

Performing Nero

by Murray K. Dahm

The image of Peter Ustinov, as Nero, singing as Rome burns in the 1951 film *Quo Vadis?* is the image most would conjure when thinking of Nero the performer: lyre and flame combined and (at best) a mediocre performance usually praised beyond its merits by sycophantic and inveigling courtiers. This particular performance garnered Peter Ustinov an Academy Award nomination for best supporting actor although we can be confident it had little to do with his singing. Such a depiction is seemingly corroborated by our ancient sources; Tacitus (*Ann.* 14.14), Suetonius (*Nero* 19), Dio (61.17.5, 62.6.3-5, 62.24.2, 62.29.1, 63.1.1), and Juvenal (8.219-230) all see the emperor's interest in artistic endeavours as unforgivable crimes.

When we examine the hostility of our sources a little more closely, it is surprising how little substance we find. The emphasis in all is on the disgrace of an emperor performing in public. Dio (61.17.5) speaks of Nero's willingness to 'usher in his own career of disgrace' (Cary translating *tes autou aschemosunes poiesai ethelesen*; see also 63.1.1) and his ridiculous acts (62.29.1. See also 63.11.1). Dio has Boudicca declare that Nero is a woman, a fact proven by his singing and lyre playing and that the Romans deserve to be the slaves of such a woman for having submitted to her for so long. Dio also observes (63.9.2) that by winning contests of lyre-playing and tragedy 'he would make certain his defeat in the contest of the Caesars.' Juvenal (8.198) uses the descriptive oxymoron *citharoedo principe*, 'lyre playing princeps', for Nero and complains that Orestes never sang upon the stage and never wrote an epic on Troy. According to John Jackson (*Jackson n. Ann.* 15.39) Juvenal considered Nero's *Troica* his crowning atrocity. Tacitus (*Ann.* 14.14) refers to Nero's 'repulsive ambition' (*foedum cupido*) to sing to the lyre in the stage manner, and (*Ann.* 14.15) that Nero was reluctant to expose his dishonour on a public stage. Pliny the Younger (*Paneg.* 46.4) also uses the oxymoron *imperator scaenicus* 'Actor emperor' (Edwards, 83). Suetonius (*Nero* 19.3) includes his account of Nero's performing under his shameful (*probris*) and criminal deeds. The Philostratean dialogue *Nero* (6) also speaks of the disgrace of the emperor performing in public. As late as Sidonius (*Panegyric on Maiorianus* 322) Nero could be remembered for 'his lyre and his lechery' (*citharam thalamosque Neronis*). Such disgrace also had a long history before Nero (see Plutarch *Sayings of Kings and Commanders* 179 B for an anecdote regarding the inappropriateness of Philip of Macedon being able to judge lyre playing).

The quality of Nero's actual performances is also overwhelmingly derided. Dio (62.6.4) has Boudicca declare that the Romans are slaves to a lyre-player, and a poor one at that. Dio further reports (61.20.2) that Nero had 'but a slight and indistinct voice, (*brachu kai melan*) so that he moved his audience to tears and laughter at once'. Suetonius reports (*Nero* 20.1) that Nero's voice was weak and husky (*exiguae vocis et fuscae*). Juvenal mentions (8.225) Nero's horrid or unseemly singing (*foedo cantu*). These claims of a weak and indistinct voice are offset by Suetonius who, immediately after stating Nero's voice was weak, records (*Nero* 20.2) that at Neapolis Nero promised the crowd he would 'ring out something good and loud,' (*aliquid se sufferti tinniturum*). Tacitus reports (*Ann.* 15.33) that Nero regarded the Juvenalia as too small for his ample voice (*tantae voci*). These claims of amplitude may be taken as empty boasts. Dio also records (63.20.5) the exclamations of Nero's (*sycophantic*) audiences: 'Divine Voice' (*hiera phone*) and 'Blessed are they that hear thee' (*makarioi oi sou akouontes*). Likewise Tacitus records (*Ann.* 16.22) that sacrifices were made to the emperor's 'celestial voice' (*caelesti voce*). We also have descriptions of Nero's conduct during competitions – he even indulged in sledging (see Dio 63.9.2).

