

**Illuminating *Gustavus the Third*
and the Art of Spectacle in 1830s London**

TAMSIN ALEXANDER

Abstract: To turn to 1830s London is to explore a time and place newly obsessed with the eye and with lighting technologies. Understanding how opera was experienced at this time, therefore, requires that visuality be brought to the fore. One staging in particular, that of *Gustavus the Third*, adapted from Daniel Auber's *Gustave III* for Covent Garden in 1833, reveals how new discussions about light and vision were influencing responses to opera. While London adaptations of French *grands opéras* in the nineteenth century have often been dismissed as shabby imitations, critics insisted that the spectacle in *Gustavus* outstripped anything that had ever been done in Paris. The reason, I propose, was the source and focus of that spectacle: light.

According to *The Literary Gazette*, *Gustavus the Third*—adapted from Daniel Auber's *Gustave III*—‘depend[ed] chiefly on the eye’ and only ‘somewhat on the ear’ for its success.¹

Versions of this article have been presented at various talks and conferences, and I am extremely grateful to those who contributed to the discussions that followed. Particular thanks go to those present at the ‘Grand Opera on the Move’ conference (King’s College London, December 2014), where these ideas were put forward in their earliest and roughest form. I am most deeply indebted to Laura Protano-Biggs, Sarah Hibberd and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable suggestions.

Premiered at Covent Garden on 13 November 1833, the new version received one hundred and one performances in its debut season. What kept drawing audiences, critics reported, was the finale: a grand masquerade ball depicting the assassination of the Swedish king Gustav III at the Stockholm opera house. More specifically, they were astounded by the scene's brilliance; the stage was illuminated all round by means of chandeliers, lamps, brackets, tripods and candelabras.² At first glance, the situation in Paris had been much the same. *Gustave III*, introduced at the Opéra less than nine months earlier, also won accolades and multiple repeat performances thanks to its spectacular final tableau. But the specific significations of gas lighting in London meant that *Gustave* was experienced quite differently as *Gustavus*. Its transference from the Opéra to Covent Garden, after all, involved far more than the adaptation of score and libretto.

Musicologists have already begun to challenge the notion that the early nineteenth century was a time when music was privileged as purely sonic experience, stimulating (at most) the inner eye. Sarah Hibberd, Anselm Gerhard and Cormac Newark, among others, have explored how staging technologies worked in conjunction with music to create critically acclaimed audiovisual effects at the Paris Opéra in the 1820s-40s and beyond.³ And James Q.

¹ *The Literary Gazette* (16 November 1833).

² As reported in *The Age* (17 November 1833).

³ Such studies include Sarah Hibberd, *French Grand Opera and the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, 2009); Anselm Gerhard, *The Urbanization of Opera: Music Theater in Paris in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago, 1998); and Cormac Newark, 'Metaphors for Meyerbeer', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 127 (2002), 23-43. Also note Tim Shephard and Anne Leonard, eds., *Routledge Companion to Music and Visual Culture* (New York, 2013), which includes essays on bringing visual culture into music studies (and vice versa).

Davies has demonstrated that the visual and bodily were central even to performances of instrumental music in early- to mid-nineteenth-century London.⁴ (Operatic stagings in London—including those of *grand opéra*—have been taken less seriously.) This prevalence of visuality in musical culture should come as no surprise. Sensory historians have argued that the print revolution and Enlightenment elevated sight so that by the nineteenth century, it was considered the most important of the senses, linked as it was with observation, rationalism and capitalist display – in a word, with modernity.⁵ This sensory hierarchy persisted into the twentieth century, and it is only in recent years that research has begun to push against it in the form of sound studies. My goal here is not to champion one sense over another, but to draw attention both to the audiovisual sophistication of opera in London, and to the critical esteem in which the multisensory potential of musical entertainments was still held.

⁴ See James Q. Davies, ‘Dancing the Symphonic: Beethoven-Bochsa’s *Symphonie pastorale*, 1829’, *19th-Century Music* 27 (2003), 25-47, and *Romantic Anatomies of Performance* (Berkeley, 2014). Laura Tunbridge has also outlined the prevalence of the theatrical and visual in relation to Schuman’s *Manfred*. See her ‘Schumann’s *Manfred* in the Mental Theatre’, *Cambridge Opera Journal* 15 (2003), 153-83.

⁵ For a review of some of the literature following this argument, see Mark M. Smith, *Sensory History* (Oxford, 2007), 9-10. Peter de Bolla in *The Education of the Eye: Painting, Landscape, and Architecture in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford, 2003) contends that the obsession with visual display and vision reached new heights earlier, in the mid-eighteenth century.

The inhabitants of London in the 1830s, as Jonathan Crary and Chris Otter have shown, were particularly consumed with vision: with exhibiting, with new lighting technologies, and with reaching a better scientific understanding of the eye.⁶ As vision came to be understood as a process dependent on physiological idiosyncrasies, the public became enamoured with having their eyes deceived. Scientists and philosophers deliberated over how modernity was impacting individual minds and bodies as urban life became evermore overcrowded with visual signs and newly installed gaslights. Arguably, nowhere was this stimulation more intensely felt than at the theatre, where performances were marketed through spectacle.

The illuminations in the finale of *Gustavus* and their clamorous reception, I should like to propose, fed into and reflected the contemporary fascination with lighting technology and illusion. When light has been discussed in relation to nineteenth-century opera, it has typically been within a loose narrative of increasing control over audience experience. Jennifer Hall-Witt draws out a correlation between the level of light in auditoria and the social aspect of opera-going in London.⁷ With regard to Paris, James H. Johnson has proposed that auditorium darkening may have contributed to attentive listening.⁸ Few have

⁶ See Chris Otter, *The Victorian Eye: A Political History of Light and Vision in Britain, 1800-1910* (Chicago, 2008) and Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA, 1990).

⁷ Jennifer Hall-Witt, *Fashionable Acts: Opera and Elite Culture in London, 1780-1880* (Durham, NH, 2007), 27-8. She argues here that dimming the house lights did not necessarily mean that audiences became more focused; it could equally facilitate more intimate socialising.

⁸ James H. Johnson, *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History* (Berkeley, CA, 1995), 240.

investigated the effects of the introduction of gas lighting on the operatic stage, however, or the more varied ways in which changes in lighting technology could affect audiences' experiences of opera.⁹ In *Gustavus*, the proliferation of light, as I show here, caused audiences and critics to marvel at the material and visual, to the extent of feeling removed from the narrative altogether. To bring light into the discussion not only enables us to focus on an element of urban and theatrical life that was dominating contemporary discourse, therefore, but also offers ways to deepen our understanding of how opera – and *grand opéra* in particular – was experienced in 1830s London.

