

ORIGINS AND CONSOLIDATION OF THE TERM “OPERA”  
FROM ITALY TO THE HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE,  
ENGLAND, FRANCE, AND SPAIN

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**ABSTRACT**

In the first half of the twentieth century, Robert Haas, Edward J. Dent, and Donald J. Grout studied the history of the term “opera.” Based on the study of some libretti, they underlined its marginal place in the seventeenth century, stressing that other labels, such as *favola in musica* or *dramma per musica*, were preferred by librettists and composers. They also concluded that “opera” was only commonly used after 1637, and then only in a very limited way. From them derives what we tend to think about this puzzling term, which certainly deserves further study. This article revises the genealogy of the word. It considers its connection with the Latin term *opus*, widely used in music in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when it was adjectivized in various ways until it became the name of a genre. The operatic meaning was more widespread, began earlier, and was much more significant than the aforementioned scholars thought, both in Italy and other countries. Certainly, it was used in very different ways depending on the institutional context, but its development in various European countries shows its richness rather than its ambiguity. For this reason, the history of the term could help solve both lexical and ontological problems.

**KEYWORDS**

opera; musicology; history of ideas; Robert Haas; Edward J. Dent; Donald J. Grout

## INTRODUCTION: REVIEWING A HISTORIOGRAPHIC TOPIC<sup>1</sup>

Throughout history, many have believed that the choice of the term “opera” was intentional. This is the case for Karl Krause in his *Compendium of Aesthetics* when speaking about “opera, or work par excellence, so-called because it brings together all the representative arts, in their superior manifestations, with dramatic poetry, for the accomplishment of its end,”<sup>2</sup> and Rafael Mitjana, for whom opera is “among all the aesthetic manifestations that are daughters of our civilization, the only truly original one,” so “its primitive creators gave it, par excellence, the extreme expressive name of opera.”<sup>3</sup> The sources, of course, tell a more complex story.

If we consider the most common names for labelling operas during the seventeenth century, we would have to use at least three different syntagmas: *favola in musica*, *dramma musicale*, and *dramma per musica*. The lack of a single word's pre-eminence to designate the new genre is very significant with respect to its novelty. *Favola in musica* was the most common label between 1590 and 1629, especially in Florence and Mantua. Between 1629 and 1636, the most important city was Rome, where we usually find the term *dramma musicale*. There is also the expression *dramma per musica*, which many consider to have been coined after 1637, given its predominance in Venetian theatre. We first find it in an untitled opera, with a libretto by Domenico Benigni, printed in Rome in 1629.<sup>4</sup> After 1637 it is, indeed, by far the most popular label in printed libretti.<sup>5</sup> Scholars usually refer to this plurality of names as proof of the indefiniteness of the genre in its early stages. Tim Carter rightly calls it a “terminological minefield,”<sup>6</sup> and Daniel Snowman claims he is tempted to “abolish the word opera altogether.”<sup>7</sup> So why or how did the term “opera” become important?

The history of the term did not receive much attention until the first half of the twentieth century. In 1918, the Austrian musicologist Robert Haas wrote a brief note focusing on three names, *favola (boscheresccia) in musica*, *tragedia*, and *dramma*, before dealing with the appearance of the term “opera,” while limiting his analysis to a few libretti. He dated the first use of the term to 1639 when *Le nozze di Teti, e di Peleo* was printed under the label of *opera*

<sup>1</sup> This research was in part made possible by an FPI-UAM contract, which resulted in the doctoral thesis *El nacimiento de la ópera. La legitimidad musical de la Edad Moderna* (UAM, Madrid, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Karl Christian Friedrich Krause, *Abriss der Aesthetik oder der Philosophie des Schönen und der schönen Kunst* (Goettingen: Dieterich, 1837), 62.

<sup>3</sup> Rafael Mitjana, *Claudio Monteverde (1567–1643) y los orígenes de la ópera italiana. Conferencia leída en el Centro de Estudios Estéticos de Uppsala el 7 de Diciembre de 1909* (Málaga: Establecimiento Tipográfico La Moderna, 1911), 7.

<sup>4</sup> The work is included in *Componimenti poetici di vari autori. Nelle Nozze delli Eccellentissimi Signori D. Taddeo Barberini e D. Anna Colonna* (Rome: Stampa Camerale, 1629), 9.

<sup>5</sup> Ellen Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice: The Creation of a Genre* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 35.

<sup>6</sup> Tim Carter, “What Is Opera?,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Opera*, ed. Helen M. Greenwald (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 17. See also Saskia Maria Woyke, “Venezianisches Musiktheater im 17. Jahrhundert: Terminologische Anmerkungen,” in *Mitten im Leben. Musiktheater von der Oper zur Everyday Performance*, ed. Anno Mungen (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 2011), 37–50.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Snowman, *The Gilded Stage: A Social History of Opera* (London: Atlantic Books, 2009).

*scenica*.<sup>8</sup> This paper was followed several decades later by an article, published in 1944, by Edward J. Dent, the then president of the International Musicological Society, who cited the first known appearance of the term "opera" in English in John Evelyn's *Diary* (1644). Except for this source, Dent based his article on libretti, as did Haas (Dent cited him in due course).<sup>9</sup> As will become clear, both of them ignored many previous libretti where the term "opera" appears, but the essential problem is the small number of different sources they consider.

The last major study to tackle the term's origins was Donald J. Grout's classic *A Short History of Opera* (1947; 2nd ed. 1965), later revised by Hermine Weigel Williams (2003). In the first two editions, Grout devoted a paragraph of his introduction to discussing the history of the term, using Haas's and Dent's articles as sources. Grout considered 1656 to be the year in which the term appeared in English, a date that must necessarily refer to Thomas Blount's dictionary *Glossographia* (1656). Furthermore, he maintained that the word "was not common in France or Germany until the eighteenth century, and is still relatively infrequent in Italy,"<sup>10</sup> which is a completely inaccurate judgement. He also stated (in the first edition) that the term "was not used in its present sense before 1639," in reference to the edition of *Le nozze di Teti, e di Peleo*. In the second edition, probably by mistake, he referred to the year 1634. In the third edition, Williams stopped quoting Haas and once again considered *Le nozze di Teti, e di Peleo* but dated the appearance of the term in Italian back to *La Deianira* (1635), citing also Evelyn's *Diary* and clarifying the source of *Glossographia*. All of this may seem anecdotal, but it has certainly reinforced the idea of the genre's Venetian origin, upheld or suggested by authors such as Ellen Rosand and Lorenzo Bianconi.<sup>11</sup>