The Philostratean dialogue *Nero* (2) casts a slightly different picture of Nero's abilities. In it Musonius reports that Nero held the exaggerated belief that the Muses themselves could not rival the sweetness of his song and that even Apollo would not dare to play the lyre or sing in competition with him. In chapter 6 we get the most extended and balanced account we have of Nero's voice. Menocrates asks 'tell me about that voice of his which makes him mad about music ... for some of those who sailed to Lemnos expressed admiration for it, while others laughed at it'. Musonius replies that it deserves neither admiration nor ridicule: 'for nature has made him tolerably and moderately tuneful. His voice is naturally hollow and low, (*koilon phusei kai baru*) as his throat is deep set and his singing has a sort of buzzing sound (*bombos*) because his throat is thus constituted. However the pitch of his voice makes him seem less rough when he puts his trust not in his natural powers but in gentle modifications, attractive melody and adroit harp-playing, in choosing the right time to walk, stop and move, and in swaying his head in time to the music; then the only disgraceful feature is that a king should seem to strive for perfection in these accomplishments.'

We can never recover the actual quality of Nero's abilities, our extant sources ensure that. The universal sense of disgrace an emperor singing in public caused our sources was, however, hardly going to lead to glowing reviews. Several factors can be borne

in mind, however, to suggest that Nero was a capable performer. The *Nero* suggests that the emperor was, at least, a creditable performer. As to the quality and skill of Nero's abilities we can add the evidence of the false Nero who seized control of Cythnus (Tacitus *Hist.* 2.8). Among his impersonation prerequisites were that he was an accomplished singer and harpist: there would be no point in claiming to impersonate Nero's abilities if you were obviously or even reputedly better than the original. To some extent we may also use the example of the quality of the performances of other monarchs who have had the time and inclination to devote much practice to artistic endeavour. Louis XVI, for instance, was a dancer of unsurpassed skill for whom Jean-Baptiste Lully composed ballets especially to display them. We need to be careful when using such methods though – Louis XV apparently went about singing the opening aria from Jean-Jacques Rousseau's 1752 opera *Le devin du village* 'with the most out-of-tune voice in the kingdom' (Parouty 10-11).

When we look to other performing Neros, however, especially those found in opera and film, we find a whole range of interpretations of the quality of his abilities as a performer; from the laughable to the exquisite, and coming from a deranged lunatic to a serious artist. This paper examines several examples of Nero the performer and the reception of Nero the performer from these genres. What we find offers up quite a few surprises and it is not at all the performing emperor we might expect, but nor is he one most of our sources would recognise.

Opera was created in late 16th century Florence by members of the Florentine Camerata, a group devoted to the revival of what they understood to be ancient Greek dramatic style. The Camerata included Jacopo Peri who combined the new methods in what are recognised as the very first operas – *Dafne* in 1597 and *Euridice* in 1600. Early operas were concerned to justify their musical and dramatic form of being entirely sung and so mythological subjects were chosen, especially those associated with music and involving Apollo or Orpheus. The first operatic masterpiece was Claudio Monteverdi's *Orfeo* from 1607 and it is Monteverdi who now takes our attention.

Monteverdi abandoned opera soon after *Orfeo* but returned to it in 1639 and in 1642, at the age of seventy-five, composed *L'incoronazione di Poppea*. This was the first opera with an historical subject and it would have been reasonable to expect to find Monteverdi embracing the performing emperor as a further vehicle to justify a sung genre. Indeed the story takes place between the years 62 and 65 AD so we would expect to find Nero performing somewhere. If so we will be disappointed; for Monteverdi's Nero never sings a note (whilst, in fact, singing every note). Even the fire of July 64, prominent in later operas, is absent. Instead, Nero and Poppea are presented in a totally heroic way and end the opera completely victorious. This work is seen as the 'total victory of ruthlessness and immorality' (Harnoncourt 11). Indeed every character who stands between Nero and Poppea's love is vanquished; Seneca is forced to commit suicide whilst Drusilla, Octavia and Otho are exiled. Understanding exactly why Monteverdi and his librettist, Giovanni Busenello, chose to depict Nero and Poppea in this way is no nearer to being solved after 350 years of speculation. Commentators have resorted to cliché, speaking of 'the evil couple' (Arnold 119), yet this does not explain why they are presented as the heroes of the piece. For our purposes we have the framework of a new performance art designed to reflect 16th and 17th century notions of how Greek drama was performed and with subjects which justified the new genre. We then have Nero, the performing emperor, chosen as the first historical subject and so, we would rightfully expect to find him performing to cement the justification of this all-sung art form. We can also envisage that Monteverdi's audience expected the same sort of treatment in accordance with what they had seen of this new genre thus far. They, and we, are in for a shock – and that shock was deliberate.

