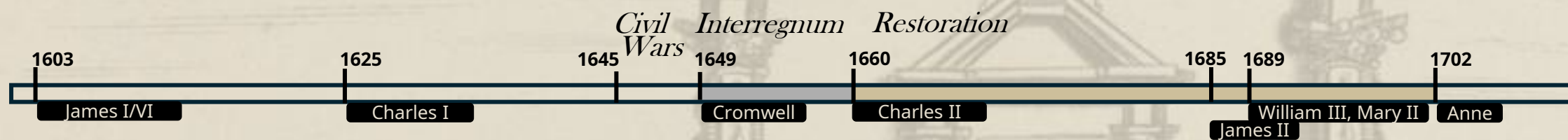


# Staging ANXIETIES, Staging The NATION.

## A Cultural History of English *Dramatick Opera*, c. 1660–1710

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### Introduction: Civil Wars, Interregnum, and Restoration.



After losing the Civil Wars, King Charles I was captured, tried, convicted for high treason, and publicly beheaded. This marked the **end of Absolutism in England**, followed by ten years as a Puritan **Commonwealth** with Oliver Cromwell as de facto ruler. **Public theatre was forbidden** at the time, but some private music theatre performances took place. Upon his accession in **1660**, Charles II gave **patents to run public theatre companies** to two loyal royalists. Thomas Killigrew (re)founded the **King's Company** in spiritual succession to Shakespeare's King's Men, while Sir William Davenant established the **Duke's Company**. The latter's first playhouse, Lincoln's Inn Fields, is the background of this poster.

### I. A Nation Disembodied. *William Davenant, John Dryden*, and the Public *Masque* (1660–1674).

**William Davenant** and his collaborators sought to adapt the **Court Masque for the public stage**, to great success. Born from essentially **Puritan** suspicions about the art form that even an empiricist mindset could not assuage, there was a particular anxiety among the creatives about the locus and evocation of **affect**, especially where music was concerned. Music on stage was thus placed under the reigning principle of **verisimilitude**, which meant confining it to the realms of **magic and/or madness**. It never expressed affect directly, but rather evoked it in characters on stage, who would in turn express their reactions by speaking. This still allowed for music's use to spectacular effect but crucially limited its expressive capability toward the audience.

#### case study

#### *The Tempest* 1667/74

**Libretto:** William Davenant/John Dryden; Thomas Shadwell [?]  
**Music:** Matthew Locke, Pelham Humphrey, Pietro Reggio, Giovanni Battista Draghi

At issue are questions of succession and the right to rule, dangerously pertinent questions in the early restoration.

Prospero, a speaking role, establishes a Dramatick Opera archetype: that of the summoner of spirits, and therefore of music and spectacle.

### II. Crisis and Foreign Influence. Defining *Opera* (1675–1688).

The King's Company went under in 1682 and was forced to merge with the Duke's Company into the **United Company**. The later years of Charles II's reign were marked by periods of political crisis and particularly extreme **anti-Catholic hysteria** (e.g. «Popish Plot» and «Exclusion Crisis»). Francophobia was consequently at an all-time high. There was a small revival of court performances under James II, but theatrical activity ground to a complete halt approaching the 1688/89 season, when the Catholic James II was deposed and fled to France.

#### case study

#### *Albion and Albanus* 1685

**Libretto:** John Dryden **Music:** Louis Grabu  
Charles II paid for this French-style opera in English but died before it was finished. A 1685 public production, overshadowed by the beginnings of a succession war, bombed, not least because Grabu had accidentally composed the already contentious recitatives in a French accent: it all sounded completely *foreign* to Londoners.

### III. *For tho' I cannot see songs, I love 'em*. Purcellian *Dramatick Opera* (1689–1694).

The United Company did not gain much from its expensive Dramatick Operas. Royal interest in theatre was minimal. Meanwhile, questions of **Empiricism and Enlightenment** were at the forefront of the creative's minds. Music and its impression on human reason and passions existed in a dialectical space between being somewhat understood as **«sympathetic resonance»** and belonging firmly with the realm of the magical and the unseen, **the occult**. The Dramatick Operas of this time, which contained more music than ever before, were a space in which to explore these seeming contradictions. This theatre now looked inward, politically and philosophically, instead of outward towards France and the continent.