These scholars not only based their works on a very limited typology of sources, leaving aside all kinds of letters, diaries, chronicles, treatises, and institutions where the term appears unequivocally, but they also ignored a large number of literary and musical sources which also use this label.<sup>12</sup> In addition, these articles are little known, so errors supposedly corrected long ago are often repeated. A good example is *The Oxford Companion to Music* (last edition, 2002), where we can read that "the Italian word opera simply means 'work', and was coined for the genre by the English later in the 17th century," something the first articles already denied.<sup>13</sup> This indicates the extent to which a new study is needed to clarify the issue, even if it is impossible to know all the sources or to exhaust the subject definitively.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Haas, "Geschichtliche Opernbezeichnungen: Ein Überblick," in *Festschrift für Hermann Kretzschmar* (Leipzig: C. F. Peters, 1918), 43–45.

<sup>9</sup> Edward J. Dent, "The Nomenclature of Opera-I," *Music & Letters* 25.3 (1944): 132–40.

<sup>10</sup> Donald J. Grout, *A Short History of Opera* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1947), 3; 2nd ed. (1965), 1–2.

<sup>11</sup> Lorenzo Bianconi, *Il Seicento* (Turin: EDT, 1991), 184. See also Deirdre O'Grady, *The Last Troubadours: Poetic Drama in Italian Opera 1597–1887* (London: Routledge, 1991), 28; Carl A. Pescosolido and Pamela Gleason, *The Proud Italians: Our Great Civilizers* (Cambridge: Latium Publishing Company, 1995), 155; and David Ewen, *Opera: Its Story Told Through the Lives and Works of Its Foremost Composers* (New York: F. Watts, 1972), 16.

<sup>12</sup> See Sabine Ehrmann-Hefort, "Opera/Oper," in *Handwörterbuch für musikalische Terminologie*, ed. Hans-Heinrich Eggebrecht and Albrecht Riethmüller (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1972–1984).

<sup>13</sup> Alison Latham, *The Oxford Companion to Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

## THE TERM *OPUS* IN MUSIC

The first aspect to consider is the use of the word *opus* in the history of music. Because of the famous *opus numbers*, we usually think about *opus* as something more connected to instrumental than vocal or stage music. According to David Fuller, “until 1800 opus numbers were more common in instrumental than in vocal music, and they have rarely been applied to stage compositions at any period.”<sup>14</sup> This would be in part due to practical reasons. As David Horn stated, “one composer could produce any number of sonatas or *concerti grossi*, each requiring its own number for purposes of unique identification in a catalogue, but rarely more than one song and certainly no more than one stage work bearing the same name.”<sup>15</sup>

However, the Italian word “opera” is a literal translation of the Latin word *opus*, and it is not coincidental that some of the first musical titles including it, like Orlando di Lasso’s *Magnum opus musicum* (1604), were published in the same period in which the first operas were performed.<sup>16</sup> In this case, *opus* is the title of a collection of works, so it is used in the classical sense, which implies the idea of art or technique as something that requires work, labour, activity, or operations. The term appeared when music printing was developed in the sixteenth century, linked to the idea of composition, authorship, and professionalization.<sup>17</sup> This meaning can be applied to any work and therefore also to opera. The best example is Alessandro Vincenti’s *Indice di tutte le opere di musiche que si trovano nella stampa della Pigna* (Venice, 1658), in which the publisher described his printed works as “opere nove, e belle,” including works as different as *madrigali*, *canzonette*, *motetti*, masses, and instrumental music, but also a “comedy in music, entitled Galatea, by Sig. Francesco Maria Melvi Romano.”<sup>18</sup>

Opera, however, has received little attention, maybe because of the German-oriented idea of musical work developed in the nineteenth century, connected to the idea of absolute or pure music.<sup>19</sup> Otherwise it is difficult to explain the absence of the word “opera” in the discussions on the genre. As far as the idea of *opus* is concerned, it marks the most surprising change in the history of music. For the first time, opera would not only be a work but also a genre, and even a theatrical space. Therefore, it is not just that opera participated in the term *opus*. It appropriated it, something that no other genre ever did.

One general explanation is that opera is a dramatic genre that requires the largest possible number of crafts, techniques, and professionals, and sometimes even its own architectural spaces. Significantly, something similar happened in ancient Greece with the term *drama* (δρᾶμα), derived from the word δράω (to do, to act). Nor should we underestimate the fact

<sup>14</sup> David Fuller, “Opus (i),” in *Grove Music Online*, <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000020394> (last accessed: 1 May 2020).

<sup>15</sup> David Horn, “Some Thoughts on the Work in Popular Music,” in *The Musical Work: Reality or Invention?*, ed. Michael Talbot (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), 161.

<sup>16</sup> Of course, there are earlier musical examples, but they did not enjoy the same diffusion.

<sup>17</sup> Laurenz Lütteken and James Steichen, “The Work Concept,” in *The Cambridge History of Fifteenth-Century Music*, ed. Anna Maria Busse Berger and Jesse Rodin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 55–68.

<sup>18</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own.

<sup>19</sup> Mark Evan Bonds, *Absolute Music: The History of an Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

that, in the first decades of the seventeenth century, opera was essentially linked to the printing press. On a purely terminological level, “opera” is “what is done,” so Krause was partly right in calling it a “work par excellence”—in the sense that it does not need any more adjectives.

Although it is not the subject of this article, the analogy with the ancient world should arouse our interest. The word “opera” undoubtedly has more historical connotations than others, like *favola* or *dramma per musica*. Only a positivist obsessed with testimonials would prefer to just read libretti covers, but even these say more than we usually think. Of course, the consolidation of the term was not so simple. Initially, it needed adjectives and was a very versatile term until the eighteenth century. Although linked to the genre since the seventeenth century, it was also used in some contexts to refer to other melodramatic genres, either to take advantage of the word's prestige or to underline some operatic aspects of them. As already mentioned, the term “opera” has always coexisted with other terms; however, this does not detract from the value of the term but rather enriches it.

