic implications. The phrase “Now that Seneca has perished,” reiterated exultantly by Poppea to her Nurse in Act II scene 12, evokes more merriment as the ambitious young woman uses her most compelling lyricism to plead with Love to make her the wife of the emperor. When Love, as the *deus ex machina*, steps improbably into this historical narrative to save Poppea’s life at the end of Act II, it is apparent – at least for the time being – Virtue has lost her hold on the Roman Empire.

The invented, non-historical characters further heighten the irony of Tacitus’ discourse in a typically Venetian manner. Poppea’s nurse Arnalta urges her mistress to restrain her desires, yet nonetheless rejoices in her ultimate triumph with strident comic commentary on female ambition. Ottavia’s nurse instructs her charge on gender inequality by advising that she should respond to Nero’s infidelity by taking her own lover. “Listen to my discourse,” she repeats with a suggestive refrain, “and every sorrow will turn to joy.” Even the ostensibly innocent Drusilla, suffering from unrequited love for Ottone, anticipates Poppea’s death with a joyful lyricism – and a callous disregard for human life.

Critics have long argued about the message of *L’incoronazione di Poppea*. Since Venetian audiences would have known from Tacitus that Nero would kill Poppea with a violent kick, should we perhaps extract a moral from the story and recognise that unrestrained female ambition and lust will ultimately prove fatal? Or might we simply see this opera as celebrating the triumph of Love in all its guises, as foretold in the Prologue? Regardless, in the aftermath of Poppea’s coronation, as we hear Nero and the newly-crowned empress intertwine their voices in the luscious final duet “Pur ti miro,” inflaming our ears with the searing dissonances and tender resolutions, it is hard to condemn the sensual delights and imperial crimes that inspired such a fitting evening’s entertainment for Venice’s carnival – and a glorious experience for the listener today.

Wendy Heller
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'AH VIRTUE, HIDE YOURSELF!'



▲ Venus Blindfolding Cupid, Titian © Borghese Collection / public domain

Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (1643) is one of those famously immoral operas that constantly challenges its audiences. Emperor Nero is married to Octavia but spends his days in amorous dalliance with Poppea, wife of (in the opera, loved by) Otho. Octavia and Otho each end up in exile; Seneca, Nero's disapproving tutor, is forced to die by his own hand. And if we know our Roman history, even the 'crowning' of Poppea is but a temporary victory: she will be viciously murdered by an emperor who himself will come to a fiery end. Is this really what opera should be about?

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Those facts of history may provide some vindication for the plot of *L'incoronazione*, and librettist Giovanni Francesco Busenello acknowledged his debt to the Roman historians Tacitus and Suetonius. 'But here', he said, 'we represent things differently.' As usual in the case of seventeenth century opera, it is the prologue that sets the frame. Three allegorical characters take to the stage: Virtù, Fortuna and Amore (Cupid/Love). 'Ah Virtue, hide yourself!' says Fortuna, only to be browbeaten by Amore, who says that he will always triumph over virtue and fortune, as the work to come will prove. But if *L'incoronazione* presents the triumph of love, our moral problems return: how can we possibly condone what Nerone and Poppea do to each other in bed and out? ➤



▲ Carnival Scene (The Minuet), Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo
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THE DELIGHTS OF CARNIVAL

When opera was ‘invented’ in Florence in the late 1590s, its focus on Greek mythology gave a veneer of classical respectability to an essentially anti-classical genre, and also justified precisely what was most irrational about opera, the fact that dramatic characters should sing rather than speak. This was essentially an art for the court, designed to entertain and edify the princes of Italy, and to display their grandeur. In 1637, however, the first ‘public’ opera house opened in Venice, and the genre took a very different turn. The city stood at the head of a republic, fiercely proud of its detachment from the north Italian courts, on the one hand, and from Rome and the Church on the other. It vaunted itself as the last, great heir to the Roman republic of antiquity. Placing on the stage the antics of a famously degenerate emperor, who might feasibly be compared with a degenerate papacy, clearly served the purpose of political propaganda.