Monteverdi's audience would have known the history of Nero and to have the couple triumphant at the end of the opera would have caused them not a little disquiet. They would also have known that Poppea was soon to die (probably) at Nero's hands. The ideas and qualities aristocratic audiences wanted to see on stage and which they associated with their own class were here deliberately debased and used to insult the very class for whom opera was created and by the composer who had created opera's first masterpiece. The reasons for such an insult can be sought in several factors. Monteverdi seems always to have had a poor relationship with various members of the aristocracy and it is almost as if *L'incoronazione* was the seventy-five year old composer's parting shot at the aristocracy. There is a sweet irony in the fact that opera's aristocratic audience liked to identify themselves with the sentiments of its characters and Monteverdi's insightful depiction of Roman power and lust associated those 'qualities' with that very audience. They can hardly have been happy to see themselves associated with such base (if accurate) feelings. Such an attack was only possible because the opera was written for a public opera house, the Teatro SS Giovanni e Paolo, which opened in Venice in 1639, rather than for an individual aristocratic patron. The opera is also described as representative of a libertine intellectual movement then rampant in Venice which was concerned with the relative value of religion and sensuality (Sadie, *Book of Operas*, 303). This essentially meant lust and ambition were glorified at the expense of reason and morality; Nero and Poppea were the perfect subject.

If we search opera for instances of Nero actually performing then we encounter a great deal of silence. The strange fact is that in the world of performing Nero, Nero rarely performs. In this discussion I have limited myself to works which are available today

(although most are still rarely performed) so that we can actually find and hear something rather than uncover works which are little more than titles in reference works. For instance there are several operas entitled *Nero* or *Nerone fatto Cesare* from 1693 through to 1735. Most of these would have been to the same libretto but it would seem none have been recorded, even in part. The character of Nero is unlikely to have sung in these works but if he did, that fact and the works themselves have been lost to the world of opera and lost to history.

The next familiar name we come across in connection with operatic Neros is Georg Frideric Handel who wrote two Nero operas. The first is 1705's *Nero (oder durch Blut und Mord erlangete Liebe)*; *Nero (or Love obtained with Blood and Murder)* which sounds historically mainstream although it is unlikely to have contained Nero performing. Unfortunately, Handel detested the libretto and the music is entirely lost. Handel's second opera on Nero was *Agrippina* with a twelve year old Nero (played by a castrato) happily intriguing to secure the succession. Other than the odd musical tantrum, this Nero does not perform either but historical clichés inform productions of the work. Christopher Hogwood describes Nero as a 'squeaking eunuch' – 'an ambitious adolescent, not yet the power-drunk monster of history' (Hogwood 45). It should be pointed out that using a castrato to play a twelve year old is quite appropriate and hardly makes Nero an eunuch.

During the late baroque and early romantic periods Nero went out of favour as an operatic subject. This offers us the opportunity to ponder why Nero was chosen as a subject for a singing genre for such a long period if he never sang. Baroque opera centred on the da capo aria (section A; contrasting section B; repeat section A with variations) with few pieces for two or more voices. This was driven by a star-singer system where each singer was graded on the number of arias they had. The most important would have five arias (or more) per opera down to the minor roles which got only one. This meant that these operas are often very long with twenty-plus arias. The reason for the continued preponderance of mythological and ancient historical subjects is that their stories offered the multiple twists and turns this kind of structure necessitated and thus ample opportunities for individual characters to contemplate the various situations they need to find themselves in to sing multiple arias. What there was not was the opportunity for the *mise en scène* of 19th century opera – thus no orgy or court scenes where Nero could perform to a captive audience. There simply was not the musical or dramatic language for such a scenario or for interjections of applause or encouragement from other characters as there was during the 19th century. What was also relatively rare were characters singing 'songs' within the context of the opera itself. During the subsequent Romantic era, however, when the dramatic and musical language had developed to a point to allow such activity on the stage, Nero was not considered appropriate material for opera. This situation began to change from the 1860s and we find several operas as the fruits of this period and finally we find Nero performing. Still we are not dealing with mainstream opera and there are few recordings of the works I'll discuss.

