

INTERPRETING ‘ABDUCTION’ OPERA: HAYDN’S *L’INCONTRO IMPROVVISO*, SOVEREIGNTY AND THE ESZTERHÁZ FESTIVAL OF 1775

MATTHEW HEAD (LONDON)

Abstract: *Austrian composer Joseph Haydn’s ‘seraglio opera’ L’incontro improvviso, which premiered at Eszterház palace in September 1775 as part of the celebrations for the visit of the Habsburg court, frustrates current understanding of this genre. With all characters from the Middle East, little attention to religious differences between Islam and Christianity, and a musical score that avoids the military topos of Janissary music, L’incontro does not stage a confrontation of East and West. Instead, it deploys the harem setting and rescue plot to celebrate the values of Enlightened Despotism, and to project the image of a benign, peace-loving sovereign. ‘Difference’ is structured not by ethnicity but social status and the opera is untouched by ideas of race. Inhabiting a harem that resembles a gallant salon, Princess Rezia embodies the contemporary ideal of woman as civilized and civilizing, and imparts a refined ‘femininity’ to sovereignty itself. The ‘exoticism’ of L’incontro did not refer primarily to a distant locale but to the context and occasion of its own performance – the opera’s luxurious sets and costumes testified to the seemingly magical power of Prince Nicolaus Eszterházy to bring forth illusions, command art and nature, and give pleasure to his imperial visitors.*

★ ★ ★

In a last-ditch effect to save himself from the sultan’s wrath, Ali, the romantic lead in Joseph Haydn’s (1732–1809) opera *L’incontro improvviso*¹ (‘The unexpected encounter’),

1 Original libretto: Carlo Friberth: *L’INCONTRO IMPROVISO*. | DRAMA GIOCOSO | PER MUSICA | TRADOTTO DAL FRANCESE, | E RAPPRESENTATO | *Á ESTERHAZ*. | IN OCCASIONE DEL FELICISSIMO | ARRIVO | DELLE A.A.L.L.R.R. | IL SERENISSIMO ARCIDUCA | D’AUSTRIA | FERDINANDO. | E | DELLA SERENISSIMA ARCIDUCHESSA | BEATRICE. | D’ESTE. | SUL TEATRO DI S.A. IL PRENCIPE | NICOLO ESTERHAZY | DE GALANTA. | NEL MESE D’AGOSTO DELL’ANNO 1775. | *A OEDENBURGO*, | NELLA STAMPERIA DI GIUSEPPE SIESS. || On p. [3]: “La Musica è di GIUSEPPE HAYDEN. Maestro di Capella in servizio di S. A. il Prencipe Esterhazy. La Poesia è di CARLO FRIBERTH parimente in servizio di S. A. il Prencipe Esterhazy.” Copy consulted in Trieste, Museo Teatrale, Inv.No. 2802 (Libretti 928).

disguises himself as French painter and seeks to distract the sultan's guard with a description of one of his recent pictures ("Ecco un splendido banchetto", III/5). In so doing, he reveals certain failings as an art critic, not least in mistaking visual for musical representation:

Trenta suonatori ubriachi,	(‘Thirty drunken fiddlers
S'affattican a suonare;	struggle to play;
Si conosce dagli attachi,	from their attack you can recognize
Ch'è armonia di Napoli.	it's music from Naples.
Un ruscello vuo mostrare:	Let me show you a stream:
Vedi l'acqua serpeggiare,	look at the water winding,
Dolcemente mormorare:	murmuring gently:
Cla, cle, cli, clo, clu, cla, clu.	cla cle cli clo clu cla clu.
Ma il conflitto qui mirate:	But here see this battle:
Pin, pan, pon, le moschettate,	pin pan pon go the muskets,
Flin, flic, flac, flan sablate,	flin flic flac flan, flash the sabres,
Bombe psci, vis, vis, vis puh. ²	flin flic flac, go the bombs, tzing boom!') ³

It's a sobering scene for any critic embarking on an account of *L'incontro improvviso*, a work that may well end up making a fool of anyone who seeks to understand it. And why take the risk? Apparently performed only once in the eighteenth century, judged a relative failure by modern critics, unpopular in sporadic twentieth-century revivals, *L'incontro*'s only claim to fame is that it belongs to the genre of 'seraglio', 'abduction' or 'Turkish' operas.⁴ Indeed, it is based on one of the founding libretti of that genre –

2 Friberth: *L'incontro improvviso*, III/v, p. 56.

3 Unless otherwise noted, English translations of the libretto are by Lionel Slater from Joseph Haydn: *L'incontro improvviso*, dir. Antal Dorati with the Lausanne Chamber Orchestra, *Esterháza Opera Cycle* [1979–89] (Philips 432416-2, CD booklet), liner notes pp. 58–179, here: pp. 151–152.

4 A typical assessment is offered by Howard C. Robbins Landon: *Haydn: Chronicle and Works*, vol. 2: *Haydn at Esterháza, 1766–1790*. London: Thames and Hudson/Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978, p. 265: "*L'incontro improvviso* is not really a first-rate opera: it is too long, too diffuse, and lacks the driving pace of its 1773 predecessor. Curiously, modern audiences feel the same lack of dramatic spirit: despite its much-publicized revival by Helmut Schultz in 1936, and various performances since then (including a complete broadcast by the Vienna Radio in 1959), the work has never been a success. Prince Esterházy, that wise judge of Haydn's talents, did not reward him for this, the most lavish, expensive and expansive Opera so far produced at the Castle; nor do there seem to have been any repetitions after the first performances. Like its 1773 predecessor, this work was also dedicated to the Blessed Virgin (and 'All the Saints' as well): but this time the great *jongleur* was not on his best form."