But Venice was also the pleasure-garden of Europe, a mecca then, as now, for tourists on the Grand Tour seeking to admire its art and architecture, and still more, to revel in its libidinous pleasures. Delights both licit and illicit were the stuff of that particularly Venetian phenomenon, Carnival, the period between Christmas and Lent when identities were masked, when the world turned upside down, when sex was for sale on every street corner, and when Venetian theatres opened their doors nightly. How better to draw a ticket-buying audience than to have an opera that celebrated on the stage the libidos seeking no less satisfaction in the bedchambers of Venice’s celebrated courtesans? And if the singers were beautiful, and the voices seductive, the attraction was greater still.



▲ Claudio Monteverdi by Bernardo Strozzi
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MONTEVERDI IN VENICE

Claudio Monteverdi (1567–1643) had started his professional life as an instrumentalist at the court of Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga in Mantua, working his way up the ranks to become the Duke’s maestro della musica. However, the court lost its lustre for the overworked, underpaid composer, and various intrigues led to his dismissal in 1612. He was lucky when, the next year, he was appointed maestro di cappella at the great St Mark’s Basilica in Venice. When opera went public in 1637, he was at the grand old age of 70. No one can have expected him to produce three new operas in quick succession: *Il ritorno d’Ulisse in patria* (1640), *Le nozze d’Enea con Lavinia* (1641; now lost) and *L’incoronazione di Poppea*.

The role of music, Monteverdi said, was to move the passions. How it might best do so, however, was open to debate. The initial solution was to treat music as some rhetorical form of heightened declamation: this was the basis for the musical recitative that formed the basis of the first operas. Here, the drama is carried by sung speech, while any actual songs – distinguished by stronger melodic writing and clearer formal structures – were incidental. Increasingly, however, these songs – arias – began to reclaim the ground for music as music. By the 1620s and ‘30s, Monteverdi and his contemporaries were exploring new types of aria-writing as rhetorical and expressive tools. They frame and punctuate the dramatic discourse: Nerone and Poppea both ‘speak’ and ‘sing’ – the question is just what they speak and sing about.



▲ Title page of the 1656 libretto of *L'incoronazione di Poppea* by Claudio Monteverdi and Giovanni Francesco Busenello
© Biblioteca Musica, public domain

TRUSTING THE SOURCES

The surviving sources for *L'incoronazione* are complex. We have a scenario associated with the first performances, a printed libretto for a performance in Naples in 1651, and Busenello's edition of the libretto in his collected works, *Delle hore ociose* (Venice, 1656). The music survives in two manuscripts: one in Naples, perhaps associated with the 1651 performance; the other in Venice, copied in the early 1650s. These musical sources seem to mix the work of various composers – whether the 1643 *L'incoronazione* did the same is an unanswerable, question – and the consensus is that much of the final scene and the parts for Ottone are by one or more other hands, probably including another Venetian opera composer, Francesco Sacrati.

This is a problem for those seeking to hear a single composer's voice in the opera, although it reflects the realities of working in the seventeenth-century opera house, when music would be added, subtracted or revised according to immediate performance needs. And these musical sources reflect theatrical realities in other ways, too. Instrumental parts are left blank, and the vocal lines often seem presented in a skeletal format. Bringing this music to sonic life is a challenge designed both to vex and to delight the performer. That, too, is part of the theatrical game.



▲ The Roman courtesan Sabina Poppea
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TRUSTING OUR EARS

We have to trust the performers, but can we trust our own reading of the performance? Or to put the question another way, how can we be sure that the music expresses what we think it expresses? Poppea's siren songs may seem seductive enough, but do they enhance or diminish the status of the character? When Ottavia sings almost wholly in recitative, does that make her noble or barren? When Seneca's famigliari exhort him not to die, they do so by way of tortuous chromaticism (so, serious) followed immediately by a dance-tune (so, comic). The musical signs remain frustratingly unclear, and the music itself seems constantly to shift focus.