In 1876 Anton Rubenstein composed *Néron*. This was set to a French libretto but premiered in German in November 1879 and then in Russian in 1884. The opera has not been performed in the 20th or 21st centuries although an aria for Vindex has entered the baritone repertoire. The opera's story revolves around Nero's pursuit of the beautiful Chrysa, daughter to the courtesan Epicharis, secret Christian and beloved of Julius Vindex. The plot provides the opportunity for several grand set pieces – including an orgy in Act 1 and the burning of Rome in Act 3. In Act 2 Nero returns to his apartments having put Octavia to death and, eager to show his accomplishments as a singer, performs a lament (on an antique model) of the sorrows and death of Iphigenia (The Gramophone Company 278-279). Nero's aria, 'Ah! Lumière du jour', has only been recorded once; in April 1917 Enrico Caruso made two takes of the aria accompanied by orchestra and harp. One take remained unpublished (both have now been released) and these remain the only recordings of this aria.

Audio 1 [Rubenstein Néron \(Enrico Caruso\) 'Ah! Lumière du jour'](#)

Finally, therefore, we have heard Nero sing – and as the recording by Caruso attests, it was not intended to be sung by a mediocre performer or in a sub-standard way. Caruso is widely regarded as the greatest opera singer of the 20th century. This is despite the fact that, in the opera, Nero is (according to The Gramophone Company) presented as a conceited and vain performer forgetful of his imperial dignity. This attitude is clearly taken from our sources' similar dismay at the fact Nero chose to perform in public and yet it is contradicted by a recording by Caruso.

There were trends in popular ancient history at the end of the nineteenth century other than opera which took advantage of the opportunity (and appetite) for Roman spectacle. For Nero there was Imre Kiralfy's *Nero; or the Destruction of Rome* from 1889. There were also numerous Nero plays such as Pietro Cossa's *Nerone* (1882) and Wilson Barrett's *Sign of the Cross* (1897). Most famously, Nero features in the Nobel prize winning novel *Quo Vadis?* by Henryk Sienkiewicz's from 1896. These works would soon be devoured and regurgitated by the fledgling film industry but for *Quo Vadis?* operatic versions came first.

In 1901 came a Spanish zarzuela by Chapi y Lorente and in 1908 Jean Nougès wrote a five act opera based on the novel. The opera focuses on Petronius and its climax is his suicide in Act 5. Nero appears in only two scenes – the orgy at the palace in Act 2 where the fire is announced and the emperor takes to his lute, and the arena in Act 4. In the opera the actual amount of singing

that Nero does is in fact limited to only one line in Act 2 after Nero has been implored to sing and surpass Homer by Tigellinus and the servile court: 'Nest of my fathers, cradle sweet to my heart.'



Plate 1 From the score of Nougès' *Quo Vadis*

Immediately following this brief performance, Nero's voice is overpowered by the cries of 'kill him' and 'Nero, the incendiary' from the crowd on the Palatine. Earlier there are stage directions that Nero should give 'the impression of a low and pretentious actor'. In *Quo Vadis?* then, Nero only sings for four bars and only 'plays' ten chords on the lute. From this fact and the tone of the stage directions it is clear that this Nero's performing is intended to be laughable. This attitude is also clear from the end of Act I when Petronius is asked if he will flatter Nero as an artist for his performances. He responds:

'An artist say you? Nero is art itself. ... But there will come a day when, wearied of life, I shall tell him the truth ...'

This Nero is therefore what we would expect to see based on Sienkiewicz's novel and the accounts of our extant sources and yet he 'sings' only one line. In an operatic context, however, it is the *Quo Vadis?* Nero who is the anomaly as the quality of other Neros' music is much higher. Nero is, admittedly, not a major character in the novel although in the films of *Quo Vadis?* he is given a more prominent role.