Opera for the eye

Competition between London theatres had created a market for audiovisual spectacle by 1833. Before the Theatre Regulation Act of 1843, only the patent theatres, Covent Garden and Drury Lane, were licensed to stage spoken drama, while through-sung opera in Italian was the domain of the King's Theatre. Both as a legal necessity and in a bid to draw audiences, the minor (or 'illegitimate') theatres embraced pantomime, farce, melodrama and

⁹ Some exceptions include Helen M. Greenwald, 'Son et lumière: Verdi, *Attila*, and the Sunrise over the Lagoon', *Cambridge Opera Journal* 21 (2009), 267-77, and Anselm Gerhard, 'Verdi's *Attila*: A Study in *Chiaroscuro*', *Cambridge Opera Journal* 21 (2009), 279-89. Beyond opera studies, various explorations have been made of theatrical lighting more generally, including that by Michael R. Booth in his *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge, 1991), Shearer West, 'Manufacturing Spectacle', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre, 1737-1832*, ed. Julia Swindells and David Francis Taylor (Oxford, 2014), 286-303, and Terence Rees, *Theatre Lighting in the Age of Gas* (London, 1978).

operas, fitted out with new music and increasingly elaborate stage effects.¹⁰ It was not long before such entertainments became so popular that managers of the patent theatres were forced to imitate them. Alfred Bunn (c.1797-1860) was one such manager; renowned for his willingness to sacrifice national or ‘legitimate’ drama for crowd-pulling spectacle, he employed circus performers, star singers, and imported foreign opera and ballet in an attempt to reverse the decline of the patent theatres.¹¹ In 1833-5, he took the unprecedented step of becoming manager of both Covent Garden and Drury Lane to form what he called the ‘Grand Junction’ of the patents.¹² Covent Garden, he announced in 1833, would be reserved for opera and pantomime, Drury Lane for drama and farce. In themselves, these pairings reveal something about Bunn’s conception of how opera should be staged: as an entertainment that could rival spoken drama, while sharing the technology, scenery and costumes used in pantomime.

French *grands opéras*, with their extravagant tableaux, were ripe for adaptation in this fluid theatrical landscape. Before *Gustave III*, Auber’s *La Muette de Portici* (1828) had been

¹⁰ See Jane Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London: 1770-1840* (Cambridge, 2000), esp.12-47.

¹¹ A fuller summary of Bunn’s career can be found in Jacqueline S. Bratton, *The Making of the West End Stage: Marriage, Management and Mapping of Gender in London, 1830-1870* (Cambridge, 2011), 10-1, and Bunn’s memoir, *The Stage: Both Before and Behind the Curtain* (London, 1840).

¹² The phrase ‘Grand Junction’ was first used to describe the joining of two British railway companies in 1833, as detailed in a forthcoming publication by Sarah Hibberd: “‘Cockneys in a Fever’: Auber’s *Gustave* in London’, *Grand Opera Outside Paris*, ed. Jens Hesselager (forthcoming). I am thankful to her for sharing the manuscript with me.

performed as a ballet-pantomime at the King's Theatre (1829) and an equestrian spectacle at Astley's Amphitheatre (1833), while Meyerbeer's *Robert le diable* (1831) had been treated to four contrasting adaptations in 1832 alone. To render these operas suitable for the London stage, libretti were translated, the number of acts reduced and—save in the case of the King's Theatre—recitative replaced with dialogue; the essential components of the spectacle were retained, although reworked depending on the theatre's means.¹³

The ubiquity of spectacle in London's theatres did not, however, go unchallenged. Since spectacle frequently suspended the action and demanded less sustained concentration on the spoken word than 'legitimate drama', critics feared that audiences were being encouraged to disengage, and even that such entertainments might, in Jane Moody's words, 'threaten the survival of imagination and indeed the future of the British political and cultural state'.¹⁴ There were moral implications too. Music and impressive stage effects could be appreciated at a distance, thus allowing theatre capacities to grow. This not only facilitated

¹³ The ways in which *grands opéras* were adapted for London have received ample attention. See Frederick Burwick, 'Masaniello on the London Stage', in *Dante and Italy in British Romanticism*, ed. Frederick Burwick and Paul Douglass (New York, 2011), 161-82; Sarah Hibberd, 'Grand Opera in Britain and the Americas', in *The Cambridge Companion to Grand Opera*, ed. David Charlton (Cambridge, 2003), 404-10; Gabriella Dideriksen, 'Repertory and Rivalry: Opera at the Second Covent Garden Theatre, 1830-1856', Ph.D. diss. (King's College London, 1997), 286-331; Christina Fuhrmann, 'In Enemy Territory? Scribe and Grand Opera in London, 1829-1833', in *Eugène Scribe und das europäische Musiktheater*, ed. Sebastian Werr (Berlin, 2007), 89-106; and her *Foreign Opera at the London Playhouses: From Mozart to Bellini* (Cambridge, 2015), 146-94.

¹⁴ Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London*, 3-4.

further disengagement, but also meant that undesirable behaviour, such as gambling and prostitution, could pass by unnoticed.¹⁵

In the instance of *Gustavus the Third*, however, critical appreciation of the visual element was near unanimous. What is more, the very potential of spectacle to distract served to shape the drama. Praise for the costumes, scenery and, above all, the well-lit finale dominated the reviews, while what was left of Auber's score after its arrangement by Thomas Cooke was widely dismissed. The same went for Eugène Scribe's libretto, adapted by James Robinson Planché (1796-1880).¹⁶ According to Edward Sterling, writing for *The Times*, such a vision-centred reception was unique to London: 'At Paris [...] *Gustavus* has been long a favourite, chiefly in consequence of Auber's music. It is not, however, for the same reason that it will be popular here', he wrote, before proceeding to describe the scenery.¹⁷

Bunn had taken particular care to make this opera a treat for the eye. In preparation for the season, he travelled to Paris to view the techniques of the Opéra first-hand and to source repertoire.¹⁸ Once back in London, he pooled the resources of both his theatres for

¹⁵ As described in William Ayrton, 'On the State of Our Theatres', *The Harmonicon* 11 (1833), 27-8.

¹⁶ The review in *The Literary Gazette* (that opened this article) continued: 'we do not think it necessary to enter into any of the details of this drama' (16 November 1833), while Auber's music was dismissed by others as 'trash' (as, for instance, in *Old England* (17 November 1833), 368). To reiterate Fuhrmann's analysis of the opera's British reception that season, few 'found Auber worthy of careful preservation' (*Foreign Opera at the London Playhouses*, 190).

¹⁷ *The Sun* (14 November 1833).

¹⁸ Bunn recounted his travels in *The Stage*, 125-31.

maximum effect and appointed Charles Farley (1771-1859), whose expertise lay in pantomime, as the opera's director. To ensure that the production retained its splendour throughout its first run, the sets and costumes were replaced twice.¹⁹ As performances of *Gustavus* pushed on almost uninterrupted into 1834, there were some misgivings – complaints that ‘the whole interest [lay] in the adjuncts of the scene-painter, the property-man, and the person who so abundantly provides that dainty material nightly exhibited in petticoatees’;²⁰ but the fact remained that Bunn was continuing to ‘wake the sleeping public’, as it was phrased in *The Athenaeum*, to the existence of the patent national theatres in place of the ‘illegitimates’.²¹

Indeed, the visual aspect of London productions was often treated as a matter of national pride: while critics habitually grumbled about importing foreign works, they could praise the locally constructed sets, costumes and lighting. When in 1833 *The Metropolitan Magazine* published an article lamenting the fact that ballet imports from Paris were superseding English drama and opera, the author nonetheless granted that a recent performance of Ferdinand Hérold's ballet *La Belle au bois dormant* was ‘a splendid affair’ owing to its inclusion of a panorama by Clarkson Stanfield.²² Evidently, special satisfaction was found in the skills of London's scene painters. For *Gustavus*, the sets were provided by

¹⁹ See Dideriksen, ‘Repertory and Rivalry’, 176.