The problems are compounded when one brings into play various possible levels of ironic subversion (so the serious becomes comic, and the comic serious). Such questions might not have bothered a Venetian audience in 1643, although certainly they are troublesome today. But this is what makes *L'incoronazione* still so fascinating, with questions far more interesting than the answers it may or may not provide. And love her or hate her, Poppea will never leave you cold.

Tim Carter

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RECONSTRUCTING THE TEATRO SAN CASSIANO: REIMAGINING MONTEVERDI'S VENICE





In 1637, the newly reconstructed Teatro Tron di San Cassiano staged Benedetto Ferrari and Francesco Manelli's *L'Andromeda* before a paying public and with it the concept of public opera was born. This momentous act sparked a global opera boom with Venice as its celebrated capital and ensured that forevermore the Teatro San Cassiano would be revered as the world's first public opera house.

Thereafter, the first Venetian theatres not only offered the greatest music performed by the best singers, musicians and dancers of the day, they also used the latest technology available of stage machinery and special effects of the time to set the operas in a magical world of descending *dei ex machina*, rolling seas, thunderstorms, twinkling stars and scene-sets which changed in the blink of an eye. It was like nothing ever seen or heard before, and sadly since. Almost 400 years later this legacy has been lost. Today, no such theatre exists.

That is until now. The project to reconstruct the original Teatro San Cassiano of 1637 targets completion by 2028 and with it will seek to restore Historically Informed Performances ("HIP") of Baroque opera to Venice. The newly reconstructed theatre will mirror in many ways Shakespeare's Globe on London's Bankside and will aim to become a world-renowned centre for the research, exploration and staging of "HIP", literally

studying and celebrating Baroque opera through its recital on stage and in the orchestra.

This will be Venice at its most glorious. Entering a box will be like walking through a time-machine. Once inside, we will find a Venetian Baroque theatre of 153 boxes over five tiers and with a *platea* (stalls) just six rows deep. With each box at just under a metre's width and a capacity of just 405 spectators, the theatre will be intense, immediate, and intimate. It will introduce its guests to a world of "HIP", where each opera will have been meticulously researched, now to be performed as its composer would recognise it, complete with period staging, gestures and costumes. It will celebrate the world's greatest composers, but also restore those currently forgotten. The aim in going backwards is to improve our understanding to take opera forwards.

Importantly, it will give us an insight into the type of Venetian theatre that allowed opera to evolve as it did in its early years. These small auditoriums encouraged ornamentation in a way that is impossible in the larger "grand" theatres today, while the smaller casts and orchestras would combine to deliver drama through music that was clearly articulated in both diction and counterpoint: *opera da camera* one might say.

But what do we know of the experience of the Venetian opera-going public in Monteverdi's Venice? ➤

"The newly reconstructed theatre will mirror in many ways Shakespeare's Globe on London's Bankside and will aim to become a world-renowned centre for the research, exploration and staging of Historically Informed Performances"



▲ *Il ritorno di Ulisse in patria*, The Grange Festival 2017 © Robert Workman

To set the scene, it is important to remember that in 1637 Venice was still recovering from the devastating plague of 1631, in which half of its population had been lost and in which all public music in *La Serenissima* had been silenced. It is no surprise, then, that *L'Andromeda* was the spark that caused such an explosion of energy. Three years later, and notably, perhaps critically, after the publication of his *Ottavo libro*, Monteverdi restaged *L'Arianna* (Teatro San Moisè, 1640), before composing new operas for Venice, of which only *Il ritorno di Ulisse in patria* (1641) and *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (1643), both at the Teatro Santi Giovanni e Paolo, are known to have survived intact.