Florent Carton Dancourt's (1661–1725) *opéra comique* *La rencontre imprévue* –, set with spectacular success by Christoph Willibald Gluck (1714–1787) in 1764 for the court-sponsored Burgtheater in Vienna (and quickly translated into German for performance there as *Die Pilgrime von Mecca* ['The pilgrims of Mecca']). In these versions, the opera was the most frequently performed 'abduction' opera in German-speaking lands. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791) almost certainly heard it during his childhood visits to the Imperial city in 1762 and 1767–1768, much later providing something like a sequel in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* ('The abduction from the seraglio', 1782), a work commissioned for the same venue. Mozart's homage to Gluck's *alla turca* idiom in the Janissary choruses of *Die Entführung*, and his set of piano variations on a theme from Gluck's *La rencontre*, established a prestigious Gluckean genealogy in Turkish matters and demonstrated Mozart's knowledge of Viennese taste.

In choosing to adapt the libretto of *La rencontre imprévue* as *L'incontro improvviso* (an Italian semi-serious opera), Haydn and his librettist Karl Friberth (1736–1816) – who was also the lead tenor, Ali – may also have sought to acknowledge the theatrical taste of the Viennese court opera house. Their opera was produced especially for the visit of representatives of the Habsburg court to Eszterház palace in 1775, in the figures of Archduke Ferdinand Karl⁵ and his consort⁶. At this time, Eszterház palace south of Lake Neusiedl, in the west of Hungary, was on Habsburg territory, and the choice of libretto, an 'abduction' opera set in Cairo, provided (paradoxically) a home-from-home for the royal visitors. The choice of libretto was part of the diplomatic dance of the festival – the notions of fidelity and reunion around which the plot turns deemed apt to the occasion. Indeed, fidelity is put on trial in the opera: After a series of misfortunes have lost him his homeland and his sweetheart, Ali, a lovesick wanderer, is reunited with Rezia in Cairo where she has been sold into the harem of the sultan of Egypt, along with two female slaves, Balkis and Dardane. Captivity in the seraglio obviously poses a threat to her chastity, but we quickly learn that (true to the chivalric practices of courtly love) the sultan is enslaved to her, not the other way around. Indeed, when she discovers that Ali is in town, Rezia first tests *his* constancy by having her beautiful slaves attempt to win him. Fortunately, he passes the tests and there is a succession of heroic arias, worthy of *opera seria*, about love and freedom. (The word *libertà* works well for coloratura). In act 2, the lovers' escape

5 Archduke Ferdinand Karl Anton Joseph Johann Stanislaus (1754–1806), youngest son of then regent Maria Theresa (1717–1780) and youngest brother of the future Joseph II (1741–1790).

6 Princess Maria Betrice Ricciarda d'Este (1750–1829), heiress to the Duchy of Modena in northern Italy and the principalities of Massa and Carrara in central Italy.

is foiled by a treacherous dervish, the Calandro. In act 3 the benevolent sultan, although initially feigning severity, rewards the lovers' constancy by uniting them in marriage. The self-interest (that is, lack of fidelity to others) of the Calandro looks to be his undoing as the sultan (in the only glimpse of fabled Ottoman violence) orders him to be "scorticato ed impalato" ('flayed and impaled'). But he is only feigning severity, Rezia and Ali plea for lenience and the sentence is reduced to banishment. Resolving to cultivate virtue, the Calandro joins in the celebration of joy and peace. The lovers are united eternally.

Many elements of the opera frustrate current understanding of later eighteenth-century 'abduction' opera (just as Haydn's operas as a whole used to frustrate expectations for opera-as-drama formed on works such as *Le nozze di Figaro* and *Così fan tutte*).⁷ In an influential study, Daniel Wilson concretized 'abduction' opera as a genre in which 'East meets West' on stage:

In jedem dieser Werke reist ein junger Mann, der aus einer angeblich überlegenen Kultur stammt (bei Wieland [*Oberon*] und Lessing [*Nathan der Weise*] ist es Europa, bei Goethe ist es analog zu Europa), in ein "barbarisches", "unzivilisiertes" Land und verwickelt sich dort in einem Versuch, eine junge Frau zu retten, die eher der "überlegenen" Kultur anzugehören scheint. In jedem Fall wird die Religion zu einem Hauptfaktor in der Differenzierung der beiden Zivilisationen.⁸

(In each of these works a young man from a supposedly superior culture (in Wieland [*Oberon*] and Lessing [*Nathan the Wise*] it is Europe, in Goethe an analogue of Europe) travels into a "barbaric", "uncivilized" country. There he becomes involved in an attempt to rescue a young woman, who belongs to the "superior" culture. Religious differences are always crucial to the difference between the two civilisations.)