²⁰ *The Monthly Magazine* (17 March 1834). Such remarks echoed comments made in reference to melodrama, as in an article for *The Literary Guardian* (19 November 1831), which voiced concerns that ‘the machinist, the painter, and the ‘picture’ grouper were called into action’ instead of the poet.

²¹ *The Athenaeum* (16 November 1833).

²² *The Metropolitan Magazine* 6 (March 1833), 323.

the Grieve family, a group so respected that Thomas Love Peacock of *The Examiner* ranked them (along with Farley) in ‘first place’, in terms of their contribution to the opera, with ‘second place’ awarded to Auber.²³ The scenes that received the highest accolades were those with the greatest obvious visual appeal: the finale and the moonlit view of Stockholm in the second act. Reviewers took time to critique the colouring of this latter scene, even suggesting ways in which the Grieves could improve by paying closer attention to their shades of green and blue, which were diluted under the gaslight.²⁴ Further evidence for the high esteem in which London-made visual effects were held can be found in the playbills, many of which listed the new scenes in detail, and named the Grieves family, Farley, the decorator, machinist, plumassiers and costume-makers, but omitted Cooke and Auber.²⁵ In an apparently unprecedented move, another native artist’s name was emblazoned on the playbills: that of the chandelier maker, a Mr Brookes.

Light as spectacle

It was the lighting, after all, that most thrilled audiences. The careful arrangement of lights in the finale was crucial in adding weight to a moment that had already been rendered more

²³ *The Examiner* (17 November 1833). Peacock was primarily a novelist and poet but wrote opera criticism for the paper.

²⁴ See, for instance, *The Examiner* (17 November 1833): ‘a little too blue, but highly effective’ and *The Sunday Herald* (17 November 1833): ‘the scenery (by the three Grieves) is very beautiful; but we object to the green hue of the waters in the *Distant View of Stockholm by Moonlight*; but all stage moonlights, when reflected by lakes and seas, are apt to be so misrepresented’.

²⁵ See, for instance, *The Theatrical Observer* (20 December 1833).

tragic in the adaptation process. In the historical events of 1792, the attack on King Gustav had been political, but in Scribe's libretto for Paris the potentially incendiary nature of a political assassination was reduced: Gustav's friend and first minister Ankastrom is instead talked into the assassination after discovering that Gustav is in love with his wife. Not only was the assassination of a monarch a sensitive subject to make it past the Lord Chamberlain's pen, but the addition of an illicit love intrigue threatened to offend living Swedish royals. In his preface to the libretto, Planché also suggested that changes were necessary in the name of historical veracity.²⁶ He therefore split the part of Gustav in two, inventing a new character, Colonel Lillienhorn, to whom the objectionable aspects of Scribe's character were given (potential adultery, singing), leaving Gustav as a blameless speaking part, and making his death more patently tragic.²⁷

This tragedy was felt more keenly by the assassination coming at a moment of extreme distraction, generated in large part by the level of light. So impressive were the illuminations that language relating to light permeated the reviews: the scene 'eclipse[d]

²⁶ James Robinson Planché, *Gustavus the Third; or, The Masked Ball* (London, 1833). See Fuhrmann's *Foreign Opera at the London Playhouses*, 183-94, and Dideriksen's 'Repertory and Rivalry', 309-17, for a thorough account of the adaptation process, which I will not rehearse here. I am extremely grateful to Fuhrmann for sharing her work with me prior to the publication of *Foreign Opera at the London Playhouses*.

²⁷ Leaving Gustav in Scribe's form would also have run the risk of drawing parallels with the previous king, George IV, who was notorious for his legion of mistresses, including the wives of his friends. William IV, by contrast, was well liked and, since his coronation, had not been known as an adulterer. A more William IV-like Gustav, therefore, was equally likely to increase the pathos of the scene.

everything before it, while the lights were ‘splendid’ and ‘brilliant’, and Auber’s music ‘sparkling’.²⁸ Critics had been primed for such reactions by the playbills, which promised ‘a degree of splendour never before attempted on the English stage’.²⁹ Even Planché’s libretto used more language relating to light than Scribe’s for this scene. The opening chorus sings of a ‘glittering maze’, a ‘gallant young spark’ and ‘flash[ing] eyes’, and the stage directions specify that the hall be ‘splendidly illuminated’, and filled with costumes to create a ‘brilliant’ picture.³⁰

To evince such a positive critical reaction was to successfully negotiate public ambivalence towards gas lighting. Since its instalment in the interiors of London theatres in 1817, first at the Lyceum and then at Covent Garden and Drury Lane, gaslight had been both

²⁸ The term ‘eclipse[d]’ comes from *The Courier* (14 November 1833). The words ‘splendid’ and ‘brilliant’ were used in almost every review. To list but a few (all date from 14 November 1833 unless stated otherwise): *The Albion and Star* (similar to reviews in *Bell’s Life in London* and *The Times*); *The Athenaeum* (16 November); *The Courier*; *The Literary Gazette* (16 November); *The Monthly Magazine* (1 December); *The Morning Chronicle*; *The News* (17 November); *The New Weekly Dispatch* (24 November); *Old England* (17 November); *The Standard* (the same review was printed in *The Morning Post*); *The St James Chronicle* (almost the same review as in *The Morning Herald* and *The London Packet*); *The Sun*; and *The True Sun*. Auber’s music was described as ‘sparkling’ in the following issues from 14 November: *The News*; *The St James Chronicle* (same review also in *The London Packet* and *The Morning Herald*); *The True Sun* and *The United Kingdom* (on 17 November).

²⁹ *The Theatrical Observer* (9 November 1833).

³⁰ Planché, *Gustavus the Third*, 40. Scribe’s version also mentions that the ball should be ‘magnificently illuminated’, but does not use language relating to light in the chorus.

praised as emblematic of modernity and condemned as a public menace in near equal measure. Letters to journals and newspapers flooded in from doctors, scientists, critics and general audience members conveying their reservations. Along with expressions of concern about leaks and explosions came complaints about the aesthetic problems of gaslight. While this lighting was intended to improve the spectacle in the auditorium, according to ‘an enemy to gas’ writing to *The Theatrical Inquisitor* in 1820, ‘the ghastly gleams of the gas’ gave ladies’ faces ‘a wan and meagre aspect, truly sepulchral, whilst the circumstance of the light being shed from the forehead and cheek bones upon the rest of the countenance, complete[d] its spectral appearance’.³¹

This description of deathly countenances hints at broader fears that gaslight was bringing about inner decay: fears underpinned by new revelations about how the eye worked. Since the early seventeenth century, the process of seeing had been understood through the model of the camera obscura – a dark chamber with a small hole through which light passes to reproduce an inverted image on the inside. By the end of the following century, however, scientists realised that images were not simply projected onto the retina; instead, nerve receptors translated light into signals conveyed along optic nerves to the brain.³² The discovery that seeing and levels of light had a physical impact on the nerves led some scientists to suggest that gaslight could cause dangerous overstimulation. A medic wrote to *The Dramatic Magazine* in 1829, for instance:

³¹ *The Theatrical Inquisitor* 1 (October 1820), 272. Due to such complaints, gaslight was removed from the King’s Theatre in 1821 (only to be reinstalled in 1828). See Hall-Witt, *Fashionable Acts*, 28.

³² Otter, *The Victorian Eye*, 27.