In Sienkiewicz's novel, Nero is referred to as playing and singing several times without being given specific verses; he is only given actual verses twice. At the announcement of the fire he cries 'Woe unto you, sacred city of Priam'. (Sienkiewicz 227). And when Tigellinus announces that the people suspect Nero of being the incendiary:

'Then suddenly he rose, threw aside his toga, and stood silent, with both hands uplifted to heaven. At last he broke forth in tragic style: 'O Zeus, Apollo, Hera, Athene, Persephone and all ye immortal gods! Wherefore have you not rescued us? What has this hapless city done to these madmen that they should set it ablaze.' (Sienkiewicz 266)

This Nero, logically enough, has been followed by its filmic children – there have been at least eight versions although most were made, ironically, in the silent era.

We brought Peter Ustinov to mind at the opening of this article. His verses from the scene on the palace roof as he surveys the fire show that the quality of Nero's performance was intended to be risible and the result (just like his actions) of his insanity:

Nero: '... I am aware that I must compete with those who sang at the burning of Troy. My song must be greater, just as Rome is greater than Troy. (He plays the lyre and begins to sing)

'Silence! Ye spheres,
Be still ye hurtling stars,
Open wide vaulted skies above me.
Now at last, lo, I see Olympus,
And a light from its summit doth illumine me.'

I am one with the gods immortal,
I am Nero, the artist, who creates with fire,
That the dreams of my life may come true.
To the flames now I give the path,
To the flames and so ...
Take now this Rome
Oh, receive her lovely flames,
Consume her as would a furnace.
Burn on oh ancient Rome,
Burn on, (screaming) Burn on!

In 1985 a major Italian television version of *Quo Vadis?* was produced with Klaus Maria Brandauer as Nero. Once again if we turn to the scene of the burning of Rome we find Nero rehearsing different histrionic postures (rage, anger, cruelty) and then practicing verses which are interrupted by his tutor advising that his arms should be lower and that he should start again. These verses are then repeated to scenes of the fire:

'Oh cradle of my fathers,
Beloved cradle,
Holy city, you bear the eternal waste of history and of empire
Now struck by divine fury.
You are seeking for a god to save you and to protect you.'

It is hardly what you would call singing and once again the quality is meant to appear ludicrous and deranged.

The most lavish *Quo Vadis?* film is 2001's Polish language version directed by Jerzy Kawalerowicz with Michal Bajor as Nero. He seems to have embraced his role wholeheartedly and sings to his own lyre accompaniment twice but again his performances are intended to appear absurd and of obviously poor quality buoyed along by a court of sycophants who remain silent to the reality of what they are hearing. He does perform with a slight and husky voice which matches Dio and Suetonius' descriptions although it is a light tenor. There are two scenes of his performing; at Antium and after the fire when he tries to calm the crowd but is shouted down by the angry crowd.

In addition to *Quo Vadis?*, Nero has been a very popular subject on film and the small screen. From *Neron essayant des poisons sur les esclaves* in 1896 to episodes of *Dr Who* and *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* we can glimpse Nero performing. Likewise, Nero the performer is a subject found with surprising regularity in theatre and fiction. Unfortunately a full analysis of all these depictions is outside the scope of this paper.

Most screen Neros make some reference to a lyre and some intone verses but very few actually sing. In Mel Brooks' *History of the World Part I* (1981) Dom Deluise's debauched and flatulent Caesar (who is clearly modelled on Nero) announces 'the Muse is upon me' and asks for a small lyre only to be delivered a small liar and there the joke ends. Few actors performing the role of the emperor seem to have been as willing to show us their vocal prowess (or lack thereof) as those in the various versions of *Quo Vadis?* Charles Laughton, as Nero in 1932's *Sign of the Cross*, opens the film laughing whilst Rome burns strumming a lyre and intoning verses rather than singing them. He then breaks a string on his lyre and sinks to his throne in a sulk. Although it isn't singing, it is clearly modelled on the idea that Nero's performance abilities were preposterous, and driven by delusion.