Wilson's examples here are from literature, but he ascribes the same "Grundstruktur" ('basic structure') to 'abduction' operas. Indeed, he cites Gluck's *La rencontre / Die Pilgrime von Mekka* and Haydn's *L'incontro improvviso* as primary examples. But in Gluck and in Haydn, all the characters are from the Middle East, and the 'abduction'

7 That said, I do not want to offer another apology for, or recuperation of Haydn's operas. Recent studies by Mary Hunter, Caryl Clark and Jessica Waldorff have done much to establish contextually sensitive frameworks of interpretation.

8 Daniel W. Wilson: *Humanität und Kreuzzugsideologie um 1780*. New York: Peter Lang, 1984 (= Kanadische Studien zur deutschen Sprache und Literatur 30), pp. 11–12.

scenario does not involve a distinction between the religion of the pasha/sultan and that of the young lover who comes to rescue his sweetheart. More broadly, the operatic fiction does not present a dichotomy between 'civilized' and 'uncivilized' cultures, the binary opposition through which Wilson defines 'abduction' opera as a genre.⁹ In other words, Wilson's focus on works of literature in which that dichotomy is undoubtedly present appears to over-determine his understanding of slightly earlier 'abduction' operas. At stake is not simply the accuracy of the plot archetype, but the set of meanings onto which it opens: specifically, the religious antagonism spawned by the medieval crusades and the later wars between the Ottoman Empire and Austria. Wilson reads 'abduction' opera as a working out of historical religious and military conflicts – conflicts he rightly characterizes as matters then passing into lore. The fact that Mozart's *Die Entführung* does involve an encounter of European-Christian and Ottoman-Islamic cultures made the framework pertinent, even seemingly natural, when it was adopted by Thomas Bauman in his Cambridge Opera Handbook on Mozart's opera.

Antagonism to Islam does figure in *L'incontro improvviso* but ambiguously so as part of a critique of an aspect of the 'home' religion: Catholic monasticism. Targeting the Koranic prohibition on alcohol, the opera opens with a hearty (laddish) drinking song for the apparently Muslim Calandro and his fellow dervishes.¹⁰ They live well on begging and feigned poverty. After a toast to Bacchus, the Calandro dismisses his followers (he is a tyrant within this all-male environment) and embarks on a session of begging to a stage song on a nonsense text "castagno, castagna" ('Conker, bonker').¹¹ (Incidentally, Haydn indulges in a little begging of his own at this point, modelling

9 The same is true of André Grétry and Jean François Marmontel: *Zémire et Azor* (1771), as noted by Thomas Bauman in: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, ed. Thomas Bauman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987 (= Cambridge Opera Handbooks), p. 28.

10 Wilson describes such drinking songs as a signature of 'abduction' opera. Cf. Wilson: *Humanität und Kreuzzugsdeologie um 1780*, pp. 31–32, citing instances from August Gottlieb Meissner and Johann Adam Hiller: *Das Grab des Mufti; oder: die zwey Geizigen* (1776) and, of course, Johann Gottlieb Stephanie and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*.

11 By their nature, gobbledygook texts involving alliterative play on words and syllables do not yield to single, authoritative translations. 'Conker, bonker' is Slater's solution (Haydn: *L'incontro improvviso* (CD-booklet), p. 64), one that substitutes a rhyme ("-onker") for the gender-switching of the original ("Castagno" becomes "castagna"). In a private communication, H. E. Weidinger expressed his conviction that, regarding this line, there is no nonsense in the original words and their meaning, in literal translation, is 'chestnut tree, chestnut fruit'; he further notes the double rhyme between this line and the third line "Rimagno, rimagna", meaning 'I eat again, he/she eats again'. At the boundary of the decipherable and the nonsensical, the text of the Calandro's aria involves a quasi-musical play of signifiers – a playfulness that also (incidentally) characterizes Mozart's letters.

the grotesque stage song “Castagna” on Gluck’s earlier setting. Both composers make the begging song sound sinister, ugly and funny). Continuing what seems to be an affront to the devout, the Calandro explains to his new disciple Osmin that “E una vecchia canzone oscura | Di Maometo, tratta d’Alcorano”¹² (‘its an old secret chant by Mahomet | taken from the Koran’).¹³

There are, however, at least two reasons why the opening scenes of the opera would be misunderstood if they were deemed exclusively to denigrate Islam. First, and most obviously, the Calandro and his fellow clerics do not follow their religion: they pretend to be devout in order to trick others into giving charity. The libretto targets their dishonesty and greed. Second, the scene targets the clerical lifestyle, finding in it a paradox that the Calandro himself announces:

Ancor io la mia parte farò:	(‘I too will do my bit;
Che il vantar agli uomini la miseria,	for to extol privation and penury to men
E poverdate,	while enjoying secure comfort
Lorche godo felicità sicura,	is my sole pleasure,
E l’unico mio piacer,	my sole skill.’) ¹⁴
L’unica mia bravura. ¹⁵	

Such a remark betrays another target: the Catholic monasteries in Austria. Considering monastic life unproductive, Joseph II (1765–1780 co-regent of the Habsburg territories with his mother Maria Theresia) closed over 700 monasteries. Selling off monastic lands, he funded the movement of clergy into the parishes they served. The interpretation of this opera as anti-clerical, as much as anti-Islamic, is supported by the reception of the libretto in its earlier setting by Gluck, which Count Karl von Zinzendorf (1739–1813) described in his diary as “une satyre bien mordante contre les Moines” (‘a very biting satire against monks’).¹⁶ The use of a dervish identity as a mask for the critique of monks was apparently easier to decode back then than it is today.