The strong vivid light, evolved from the numerous gas-lamps on the stage, so powerfully stimulates the brain, through the medium of the optic nerves, as to occasion a preternatural determination of blood to the head, capable of producing headaches or giddiness; and if the subject should at the time laugh heartily, the additional influx of blood which takes place may rupture a vessel, the consequence of which will be, from the effusion of blood within the substance of the brain, or on its surface, fatal apoplexy.³³

This dulling of the senses was also linked by some with a supposed dulling of taste. The aforementioned ‘enemy to gas’ blamed the ‘present degraded state of the drama’ on the ‘present mode of lighting the theatres’.³⁴

What impressed audiences about the spectacle in *Gustavus*, therefore, was not necessarily the strength of the light, or even the extent of the gas fittings, but rather the demonstration of the ability to control and manipulate a mixture of lighting apparatus. This mixture was in part a practical issue. Gas had not completely displaced previous lighting methods – oil lamps and candles continued to be used alongside gas well into the nineteenth century.³⁵ And for *Gustavus*, there were limitations as to which parts of the stage gas could

³³ A letter to the editor of *The Dramatic Magazine* signed ‘Chiro-Medicus’ (1 December 1829). For more on fears about sensory overstimulation in everyday urban life, see Roger Parker, “‘As a Stranger Give it Welcome’: Musical Meanings in 1830s London’, in Joshua S. Walden, ed., *Representation in Western Music* (Cambridge, 2013), 33-4, and Otter, *The Victorian Eye*, 40-98.

³⁴ *The Theatrical Inquisitor* 1 (October 1820), 272.

³⁵ See Otter, *The Victorian Eye*, 260-1.

reach. If chandeliers hung from the set as indicated in Figure 1, the only way to supply these with gas would have been by short lengths of portable piping.³⁶ The standing candelabras and lamps would have required this system too. Such a tangle of piping would have been impractical considering the number of dancers on the stage, and would have detracted from the splendour of the scene; candles and oil lamps were thus implemented instead. The brackets and wing lights on the side walls, the footlights, and chandeliers hung from the ceiling, however, would have been supplied by the gas pipe lines installed back in 1817.³⁷

[INSERT FIGURE 1 AROUND HERE]

Employing mixed lighting in this way addressed one of the most commonly expressed complaints about stage illumination at that time: the use of gas in the footlights. These footlights consisted of metal reflectors that, directed light from foot-high naked gas flames into the stage area. While it had been hoped that using gas in the theatres might be ‘like the striking of daylight’,³⁸ the new brightness from the bottom of the stage produced a hellish glare on the actors’ faces and ghostly shadows behind.³⁹ The footlights did remain in

³⁶ Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age*, 85.

³⁷ These fittings were described in an announcement in *The Times* (8 September 1817), recorded in Rees, *Theatre Lighting in the Age of Gas*, 10.

³⁸ See a report on Drury Lane in *The Examiner* (7 September 1817), quoted in Frederick Penzel, *Theatre Lighting Before Electricity* (Middletown, CT, 1978), 39-41.

³⁹ Note that such complaints had also been made when floating oil footlights were used, but became stronger the introduction of gas. See Donald Roy and Victor Emeljanow, *Romantic and Revolutionary Theatre, 1789-1860* (Cambridge, 2003), 392.

Gustavus, but their effect was alleviated by the plethora of other lights used. In the finale, light shone in from all directions – from chandeliers on the ceiling, brackets on the walls, candelabras propped on tables and tripods on the floor.⁴⁰ The cut glass in the chandeliers meanwhile further diffused and augmented the light. The overall effect was of a deluge of gentle light that balanced out the harsh effects of the footlights and illuminated right to the back of the stage.

In the end, it was gaslight's associations with progress, therefore – rather than with decay or distaste – that infiltrated the reviews. As Lynda Nead has shown, gaslight signalled modernity as much as degeneration in nineteenth-century London. With gas came the ability to conquer darkness: to illuminate dark places and extend working hours.⁴¹ However reluctant some were to concede that gas illumination was an important innovation, others made claims for its powerful potential. In an article detailing 'A History of Gas' from 1834, for instance, this new technology was praised as 'a leap in the march of improvement far beyond any that had been previously made or hoped for'.⁴²

Such was the admiration for controlled gaslight that *The Athenaeum* used it as a metaphor for *Gustavus*'s success, reporting that the opera had

⁴⁰ Gas brackets were the extension of a gas supply pipe out of the wall with a control tap at some point and a burner at the far end. See Rees, *Theatre Lighting in the Age of Gas*, 94.

⁴¹ For more on the links between gas and modernity, see Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven, 2000), 83-98.

⁴² 'A History of Gas', *Penny Magazine of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge* 3 (1834), 373.

thrown all [Covent Garden's] former successes into shade. Those productions which we thought splendid before, now twinkle in our mind's eye like rush-lights, when compared with the gas of "Gustavus the Third." ... The last scene surpasses, not only in grandeur, but in chasteness and elegance, all that we have ever beheld either on our own or on the Parisian stage.⁴³

The emphasis on 'chasteness and elegance' exempts the scene from the immoral and taste-compromising effects that were typically associated with overly strong lighting. Just a year before, a similarly bright ballroom scene in Planché's military spectacle *His First Campaign* had been described as 'brilliant, but not tasteful'.⁴⁴ And reactions to a later French import reveal the benefits of having employed mixed lighting for *Gustavus*. Early in 1835, Bunn attempted to replicate the previous season's success with a new Auber opera featuring a grand ballroom scene: *Lestocq* (1834).⁴⁵ This time, Bunn drastically increased the number of gas lamps used, inducing critics to once more give detailed accounts of the display:

In order to produce the extraordinary and novel effects exhibited in the scene of the Fête of the Hermitage, it was absolutely necessary to lay down an entirely new gas apparatus, from the stage to the top of the proscenium, which has increased the

⁴³ *The Athenaeum* (16 November 1833). 'Rush-lights', as the name implies, were candles made by lighting rushes.

⁴⁴ *Arnold's Library of the Fine Arts* 1 (November 1832), 61.

⁴⁵ As suspected by the critic for *The Times* (23 February 1835): 'It is conceived in obvious emulation of the celebrated *bal masqué* of the opera of *Gustavus*'.

number of lights now used in the scene to above 4,200, including all the lamps, candelabras, chandeliers, candles, illuminated columns and borders.⁴⁶

But *Lestocq* did not fare as well as its predecessor. With the stage flooded with gaslight, objections to overstimulation were made: ‘to our eye’, complained Edward Taylor of *The Spectator*, ‘it is all glare’.⁴⁷

The combination of gas with older lighting methods in *Gustavus* invited favourable comparisons with the past. Maribeth Clark has argued that for *Gustave III* in Paris, extravagantly staging an eighteenth-century ball scene using all the space and technical effects available at the Opéra encouraged observations on the advancements made in French staging techniques in the preceding decades – steps that had made the Opéra world-renowned for its divertissements.⁴⁸ A similar case might be made for London’s *Gustavus* regarding the lighting. Critics mentioned seeing wax candles in some of the chandeliers, which indicated that this was a ball held in an age before theatres were fitted with gaslight;⁴⁹ and yet, from all sides, this candlelight was illuminated by gaslight fixtures. This layering of lighting – the theatrical gas illumination and, within that, the situational candlelight – may well have drawn attention to the power of present-day theatre technologies in contrast to those of the previous century.