One cinematic Nero where his performing is a major part of the plot is *Mio figlio Nerone* from 1956 (dubiously released in the USA as *Nero's Big Weekend* or *Nero's Mistress*). This film starred Gloria Swanson as Agrippina, Brigitte Bardot as Poppea, and Alberto Sordi as Nero. *Mio figlio Nerone* is, unexpectedly, a comedy and Sordi plays his role for laughs as a 'lyre-plucker and fire bug' (*New York Times*). Nero sings throughout the film but has a bass-baritone voice and his displays of virtuosity consist of him descending as low as he can sing (until going out of tune) and then hiccupping into falsetto, all to the adoring cries of his sycophants. Some publicity shots show him strumming a lyre while the figures in the background block their ears. The choice of voice type is a surprise but in the context of such a comedy it adds to the laughs.

The 2004 Italian *Imperium: Nero* also deserves our attention because in it Hans Matheson plays a black-haired emperor who is a serious and talented artist. He is shown playing the lyre on several occasions and even sings on one. His voice is a light baritone but the way in which his abilities are depicted make it clear we are meant to see Nero as a misunderstood virtuoso.

Returning to opera; at the time of Nougè's *Quo Vadis?* the Italian composer and librettist Arrigo Boito had been at work on his opera, *Nerone*, for forty-six years. *Nerone* was conceived of in 1862 yet Boito left it incomplete at his death in 1918. It was premiered six years later in a four act version and was one of the great artistic events of the year.

The nature of good and evil fascinated Boito and Nero was therefore a natural choice of subject. Boito explored the duality of his 'good' creativity and his 'evil' destructiveness (Rizzuto 3). This exploration permeates other characters such as Rubria, the newly converted to Christianity Vestal Virgin, whose conflict over her vow to both Christ and paganism tear her apart. She has been raped by Nero – the incident and her name is taken from Suetonius (Nero 28.1).

Boito's correspondence makes apparent the amount of research he undertook. He includes the praise of Nero's voice found in Dio and Tacitus, and consulted Gregory of Tours for the character of Simon Magus. He also studied ancient musical ideas and metre. Although Boito was encouraged by some of the greatest musicians of the day to present *Nerone*, he always found an excuse to withdraw it. A libretto for a five act version was published in 1901 and the fifth act would have ended with Nero, as Orestes, on stage as Rome burned. Boito contrasts Nero the poet, musician, artist, creator of beauty with Nero the deranged monster who destroys everything in his path.

The opera opens on the via Appia where Nero seeks to bury Agrippina's ashes and is oppressed by voices accusing him of matricide. As he performs the rites, he sees himself as a new Orestes:

Audio 2 [Boito *Nerone* 'Queste ad un lido fatal'](#)

The Dionysiacs also sing Nero's verses amidst a procession which exalts Nero's abilities:

Audio 3 [Boito *Nerone* – Finale to Act 1 'L'eneator t'annuncia ...'](#)

In this scene Nero is hiding, fearing that the people hate him. He recognises his verses but only reveals himself when Tigellinus pushes him into the path of the oncoming procession. Thus the people's sycophancy for Nero's abilities extends beyond the imperial presence. Yet, the quality of the music of this scene creates an effect very different from that of an unworthy performing emperor being courted by false praise.

Nero's character fluctuates between guilty matricide, extrovert performer and cowering and simpering weakling – he longs to flee, and, when asked where to by Tigellinus, he replies 'somewhere where singers go to find a safe haven, where the only glory is Art!':

Audio 4 [Boito *Nerone* – 'Fuggir! Fuggir? Dove...?'](#)

The second act ends with Nero's line 'Now that the gods have been vanquished, the cithara and the altar are mine. Now I shall sing.' At this point, ironically, the curtain descends although Boito's stage instructions advise that Nero adopt the pose of Apollo Musagetes and we do hear the imperial cithara being plucked:

Audio 5 [Boito *Nerone* – 'Or che i Numi son vinti'](#)

Setting aside the fascinating historical intricacies of Boito's opera, Nero's performing is finally a major part of his character although he does not sing in a performance context in the surviving form of the opera. It was originally intended that he should, and others have sung his verses. For Nero to again perform a composition of his own we must turn to the last opera composed on Nero.