If *Il ritorno* is about loyalty, fidelity and constancy, *Poppea* is about lust, power, ambition and hedonism. So, we see two entirely contrasting subjects set before the Venetian public. By now, we are only in the seventh year of public opera, and we are already moving at great speed from mythology to historical drama. Busenello and Monteverdi's *Poppea* was unquestionably cutting edge. Busenello was a key figure of the "Accademia degli Incogniti" (the free-thinking intellectual driving force of early opera) and his openly-stated intent to change history relied on a shared perception with his Venetian public, and therein presumably required its permission to indulge in dramatic licence. In turn, Monteverdi's exhilarating, often sensual, music must have conveyed a sense of something never heard before. The excitement and energy of the opera must, therefore, have been palpable, but more, it gives us an insight not only into what was acceptable in a Venetian theatre, but of the extraordinary forces simultaneously at play. It is when we then consider this new movement of artistic and intellectual creativity, set against the ingenuity and ever greater demands for special effects, driven continually by



▲ Shakespeare's Globe © Diego Delso, delso.photo, License CC-BY-SA

the competing commercial theatres, and all to be performed as one spectacle before the collective emotional release of a post-plague Venetian public set on pleasure, that we then start to get some understanding as to just how intoxicatingly captivating and complex the world of early Venetian theatre must have been: the opera boom is perhaps explained.

There is little wonder, then, that the authorities were cautious. Here, Venice was no different to London and location tells us much. As with the Shakespeare's Globe being built south of the Thames, cheek by jowl with the brothels and safely out of sight of both the religious and political powers of the City, this too was true in Venice. While the Gran Teatro La Fenice is today a flagship of Venetian culture, a short distance from Piazza San Marco and its Basilica and Ducal Palace, the Teatro San Cassiano was set across the Canal Grande and tucked away in Santa Croce, just yards away from the prostitutes (*Carampane*) of the infamous *Ponte delle Tette*. This wasn't grand opera as we would come to know it. There was a reason why they wore masks and why the prostitutes in the theatre would wear double-masks: with identities protected, the richer side of Venetian life stayed within the theatre and out of public view. For all *Poppea* tells us of Ancient Rome, it too mirrors Venice in 1643: the analogy between *Poppea* herself and Venetian courtesans having long since been posed and surely never lost within the theatre. Similarly, sex was also seemingly ever-present: the authorities intervening to decree that the doors to the boxes must be kept open to ensure that any activity inside could be monitored. Externally, we simply have no detailed iconography for these early theatres. It says much of their place in Venetian society: no evidence of grand façades in 1637, side entrances under a discrete *sotoportego* being the more appropriate reality.



But with success came competition and by 1639 the Teatro Grimani di Santi Giovanni e Paolo was constructed not simply “to emulate” the Teatro San Cassiano, but also to “overshadow [its] fame”, and this it did. The new theatre with its deeper stage and greater technology exceeded the San Cassiano in spectacle and magnificence. By 1645, it was considered “the most comfortable and beautiful in the city”. It maintained this reputation until the construction in 1678 of the Teatro Grimani di San Giovanni Grisostomo (today the site of the Teatro Malibran). Opera was, by now, a thriving business and so responding to the laws of supply and demand the owners built ever larger theatres, requiring ever larger orchestras and putting ever greater demands on the singers. The result was to leave the smaller *teatri* outdated and eventually obsolete. The final death knell for the Teatro San Cassiano came not in 1812, when Napoleon gave the final decree to demolish the theatre, but in 1792 when the new Gran Teatro La Fenice gave Venice the very latest in theatre technology, design and comfort. By comparison to the San Cassiano, which tellingly ceased staging opera in 1798, it was enormous, approximately three times larger. It thus dominated the market, and with it one might also argue that opera as we know it had arrived.

Paul Atkin

CEO of the project to reconstruct the Teatro San Cassiano



▲ Teatro Malibran, Venezia, Italy © Andreas Praefcke, Creative Commons



▲ Digital reimagination of the Teatro San Cassiano of 1637, complete with Nero centre stage, as he would have been seen in the 17th century. Taken from Antonio Gianettini's *L'ingresso alla gioventù di Claudio Nerone* (Modena, 1692, restaged Český Krumlov as a co-production with Teatro San Cassiano in 2018)