⁴⁶ *The Age* (8 March 1835).

⁴⁷ *The World of Fashion and Continental Feuilletons* (1 April 1835).

⁴⁸ See Maribeth Clark, ‘The Role of *Gustave, ou Le bal masqué* in Restraining the Bourgeois Body of the July Monarchy’, *The Musical Quarterly* 88 (2005), 211.

⁴⁹ *The Figaro in London* 2 (1833), 188.

London opera-goers could equally contrast the staging positively with efforts across the channel. Critic after critic proclaimed that London's *Gustavus* was far more spectacular than the Parisian *Gustave*, and there may have been some validity to these claims.⁵⁰ On seeing the opera in Paris, Bunn had declared that in London 'some parts' would 'be better done';⁵¹ the lighting may well have been on his mind. At this time, it was not Paris but London that was known as the 'city of light' owing to the extent of its gas networks and street lighting. London had been first in Europe to install gaslight in its theatres – the Paris Opéra began using gas in 1821, while Italian and German theatres would not catch up until the 1830s and forties respectively.⁵² It seems inconceivable this had no impact on the sophistication with which gas was harnessed at the theatre. Indeed, that, according to a report in *La Revue des modes du Paris*, the director of the Paris Opéra, Louis Véron, travelled to London in 1833 to study the lighting methods used there reinforces the notion that the London theatres would have been able to outstrip their European neighbours in this respect.⁵³

⁵⁰ For example, in *The Age*, it was said to have 'surpassed' the 'blaze' achieved in Paris (17 November 1833).

⁵¹ Bunn, *The Stage*, 131.

⁵² See Diego Saglia, 'Theatre, Drama, and Vision in the Romantic Age: Stages of the New', in *The Oxford Handbook of European Romanticism*, ed. Paul Hamilton (Oxford, 2016), 759.

⁵³ Although some suspected that Véron's true goal in visiting London was to scout out singing talent, a report in *La Revue des modes du Paris* read: 'Le directeur de l'Opéra, M. Véron, est déjà de retour de Londres. Le but de son voyage était d'étudier le système d'éclairage appliqué aux théâtres anglais', 1 (1833), 385-86. For more on gaslight in Paris theatres, see Roy and Emeljanow, *Romantic and Revolutionary Theatre*, 385-6.

In this age of technological exhibition and competition, critics delighted in trying to count and describe the light fittings in *Gustavus* as accurately as possible. Some approximated ('nearly 40 cut-glass chandeliers, besides lamps, brackets, tripods, and candelabras, holding some seven or eight hundred lights',⁵⁴ 'about thirty glass lustres'⁵⁵), while in *The News*, a footnote provided a thorough rundown:

In lighting this scene there are made use of 36 cut glass chandeliers containing 468 lights, 6 tripods containing 78, Gothic and other lamps holding 125, and 52 brackets mounting 308 – in all 979; a blaze of light never before seen on a stage.⁵⁶

Wonder at the material is also evident in comments on the lustres, which were made especially for the performance, being 'real glass; none of your hoops from butter tubs with bits of tallow stuck round them, but veritable cut-glass chandeliers'.⁵⁷ Much like gaslight, London's recent advances in glass-making (as detailed by Isobel Armstrong) were at that time inviting widespread contemplation of modern achievement.⁵⁸ No wonder that, faced

⁵⁴ *The Globe*, quoted in *The Age* (17 November 1833).

⁵⁵ *The Spectator* 6 (1833), 1075.

⁵⁶ *The News* (17 November 1833). The actual number may have been a little higher; Bunn recorded in a letter that 'on reference to our Gas Man, more than 1200 lights altogether' were used on the stage for *Gustavus* (quoted in Rees, *Theatre Lighting in the Age of Gas*, 13).

⁵⁷ *The Figaro in London* 2 (1833), 188.

⁵⁸ See Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830-1880* (Oxford, 2008).

with this assembly of fine glass and multitudinous lights, one critic claimed that the scene represented ‘the *ne plus ultra* of human invention and effect’.⁵⁹

As had become characteristic of works conceived for the Paris Opéra, the finale to *Gustave III* comprised a climactic audiovisual tableau. For both London and Paris, the finale presented the brightest and the most tragic moment in the opera. But at Covent Garden, both aspects were heightened. Where in each version, the brightness of the scene was accentuated by the dimness of the previous acts, Planché cut an earlier ball scene, allowing the finale to become a clearer visual peak. As in Paris, the final act came after the opera’s darkest moment: the view of Stockholm by moonlight in Act II, although the first scene of Act III (an anteroom at the opera house) provided some gradation. Moonlit penultimate settings became a prominent feature of Romantic theatre with the introduction of dimmable gaslights, and were a common method of heightening the impact of dramatic finales in London’s playhouses. To take examples from that Covent Garden season alone, in the pantomime of *St. George and the Dragon*, a ‘Dragon’s Haunt by Moonlight’ appeared before the fight scene finale; and the melodrama, *The Ferry and The Mill* (November 1833), showed a moonlit ferry house before the bursting of the dam in the final act. Finales with astonishing lighting effects were popular too. In 1832, a burletta of *Don Quixote* at the Adelphi was advertised as featuring ‘jets and fountains illuminated by coloured lights’ in the final scene.⁶⁰ *Gustavus* combined the two practices (dark penultimate scenes and bright finales) by ending with the opera’s brightest and most visually astounding moment.

⁵⁹ *The Age* (17 November 1833).

⁶⁰ *The Literary Gazette* (12 January 1833).

In Paris, a typical method of building towards the final tragic moment in *grand opéra* was through sensory overload.⁶¹ Hibberd has argued that in *Gustave III*, the whirl of mesmeric dances, bright lights, vibrant costumes and myriad dancers temporarily disorientated audiences to render the moment of assassination all the more cataclysmic.⁶² A similar effect was achieved in London; but again, it was the onslaught of visual stimuli that most preoccupied the critics. Where some were eager to quantify the brightness by counting the lights, others pronounced them ‘innumerable’.⁶³ The reviewer for *The Morning Post* declared himself unable to ‘chronicle the least ray of [the scene’s] splendour’.⁶⁴ To another,

⁶¹ See Sarah Hibberd, ‘*Le Naufrage de la Méduse* and Operatic Spectacle in 1830s Paris’, *19th-Century Music* 36 (2013), 248-63, and Newark, ‘Metaphors for Meyerbeer’, 23-43.

⁶² See Sarah Hibberd, ‘Auber’s *Gustave III*: History as Opera’, in *Music, Theater and Cultural Transfer: Paris, 1830-1914*, ed. Annegret Fauser and Mark Everist (Chicago, 2009), 168-72. This is supported by comments made by the French critic Jules Janin: ‘It is impossible to describe this endless madness, this whirl, this *bizarrerie*, on which the rays of two thousand wax tapers, in their crystal lustres, pour an inundation of mellow light. I, who am so well accustomed to spectacles like this—I, who am, unfortunately, not easily disposed to be surprised—I am yet dazzled with this radiant scene’, quoted and translated in Ellen Creathorne Clayton, *Queens of Song* (New York, 1865), 324-5.

⁶³ As in *The Town*: ‘innumerable cut glass chandeliers and golden candelabras’ (17 November 1833). Another exaggerated that there were ‘ten thousand lamps’ (*The United Kingdom* (17 November 1833)).

