

THE DEFINITIVE

KOBBÉ'S
OPERA
BOOK

REVISED, REVISED AND UPDATED BY
THE EARL OF HAREWOOD

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PREFACE

Gustave Kobbé was born in New York in 1857, and received his musical education there and at Wiesbaden in Germany. He began his career as co-editor of the *Musical Review*, and in 1882 was sent as correspondent to Bayreuth by the *New York World* for the first performance of *Parsifal*. He contributed many articles on music to the leading American magazines of his day and became music critic of the *New York Herald*, remaining with it for eighteen years. His hobby was sailing, and it was while he was out in the Great South Bay, Long Island, New York, in July 1918, that a seaplane, coming down for a landing, struck his boat and killed him instantly.

At the time he died, Kobbé was on the point of completing the book which was published after his death as *The Complete Opera Book*. Various additions to it were made before publication and also in subsequent editions, with a view to fulfilling the claims of the title, although these must necessarily remain to a great extent illusory. In the early 1950s, I was asked to bring Kobbé up to date and in the 1954 edition made an attempt to reflect some of the changes which had taken place in the repertory and in operatic outlook between 1918 and then. In 1976 I repeated the process and now I have done so again, and, as in 1954, the entry for each opera is signed with an initial, 'K' standing for the material left by Mr Kobbé; 'KW' for the operas added after Kobbé's death by Katherine Wright, who put together the material he left; 'FB' for Ferruccio Bonavia; and 'JP' for the present Editor.

Why are over 300 operas to be found in Kobbé, many thousands more excluded? The criterion is still that the travelling opera-goer is likely to meet the opera in question during his peregrinations. There are however a number of factors: many are in because they are popular, some because they are noteworthy as milestones, some because the editor feels they will (or should) gradually become better known, some as a result of an exercise in choice. Operettas (like *La Belle Hélène*) are included because they are so good that opera companies often play them, others, which are also good (like *West Side Story*), are excluded because their nature or their vocal requirements suggest that an opera company brings fewer positive attributes to them than it does to, say, *Wienerblut*.

There are probably as many reasons for choosing operas for Kobbé as there

are for the actual event of going to the opera. Are you more interested in the Singer or the Song? In the glamour of the performer or the effect of the performance? Do you go back to the more popular operas because of what in a decent performance they can still give, or because they provide the best opportunities for good singers, and good singing is for you a major pleasure? My own priorities are probably obvious, and certainly have become more apparent to me over the decades. I get vast enjoyment from listening to good singing, but even more pleasure from good opera.

When I was asked for the second time to revise *Kobbé*, some fourteen years ago as I write, I made reference in my preface to changes in operatic fashion, particularly in connection with revivals. In the early 1970s, these were already in the great centres a feature of operatic life; with Monteverdi vying with Mozart for a high place in the list of new productions, the lesser works of the Italian Ottocento – by Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, even by the brothers Ricci and Mercadante – joining Verdi in the new fashion parade of golden oldies; with *Leonore* added in 1970 to *Fidelio*, and *Euryanthe* and *Oberon* outgunning *Freischütz* for mentions in the index for the operatic year. Later still, the fashion for revivals ran riot, the Metropolitan inaugurating its centenary with *Francesca da Rimini*, and with 1985 raining Handel operas on to an often (but not invariably) grateful public. This situation was in fairly strong contrast with what was happening in the early 1950s when I first worked on the book and had myself within the space of three years been present at the first nights of *The Rake's Progress*, *Billy Budd*, and *Gloriana*, and was looking forward to premières of *The Turn of the Screw*, *Troilus and Cressida* and *Midsummer Marriage* within a year of delivering the proofs to the printer. In retrospect that seems like a golden quinquennium and since then the cry has gone up, as so often before, that opera is in crisis. In 1970, Hans Werner Henze, in the preceding two decades one of opera's most successful and most prolific composers, was quoted, accurately I believe, as saying: '... I could see that I would contribute no more new operas, masquerades, charades ... I feel opera is finished. Of course, the basic idea of putting drama to music is *not* finished ...' As someone steeped for most of his life in opera, I should hate to think there was too much force in Henze's premise, and I take comfort from his reservation.