### THE TERM “OPERA” BEFORE 1637: SCENIC AND MUSICAL ADJECTIVES

The term “opera” spread faster and much earlier than has been generally assumed. Of course, it would not be appropriate to talk about the label when the editor of Emilio de' Cavalieri's *Rappresentatione di anima, et di corpo* (1600) refers to “la presente opera” (the present work),<sup>20</sup> or when Federico Follini calls Monteverdi's *Arianna* (1608) “quell'opera per se molto bella” (that very beautiful work).<sup>21</sup> But other early uses suggest the gradual consolidation of the name. In 1610, an Italian letter already refers to an “Opera Dramatica rappresentata pubblicamente in musica” (dramatic work publicly performed in music), which can only be *Andromeda* by Ridolfo Campeggi and Girolamo Giacobbi.<sup>22</sup> Here we have a clear connection between the Latin “opera” and the Greek “drama,” which could indicate that initially the term related more to theatre than to music. Something similar happens with the aforementioned syntagma *opera scenica*, which also appears before 1639. It dates back at least to *L'alterezza di Narciso* (1611) by Francesco Andreini, printed in Venice under the label of “opera scenica rappresentativa.” In the dedication to Senator Hieronimo Priuli, dated 18 January 1611, the publisher Vincenzo Somasco indicates that the work was conceived “acciò ch'ella si possa rappresentare, ò recitando, ò cantando come più piacerà à coloro, che rappresentar la vorranno” (so that it may be represented, or recited, or sung, as will please those who will represent it), indicating it is a libretto (like many others in this period) that could be either performed with or without music.<sup>23</sup> A similar case is *L'ingannata Proserpina* (1611) by the same librettist and publisher, where the word “opera” is clearly highlighted on the cover page. The complete title is *L'ingannata*

<sup>20</sup> Emilio de' Cavalieri, *Rappresentatione di Anima, et di Corpo* (Rome: Nicolò Mutii, 1600).

<sup>21</sup> Federico Follino, *Compendio delle sontuose feste fatte l'anno MDCVIII* (Mantua: Aurelio & Lodovico Osanna, 1608).

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Giorgio Fulco, “Marino, 'Flavio' e il Parnaso barocco nella corrispondenza del 'Rugginoso,’” in *Feconde vanner le carte*, ed. Tatiana Crivelli (Bellinzona: Casagrande, 1997), 304.

<sup>23</sup> Francesco Andreini, *L'Alterezza di Narciso. Opera scenica rappresentativa* (Venice: Giacomo Somasco, 1611).

*Proserpina: Opera Rappresentativa, e Scenica*; the dedication includes the same remark by its editor.<sup>24</sup> The fact that this play could be performed without music reinforces the idea that, at least in this case, “opera” is more connected to the scenic aspect of the play than to the musical one.

Still, the opposite is also true in other cases. In addition to analysing the generic appearance of the word in Italian texts, it seems crucial to consider the foreign uses, which also appeared earlier than we usually think. The expression *opera in musica* can already be found in a German text dated 19 November 1618, referring to *Andromeda*, performed in honour of Archduke Leopold V of Further Austria. In his chronicle of the plays staged in Salzburg, Johann Stainhauser wrote that “die schöne und khunstreiche opera, *Il Perseo, in Musica* statlich exhibirt und gehalten Worden [ist]” (the beautiful and artistic opera, *Il Perseo, in Musica* was performed).<sup>25</sup> Does this suggest that at the time “opera” already existed as a term? We may question it, but, significantly, we do not find this type of use to mention other Italian genres.

On the other hand, it is important to note that the word “opera” is here connected to music, not to drama, so the musical aspect of the play seems to be Stainhauser’s main focus. The same is true of the French edition of *La Ferinda* (1622), a comedy by Giovan Battista Andreini, son of the aforementioned Francesco Andreini. In his note to the reader, Giovan Battista refers to a group of operas he saw in Florence and Mantua, including Monteverdi’s *Orfeo* and *Ariana*, as *opere recitative musicali* (musical recitative works), a label that will reappear in the future.<sup>26</sup>

A third musical formula is to be found in two libretti printed in Venice in 1635: *La Deianira* by Malatesta Leonetti (Rome, 1631), and *La pazzia d’Orlando* by Prospero Bonarelli (1647), both edited by Salvadori and called “opera recitativa in musica,”<sup>27</sup> a mixture of both previous labels (*opera in musica* and *opera recitativa musicale*). This label could be the publisher’s choice or a term used in Venice, where it would resurface in the following years, but its origins should be traced to the Florentine, Mantuan, and Roman operas.

In short, in these first decades the word “opera” could be understood in at least two ways, the scenic and the musical, both of which coexisted for a long time. As mentioned earlier, the term *opera scenica* would reappear in the printed libretto of *Le nozze di Teti, e di Peleo*, which Haas thought to be the first appearance of the term, although it already existed in 1611.<sup>28</sup> There is, therefore, no substantial difference in its use before and after 1637; it is also important to understand some of its uses in the future when “opera” is employed to underline the centrality of the scenic or musical aspects of a play.

<sup>24</sup> Francesco Andreini, *L’Ingannata Proserpina. Opera Rappresentativa, e Scenica* (Venice: Giacomo Somasco, 1611).

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Herbert Seifert, “Early Reactions to the New Genre Opera North of the Alps,” in *Lo stupor dell’invenzione. Firenze e la nascita dell’opera*, ed. Piero Gargiulo (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2001), 109.

<sup>26</sup> “Allor che per mia felice fortuna in Firenze et in Mantova fu spettator d’opere recitative musicali, vidi l’Orfeo, l’Arianna, la Silla, la Cerere e la Psiche, cose in vero maravigliosissime.” Quoted in Angelo Solerti, *Gli Albori del Melodramma* (Milan: Remo Sandron, 1904), 1:121.

<sup>27</sup> Malatesta Leonetti, *La Deianira* (Venice: Angelo Salvadori, 1635); Prospero Bonarelli, *La pazzia d’Orlando* (Venice: Angelo Salvadori, 1635).

<sup>28</sup> Oratio Persiani, *Le nozze di Teti, e di Peleo. Opera Scenica* (Venice: Giacomo Sarzina, 1639).