#### case study

#### *King Arthur* 1691

**Libretto:** John Dryden **Music:** Henry Purcell  
What John Dryden had earlier on called music's greatest weakness, its «perpetual harmonious sweetness», here becomes its greatest strength: Purcell's remarkable self-confidence and self-fashioning as a co-author in collaboration with Dryden leads to a theatre music that flaunts its form and interacts with the text in new ways.

### IV. Who's Afraid of Wanton Love? The London Stage Post-Purcell (1695–1707).

Due to mismanagement and corruption, a **breakaway acting company** split off from the United Company and moved back into the old Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre. As its spectacular capabilities were minimal, they started relying increasingly on music as a primary form of spectacle, as this was cheapest to realise. Italian singers increasingly came to London for **concerts** and the first **fully sung operas in English and Italian** started appearing on stage. Masques were once again popular, interspersed in pieces in Dramatick Operas or as stand-alone afterpieces. Audiences became increasingly **bourgeois** as opposed to aristocratic.

#### case study

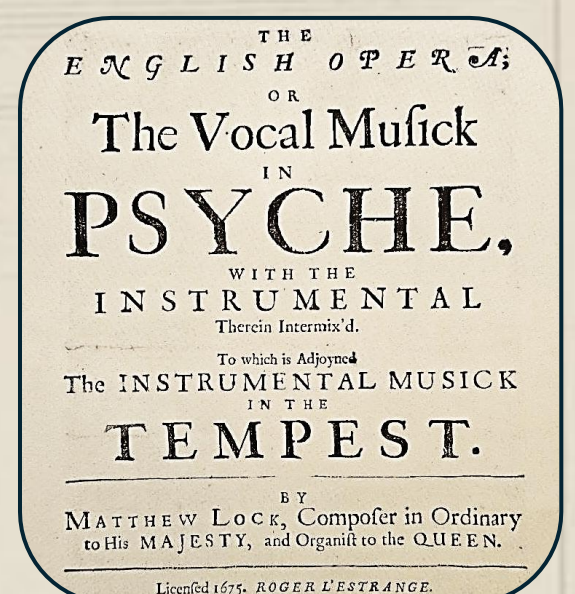
#### *Rinaldo and Armida* 1698

**Libretto:** John Dennis **Music:** John Eccles

This experimental piece sought the highest degree of dramatic integration of music in any Dramatick Opera thus far. It achieves its goal without the main characters singing a single note, though Armida is another fine example of the summoner archetype. Particularly striking is the lack of music in Act V, where reason triumphs over passion. *Rinaldo and Armida* is where music goes to die, and in that, we learn much about how it was associated with passions specifically.

### Conclusions: Death of a Form or Metamorphosis of Music Theatre?

The use of music on the London Restoration stage from 1660–1710 stayed remarkably consistent, despite its meanings changing subtly. It remained a **productive semantic agent** as opposed to an unquestioned, non diegetic carrier of plot and passions, always embedded in a plot that called its witnesses to reasonable judgement. Nonetheless, it stood for excess and splendour. In light of constant pressure to keep up with and **outdo continental developments**, as well as satisfy audiences, these theatrical productions could and would not do without music. **Reading Restoration spectaculars as theatre** instead of opera enables us to ask what was set to music and why, and not why other things were not. What emerges is a remarkably self-aware form of public theatre with a **consistent, didactic approach to music** and its expressive capabilities. Looking ahead to 1711 and beyond, Handel's arrival and with it, the arrival of Italian-style opera on the London stage must seem less a drastic cut than a gradual development. **These entertainments did not die out, and neither did their aesthetic paradigms**. They are latent not only in Rinaldo 1711, the Beggar's Opera, and the discourses that would ultimately lead to the invention of English Oratorio, but even more obviously in Restoration *Macbeth* and *The Tempest* revivals that lasted well into the nineteenth century.



A Statement toward France in particular: Matthew Locke's 1675 printed score «The English Opera»



References  
(Google Doc)



Music Examples  
(YouTube playlist)