

‘Zealous partisans of both, I think, must have applauded’:  
Kitty Clive, Regina Mingotti and Mimic Italian Song

Attacking Italian opera was a big draw for London playhouses in the middle of the eighteenth century. At Drury Lane, singer-actress Kitty Clive was the star, and creator, of such entertainment. Her skills, and her unprecedented fame as a British soprano, empowered Clive to turn ‘Favourite’ Italian songs to her advantage. Tapping established practices in ballad opera, and in burlesques of Italianate vocal writing, Clive gave her audiences the opportunity to both relish and laugh at *dramma per musica* arias. She also exploited Favourite Italian numbers in a novel way, by *taking off* one or the other female Italian singer, rather than just her song. Clive’s ‘Mimick Italian Song’ was a quasi-mechanical reproduction of another star’s performance, by which means Clive appropriated Italian ‘Favourites’ into her own stage line. Largely passed over by music scholars, her practice illuminates the long reach of ‘Favourite Italian Songs’, and the variety of their appeal for English audiences.

In this paper I will explore two aspects of this phenomenon. First, I will show how Italian song, once transplanted to the playhouse, could be both esteemed and mocked within one production, or even within a single song. Second, through a review of these strains of emulation and satire over the course of Clive’s career, I will consider the creative practices on which she appears to have drawn, and how her interpretations likely re-shaped perceptions of the originals.

Ballad opera was famously ‘invented’ by John Gay with *The Beggar’s Opera*, which opened at Lincoln’s Inn Fields theatre on 28 January 1728 [slide 2]. Though highly simplified Italian song would become a staple of the genre, *The Beggar’s Opera* itself contained no mock airs in its takedown of *dramma per musica*. This was likely due in part to its cast of untrained singers. After the Lord Chamberlain banned Gay’s second ballad opera, *Polly*, for its subversive

politics, both royal playhouses wanted to stay out of trouble; the ballad operas they staged were flimsy sentimental stories full of common tunes, including those derived from Italian opera.

This was a repertory that Clive came to dominate, raising musical standards in the process. Ballad opera playwrights turned early and often to favourite Italian arias for catchy melodies, identified in wordbooks by titles like ‘Caro spene’ [slide 3], but did so only by altering the original [slide 4] – the B section of a *da capo* aria might be cut altogether – altering or transposing the melody to make it easier to sing, and rescoring the accompaniment for a playhouse band. Before engaging with such music, however, in 1729 Clive earned applause by singing a Favourite Italian Song in its original form, treating Drury Lane entr’acte audiences to the Handel favourite, ‘Son confus’ pastorella’ from *Poro*. By the summer of 1731 she had catapulted to fame in the ‘operatized’ farce *The Devil to Pay* [slide 5]. The popularity of Clive’s depiction of the abused cobbler’s wife Nell in this work caused a shorter and more Clive-centred afterpiece version of *The Devil to Pay* to be rushed to the boards. This featured a new duet for Clive in which almost every pitch from the Favourite bass Song ‘No non temere’ (from Handel’s *Ottone*) was faithfully preserved – in contrast to the established practice in ballad opera to simplify such music. Let’s listen [example]. So it was that Clive, already a Town Favourite, came routinely to sing in English a Favourite Italian Song whose music was largely retained. The afterpiece version of *The Devil to Pay* became a hit that was then exported, spawning French and German translations which helped give rise to both *opéra comique* and the *Singspiel*.

If Italian opera was mocked in a ballad opera production, it tended to be in words, not in music. This split helped Clive: in several of her most renowned ballad opera parts, she sang melodies derived from Favourite Italian Song while expressing contempt for that very genre in her dialogue, epilogues, and song verse. This was not least the case with ‘Life of a Beau’ [slide

6], which the editors of the *London Stage Calendar* identify as one of the era's most-performed playhouse airs. By the 1730s, those attending a Clive ballad farce could have their cake and eat it, too: that is, they could nibble at their simplified Italian Favourites, while gorging on the xenophobia to which Clive's onstage complaints against *dramma per musica* appealed.

Mimic Italian song was more sophisticated, blending as it did both the pleasures of Italian arias and the mockery of them in a single number. 'Mimic' means, in this context, the burlesquing of serious stage practices, an entertainment type that first gained traction on the Restoration stage. The object of derision was typically a genre. For instance, farmyard imitations in Thomas D'Urfey's 1706 'Comick Opera' *The Wonders in the Sun* – [slide 6] mounted just sixteen months after London playhouse audiences had witnessed Italian opera for the first time – deflated the musical lowings of pastoral animals in an Italian simile aria. With the Duke of Buckingham's *The Rehearsal* of 1671, mimicry's targets broadened out from genre – Buckingham's target was high tragedy – to public figures, in this case John Dryden, whose mannerisms Buckingham caught in his dialogue. Hugely successful, *The Rehearsal* ushered in a new age in which authors invoked genres, while players imitated their celebrities.

Henry Carey [slide 7], a poet and composer who was also Clive's singing teacher, based his music burlesques on Buckingham's model. Writing the libretto to his stage hit *The Dragon of Wantley* in 1732, Carey sought to showcase the artists he had trained: besides Clive, for whom Carey had already supplied vehicles, Carey promoted his composition student John F. Lampe, who wrote the score, according to Carey, with his help. Carey outlined his technique for burlesquing Italianate writing thus [slide 8] 'hopping and changing, lopping, eking out, and coining Words, Syllables, and Jingle, to display in *English* the Beauty of Nonsense, so prevailing in the *Italian Operas*.