## THE APPEARANCE OF THE TERM AFTER 1637

In addition to Rome, Florence, Mantua, or Venice, the term "opera" also appears in Ferrara. In a letter dated 21 August 1640, written by the librettist Pio Enea Obizzi to the Duke of Modena, the former refers to "an *opera in musica*, which must be performed this coming carnival in Ferrara," asking the duke for "a bass, in addition to the others we found."<sup>29</sup> Obizzi is key to understanding the history of opera after 1637, given his role as the librettist of *Ermiona* (Venice, 1636), which served as a productive model for the new Venetian operas.<sup>30</sup> *Opera in musica*, *opera recitativa musicale*, *opera recitativa in musica*, as well as *opera scenica rappresentativa*, all of them already present in so many Italian cities and abroad, would continue to spread thanks to Venice from that year onward.

There is no essential difference in the use of the term before and after 1637, as if the opening of the Venetian theatres had not initiated a new stage in this sense, nor is there a huge difference between courtier and business theatre after 1637. In 1642 the term "opera" is found in Vienna and Ferrara. It figures, for instance, in the Viennese edition of Orazio Persiani's *Lo specchio di virtù* (1642) dedicated to Ferdinand III. The librettist presents himself as the poet of Archduke Leopold Wilhelm, which reminds us of the case of *Andromeda* (1618) as if there were a relatively common label in this context. On its cover, it is called "Opera Drammatica . . . rappresentata in musica," thus mixing the ideas of opera, drama, and music.<sup>31</sup> The same term appears in *Narciso et Ecco* (1642) by the same librettist, performed and printed in Venice.<sup>32</sup> A similar denomination can be found in Giovanni Faustini's *La virtù dei strali d'Amore* (1642), subtitled *Opera Tragicomica Musicale*. The word "opera" is clearly distinguished from the rest of the text on the title page, seemingly indicating an independent label.<sup>33</sup> A parallel example is Ascanio Pio di Savoia's *L'Amore Trionfante dello Sdegno* (1642), dedicated to Taddeo Barberini. The first label is "Drama Recitato in Musica." But then, as an independent addition, the bottom of the title page states this is an "opera,"<sup>34</sup> which leads us back to the idea of *opus* as a genre.

It should be stressed that these works were printed by four different editors, Gregorio Gelbhaar, Antonio Bariletti, Pietro Miloco, and Francesco Suzzi, so the label does not seem to be there for a purely editorial reason. These editions also indicate that the term was consolidated in printed libretti after the opening of the first commercial theatres in Venice, although the most common label was still *dramma per musica*. It was also then that the term *opera musicale* began to be used (a reduced version of the label of *La virtù dei strali d'Amore*), as in *L'Ulisse errante* (1644) by Giacomo Badoaro.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>29</sup> "Per un'opera in musica, che deve questo prossimo carnevale recitarsi in Ferrara, v'è necessità d'un basso, oltre gli altri che si sono trovati." Quoted in Roberta Ziosi, "Il teatro di San Lorenzo: vita, avventure e morte di un teatro ferrarese del Seicento," in *I Teatri di Ferrara: commedia, opera e ballo nel Sei e Settecento*, ed. Paolo Fabbri (Lucca: LIM, 2002), 229.

<sup>30</sup> Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice*, 67–72.

<sup>31</sup> Orazio Persiani, *Lo specchio di virtù* (Vienna: Gregorio Gelbhaar, 1642).

<sup>32</sup> Orazio Persiani, *Narciso et Ecco* (Venice: Antonio Bariletti, 1642).

<sup>33</sup> Giovanni Faustini, *La virtù dei strali d'Amore* (Venice: Pietro Miloco, 1642).

<sup>34</sup> Ascanio Pio di Savoia, *L'Amore Trionfante dello Sdegno* (Ferrara: Francesco Suzzi, 1642).

<sup>35</sup> Giacomo Badoaro, *L'Ulisse errante* (Venice: Gio. Pietro Pinelli, 1644).

## THE APPEARANCE OF THE TERM IN EVELYN'S *DIARY*

It should not be inferred from the above that the use of the term “opera” was already homogeneous. It could still be applied to other genres, as with Bonarelli's collection of *melodrami* [*sic*], including both operas and *intermedii*.<sup>36</sup> Nor can we deny that the term “opera” was used as a noun. That this was happening in Rome and Venice in the 1640s is evident in the *Diary* of John Evelyn, who visited both cities between 1644 and 1645. He first used the term in his account of his trip to Rome, this being its first known appearance in English, three decades after its use in German as *opera in musica*. In fact, Evelyn refers to “opera” not only as a genre but also as a theatrical space.

The use of the term regarding the genre can be found in an entry dated 17 November 1644, when Evelyn was in Rome. After visiting the Palazzo Borghese, where he saw Bernini's *Apollo and Daphne* and *David* as well as a room of musical instruments, he visited St. Peter's Basilica. In his praise of Bernini, he attributes to the artist not only the scenographic, pictorial, sculptural, and machinery parts, but also the music, the libretto, and the construction of the theatre itself.<sup>37</sup>

“Opera” is here conceived as a “work” (the English translation of *opus*) made possible by very different crafts, in this case practiced by the same professional. Also in Rome, on 11 April 1645, after listening to music in the morning at the Chiesa Nuova, Evelyn recounts his evening entertainment as follows:

We were entertain'd at night with an English play at the Jesuits', where we before had dined; and the next at Prince Galicano's who himself composed the musiq to a magnificent opera, where were present Cardinal Pamphilio the Pope's nephew, the Governors of Rome, the Cardinals, ambassadors, ladies, and a number of nobility and strangers.<sup>38</sup>

This reference to the magnificence of opera might be important to understand the “operatic” elements we find in other genres, which are sometimes called “opera” just because they are also “magnificent.” Shortly afterwards, Evelyn arrived in Venice. This is how he describes his visit to one of its theatres in June 1645:

This night, having with my Lord Bruce taken our places before we went to the Opera, where comedies and other plays are represented in recitative music, by the most excellent musicians, vocal and instrumental, with variety of sceanes painted and contrived with no lesse art of perspective, and machines for flying in the aire, and other wonderfull motions; taken together it is one of the most magnificent and expensive diversions the wit of man can invent. . . . This held us by the eyes and eares till two in the morning.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Prospero Bonarelli, *Melodrami, cioe opere da rappresentarsi in musica. Alla serenissima d. Vittoria Gran Duchessa di Toscana* (Ancona: Marco Salvioni, 1647).