A related power struggle between Joseph II and the Catholic Church also makes an appearance in the opera when the sultan of Egypt decrees that Ali and Rezia will marry and announces the start of celebrations. Now that marriage can take place

12 Friberth: *L’incontro improvviso*, I/iv, p. 9.

13 Haydn: *L’incontro improvviso* (CD-booklet), p. 66. The correct meaning of “canzone oscura” is not ‘secret chant’, but ‘obscure chant’.

14 Haydn: *L’incontro improvviso* (CD-booklet), p. 62.

15 Friberth: *L’incontro improvviso*, I/ii, p. 7.

16 Bruce Alan Brown: “Gluck’s ‘Rencontre imprévue’ and Its Revisions”, in: *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 36/3 (Autumn 1983), pp. 498–518, here: p. 505, footnote 22.

at the end of a bungee rope, it is easy to forget the privilege historically enjoyed by the Church over the ceremony. Joseph II was irritated by this (the privilege not the bungee rope), and although he did not sanction drive-through weddings, he did redefine marriage as a civil contract and so wrested some control from the Church. It is apt, then, that Haydn announces the arrival of the Sultan not with Janissary music in the mould of Gluck and (later) Mozart but with a version of the *Törökös* ('Turkish'), a masked Hungarian wedding dance.

Indeed, the score as a whole is almost entirely without musical signs for Turkish military music: it is, so to speak, demilitarized. The image of the 'sabre-wielding Turk' associated with, among other encounters, the Second Siege of Vienna (1683), and so frequently evoked in the scholarly literature on musical-theatrical *turquerie*, is absent, except as the pasha's feigned severity (see above). While the libretto does allude to political unrest in Ali's native city of Basora (modern day Basra in Iraq), the opera transports the audience to a quiet, unruffled realm in which Ali reads about and dreams of eternal peace.

FEMINISING SOVEREIGNTY

Recent literature regards *opera seria* in Italy as not just the preferred entertainment of kings and queens but as a representation of the institution of sovereignty itself, containing elements of celebration and critique in its images of rulers that articulated and regulated official versions of the good ruler.¹⁷ For all its comic subplots, *L'incontro improvviso* remains at core an *opera seria*, and it is to this genre that the figure of the benevolent pasha can be traced. To put things bluntly, it simply would not do in an entertainment for the nobility, to picture an on-stage ruler in a negative light. While in the predominantly bourgeois genre of *Singspiel* a Middle Eastern setting sometimes authorized a portrait of a villainous leader, *opera seria* (and related genres) did not risk equating even its 'oriental' monarchs with evil.¹⁸ The

17 Reinhard Strohm: *Dramma per musica: Italian Opera Seria of the Eighteenth Century*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997. – Martha Feldman: *Opera and Sovereignty: Transforming Myths in Eighteenth-Century Italy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

18 Cf. Mozart: *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, ed. Thomans Bauman, pp. 32–25, where the connection between the 'noble Turk' and Metastasian *opera seria* is made. Among the malevolent pashas conceived away from Habsburg court theatres are the Kaled in Sebastien Chamfort and Georg Joseph Vogler: *Der Kaufmann von Smyrna* (1771) and the Cadi in Issac Bickerstaff and Charles Dibdin: *The Captive* (1769).

particular political propaganda at play in the benign pasha of *L'incontro improvviso* is 'enlightened absolutism' (sometimes called 'enlightened despotism') – a tight-rope response on the part of European rulers to the critical, reforming ideals of English and French writers (particularly Voltaire [1694–1778]), variously expressed in 'rational' and 'humanitarian' reform of the law, the abolition of serfdom and the cultivation of the arts. The 'abduction' plot is suited to extol such ideals, at least through characterization of the pasha. In *L'incontro improvviso* he is seen to set aside his own desires for Rezia in uniting her with Ali, a gesture that expresses in miniature the use of power to further the welfare of subjects. The fact that Rezia remains chaste, and enjoys apparent freedom in the seraglio, further reveals a ruler who overcomes his own selfish or baser instincts, who wields power in a 'civilized' manner. 'Otherness', in this context, is not a matter of nationality or ethnicity but a characteristic of male servants and beggars, who think first and foremost of themselves, particularly of their bellies. Social hierarchy, not ethnicity, structures difference.

As does gender: Princess Rezia embodies a femininity that seems to explain the pasha's civility, as if her presence had transformed him. In a subtly feminine gendering of absolute despotism, she shares in, and lends qualities of grace to, sovereignty. Following courtly ideals, the role of 'woman' in the opera is to bring about a transformation, a reform of male manners (in this later eighteenth-century context she is the catalyst for the reform of despots). Just as Konstanze in Mozart's *Die Entführung* – in the heroic defence of her sexual virtue – acts as a civilising force, inspiring the pasha to overcome his desire to force 'love' upon her, so Rezia (and her two slaves) cast a spell of coloratura in their dream of romantic love, a spell at once erotic and urging restraint. If Haydn secretly codes this trio as Trinitarian (there are three threes – the trio text, the triple time signature, and the three flats of the key signature), this was for the eye rather than the ear, and not something authorized by the libretto.