Score and text by Carey and Lampe show us what he meant: mock recitative [slide ] misplaced syllabic emphases [slide 11], melismas on absurd words [slide 12], and awkward leaps and articulation [slide 13]. I contend that Clive absorbed such tricks from Carey no less than Lampe did, learning how she could render a prima donna's song absurd in the numbers she later improvised. From 1742, Clive added her burlesques of Italian favourites to those songs 'proper' to the comedies she led. Our earliest notice of this practice is Horace Walpole's letter to Horace Mann of 6 June 1742 [slide]:

'There is a little simple farce at Drury Lane, called *Miss Lucy in Town*, in which Mrs Clive mimics the Muscovita [Lucia Panichi] admirably, and Beard Amorevoli [soprano castrato Angelo Maria Monticelli] intolerably.

How did Walpole and others in the playhouse identify the Italian singers being pilloried? Almost certainly, by recognizing an inserted 'Italian Favourite' whose printed title named its singer. To poke fun at 'La Muscovita', Clive most likely used one of two *Favourite Songs* [slide] from Walsh's edition of *Scipione in Cartagine*, the only printed music sung by Panichi that was available that season, from an opera led by the *primo uomo* Monticelli.

As Clive's career faltered during the mid-1740s, she stepped up her mockery of prima donnas, adding mimic song for instance to her 1746 benefit mainpiece *The Comical Lovers* and to David Garrick's *Lethe* of 1749, a work designed to engineer Clive's comeback. Mimic song also featured in the Buckingham-styled afterpiece Clive wrote in 1750 for herself to lead: *The Rehearsal, or Bayes in Petticoats*. Here Clive, performing *in propria persona* as Mrs Hazard, mimicked Caterina Galli's performance of 'Powerful Guardians of all Nature' from Handel's 1748 oratorio *Alexander Balus*. Clive slyly has Hazard mis-title this air, identified by Walsh in

his 1748 *Favourite Songs from Alexander Balus* simply as ‘Sung by Signora Galli’ [slide ], as ‘Powerful Guardians of *ill* Nature’. As Hazard instructs a wannabe English soprano in current music fashion, Clive will have displayed her vocal prowess, probably through embellishment, while mocking Galli’s English diction [slide]:

Mrs Hazard: Oh fie! Miss you speak your words as plain as a parish Girl, the Audience will never Endure you, in this kind of Singing if they understand what you say: You must give your words the Italian Accent Child, Come you shall hear me.

By 1752, with Clive back in public favour, her Mimic Italian Song – ‘Italian’ understood here to mean not the music but its foreign singer – was earning separate billing [slide].

Our richest description of Clive’s mimic song is from a periodical article of 8 May 1756 by the pioneering female novelist Frances Brooke [slide]:

I was particularly diverted by her *Italian Song*, in which this truly humorous actress [Clive] parodies the air of the Opera, and takes off the action of the present favorite female at the Hay-Market [Regina Mingotti], with such exquisite ridicule, that the most zealous partisans of both, I think, must have applauded the comic genius of Mrs. Clive, however they might be displeased with this application of it. I am a lover of music, am no enemy to the Opera, have seen and heard this performer [Mingotti] with pleasure, but have still been a good deal surprized ... [by the] praises of this Foreigner’s action ... when we have more than one actress on our own stage so infinitely superior to her.

Why did Clive pick on Mingotti, and which song did she choose? By May 1756, Mingotti was in disrepute [slide]: she had that season not only born a baby out of wedlock, but was openly at war with the opera company’s impresario, and stood accused by critics of cancelling performances at

will. Bad press made Mingotti a natural target for Clive. *Demoofonte* was that opera season's only success, earning two rival editions published in December 1755, the same month it appeared on stage – so Clive almost certainly chose one of Mingotti's four Favourite *Demoofonte* Songs then in print. Given the press complaints against Mingotti, my hunch is that Clive sang 'In te spero' (Act I, scene 2 [slide]), whose affective and melismatic extremes, theme of fidelity ('Beloved husband, my hopes are in you'), and simple Italian verse could be appreciated both by those who regularly attended the opera and those who did not.

Whichever Mingotti song Clive chose, it is all difficult music. According to Brooke, Clive's 'genius' for 'exquisite ridicule' 'must have [been] applauded' by 'the most zealous partisans' of both Mingotti and Clive. To pull this off, Clive had to be mistress of Italian singing as well as comic delivery. She also will have needed to excel in the depiction of another performer's physical gesture: according to Brooke, Clive took off Mingotti's 'action' as well. Taken as a whole, Brooke's account suggests three features of Clive's Mimic Italian Song: its technical accuracy, by which means opera connoisseurs could measure the copy against the original; its semantic richness, as Clive layered Mingotti's musical and gestural habits; and the tastefulness of Clive's parody, through which all listener could experience her virtuosic vocalism – and opera-goers pride themselves on recognizing the butt of the joke.

[slide] This was a complex act, one in which Clive used her unmatched gifts in musical and dramatic improvisation to capitalize at once on the several types of public taste fostered by Walsh's *Favourite Italian Songs*: for gorgeous melodies, beloved also by ballad opera playwrights; for a reigning prima donna, whose live performance many members of a playhouse audience couldn't afford to see; and for mimicry, which in this nationalistic age put Italian

virtuosas in their place. Clive's singing, mimic and otherwise, popularized the 'Favourite Italian Song' as a dazzling display of English arts.