<sup>37</sup> John Evelyn, *The Diary*, ed. William Bray (London: Frederick Warne and Co., 1818), 102.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.



The term "opera" is also used in the 1650s. Among the most illustrious examples is the libretto of *L'incoronazione di Poppea* by Giovanni Francesco Busenello, edited in Venice in 1656.<sup>40</sup> In the same year also appears the edition of *La Didone*, presented as "opera rappresentata in musica" (the word "opera" stands out clearly on the title page, printed in italics and expanded to occupy a single line),<sup>41</sup> and *La prosperità infelice di Giulio Cesare Dittatore*, entitled "opera musicale."<sup>42</sup> Also in these years the label "opera drammatica rappresentata in musica" is used in the printed edition of *La Gara* (1652) by Alberto Vimina, which was held in Vienna to celebrate the birth of the Infanta of Spain, Margarita María Teresa de Austria,<sup>43</sup> an interesting case given the later appearance of the term in Spain.

### THE FIRST DICTIONARY TO INCLUDE THE TERM "OPERA"

In 1656 the term "opera" appears, for the first time, in a dictionary of strange words in English, the aforementioned *Glossographia* by the Catholic antiquarian Thomas Blount. The work includes an introductory poem by a certain J. S., where the term "opera" is already used, the author noting that "Gallants had paid their Crowns to see the Play, / And nor known first what meant an Opera." This is how the Italian genre is defined in a corresponding voice:

Opera (Lat.) a work, labor; diligence, study, &c. In Italy it signifies a Tragedy, Tragi-Comedy, Comedy or Pastoral, which (being the studied work of a Poet) is not acted after the vulgar manner, but performed by Voyces in that way, which the Italians term *Recitative*, being likewise adorned with Scenes by Perspective, and extraordinary advantages by Musick. The common Plays (which are not *Operas*) are performed *ex tempore* by the Actors, and are but in the nature of *Farces* or Gigs, wanting the above mentioned adornments.<sup>44</sup>

What seems remarkable to the Englishman is that opera is not to be interpreted like any other play but sung. This formal definition can partly explain why the term "opera" would sometimes be used in English to label different genres. This seems to be especially true of all the locations where the new genre was not yet linked to permanent and professional institutions, as was the case in England in this period.

In fact, Blount's entry cannot be understood without considering the premiere of William Davenant's *The Siege of Rhodes*, whose libretto was printed that same year. The printed edition of the play underlines that it was performed "by the art of prospective in scenes" and "sung in

<sup>40</sup> Giovanni Francesco Busenello, *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (Venice: Andrea Giuliani, 1656). The *scenario* was published in 1643 as "opera reggia . . . che si rappresenta in Musica" (Venice: Gio. Pietro Pinelli, 1643).

<sup>41</sup> Giovanni Francesco Busenello, *La Didone* (Venice: Andrea Giuliani, 1656).

<sup>42</sup> Giovanni Francesco Busenello, *La prosperità infelice di Giulio Cesare Dittatore* (Venice: Andrea Giuliani, 1656).

<sup>43</sup> Alberto Vimina, *La Gara. Opera Drammatica rappresentata in Musica, Per introduzione di Torneo fatto in Viena, per la nascita della serenissima infanta di Spagna, donna Margarita Maria d'Austria . . .* (Vienna: Matteo Riccio, 1652).

<sup>44</sup> See "opera" in *Glossographia: or a Dictionary, Interpreting all such Hard Words, Whether Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Italian, Spanish, French, Teutonick, Belgick, British or Saxon, as are now used in our refined English Tongue . . .* (London: Tho. Newcomb, 1656).

recitative musick,” two ideas also mentioned by Blount.<sup>45</sup> This insistence on scenes and music can explain future uses of the term, like Dryden’s *The State of Innocence and Fall of Man: An Opera*, where the subtitle indicates that he meant it to be spectacularly staged.<sup>46</sup> In some cases, changes in the theatrical form of the original works might explain the term’s versatility. For example, *The Siege of Rhodes* was restaged in the 1660s as a regular play including only a few ballad-like songs, and performed with actors rather than singers. Another interesting example is Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas*, initially called an “opera” in the surviving libretto, but a “mask” when dissected and performed between the acts of Charles Gildon’s adaptation of *Measure for Measure* (1700).<sup>47</sup> Dryden, when simultaneously working on the opera *Albion and Albanus* and the play with musical inserts *King Arthur*, used distinguishing labels: “a singing opera” for the former<sup>48</sup> (or “opera,” when the text was published),<sup>49</sup> and “a dramattick opera” for the latter.<sup>50</sup> Again, the term is broad and applicable to different melodramatic genres, but it is especially associated with the genealogy of Italian opera, i.e., a sung drama distinguished by the use of the recitative and its spectacular nature.

### “OPERA” IN ITALY AND FRANCE: INSTITUTIONS, WORKS, AND TREATISES

In the 1660s and 1670s, it is easy to find examples of operas whose titles include the term in Italy,<sup>51</sup> but thereafter it is also worth considering its use in France, where it was applied both to Italian operas and French operas produced before and after Lully’s lyrical tragedies. The institutional use of the term increasingly demonstrates its ontological strength.

Saint-Évremond attended several performances of Italian operas staged in France in the 1660s. Around 1669–1670, he wrote an essay “Sur les opéras,” where he compared “la maniere de chanter des Italiens” with “celle des François,” harshly criticizing the former. Italian opera was here understood as a chaotic hybrid of various arts, where the poet was subordinated to the musician and the show, plagued with the use of the recitative, which the author considered boring, among other things. Saint-Évremond’s essay also attests to the fact that the French were already calling Italian melodramas “operas,” a term that would soon be applied to French opera itself.

<sup>45</sup> William Davenant, *The siege of Rhodes: made a representation by the art of prospective in scenes, and the story sung in recitative musick* . . . (London: J. M. for Henry Herringman, 1656). See also James R. Jacob and Timothy Raylor, “Opera and Obedience: Thomas Hobbes and A Proposition for the Advancement of Morality by Sir William Davenant,” *The Seventeenth Century* 6.2 (1991): 205–50.

<sup>46</sup> John Dryden, *The State of Innocence and Fall of Man. An Opera Written in Heroick Verse* (London: H. H., 1678).