⁶⁴ *The Morning Post* (and also in *The Standard*) (14 November 1833).

the lighting was ‘dazzling’, implying that, at least momentarily, the level of light overpowered the senses.⁶⁵

The extended stage and numerous extras compounded the confusion. Sterling’s account for *The Times* of masqueraders in ‘numbers more than can be counted’, in ‘dresses of endless variety’, ‘flit[ting] before our bewildered eyes’ gives some indication of the experience of the scene.⁶⁶ The playbill stated that there were 250 supernumeraries, while a later review asserted that this, in conjunction with the actual company and extra audience members brought on to sit in the onstage galleries, meant that there were ‘between four and five hundred people on the stage’.⁶⁷ Such numbers are likely to have been unprecedented (and thus overwhelming) –they were only achievable because Bunn had combined the forces of both his theatres.⁶⁸ Critics were ‘astonished’, too, by the ‘vastness’⁶⁹ of the stage, so deep, even ‘interminable’⁷⁰ it appeared, full of reflective glass and with its back and sides opened out. Sterling, among others, described the effect as an optical illusion:

⁶⁵ *The Weekly Dispatch* (17 November 1833). Cray has explored the ways in which artists attempted to represent visual overstimulation through the example of J.M.W. Turner’s *Light and Colour (Goethe’s Theory) – The Morning after the Deluge* (1843) in *Techniques of the Observer*, 138-41.

⁶⁶ *The Times* (14 November 1833). This review was repeated in *Bell’s Life in London*, *The Observer* and *The Albion and Star*.

⁶⁷ *The Age* (17 November 1833).

⁶⁸ Hibberd offers further detail on this in ‘Cockneys in a Fever’.

⁶⁹ *The Sunday Times* (17 November 1833).

⁷⁰ *The Morning Post* (and in *The Standard*) (14 November 1833) (the author here was possibly John Ella).

The whole space of the stage, up to the extreme end, represents a hall brightly lighted, and by an ingenious contrivance the actual space is made to appear much greater than it is.⁷¹

Others called it ‘pictorial deception’⁷² or ‘magic’.⁷³ In Paris, Hibberd has suggested, the equivalent scene resonated with the overwhelming rate of political change in France at that time.⁷⁴ In London, however, the frequent expressions of disorientation and attempts to assess the glass and gaslight suggest that the finale’s pace and brightness resonated with the rapidly modernising, dazzling city, just beyond the theatre walls. The use of light and glass for the sake of illusion invites comparisons with what Armstrong describes as the ‘gas-lit mirrored spaces’ of London’s shopfronts, whose ‘sensuous allure of light and transparency created optical overload’.⁷⁵

Sound completed the effect. At the moment of assassination, there was a sudden shift from extreme audio-visual-dramatic cohesion to extreme disjunction. Auber’s ‘sparkling’ music matched the visual brightness and celebratory mood of the ball; but with the fatal gunshot, according to one critic, the ‘whole complexion of the scene reversed’. As Gustavus lay wounded on the stage ‘slight catches of music [were] heard at intervals from the

⁷¹ *The Times* (14 November 1833) (repeated in *Bell’s Life in London, The Observer* and *The Albion and Star*).

⁷² *The Examiner* (17 November 1833).

⁷³ *The Theatrical Examiner* (17 November 1833).

⁷⁴ Hibberd, *French Grand Opera and the Historical Imagination*, 57.

⁷⁵ Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, 134-41.

more distant apartments', adding to the feeling that this scene stretched spatially beyond the audience's vision.⁷⁶ Where the scene's brightness had previously been a source of delight – of illusion, of modernity – now, it forced the eye to gaze upon the dying monarch. The offstage music and onstage lights became a glaring reminder of the recent merriment of the party, casting an embarrassment of brightness over the tragic scene.

The illusion of access

The shock was more intensely felt because the gunshot forced audiences back into a narrative world that had been temporarily paused. The illuminations made the picture so vivid, and gaslight was so entwined with modern London, that the scene resembled an enterable reality.⁷⁷ Clark and Hibberd have described *Gustave III*'s opera ball finale at the Opéra as a 'kaleidoscopic' layering of past and present, Paris and Stockholm. The dances were decidedly contemporary and local – the galop, in particular, had only been popularised in France in the late 1820s – while the fully-costumed revellers belonged to a pre-revolutionary age. Masquerade balls were still held occasionally in Paris, but men were banned from wearing costumes.⁷⁸ In London, however, there were no such restrictions.⁷⁹ The costumes

⁷⁶ *The Town* (17 November 1833).

⁷⁷ Nead has also suggested that gaslight had the ability to create the illusion of reality on the stage, but in relation to spectacle scenes in the 1860s (see Nead, *Victorian Babylon*, 100).

⁷⁸ See Clark, 'The Role of *Gustave*', 216 and 211, and Hibberd, 'Auber's *Gustave III*', 165-6.

⁷⁹ As in Paris, the tradition declined somewhat in London after the eighteenth century, but masked balls still took place regularly at theatres and in private saloons. See Terry Castle, *Masquerade and Civilization: The Carnavalesque in Eighteenth-Century English Culture and Fiction* (Stanford, 1986), 331-2.

worn in *Gustavus*, moreover, were typical of contemporary masquerades: a host of recently popularised characters appeared, such as Paul Pry (the titular character of a play of 1825 by John Poole) and Don Giovanni (whose opera only reached London in 1817).⁸⁰ Where in Paris, audiences viewed eighteenth-century characters dancing to 1830s music, in London, both appeared modern, meaning that the scene became more thoroughly detached from the rest of the opera. What resulted was more mirror than kaleidoscope.

It was perhaps inevitable that this scene would be understood as a virtual reflection of the opera goer's reality: the ball was after all set in an opera house. In London, though, a crucial change was made to the setting. Where Scribe's libretto placed the action in 'la salle du bal de l'Opéra' with a large granite staircase to the left, Planché chose simply the 'opera-house stage'.⁸¹ The scene was lined all around with galleries occupied by extra audience members, who reviewers recognised from 'off the boards'.⁸² Faced with people like themselves sat on the other side of the proscenium, the stage must have appeared to audiences like a mirror – a sensation attempted in more material terms by the looking glass curtain at the Coburg Theatre eleven years earlier – or a mirage of Covent Garden set up for a masquerade on another night.⁸³

⁸⁰ These characters are listed in a humorous review of *Gustavus* in the form of a song which appeared in *The Age* (1 December 1833).

⁸¹ Compare Planché, *Gustavus the Third*, 40, and Scribe, *Gustave III, ou Le Bal masqué, opéra historique en cinq actes suivi d'une relation de la mort de Gustave III extraite de l'ouvrage de M. Coxe sur la Suède* (Paris, 1833), 68.

⁸² *The Weekly Dispatch* (17 November 1833).

⁸³ For a discussion of the Coburg's looking glass curtain, see Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, 97-9.