Pietro Mascagni considered the subject of *Nerone* as early as 1891 when he read Pietro Cossa's play. He began composing but abandoned work in 1892 because of the association of the subject with Boito (Stivender 242-3). He returned to the idea in 1933 at the age of seventy. Mascagni envisioned Nero as an artist in the last period of his life; 'one very different from that which is generally conceived.' (Stivender 244). Mascagni had been disappointed with Boito's conception of the emperor and saw him not as an emperor or political animal but primarily as 'an artist, unsuccessful if we will, but an artist.' (Stivender 244). Mascagni saw drama in the fact that Nero aspired to be an artist and yet was unsuccessful. He also believed that Nero 'was a terrible singer, but he loved to sing for the love of singing,' and stated 'I wanted to create a human Nero and believe I did not go astray.' (Stivender 245). Nero is therefore a vehicle to display the artistic and histrionic aspects of the emperor's personality along with his inner torments as a poet, actor, and singer. He sings the aria 'Quando al soave anelito' at his orgy in Act 3, scene one:

Audio 6 [Mascagni *Nerone* 'Vergini Muse ... Quando al soave anelito'](#)

Nero's fawning admirers praise his performance, calling him a great poet, a wonderful artist and demand that an Epinician hymn be raised to Apollo's emulator:

Audio 7 [Mascagni *Nerone* 'Evviva il gran poeta ... Nerone a te la Gloria'](#)

The outburst at the end is when Nero discovers that Egloge has been poisoned. These praises echo the opening of the scene where Nero is again praised:

Audio 8 [Mascagni *Nerone* 'Gloria a Nerone'](#)

Nero also recites verses from Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* (lines 1349-50) and then observes that his own life is more worthy of Plautus than Sophocles:

Audio 9 [Mascagni *Nerone* 'Possa la Morte ...'](#)

These verses do seem haltingly performed and the music is not inspired which might suggest the emperor at which Mascagni aimed. When Nero is on the run he finds the time to recite Horace and comment on his fleeing the battle of Philippi:

Audio 10 [Mascagni *Nerone* 'L'uom giusto e fermo nei suoi propositi'](#)

From these examples it is easy to see that Mascagni's Nero conforms to the image of our sources (they also indicate how erudite Mascagni's vision of Nero was). Yet it is not quite so simple. Both Boito and Mascagni's Neros were created by the same singer, Aureliano Pertile, who, with Caruso, is considered one of the greatest singers of the twentieth century (Steane 141-5). Mascagni's Nero has in fact always been sung by artists of a calibre slightly higher than the 'terrible' Mascagni suggested and his music is not what you would call awful either. His aria, 'Quando al soave anelito', has been recorded by Plácido Domingo and Rolando Villazón neither of whom attempt to make their performance 'terrible'.

With *Nerone*, Mascagni believed he had created a new relationship with reality through the metaphor of history. It was, in the operatic context of 1935, a last attempt of Romanticism against Modernism. Mascagni was described as 'a vigilant sword to protect the artistic strength of the Italian race' (Sadie, *Dictionary of Opera*, 244). This can be seen when *Nerone* is compared to other operatic styles then coming to the fore such as Richard Strauss' *Arabella* or Dimitri Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of the Mitenks District*. Nero the performer had become the representative subject of conservative operatic tradition. Hardly the place we would expect for him, especially when we remember that Monteverdi used him at the other end of the spectrum. Very few other subjects had as long a history in the world of opera, however, so in a sense (and however unexpectedly) Nero was ultra-traditional.

What then can we say of Nero the performer in these various guises?

These performing Neros are not necessarily mediocre as we might expect and nor would any of these roles be performed by a mediocre artist. Considering these performances leads one to consider that Nero's artistic endeavours should not be dismissed as the pretensions of a deranged mind. Nor should we assume that Nero was not skilled or talented in his artistic endeavours. He certainly took them seriously and was, more than likely, a talented musician despite the distorted picture that our sources paint. On the whole, film has paid little attention to Nero the performer; at most a passing reference to a lyre or a single (and brief) recitation of verse. In the various versions of *Quo Vadis?* he has been presented as a performer but in accordance with Sienkiewicz's novel and the derision of our sources. Only occasionally is he presented otherwise.