<sup>47</sup> Ellen T. Harris, *Henry Purcell’s Dido and Aeneas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 74–75.

<sup>48</sup> Judith Milhous, “The Multimedia Spectacular on the Restoration Stage,” in *British Theatre and the Other Arts, 1660–1800*, ed. Shirley Strum Kenny (Washington: Folger, 1984), 52.

<sup>49</sup> John Dryden, *Albion and Albanus: An Opera* (London: Jacob Tonson, 1691).

<sup>50</sup> John Dryden: *King Arthur: or, The British Worthy. A Dramattick Opera* (London: Jacob Tonson, 1691).

<sup>51</sup> For example, *Mutio Scevola. Opera drammatica per musica* (Bologna: Benacci, 1665); Aurelio Aureli, *L’Erismena. Opera Drammatica per musica* (Bologna: Benacci, 1668); Giovanni Rabbia, *L’Ippolita. Reina delle amazoni. Opera in musica* (Milan: Marc’Antonio Pandolfo Malatesta, 1670); Francesco Fulvio Frugoni, *L’Epolone. Opera melodrammatica* (Venice: Combi & La Nou, 1675).

During these same years, in Paris appeared the first institution recognized by the name of Opera, i.e., the French Academy of Music, founded in 1669. In June of that year Pierre Perrin obtained "permission to establish an academy . . . to represent and sing in public operas and performances in music and French verse, in the same way as those in Italy."<sup>52</sup> The French court, therefore, set its goal of making a genre similar to the Italian one, as had already happened in Spain with the appearance of mythological comedies and the *zarzuelas*. However, while the term "opera" was not commonly used for this type of work in seventeenth-century Spain, France made it its own from then onwards. As early as 1671, when the *Pomone* score was published, written by Perrin with music by Robert Cambert (generally considered the first French opera), the term "opera" was printed in the margins of some of its pages.<sup>53</sup> In 1672, we find it again in the edition of Gabriel Gilbert's *Les peines et les plaisirs de l'Amour*, presented as "Opera pastorale," on whose title page we also find the name of the French institution as "Academie Royale des Opera."<sup>54</sup> The term would soon be expanded to cover all theatre sung in French.

There were also disputes between the French and the Italians as to whose opera was superior, a conflict between nations already anticipated in Saint-Évremond's letter. The term used to refer to Italian and French fables is "opera," which already functions as an idea that homologates both melodramatic types. A fundamental source at this point is André Maugars's *Response faite à un curieux sur le sentiment de la musique d'Italie* (1639), posthumously published in 1672 as *Discours sur la musique d'Italie, et des opera*. Maugars intended to explain, about the Italian opera, "the difference . . . between this one and our one," going back to "this beautiful *Arianna* from Mantua, who was a miracle in her time."<sup>55</sup> The disputes are not unrelated, therefore, to the historical development of opera, traceable to the first court fables. As in other examples discussed earlier, it should be noted that the term "opera" has an international scope, something that does not occur with other labels, no matter how frequently they appear in the libretti. This is undoubtedly due to the international impact of opera, especially through the printing press, which can be traced back to 1600.

The term "opera" was also applied to the lyrical tragedies of Jean-Baptiste Lully. One year after Lully's first opera, Charles Perrault's *Critique de l'opera* (1674) was published, a dialogue between two characters, Aristippe and Cleon, who comment on the premiere of his second opera, *Alceste*, performed that same year.<sup>56</sup> This text can be considered the first essay on the history of opera, and shows how the term was used from the beginning to name French lyrical tragedies, regardless of their comparison with Italian operas. We also have the *Recueil des*

<sup>52</sup> "Permission d'établir une académie . . . pour y représenter et chanter en public des opéras et représentations en musique et vers françois, pareilles et semblables à celles d'Italie." Quoted in René Ternois, *Oeuvres en prose de Saint-Evremond* (Paris: M. Didier, 1996), 3:139.

<sup>53</sup> Robert Cambert, *Pomone, pastorale, mise en musique par Monsieur Cambert* (Paris: Christophe Ballard, 1671).

<sup>54</sup> *Opera pastorale heroique, des peines et des plaisirs de l'amour* (Paris: Olivier de Varennes, 1672).

<sup>55</sup> "Discours sur la musique d'Italie, et des opera," in *Divers traitez d'histoire, de morale, et d'eloquence*, Claude Thiboust et Pierre Esclassan (Paris: Thiboust and Esclassan, 1672), 154–79.

<sup>56</sup> Charles Perrault, *Critique de l'opera ou examen de la tragedie intitulée Alceste, ou le Triomphe d'Alcide* (Paris: Claude Barbin, 1674).

*Opera, des Balets, & des plus belles Pieces en Musique*,<sup>57</sup> which includes several opera libretti and other musical pieces. In the 1670s, a relatively new metaphorical use of the term also surfaced in French, which would later appear in other languages. In the *Remarques nouvelles sur la langue françoise* (1675), the Jesuit Dominique Bouhours takes up the term, underlining that “ce mot . . . signifie parmi nous une comédie en musique avec des machines” (this word means among us a musical comedy with machines), but it is also used for that “which seems difficult,” “an excellent thing,” or “a masterpiece.”<sup>58</sup> We will return later to the idea of a play *avec des machines*, which was one of the characteristics already highlighted by Evelyn in the 1640s.

In the eighteenth century there were many disputes in France employing the term “opera,” which eventually gave rise to Jacques-Bernard Durey de Noinville’s *Histoire du théâtre de L’Opera en France* (1753). Although the author admits that opera was invented by the Italians and brought to France by Mazarin in 1645, the work is a defence of the French origin of opera as a genre already truly perfected.<sup>59</sup> All this would make the French, during these years, the main promoters of the term “opera” in Europe.

### THE TERM “OPERA” IN SPAIN: A VERSATILE BUT CONSOLIDATED CONCEPT

From the 1670s onwards, it would be a matter of time before the term “opera” crystallized in other languages, in the sense of both Italian opera and indigenous melodramatic production. This is especially true when there is an established production system in a given country. In England, for example, we have Haendel’s operas, from *Rinaldo* (1711) to *Deidamia* (1741).