A feminized realm of love, bound up with absolutist ideals of global peace and conviviality, takes centre stage. The 'abduction' plot notwithstanding, male adventure and heroism are rendered decorative. Even the pirates who abducted Rezia are polite to ladies, entertaining them aboard ship with gently teasing song. Ali arrives in Cairo accidentally, not as part of a rescue mission, and spends his leisure time reading, like a good enlightened prince.

L'incontro is suffused with an ideal of universal and eternal peace, familiar, again, from French courtly rhetoric validating the reign of the Sun King. This ideal is expressed allegorically through the love of Rezia and Ali. And in case the allegory was to remain opaque, it is spelled out at the beginning of Act 2. Here Ali sits alone, reading. In a delicious artifice, the words of his canzonetta are read from his book, which describes a utopia where love reigns and enemies are reconciled:

<p>Quivi in un seren gentile (<i>leggend.</i>) La stagion si spiega ogn' or; Ha l'arsura, e il gel a vile, Non la turba aquoso humor. Ride sempre un verde Aprile, Ride un candidetto amor.¹⁹</p>	<p>(‘There in gentle calm the season reigns forever that scorns torrid heat and frost, is untroubled by storms – a verdant April smiles eternally, as smiles a pure and innocent love.’)²⁰</p>
---	--

The last clause discloses how the “candidetto amor” of Ali and Rezia is bound up with a political ideal of eternal peace. For this reason, love in *L'incontro* belongs to an absolutist semiotics of kingship – it is a way of extolling the competence, and mystical power, of the sovereign – even if it resonates with contemporary bourgeois sentimentalism (the discourse of romantic love in poems and novels). As Ali’s canzonetta continues, his book seems to allude to the myth of Orpheus, whose song, in Ovid’s telling, tamed wild animals:

<p>Gli animali in pace accoppia, Puo sicuro ognun dormir. Quivi unisce volpe doppia Con il Pollo i suoi desir. Quì l’augell’ in dolce coppia Con il nibbio va à garrir.²¹</p>	<p>(‘The beasts live together in peace, and each can sleep secure. There the fox joins the chicken, sharing the same desires. Here the bird warbles in sweet harmony with the buzzard.’)²²</p>
---	--

The power of music is appropriated for a vision of global peace.

Peace, the opera suggests, involves men (whatever their social status) coming under the civilising, softening influence of women. The charms and influence of Rezia in the harem rhetorically rescue sovereignty from barbarism. At a point of furthest remove from the ‘oriental Other’ of opera a century and more later (*Carmen*, *Delilah*, *Salome*), Persian Rezia provides the moral insurance policy on the political organisation of ‘home’.

19 Friberth: *L'incontro improvviso*, II/i p. 29.

20 Haydn: *L'incontro improvviso* (CD-booklet), p. 102 (modified).

21 Friberth: *L'incontro improvviso*, II/i, p. 29.

22 Haydn: *L'incontro improvviso* (CD-booklet), p. 102.

EXOTICISM AND THE ESZTERHÁZ FESTIVAL

The exoticism of *L'incontro improvviso* does not exist to 'other' the Middle East, or even to establish it, in the manner of reverse critique, as superior to European society. Both of those strategies belong more to the practice of exoticism in non-court contexts – to the culture of the middling-social strata from the later eighteenth century onwards. Lawrence Kramer describes such strategies as comprising a “logic of alterity”, a bifurcation of reality under the headings of Self and Other, through which power is routed along a procession of hierarchically arranged terms: rational/irrational, orderly/chaotic, democratic/despotic, normal/abnormal, perfect/imperfect, moderate/extreme, civilized/primitive, inside/outside, virtuous/evil, and so on.²³ If Mozart and his librettists offer instances of such logic (as well as powerful examples of the attractiveness of the Other) in Osmin, the Queen of the Night, Monostatos, and Don Giovanni – all expelled from their opera's happy endings – *L'incontro improvviso* equivocally reembraces its chief rogue. The Calandro will be banished, but only beyond the city wall of Cairo, and, determining to cultivate virtue, he joins in, and forms part of, the concluding celebrations. Perhaps his banishment will prove temporary.

If the exoticism of *L'incontro improvviso* does not exist to establish difference between East and West, then how does it function? Part of the answer has already been suggested – exoticism functions like other literary-theatrical modes, such as pastoral, as a conventionalised disguise, a costume and setting, in which ideals of courtly conduct and character are represented.²⁴ But such interpretations do not engage the phenomenology of the opera, its glittering, candlelit splendour – a splendour which connects the fictional world of a pasha's palace and seraglio to the occasion of the opera's performance. The fabulous luxury and riches of the East, the endless pleasures of the seraglio, mirrored the aesthetics of the festival, and the lavish staging of the opera itself. Italian opera was itself an expensive, exotic import, offering in the illuminated night encounters with the (female) singing voice – 1001 arias. In a curious doubling, the exotic costumes of the cast cost a king's ransom; a detailed invoice in the court archives, reproduced by H. C. Robbins Landon, documents a bill

23 Lawrence Kramer: *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, pp. 34–35.

24 This could extend to exoticism as a vantage point from which to evaluate other modes, as in Pietro Metastasio's (1698–1782) *Le Cinesi*, set by Gluck, in which three Chinese princesses entertain themselves by performing, and discussing the merits of arias in tragic, comic and pastoral styles.

totalling 351 gulden (about a third of Haydn's annual salary at this time).²⁵ But not just the costumes, the musicians themselves were exhibited in the manner of costly resources at Prince Eszterházy's disposal.