Composers *have* appeared, believing in Henze's 'basic idea' and putting their beliefs successfully into practice: some, like Ligeti, announcing that they might write only a couple of operas, or, like Harrison Birtwistle, saying that what they are writing is not really opera at all; others, working in countries where native opera had not previously flourished, like Harry Somers in Canada with *Louis Riel*, or Brian Howard with *Metamorphosis* and Richard Meale with *Voss* in Australia. At least one in the 1970s – Philip Glass – has apparently found something not unlike a successful operatic formula, at the very least a means of communication with the public which has ensured that a première of one of his operas would be approached by its potential audience with keen anticipation rather than as an act of funerary penance.

I remain convinced that opera fulfils an aspect of human need, the transmission through music of one or another of the many forms of drama in which the human condition deals. That is why I hope with some confidence

that a future editor of Kobbé will, in perhaps another dozen or so years, find him or herself still adding to and subtracting from its original table of contents in an effort to make that chimerical claim to completeness something other than a total affront to the publishers' (and the editor's) conscience.

One of the many problems associated with the preparation of a new edition of Kobbé was that of Russian transliteration. We have not tried to be strictly logical, which will offend some, but have based our attempts on usage (Tchaikovsky rather than Chaikovsky), and euphony ('*Ruslan*', which is how it sounds, rather than '*Ruslan*', which is – I think – how it should be written).

For help in the preparation of this edition my thanks are due to Harold Rosenthal for his care of the details of premières and revivals of the individual operas; and to many musicians and other operatic friends for supplying material and for suggestions based on the last edition, particularly to Charles Mackerras, David Lloyd-Jones, Winton Dean and Edmund Tracey.

May 1986

HAREWOOD

PART I

1600-1800

Opera Before Gluck

CLAUDIO
MONTEVERDI

(1567-1643)

Man's instinct for drama *expressed through* (as opposed to *accompanied by*) music has taken very many forms through the ages—the tragedies and comedies of the Greeks, the Buffalo dances of American Indian Blackfoots, the Ramayana of India, Miracle plays, Mysteries and Masques, the Christian Mass itself—and opera is a culmination of a particular form of Western expression, itself to this day in a constant state of evolution.

Modern opera may conveniently be said to have begun in 1600, the date of Peri's *Euridice*, the first surviving example of the form (his *Dafne*, 1597, has been lost).

At the end of the sixteenth century a small group of aristocratic intelligentsia, known collectively to musical history as the 'Camerata', was meeting in Florence. Under the auspices of Count Giovanni Bardi di Vernio, and later of Jacopo Corsi, it included composers such as Vincenzo Galilei (father of the astronomer), Emilio de' Cavalieri, Jacopo Peri, and Giulio Caccini, and the avowed intention was to reproduce as far as possible the combination of words and music which together made up Greek theatre. With this restorative aim in view, the members laid down that the text must at all times be understood, that the words must be sung with a scrupulously correct and natural declamation, and that above all the music must interpret the spirit of the whole, not concentrate on details of incidents and words or even individual syllables. In a word, taking the Greeks as their authorities, the composers and poets concerned were anxious to end the distortion of the words which was inevitable in polyphonic music; in its place they were responsible for putting monody (or solo song), to form something like the opera we know today.

Claudio Monteverdi, already highly successful in polyphonic style, was the composer who was able to build on the foundations which had been laid by the Florentine 'Camerata' and his first opera, *Orfeo*, has been described by Professor Jack Westrup as a landmark 'not because it broke new ground but because in it imagination took control of theory'. It was opera's good fortune that there should appear so soon a composer whose outlook was essentially dramatic, and Monteverdi's *Orfeo* makes the *Euridice* of Peri and Caccini (both set Rinuccini's libretto in the same year, 1600) appear pale and monotonous by comparison.