

Claudio Monteverdi's *L'Incoronazione di Poppea*

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Published in *Goldberg Early Music Magazine* 42 (October 2006): 60-71

L'Incoronazione di Poppea (1642), Claudio Monteverdi's last opera, is probably the first opera to focus on human beings. Instead of drawing on mythology, it takes its cue from Roman history: the affair between the Roman noblewoman Sabina Poppæa and the Emperor Nero.

It seems clear that Monteverdi wrote most, but not all, of the music for this opera (the final scenes, in particular, probably contain music by younger composers). Furthermore, the two surviving manuscripts (from Naples and Venice) represent rearrangements for productions that took place after Monteverdi's death. For Monteverdi's contemporaries, such joint authorship and subsequent adaptation probably caused little comment. It does, however, cause problems for modern interpreters, frustrated by our inability to know what the original music was like, and how much of it is indeed by Monteverdi.

There are also controversies on the performance of this opera. *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* is written for a large group of soloists accompanied by a small instrumental group. In the surviving sources, the singers are accompanied by continuo only, with instrumental ritornelli between vocal passages. Some scholars and performers contend that Monteverdi would have endorsed, or even expected, richer accompaniments and more ritornelli than the sources indicate. Others claim that additional instrumental interventions are historically anachronistic – and dramatically distracting. As Alan Curtis notes (p. xii), Monteverdi's "vocal lines, with their wonderfully delicate balance and free ranging between the extremes of the purely lyrical and the practically spoken, are themselves so intensely charged with drama that the piece could be successfully performed with only continuo accompaniment". The addition of instruments could make the music more rigid, limiting the singers' fluidity and flexibility.

The third major controversy surrounding *Poppea* – and the one on which I'll focus in this article – concerns its alleged immorality. The central characters are a callous, capricious Emperor and his ruthlessly ambitious mistress; yet in the end they

are united in apparent bliss, their evil acts unpunished. Many commentators assume that Poppæa and Nero are not really in love: Nero is merely lusting after Poppæa, and the latter feigns love for the Emperor in order to gain a crown of her own.

Yet there is also a subtler view. The musicologist Ellen Rosand, for example, argues that Monteverdi's characters cannot be described as stereotypical heroes and villains; they are "profoundly human beings, shaped by the complex forces of their own feelings" (Rosand, "Seneca", p. 54). In this article, I hope to make my own modest contribution in support of this position, relying on the already-strong case presented by Rosand and others.

***Poppea* as "History"**

L'Incoronazione di Poppea is largely a work of fiction. The librettist, Giovanni Francesco Busenello (1598-1659; see also GOLDBERG 36), cited Tacitus's *Annals of Imperial Rome* as his source. However, his characters often bear little resemblance to their historical namesakes, whether in terms of their life-stories or in terms of their character. To make the distinction clearer, I will use the Italian spelling when discussing the operatic characters (Poppea, Nerone, Ottavia, Ottone) – but revert to the standard English spelling of their names when discussing the historical characters that inspired them (Poppæa, Nero, Octavia, Otho). This will, I hope, help in illustrating the profound gap between Roman history, as Busenello and his audience knew it, and the events presented in the opera.

For example, a crucial event in the operatic plot is the Empress Ottavia's attempt to kill Poppea. Tacitus does mention this murder attempt – by telling us that it never happened. According to Tacitus, shortly after Nero divorced Octavia he came under popular pressure to restore her. His new wife Sabina Poppæa, fearful that Nero might yield to this pressure, started a slanderous campaign against Octavia, even claiming that the former Empress was plotting to murder both her and the Emperor.

Tacitus presents this as an absurd story, proof of Poppæa's viciousness and paranoia. This fits with his general portrayal of Octavia as the ultimate innocent victim. Busenello's Ottavia, by contrast, has all the hellish fury of a woman scorned. Inspired by this fury, she orders a Roman nobleman, Ottone, to murder Poppea – thereby providing her husband with a legitimate pretext to divorce and exile her.