The aesthetic and political principles of display employed in the festival were similar to those developed a century before at Versailles. They centred on the power of the royal host to bring forth illusions and spectacle through seemingly unlimited resources. The ability to give pleasure – particularly in the form of wonder and astonishment – testified to the almost magical power of the host, and, in turn, honoured the guests.²⁶ An array of intense, sometimes bizarre pleasures were engineered, pleasures captured in words like enchantment, wonder, marvel, astonishment. The natural world was drawn into the theatrical fiction – trees, plants, streams and fountains – “as one more element in the satisfying of the King”.²⁷ It was as if illusions appeared at the command of his Highness.

The festival and its opera were united in a single, continuous fiction. Echoing the larger structure of the three-day festival, the opera's three acts culminate in banquets and dancing – or rather the festival echoed these conventional features of *opera seria*. Just as the arrival of the Habsburg court at Eszterház was marked with fanfares of trumpets and kettledrums, so, as was customary, fanfares announce the arrival of the sultan in act 1.²⁸ Haydn did not write these out, but he indicated where the singers and orchestra should break off and the diegetic music intrude. Diana, Sun, Love and Fortune: these classical deities of the palace gardens return in the opera, ruling over the noble lovers Ali and Rezia, invoked by them in arias and duets, as if the world of the opera and the classically embellished landscape beyond belonged to the same theatrical presentation.²⁹ The power of culture to determine ‘reality’ is such

25 For the bill, see Robbins Landon: *Haydn at Esterháza*, pp. 220–222, and on Haydn's salary, *ibid.*, p. 41.

26 These comments are indebted to Georgia J. Cowart: *The Triumph of Pleasure: Louis XIVth and the Politics of Spectacle*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008, especially pp. xvi–xvii. Cowart's emphasis on the dialogic, critical aspects of spectacle in relation to kingship at the court of Louis XIV poses important questions that I have not attempted to answer here – though my sense is that the images of artists in *L'incontro improvviso* (as when Ali disguises himself as a French painter, or Osmin turns singer-beggar) are so farcical that they posed little danger to the overall authority, and symbolic authorship, of Prince Eszterházy and his royal guests.

27 Gerry McCarthy: *The Theatres of Molière*. London: Routledge, 2002, p. 92.

28 Cf. [Anonymous]: “Beschreibung”, in *Pressburger Zeitung*, no. 73, September 13, 1775, pp. 6–8, here: p. 6, col. 1: “Nahe am Schloße war eine Bühne von grünen Zweigen aufgerichtet, worauf ein Chor Trompeter und Pauker stand, um mit ihrer Musik die Ankommenden zu bewillkommen.” (‘Near the palace was a stage made from green branches, on which stood a band of trumpeters and kettledrum players who welcomed the visitors with music.’)

29 Immediately before attending *L'incontro improvviso*, [Anonymous]: “Beschreibung”, p. 6, col. 2,

that, within this courtly environment, sovereign power elided distinctions between nature, theatre, fantasy and fact – there was no official place in the Eszterház festival for bourgeois common sense to divorce representation and reality.³⁰

The Eszterház festival is outlined in the appendix. The report in the *Pressburger Zeitung* emphasizes the orderly movement of the royal bodies about the Eszterház palace and grounds as if retracing a liturgical procession. The movement of the courtiers from one festive spectacle to the next becomes, in the narration, a spectacle in itself, viewed phantasmatically by the reader. The particular attention given in the report to exits and entrances resonates with the stage formalities of *opera seria* (that genre of kings): carriages rattling around the park of Eszterház like so many recitatives, while each entertainment laid on for the guests offered a moment of florid, intensely pleasurable stasis.

On August 28, the approach of the royal party was marked along the route with trumpet and drum fanfares, the arrival at Eszterház with a cannon salute. The travel weary guests retired after supper and a short German play. The next morning, the 29th, after the *levee*, they were entertained with *Feldmusik* ('a wind band') beneath their windows. A tour of the palace and its grounds included visits to garden temples dedicated to Diana, the Sun, Love and Fortune – mythological figures who return in Haydn's opera that followed immediately after. A masked ball in the Chinese ball room rounded off the day. On August 30, the guests enjoyed browsing in a mocked-up village market selling "trinkets" and "jewellery",³¹ before, in a clearing, an array of street entertainments: a Punch and Judy theatre, a quack on a wagon drawn by oxen and accompanied by monkeys, lions and tigers; a picture singer (*Bänkelsängerin*) describing a murder in French song; a dentist on stilts four or five metres high demonstrating his technique of tooth extraction; peasants singing and dancing; musicians; a marionette display, a cobbler acting out a farce, three characters from French farce – Harlequin, Pirot and Balliazo. The *frisson* attending such encounters with the low urban Other in the landscaped gardens of the Eszterház palace can only be imagined. The day was rounded out with a marionette opera, fireworks and another masked ball. On the finale day, which began with a deer hunt, the guests

relates, "der Dianentempel, der Sonnentempel, der Tempel der Liebe und der Fortuna, so wie die neue geschmackvolle und prächtige Ermitage und der größte Theil des Parks wurden in Augenschein genommen und bewundert" ('the Temple of Diana, the Sun Temple, the Temple of Love and of Good Luck, along with the new, tasteful and magnificent hermitage and the majority of the park were inspected and admired').

