The Royal Academy of Music (1719–28) and its Directors

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The Royal Academy of Music was founded in 1719 to establish regular seasons of Italian opera in London. By the time it closed its doors, nine seasons later, it had succeeded in setting higher standards of artistic taste and production. This did not come about by chance; it was the fruit of a conscious effort on the part of its supporters to create an opera worthy of London, a city transformed by a period of political stability and vast economic growth. 1 The intention of this article is to investigate the interests of the group of aristocrats who directed the Academy and to determine, first, their competence to manage and their motivation to support such a company, and secondly, their influence on its policies, particularly in the choice of librettos.

The first opera ‘after the Italian manner’, Jacob Greber’s Gli amori d’Ergasto, had been offered in London as early as 1705. 2 Further productions in the intervening years paved the way for the formation of the Academy; among the most influential of these were the early successes of Handel, Rinaldo (1711), Teseo (1713) and Amadigi di Gaula (1715). In 1717, however, there came a break of three years, and despite the efforts of the impresario Heidegger and the popularity of Handel, Italian opera was not offered in London from the close of the 1716–17 season until the Academy opened its doors on 2 April 1720 with Giovanni Porta’s Numitore. An attempt to present an opera season in 1718–19 came to nothing. 3 Two reasons have been put forward to explain this break: the expense of staging opera and the uncertainty of court life during a period of dispute in the royal household. The costs of running the opera were prohibitive, and the price of seats (double those at the playhouses) severely restricted the audience. In most European cities at this time opera was a court function, not an entertainment funded by its box office, and the notion of a deficit did not arise. The opera houses of Venice, Rome, Hamburg, Leipzig and Brunswick were the only publicly supported establishments. Experience in London up to 1717 had shown that box-office revenue was insufficient to maintain a first-
class opera house and that a guaranteed method of financing was needed. The solution, in a city well familiar with entrepreneurial business methods, was to form a joint-stock company of subscribers willing to invest regular capital sums, which would ensure proper funding over a period of years. Such long-term planning was new. The early Italian operas in London had also been produced by subscription, but there the subscribers merely bought the right to attend the first six nights of a new opera;\textsuperscript{4} they were not responsible for an entire season, much less the period of 21 years that the founders of the Academy were aiming for.\textsuperscript{5}

A more decisive factor, however, in halting the production of Italian opera was the uncertainty of court life during the period between June 1717 and the spring of 1720.\textsuperscript{6} Handel was absent from London from 17 July 1717 until February 1719; it is often said that he stayed away because of the failure of Italian opera in the 1717–18 season. It is more pertinent to ask why the opera did not function; and the main reason for this was the chaos surrounding relations between George I and his son, the Prince of Wales, which had a profound impact on the social activities of the primary financial supporters of the opera, the aristocracy.\textsuperscript{7} The two Georges had never been on particularly good terms. Early in 1717, George I accused his son of pre-empting power and encouraging the opposition when he was serving as regent during the king’s visit to Hanover (7 July 1716 to 18 January 1717). During the spring of 1717 the situation deteriorated and the prince’s supporters began to vote with the opposition in parliament. There was a break between the king and his son in December 1717 after a quarrel over the choice of a godfather to the prince’s son. The prince and princess were expelled from St James’s Palace; by early 1718 their court at Leicester House had become the centre of opposition. Competition between the courts continued for two years, creating difficulties for the aristocracy who were discouraged from visiting the rival establishment. It was also awkward for Handel. He was Kapellmeister to George I in his capacity as Elector of Hanover and also received an annual pension of £200 from him as King of England. But the Princess of Wales was a personal friend from Handel’s days in Hanover; he had written many of his Italian chamber duets for her. Eventually both courts tired of the dispute, and a reconciliation arranged by Robert Walpole was effected in April 1720; it was during this truce that the Academy began its productions of Italian opera in London. The timetable of the opening performances shows how closely the formation of the Academy was linked to the well-being of the aristocracy. The season began with Porta’s \textit{Numitore}, although Handel’s \textit{Radamisto} was also ready. Porta’s opera received performances on 2, 6, 9, 19 and 23 April. None of these was attended by the king and his son, who were still officially estranged. On 23 April, St George’s Day, the prince was reconciled with his father at St James’s, and on the next day they attended the Chapel Royal together for the first time in three years. Three days later they appeared at the