Spain, like France and England, is a very interesting case when it comes to the application of the term. In the same year that France created the Academy of Music, the melodrama *El Prometeo* (1669) was performed in Vienna, presented in the Spanish libretto as “Comedia en Música, escrita en Estilo Ytaliano” (comedy in music, written in Italian style).<sup>60</sup> In the manuscript of the score, we can read over the first musical passage the following commentary in Italian: “Zinfonia avanti L’opera.” It seems reasonable to take this note, in the light of what has been said, as an appearance of the term “opera” in the sense of *opera in musica*. The same use is found in a note signed in Brussels on 21 February 1696, saying that “Don Francisco Bernaldo de Quiròs, ambassador of the King our Lord in The Hague, arrived here a few days ago and soon had a conference with His Highness,” then attended a solemn function in the Royal Chapel of the Palace, and “in the afternoon he went to see the performance of the Opera of the Fall of Phaeton.”<sup>61</sup>

<sup>57</sup> E.g., *Recueil des Opera, des Balets, & des plus belles Pieces en Musique, qui ont été représentées depuis dix ou douze ans jusques à présent devant Sa Majesté Tres-Chrétienne*, vol. 1 (Anvers: Henry van Dunwaldt, 1685).

<sup>58</sup> Dominique Bouhours, *Remarques nouvelles sur la langue françoise* (Paris: Sebastien Mabre-Cramoisy, 1675), 122.

<sup>59</sup> Jacques-Bernard Durey de Noinville, *Histoire du théâtre de L’Opera en France* (Paris: Joseph Barbou, 1753).

<sup>60</sup> *Aun vencido, vence amor. Ó el Prometeo. Comedia en Musica, escrita en Estilo Ytaliano* (Vienna: Matheo Cosmerovio, 1669).

<sup>61</sup> “Viò esta solemne, y esclarecida ceremonia, desde la Tribuna, su Alteza Serenissima la Señora Electriz; despues les tuvo el Señor Duque à los Cavalleros una soberbia comida, y à la tarde fuè a vèr la representacion de la Opera

The term “opera” was widely used in Spain from the beginning of the eighteenth century, even before the first Italian operas were performed in Madrid. We find it on the cover of the luxurious manuscript score of *La guerra de los gigantes* (c. 1701) by Sebastián Durón, master of the Royal Chapel, who uses the expression “ópera escénica,” whose origin dates back to the Venetian libretti of 1611.<sup>62</sup> Interestingly enough, this was not a conventional opera, but a *sui generis* group of scenic episodes with music. It is just further proof of the versatility of the concept, sometimes used in a broad sense for works that do not fit well in other genres.

In general terms, it is important to bear in mind that Spain had its own melodramatic tradition of mythological comedies and *zarzuelas*,<sup>63</sup> so some appearances of the term can refer to the operatic features highlighted so far, rather than to opera as a genre. One interesting case here is Durón’s mythological comedy *Muerte en amor es la ausencia* (1697), called by the French *Gazette* “opera avec des machines.”<sup>64</sup> Apparently, the author understood it as an operatic play because of the music and the machinery.

The genre term appeared when Italian opera was established in Spain with the premiere of *Decio y Eraclea* (1708), presented as an “opera para recitar en música según estilo y metro italiano” (opera to recite in music according to Italian style and meter),<sup>65</sup> followed by *Dido y Eneas* (c. 1710), a *pasticcio* based on previous Italian operas,<sup>66</sup> labelled in the score as “ópera armónica al estilo italiano” (harmonic opera in Italian style).<sup>67</sup> However, the lack of solid operatic institutions, singers, and other professionals resulted in the vagueness of the term in other cases. The expression “ópera armónica,” for example, appears in the handwritten edition of *Los elementos* (c. 1710) by Antonio de Literes,<sup>68</sup> which is a *sui generis* chamber melodrama. Other examples are the *Opera a 5 voces al Patriarca San Joseph* (1718), which is an oratorio, and Francisco Hernández Illana’s *Ópera a 4* (1741), which can be defined as an allegorical “encomiastic loa.”<sup>69</sup> Again, the predominance of some “operatic” characteristics (like the fact that these works were fully sung) motivated the use of the label.

This tradition explains the appearance of the term in the first Spanish dictionaries. “Ópera” already appears in volume V of the *Diccionario de Autoridades* (1737), where the two meanings are included: (1) “any long and complicated work, whether by hand or by wit”<sup>70</sup> and (2) “theatrical

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de Caída de Faeton.” *Noticias ordinarias del Norte, Italia, España, y otras partes, publicadas el Martes à veinte de Março de 1696* (Madrid: Sebastian de Armendariz, 1696), 119.

<sup>62</sup> Sebastián Durón, *La guerra de los gigantes* (c. 1701), Biblioteca Nacional de España, M/2278.

<sup>63</sup> See Louis K. Stein, *Songs of Mortals, Dialogues of the Gods: Music and Theatre in Seventeenth-Century Spain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

<sup>64</sup> *Recueil des gazettes*, no. 50 (14 December 1697), 198. See Raúl Angulo Díaz, *La música escénica de Sebastián Durón* (Oviedo: Codalario, 2016), 378.

<sup>65</sup> *Decio y Eraclea* (1708), Biblioteca Nacional de España, R/38907.

<sup>66</sup> Antoni Pons Seguí, “*Dido y Eneas*: una ópera *pasticcio* en la corte de Felipe V,” *Revista de Musicología* 37.2 (2014): 503–40.

<sup>67</sup> *Dido y Eneas* (c. 1710), Biblioteca Nacional de España, M/1338.

<sup>68</sup> Antonio de Literes, *Los elementos* (c. 1710), Biblioteca Nacional de España, M/1351.

<sup>69</sup> See Francisco Hernández Illana, *Ópera a 4 a la bienvenida de el Ilustrísimo Señor Don Diego Perea &c, arzobispo de Burgos*, ed. Raúl Angulo Díaz (Madrid: Ars Hispana, 2018), 15.

<sup>70</sup> “Qualquiera obra enredosa y larga, ya sea de manos ù de ingenio.”

representation of music," allegedly derived from "Melodrama" or "Fabula musicis modis decantata." The first meaning, metaphorical in nature, recalls the use of the term in Bouhours's *Remarques*, and seems to corroborate that the word "opera" could have reached academics through the mediation of the French. These same definitions, and the same set of meanings, are repeated in the editions of the Academia of 1780, 1783, 1791, 1803, 1817, 1822, 1832, and 1837.