30 Such characterisation is inspired by McCarthy: *The Theatres of Molière*, p. 92, with reference to La Fontaine's description of royal entertainments at Vaux.

31 Howard C. Robbins Landon's words, glossing the *Pressburger Zeitung*, no. 73, September 13, 1775, via a translation in the *Haydn Jahrbuch*, vol. 8, in Robbins Landon: *Haydn at Esterháza*, p. 222.

attended a play in German by the troupe of Carl Wahr (b.1745) with incidental music by Haydn and then the *pièce de résistance* – in an oval clearing in the park were illuminations, flowers and stage sets showing *galant* scenes (*Konversationsgemälde*³²):

Aufeinen Kanonenschuß wurde zur allgemeinen Bewunderung der ganze leere Platz mit 2000 Unterthanen des Fürsten erfüllt, welche in einem Augenblicke aus allen Eingängen hervorkamen, nach ihrer Art, die Kroaten kroatisch, die Ungarn ungarisch, und alle nach ihrer Art und besondern Instrumenten um ihre Fahnen herum tanzten und mit allgemeinem Freudengeschrey die Luft erfüllten. Die Bauern wurden mit Wein, Bier, Brod und Fleisch bewirthet, und tanzten biz an den Tag.³³

(‘To everyone’s astonishment, cannon fire summoned 2,000 princely subjects. They poured in, filling the empty clearing, each dressed according to his type – the Croatian Croatian, the Hungarian Hungarian, and so on, each with their particular tools, dancing around their [national] colours, and filling the air with cries of joy. The peasants were repaid with wine, beer, bread and meat, and they danced until dawn.’)

CONCLUSIONS

‘Abduction’ operas contain traces of diverse historical moments and cultural pre-occupations. Most archaic among these is the memory of the crusades. The notion of a Christian made a slave in the Holy Land was central to crusading ideology, authorising the type of ‘rescue’ of which ‘abduction’ operas are an oblique reminder. However, at the level of the libretto, *L'incontro improvviso* does not fit, because Rezia is a Persian princess, without explicit religious affiliation. While one might argue that she is a Christian ‘despite herself’, any connection to a crusading background is tenuous. Nonetheless, religion does come under the spotlight: the notion of a false religion transposed into a critique of false piety and hypocritical monasticism.

A more recent but still historical layer concerned the threat of the Ottoman Empire to Western and Central European security – a threat epitomized in the Second Siege of Vienna by Ottoman troops in 1683 but which had passed into lore by the 1760s. This is a significant aspect of modern scholarship on ‘abduction’ opera,

32 [Anonymous]: “Beschreibung”, p. 8, col.1.

33 [Anonymous]: “Beschreibung”, p.8, col. 1. Cf. Robbins Landon: *Haydn at Esterháza*, pp. 222–223.

understandably so in the case of Mozart's *Die Entführung*, with its military-style Janissary choruses, menacing, *forte* bursts of 'Turkish' percussion in the overture, and the bloodthirsty coda to Osmin's famous aria "*Solche hergelauf'ne Laffen*". (Indeed, Mozart's *Rondo alla Turca* was probably composed to coincide with the centenary of 1683). But *L'incontro improvviso* is almost entirely free of such militaristic resonances. Although the sole recording uses the *batterie turque* for the overture, this is an editorial addition/suggestion. As we saw earlier, the pasha is associated not with Janissary music but with a Hungarian folk dance, appropriately enough given that he arranges the marriage of Rezia and Ali. I say appropriately because this was a masked wedding dance 'in the Turkish style'.

The 'politics' of *L'incontro improvviso* are not, in other words, those of 'East meets West' but of enlightened absolutism in general, and the practices of display in particular occasioned by the Habsburg visit to Eszterház. The power of those politics to condition visions of the Middle East are particularly apparent in the treatment of the pasha's seraglio. Far from being a site of female enslavement and male tyranny (tropes of the harem already in place in this period), the seraglio of *L'incontro improvviso* serves to stage the civilising, refining influence of 'woman'. At a time when civilisation was measured in no small part by the extent to which it accorded women 'freedom', the seraglio emerges as a symbol of refinement and modernity, albeit predicated, here at least, on Rezia's nobility.³⁴

In sum, the context of courtly entertainment goes along way to explaining the apparent anomalies, and the particular brand of exoticism, of *L'incontro improvviso*. Holding a mirror to the court, the opera not only afforded pleasure and spectacle but was about them: its content and its function were overlain. Middle-Eastern exoticism was in no small part a sign of the luxury and riches deployed on the occasion of performance: the noble and royal guests were immersed in a festival marked by apparently infinite resources, and by the seemingly magical power of the host to bring forth illusion. Absolutism found its expression in the power of the crown prince to assemble in one place, as if in a dream, a fleeting congress of natural and artificial pleasures; the night was illuminated, gardens were adorned with paintings, carriages bore visitors through landscaped parks to the temples of classical goddesses,

34 In this way, 'abduction' opera might seem to differ from that classic instance of the 'exotic-erotic' *1001 Nights* (translated into German in 1710 as *Tausendundeine Nacht*). Certainly, these stories are far richer than 'abduction' operas in their construction of 'the East' as a place of magical enchantment, adventure, incalculable riches, violence and sexual conquest. But the narrative conceit of *1001 Nights* – according to which Scheherazade evades consummation of her marriage to Sultan Shahriyar (and thence execution) by nocturnal story telling reveals a similar dialectic of female sexual power (lessness).