The scene not only closely resembled a London opera ball, but it simulated the slippage between participation and spectatorship typical at such events. The masked balls held in London's theatres at that time allowed audiences to step into a quasi-operatic world. It was at the King's Theatre, rather than Covent Garden, that opera masquerades were most commonly found (hence one critic's remark that 'the whole appearance' of *Gustavus* 'was that of such a masquerade as may be seen ... at the Opera-house in the Haymarket'⁸⁴). These occasions, with their costuming, music and dance, were already inherently theatrical. But the King's Theatre balls also included performances of popular ballet and opera numbers. In 1833, for instance, grand masquerades held there featured a German choir performing the huntsmen's chorus from *Der Freischütz* 'in character' and, in 1834, the military scene from the ballet-pantomime, *La Révolte au sérail* was acted out.⁸⁵ Guests could attend as spectators in the boxes and galleries or, for a higher price, promenade or dance on the stage, which was extended out across the pit to fill the auditorium.⁸⁶ Those dancing could draw close to the musicians, dancers and tumblers, and exhibit themselves to the audience to become part of the performance. As such, these hybrid entertainments enabled participants to move freely between performing and spectating. This served as a contrast to an evening at the opera, where the distinction was becoming increasingly delineated, in part owing to the powerful blaze of the gaslit proscenium.

⁸⁴ *The Spectator* 6 (1833), 1075.

⁸⁵ See reports in *The Morning Chronicle* (1 May 1833), and *The Age* (26 January 1834).

⁸⁶ An advertisement for a King's Theatre ball reported in 1833: 'The pit and stage made level will form a grand saloon' (*The Morning Chronicle* (1 May 1833)). A similar practice could be found elsewhere, including Paris (see Clark, 'The Role of *Gustave*', 209-10).

Just as balls featured theatrical set pieces, it was not uncommon for theatrical entertainments to contain ball scenes. In addition to *His First Campaign*, recent productions with grand ballroom tableaux included Rossini's *La Cenerentola* (as *Cinderella*) at Covent Garden (1830), John Buckstone's melodrama *Henriette the Forsaken* at the Adelphi (1832), and *Don Giovanni* in various guises since 1817. The masked ball scene in *Gustavus*, however, offered something new. Bunn allowed his audiences a similar experience to that at an opera ball by inviting select audience members (largely gentlemen subscribers) to participate.⁸⁷ A chief incentive behind this venture was no doubt financial: Bunn was able to augment the number of supernumeraries on the stage and sell extra high-priced tickets in the process. It also catered to those who, on a typical night, would wait in the greenroom for their favourite dancers, actors and singers to exit the stage. But it meant additionally that the scene became a potentially interactive spectacle.

That many of those who appeared in the final scene were recognisable figures from public life further shattered the fictive world generated in the previous acts. As at an opera ball, only a privileged few could afford these places. In consequence, audiences found the characters of *Gustavus* joined by lords, politicians, ambassadors and military men.⁸⁸ (For the

⁸⁷ This perk does not appear to have been publicised openly. It was reported in *The Weekly Dispatch* as follows: 'we have been told that any person who chose might have tickets of admission to view the spectacle – if he would mingle in the group of the stage' (17 November 1833).

⁸⁸ *The Age* (17 November 1833): 'We have seen a dozen Lords at a time on the stage, whom neither mask, nor domino, could at all conceal from us; and by the side of them, or among them, we have seen sundry Ambassadors ... to the Court of St. James's ... enjoying themselves amongst the motley group'.

Parisian *Gustave*, only women audience members were invited on stage, and appear to have been less widely recognised.⁸⁹) A song printed in *The Age* – a paper that specialised in gossip – listed some of the faces spotted. In a carnivalesque reversal typical of a masked ball, amusement was drawn from seeing powerful gentlemen in debasing costumes, such as ‘a maid’, ‘an ass’, ‘the Devil’ and ‘the *horns* of a pan’ (a cuckold).⁹⁰ The costume that sparked most discussion, however, was that of Napoleon, worn by Bunn himself. Not only was the costume anachronistic, but it drew attention to its wearer, the self-proclaimed Napoleon of London’s theatres. As with the respectable gentlemen in undignified dress, the amusement depended on the audience disconnecting from the drama to recognise the face beneath the costume.

The music and choreography were also familiar, thus reinforcing the sense that this was a mirror of London. The galop would have sounded and looked contemporary, as in Paris. But where Auber’s dance music for *Gustave III* was new to Parisian audiences when the opera was first performed at the Opéra, in London it was already known.⁹¹ Music from popular operas was staple fodder for the ballroom, and so when word about *Gustave III*’s

⁸⁹ Rumours that ladies of the public could pay to appear in the grand finale were reported by Jules Janin in *Le Journal de débats* (11 March 1833) (see Clark, ‘The Role of *Gustave*’, 226). Eventually, Bunn stopped allowing gentlemen up on the stage, due to complaints that they danced awkwardly and tried to pursue the ballerinas (see *The Ladies’ Cabinet of Fashion, Music and Romance* (1 January 1834)).

⁹⁰ *The Age* (1 December 1833).

⁹¹ This said, Clark has pointed out that in Paris, too, audiences would often dance operas before they heard them. See ‘The Quadrille as Embodied Musical Experience in 19th-Century Paris’, *The Journal of Musicology* 19 (2002), 503-4.

success reached London, musicians were quick to act. A notice in *The Theatrical Observer* in March 1833 reported that ‘Mr. F. Weippert’ of Weippert’s band, had ‘left town on a musical mission to the French capital, to purchase the copyright of Auber’s last new Opera, entitled “Gustave; ou, le Bal Masque,” which is stated to contain some of the most beautiful quadrille music of any which this eminent musician has yet composed’.⁹² The operation was evidently successful: in April, quadrilles from the opera were played by the band at the Southampton Annual Easter Ball and at the exclusive Almack’s club in London.⁹³ On 24 May, the dance music of *Gustave III* received an even more prestigious outing when it was performed for a ‘Juvenile Ball’ at St. James’s Palace held in honour of Princess Victoria’s birthday.⁹⁴

When it came to the performances of *Gustavus* at Covent Garden, therefore, those who had attended these occasions would have heard Auber’s galop and quadrilles before. It is likely that there was substantial overlap in attendees – reviewers of the first night of *Gustavus* noted that a whole host of ‘fashionables’ were present, including Princess Victoria, who had heard the dances at her own ball.⁹⁵ The extensive lists of persons at these balls, printed in

⁹² *The Theatrical Observer* (2 April 1833).

⁹³ *The Morning Post* reported on both events on 15 and 19 April 1833 respectively. Almack’s held another ball in June, which included Weippert’s band and these quadrilles again (see *The Morning Post* (28 June 1833)).

⁹⁴ As reported in *The Morning Chronicle* (27 May 1833).

⁹⁵ *The News*, for example, recorded that ‘a long list of fashionables’ was in attendance. The young Victoria noted attending the performance in her diary entry on 13 November 1833, but did not enjoy it. In fact, she left at 10:45pm, possibly before the finale began. See the transcriptions of her diaries at <http://www.queenvictoriasjournals.org/> (accessed 17 August 2015).

newspapers and magazines, also reveal that some of the guests were the same as those found on the stage during the finale. Among the figures noted in the song published in *The Age* was Prince Paul Lieven, whose name had also appeared frequently in the guest lists of the summer balls. Even those who did not move in such elite circles may have heard the music in advance. With Auber's quadrilles having become the fashionable dances of the season, the London publisher D'Almaine advertised in July that a piano arrangement by Henry Herz was forthcoming. The galop was not printed until November, but this is not to say that it had not already been widely pirated beyond the ballroom.