Opera presents a different (and more complex) picture both in terms of Nero's abilities and performances and also in the reception of the idea of Nero the performer. What opera generally must have of course is a love story and in all these cases it is there, usually fictitious, although not in the case of *L'incoronazione di Poppea* and Boito's *Nerone* has expanded on the ravished Vestal named in Suetonius. Usually in opera the lovers are tenor and soprano. Setting aside the Monteverdi and the Handel where convention dictated otherwise, Nero is always a tenor. Indeed, operatically he could not conceivably be any other voice type. Why is that? It certainly doesn't match ancient descriptions of his voice. The phrases deep/low (*baru*) and dark/husky (*melan* and *fuscae*) suggest he was a baritone. It is also true that an eponymous tenor lead should nearly always be the hero. Nero is certainly not that – more like anti-hero or villain. Tenor villains do occur but they are never eponymous (the closest would be Benjamin Britten's Peter Grimes but the jury is still out as to whether he is a villain or not). In this respect Nero is difficult to categorize in

opera – in most cases an anti-heroic/villain tenor eponymous lead character. He almost needs a sub genre created for him. The problem can be shown when we consider that the Domingo recording of the Mascagni *Nerone* aria was originally released in 1990 on a disc called *Roman Heroes* yet the emperor is stereotypically described: ‘as usual, Nero is portrayed as a cruel and cowardly voluptuary with absurd artistic intentions’ (Budden 5); hardly ‘heroic’ material (nor is it sung in an absurd way). At the same time it is impossible to reconcile the eponymous character of an opera with a deliberate mediocre performance in mind. The character of Nero is the main role in most of these works and he was intended to be taken by the most important singer in the cast. In the recordings presented here that is certainly the case and what those performances suggest is that we should give Nero the performer a little more consideration.

This preliminary examination begins to reveal that Nero the performer in the performance art of opera is an anomaly – a subject and character which do not fit any of the norms of the operatic genre or any historical school, indeed he breaks the mould on several occasions. While depictions of the emperor in film, television, fiction and theatre also offer variety, for the most part they offer a picture in accordance with our sources. Just as Nero the performer is difficult to characterise historically without recourse to stereotype or cliché so too is his position in all these genres. Yet, putting aside the few non-operatic Neros who do sing well and those operas where he does not, it would seem that opera is the only forum where Nero the performer finds a true voice.

References

- Arnold, D., 1990. *The Master Musicians Monteverdi*. (3rd ed.). London: Dent.
- Budden, J., 1990. Liner notes. *Roman Heroes - Placido Domingo*. EMI CDC 7540532.
- Edwards, C., 1994. Beware of Imitations: Theatre and the Subversion of Imperial Identity. In *Reflections of Nero*, eds. Jas Elsner and Jamie Masters. London: 83-97.
- The Gramophone Company Co., 1925. *Opera at Home*. (3rd ed.). London: Gramophone Co.
- Griffin, M., 1984. *Nero The End of a Dynasty*. London: B.T. Batsford.
- Harnoncourt, N., 1993. Liner Notes. *L'incoronazione di Poppea. Claudio Monteverdi*. Teldec, 1974. Reissued on CD 2292 42547-2.
- Hogwood, C., 1984. *Handel*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- ‘Mio Figlio Nerone.’ *New York Times*. 9 November 2008.
- Parouty, M., 2002. Liner notes. *Richard Cœur de Lion & Le Devin du village*. André Modeste Grétry and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Trans. Hugh Graham. EMI 5752662.
- Rizzuto, C., 1982. Liner notes. *Nerone. Boito*. Hungaroton Classic HCD 12487-89.
- Sadie, S., (ed.) 1992. *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, Vol.3. London: Macmillan.
- Sadie, S., (ed.) 1996. *The New Grove Book of Operas*. London: Macmillan.
- Sienkiewicz, H., undated. *Quo Vadis?* London: Thomas Nelson and Sons.
- Steane, J., 1996. *Singers of the Century*, Vol.1. London: Duckworth.
- Stivender, D., 1988. *Mascagni: An Autobiography Compiled, Edited and Translated from Original Sources*. White Plains, New York: Pro/Am Music Resources.

Audio Material

Caruso, E. *The Complete Recordings*. Vol. 10. Naxos 8.110751 (Original Matrix numbers C-19484-2 and C-19485-2).

Boito, A., 1996. *Nerone*. Hungaroton Classic HCD 12487-89.

Mascagni, P., 1988. *Nerone*. CD GB 2052/53 Bologna: Bongiovanni.