French markets and street entertainers appeared, magically, and vanished again, as if on royal command. From the Chinese décor of the marionette theatre, to Prince Eszterházy's collection of Japanese porcelain, the 'Turkish' costumes of the nocturnal masquerade balls, the scenes of Cairo and lavish costumes in *L'incontro improvviso*, the exotic functioned not just as imaginative escape but a sign of royal power, as the essence of aristocratic privilege to command the globe itself. The laws of time and space were banished, as Prince Eszterházy summoned China, France, Japan, Croatia and Cairo in scenes of miraculous, shimmering beauty.

APPENDIX

Theatrical and musical elements of the festival at Eszterház to honour the visit of the Habsburg court summarized via documents and editorial commentary in Robbins Landon (ed.): *Haydn: Chronicle and Works* (see bibliography below).

August 28, 1775

Trumpet and drum fanfares welcome the royal party as they approach the Eszterház palace

Cannon salutes mark their arrival; more fanfares

"Ein kleines deutsches Schauspiel", possibly a marionette play

August 29, 1775

Feldmusik wakes the guests

Cannons punctuate the events of the day

A tour of the palace and grounds includes a visit to the garden temples of Diana, Sun, Love and Fortune

L'incontro improvviso in the opera house

Masked-ball in the Chinese ball room

August 30, 1775

In the park, a village market is contrived with stalls selling jewellery and trinkets

A clearing where an array of street entertainments and curiosities were arranged:

Punch and Judy theatre (a *pulcinello*)

A quack on a wagon drawn by oxen and accompanied by monkeys, lions and tigers

A picture-singer (*Bänkelsängerin*) describing a murder in a French song

A dentist on stilts 4 or 5 metres tall demonstrating tooth extraction

Peasants singing and dancing

Musicians

A marionette display

A cobbler acting a farce

A marionette opera (a parody version of Carlos d'Ordonez's *Alceste*)

Fireworks

Masked ball

August 31, 1775

Deer hunt

Der Zerstreute, by the Wahr theatre troupe, translated from Regnard's *Le Distrait*,
with incidental music by Haydn

In an oval clearing in the park:

Illuminations, flowers and stage sets showing *galant* scenes (*Konversations-
gemälde*)

A cannon salute initiates a *Volksfest* comprising 2000 Hungarian and Croatian
peasants singing, dancing and shouting joyously

Masked ball

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- [Anonymous]: "Beschreibung", in: *Pressburger Zeitung*, September 13, 1775, pp. 6–8.
- Brown, Bruce Alan: "Gluck's 'Recontre imprévue' and Its Revisions", in: *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 36/3 (Autumn 1983), pp. 498–518.
- Cowart, Georgia J.: *The Triumph of Pleasure: Louis XIVth and the Politics of Spectacle*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- Feldman, Martha: *Opera and Sovereignty: Transforming Myths in Eighteenth-Century Italy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.
- Friberth, Carlo: *L'INCONTRO IMPROVVISO. | DRAMA GIOCOSO | PER MUSICA | TRADOTTO DAL FRANCESE, | E RAPPRESENTATO | Á ESTERHAZ. | IN OCCASIONE DEL FELICISSIMO | ARRIVO | DELLE A.A.L.L.R.R. | IL SERENISSIMO ARCIDUCA | D'AUSTRIA | FERDINANDO. | E | DELLA SERENISSIMA ARCIDUCHESSA | BEATRICE. | D'ESTE. | SUL TEATRO DI S.A. IL PRENCIPE | NICOLO ESTERHAZY | DE GALANTA. | NEL MESE D'AGOSTO DELL'ANNO 1775. | A OEDENBURGO, | NELLA STAMPERIA DI GIUSEPPE SIESS [1775]*.
- Goldzink, Jean: "Introduction", in: Voltaire: *Zaïre. Le fanatisme ou Mahomet le prophète. Nanine ou l'homme sans préjugé. Le café ou l'Écossaise*, ed. Jean Goldzink. Paris: Flammarion, 2004, pp. 7–46.
- Haydn, Joseph: *L'incontro improvviso*, dir. Antal Dorati with the Lausanne Chamber Orchestra, *Esterháza Opera Cycle* [1979–89] (Philips 432416-2, CD-booklet).
- Kramer, Lawrence: *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
- McCarthy, Gerry: *The Theatres of Molière*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus: *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, ed. Thomas Bauman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987 (= Cambridge Opera Handbooks).
- Robbins Landon, Howard C. (ed.): *Haydn: Chronicle and Works*, vol. 2: *Haydn at Esterháza, 1766–1790*. London: Thames and Hudson/Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978.
- Strohm, Reinhard: *Dramma per musica: Italian Opera Seria of the Eighteenth Century*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997.
- Wilson, Daniel W.: *Humanität und Kreuzzugsideologie um 1780*. New York: Peter Lang, 1984 (= Kanadische Studien zur deutschen Sprache und Literatur 30).