The lighting intensified the sense of mirroring. The number of references to the 'brilliant' illuminations recalled descriptions found in notices for and accounts of balls.⁹⁶ Once again, however, it was to balls held in London's theatres specifically that the lighting parallels were drawn. The wax-candle chandeliers hanging over the onstage audience boxes mirrored the wax-candle chandeliers above the dress and first circles; the auditorium, like the stage, had been recently fitted with mixed lighting methods since, while gaslight was

⁹⁶ The phrase 'brilliantly illuminated', which appeared frequently in relation to *Gustavus*, was a staple for advertising balls. A template, for instance, was used to advertise the King's Theatre masked balls in the daily papers of 1833 and 1834 using the phrase (see issues of *The Morning Post* in March-May 1833 and *The Morning Chronicle*, April-May 1834), as was a masked ball at Drury Lane in 1829 (see *The Age* (28 June 1829)). It was used for balls beyond the theatres too, as in the report on Victoria's birthday celebrations: 'the entire suite of State Rooms were very brilliantly illuminated with chandeliers and candelabras', *The Morning Chronicle* (27 May 1833).

desirable for the most part, candles were preferred in the intimate spaces of the boxes.⁹⁷ Further chandeliers hanging from the ceiling over the stage helped balance the light of the central chandelier, as would be the case at a theatre ball, where the light over the dancing space on the stage would need to match that over the pit, dissolving the frame of the proscenium in the process. With the stage opened out to the back of the building and the light spread evenly between auditorium and stage, it was not only unclear where the stage ended, but also where it began.

The feeling of watching a technologically enhanced, fairytale representation of reality would not have been unfamiliar to London audiences. Panoramas and dioramas had been popular forms of entertainment since the late eighteenth century, offering visitors the sensation of overlooking city- and mountain-scapes, or stepping through abandoned castles and monasteries. By the 1830s, these installations were frequently animated through theatrical technologies, using sound effects, moving scenery, living props, and carefully positioned gaslights to create the illusion of depth.⁹⁸ The finale of *Gustavus* appears to have brought to mind such entertainments. John Payne Collier of *The Morning Chronicle* described the dancers and actors as if they were cleverly engineered figurines moving through a diorama: ‘the whole stage, in its width and depth, is thrown open, brilliantly lighted, and filled with moving and dancing figures’.⁹⁹ Peacock’s account in *The Examiner*

⁹⁷ This lighting in the auditorium is detailed in Horace Foote, *A Companion to the Theatres; and Manual of the British Drama* (London, 1829), 49.

⁹⁸ These more intricate techniques had been introduced to London by Louis Daguerre and his moving dioramas in the 1820s. See Richard D. Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge, MA, 1978), 190.

⁹⁹ *The Morning Chronicle* (14 November 1833).

portrayed the scene more explicitly as a three-dimensional, living panorama. ‘Nor was life wanting in the picture’, he wrote; ‘instead of painted spectators in the galleries, as has been usual in such cases, we had an abundance of real men and women’.¹⁰⁰ And where chandeliers would typically have been painted above these ‘painted spectators’, here, functional lighting fixtures were used. So tangible was the picture that the song in *The Age* contained a refrain calling on audience members to enter the scene, just as they might a panorama: ‘come put on your domino—come! ... “Gustavus the Third” is “at home”’.¹⁰¹

Conclusion

An illustration used by D’Almaine to decorate musical numbers published from *Gustavus* captures this feeling of being within, or at least potentially within, the action (Figure 2). The perspective is ambiguous. At first glance, this is simply a view of the stage. A handful of characters are positioned in front of the curtain – the conspirators perhaps. But the grand chandelier in the top left is recognisably that of the auditorium, and there are too many tiers of boxes for this to be the seating on the stage. Neither is this a view of the historic scene at the Stockholm opera. It is inside the auditorium (not the opera house ballroom), and the puffed sleeves of the women and long trousers of some men betray their contemporaneity. Rather than conspirators, it appears that the gentlemen in the bottom corners are bewildered extras, surrounded by ladies, maybe dancers, whispering instructions on how to behave on the stage. And the figure in the bicorn hat, one arm raised as if in direction – might this be Bunn as Napoleon? So this is the Covent Garden stage, but the masked ball has spilled out beyond the proscenium into the auditorium, and the viewer has found themselves beyond the

¹⁰⁰ *The Examiner* (17 November 1833).

¹⁰¹ *The Age* (1 December 1833).

curtain. Or, if this is a view of the stage, as expected of an image used to decorate an opera extract score, then what we are looking at is a reflection. The ornate border – not found on D’Almaine’s other lithographs for sheet music from *Gustavus* – seems to play on interpretations of this finale as a living picture or mirror: a suspended moment that invited audiences to gaze into the scene, spotting famous faces, counting lights, searching for the back of the stage and imagining themselves as part of the action, only to be shocked back into the narrative at the moment of the assassination.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 AROUND HERE]

The mirror I have described, however, was only directed towards a certain few. Not all would recognise figures like themselves among the dancing supernumeraries or spectators in the onstage boxes. Where the *Tory Age* enjoyed celebrity spotting during the masquerade, the satirical *Figaro in London* reported:

noblemen and other scum ..., by paying something extra, are allowed to fret their half hour upon the stage in dirty dominos. Three or four of these bipeds may every night be detected by their Wellington boots and their awkwardness.¹⁰²

Illuminations signalled elegance and progress only for those who were best situated to view them. New lighting technologies obscured the view for those in the cheaper galleries and stalls. From the top of the theatre, it was not possible to see to the back of the stage to witness the optical illusion described in the papers, and the view of the stage front was impaired by

¹⁰² *Figaro in London* (7 December 1833).

the gas footlights, which blazed upwards.¹⁰³ Spectators in the stalls equally suffered from the installation of gas—their perspective was obstructed by the tall footlights, and it was here that the odour and heat from the gas were worst. And yet, visual sources such as the lists of scenery on the playbills, the detailed descriptions in reviews and the lithographs on sheet music allowed these people to see through the eyes of those in the boxes – those with more power to control their sensory environment, and to feel the benefits of London’s modernisation.

This account, then, points to ways in which we might consider how changing lighting technologies affected the ways opera was experienced in early nineteenth-century London. In this example, light dazzled, distracted, prompted audiences to delight in illusion, wonder at craftsmanship and technology, and become swept up in the scene. Indeed, despite critical reservations about spectacle, it was by playing on audiences’ fascination with technological display – on their tendency to disengage and revel in the visual – that the tragedy was heightened.¹⁰⁴ Such a reaction was only possible because gas remained at that time a source of novelty and modernity, which still had the power to overwhelm.

¹⁰³ This problem was described in a letter from ‘a gallery frequenter’ printed in *The Examiner* (9 June 1833).

¹⁰⁴ So strong was this distraction that soon the scene was separated out from the opera altogether. Following on from the success of the first season, Bunn programmed *Gustavus* every year until 1838, moving across to Drury Lane once he stopped managing Covent Garden in 1835. In most cases, *Gustavus* was not the main piece of the evening, and was placed after a play or another opera and reduced to either the first two acts or, more often, to the finale. Various sources had predicted that this would happen. For instance, in *The Weekly Dispatch*: ‘As a *full* opera this piece can never stand at first price. Curtailment may bring a

few pounds of *nine o'clock* money, and the masquerade-scene may do *ditto*, as a sort of interlude' (17 November 1833).