The fact that the musical meaning of the term "opera" is maintained for a hundred years in the background could surprise anyone who knows the Spanish opera tradition of the eighteenth century. It could be explained by the distance of the academics from the court, which witnessed an unusual amount of operatic splendour in the middle of the century. It was in 1737 that the famous Farinelli arrived in Spain, where he stayed for more than two decades; from 1746, he was in charge of the organization of court festivities during the reign of Ferdinand VI. In his meticulous *Descripción*, written in Spanish and signed in 1758, Farinelli refers to Italian melodramas as "óperas."<sup>71</sup> This word can also be seen on the covers of printed libretti, some of them in a bilingual Spanish-Italian format, which reinforces the idea of an untranslatable term of its own kind. Pietro Metastasio's *La clemencia di Tito* (1747) and *Semiramis* (1753), for example, are presented as "opera drammatica," the label dating back to 1610.<sup>72</sup> Ignacio de Luzán also refers to them as operas in his *Poética* (1737, 1789), distinguishing them from Spanish *zarzuelas*.<sup>73</sup>

The term discussed was also known and used outside Madrid. In 1749 Vicente Ximeno mentioned an "Ópera que se cantò à la tarde como Siesta, y se repartió en libritos impresos."<sup>74</sup> The term can also be found in literature, for instance in *El crisol de la fineza* (1742) by Francisco Rossell y Oriol.<sup>75</sup> The same applies to the American provinces of Spain. In Lima, for example, it appeared in *Primero en la honra*, subtitled "ópera" in a manuscript of the score dated 1762.<sup>76</sup>

Terreros y Pando's dictionary (1787) includes two meanings of "opera" in its melodramatic sense, without the metaphorical meaning of the Academy dictionary. The first one seems to trace the origins of the term back to French and (only later) to Latin and Italian, something that could have been caused by the aforementioned French influence:

ÓPERA, espectáculo público, representacion magnífica de alguna obra dramática, cuios versos se cantan y se acompañan con música, danzas, sainetes, vestidos, y decoraciones magníficas, y máquinas singulares. Fr. *Opera*. Lat. *Drama*. It. *Opera, dramma*.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Farinelli, Carlo Broschi, *Descripción del estado actual del Real Theatro del Buen Retiro* . . . (Madrid: Turner, 1992).

<sup>72</sup> *La clemencia de Tito. Opera drammatica de D. Pedro Metastasio para representarse en el Real Coliseo del Buen-Retiro* . . . (Madrid: Lorenzo Francisco Mojados, 1747); *Semiramide conocida. Opera drammatica para representarse en el Real Coliseo del Buen-Retiro* . . . (Madrid: Lorenzo Francisco Mojados, 1753).

<sup>73</sup> Ignacio de Luzán, *La poética*, ed. Russell P. Sebold (Madrid: Cátedra, 2008).

<sup>74</sup> Vicente Ximeno, *Escritores del Reyno de Valencia* (Valencia: Joseph Estevan Dolz, 1749), 2:259.

<sup>75</sup> "No vès con quanta armonia / La Musica te celèbra, / Y en regalos, y dulzuras / Te obsequian, y recrean. / Harè que Ninfas hermosas / Te diviertan, y entretengan / Con una Opera pasmosa, / Donde veràs en su essencia, / Como junto Infierno, y Gloria / En tu theatro representan." Francisco Rossell y Oriol, *El crisol de la fineza* (1742), Fondo Antiguo de la Universidad de Sevilla, A 250/233(08), 66.

<sup>76</sup> *Primero en la honra* [1762], Biblioteca Nacional de España, MP/1744/1.

<sup>77</sup> Esteban de Terreros y Pando, *Diccionario castellano con las voces de ciencias y artes y sus correspondientes de las tres lenguas francesa, latina e italiana* (Madrid: Imprenta de la viuda de Ibarra, 1787), 2:710.

[OPERA, public spectacle, magnificent representation of some dramatic work, whose verses are sung and accompanied by music, dances, sainetes, costumes, and magnificent decorations, and unique machines. Fr. *Opera*. Lat. *Drama*. It. *Opera, dramma*.]

The second meaning refers to opera as "the same drama or play which is performed," implying that both the pieces and the show itself were called "opera."

### **TREATISES ON OPERA, HISTORIOGRAPHY, MUSICAL DICTIONARIES, ETC.**

During the eighteenth century numerous treatises were written using the term "opera" in their titles. In 1702, it appears in the famous treatise of François Ragueneau, *Parallèle des italiens et des françois, en ce qui regarde la musique et les opéras*. In Germany, we have the *Gedancken von der Opera* (1708) by Barthold Feind; in Italy, the *Saggio sopra l'opera in musica* (1763) by Francesco Algarotti; in England, partly in response to Algarotti's text, *The Lyric Muse Revived in Europe; Or a Critical Display of the Opera in all Its Revolutions* (1768). The term also appears at the end of the century among historians, such as Charles Burney or John Hawkins, and in music lexicons, starting with Rousseau's famous dictionary. Since then, it can be found everywhere, including newspapers and magazines. There is even a melodramatic work that contains the term "opera" as part of its title, *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) by John Gay, predating by two centuries Kurt Weill's *Die Dreigroschenoper* (1931).

### **CONCLUSION**

In general terms, there were three phases in the development of the term "opera" during the seventeenth century. First, it was used in Italian in a generic way, in the sense of *opus*, and it was mostly accompanied by dramatic and musical adjectives. It later started to be used as an independent name, as can be ascertained especially from English mid-century sources. Finally, the term was used to name and compare both French and Italian opera. From the eighteenth century it spread throughout Europe, as was the case with Spain, where the Italian and French influence is evident. In this process, opera appears as the *opus par excellence* among the arts, in a sense analogous to the term *drama* in Greek times, linked to the idea of professionalization, the printing press, a specific theatrical space, and the ideas of music, spectacle, and drama of the Modern Age.

Although Italian, German, English, French, and Spanish librettists and musicians used different terms on the covers of their works, the term "opera" is the only one that appears in historiography, dictionaries, treatises, and many other academic and public fields. There are not as many differences between the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries as had been assumed, either before or after 1637, something that might be useful to understand the continuity of the genre from its first decades onwards.

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