Ottone's character, too, is based on historical distortion. His real-life namesake, Marcus Slavius Otho, was Sabina Poppæa's husband. But the operatic Ottone is Poppea's jilted lover, who ends up having an affair with Drusilla, a completely fictional character. His involvement in the attempt on Poppea's life has no counterpart in history. The historical Otho, removed from Rome to clear the way for Nero's affair with Poppæa, was appointed Governor of Lusitania (Portugal). He was therefore in command of a military force, enabling him to join a rebellion against Nero and to become Emperor shortly after Nero's death (though his reign only lasted three months). The operatic Ottone, however, was deprived of his title, possessions and military command, and banished to a remote corner of the Empire. All in all, the historical Otho and Busenello's Ottone bear only a superficial resemblance to each other.

Such radical departures from history were not unique to Busenello. The librettist belonged to an influential intellectual group known as the *Accademia degli Incogniti*. The *Incogniti* derived much inspiration from Tacitus – but took substantial liberties with the historical record as they knew it.

This has direct bearing on the moral interpretation of the drama. Modern interpreters, discomfited by the triumph of Poppea and Nerone, claim that this triumph is illusory: in history, they both suffered violent deaths. But Busenello's deviations from historical truth are so flagrant that history becomes irrelevant. It is difficult to imagine Busenello's indecisive, self-tormenting and powerless Ottone ever becoming Emperor; conversely, it is possible to imagine Busenello's Nerone and Poppea spending the rest of their lives in undeserved bliss.

In any case, Busenello's portrayal of the other characters is not exactly flattering. The coronation of Poppea is hardly the triumph of vice over virtue; at most, it is the triumph of vice over lesser vice. The music at once enhances and contradicts this cynicism; as Ellen Rosand puts it ("Seneca", p. 55), "All the characters in the opera gain psychological depth at [Monteverdi's] hand and realize their human potential through his music".

Seneca and Ottavia: The representatives of Virtù?

Poppea opens with an allegorical scene. The Goddesses Fortuna (Fortune) and Virtù (Virtue) vie for supremacy over one another. Amore (Love) declares that that he

can defeat them both in one day. The opera thus sets out to prove that Love triumphs over Virtue and Fortune alike.

Virtù's primary representative in this contest is the philosopher Seneca, who is executed by his former pupil Nerone after standing up for his principles, and is deified by Pallas Athene, the Goddess of Wisdom, as a reward for his virtue. Yet Seneca is not all that he seems. Nerone's soldiers denounce him as a sly man "who built his house on the tombs of others"; Ottavia and her valet dismiss his philosophy as pompous and meaningless. Ottavia, however, does trust him and seeks his help. Later, his dignity and courage become apparent. At the risk of his own life, he advises Nerone against marrying Poppea, telling him that even Emperors are subject to law and reason. When Nerone finally commands him to commit suicide, he accepts his fate with stoic nobility.

Initially, the music does seem to portray his pomposity. During his supposedly comforting speech to Ottavia, for example, he sings an elaborate melisma on the word "la" (the Italian for "the"), an affectation that seems to justify the valet's subsequent claim that, "if [Seneca] but sneezes or yawns, he claims to be teaching something moral".

On the whole, however, Monteverdi's portrayal of Seneca is positive. His calm demeanour when confronting the increasingly-enraged Nerone draws the audience towards him, as does his lyricism when he accepts his own death. His farewell from his friends conveys a peaceful serenity, yet its sensuous lyricism is oddly reminiscent of Poppea's music: both characters seem to receive the opera's most beautiful tunes.

Moreover, they both inspire such tunes in others. This is evident in the musical portrayal of the messengers who inform Seneca of his impending doom in Act II: the messenger God Mercurio who promises Seneca a divine afterlife – and Liberto, the freed slave who delivers Nerone's death-warrant on Seneca. Both of them enter in speech-like recitative, yet depart with distinctively lyrical melodies as they realise that their news are accepted with such calm and happiness (Rosand, "Seneca", pp. 68-69). In doing so, they adopt features of Seneca's own musical style, just as Nerone and Ottone adopt features of Poppea's style when they contemplate her beauties.

Even here, however, Seneca is not entirely successful: his friends, trying to dissuade him from dying, juxtapose intense mourning with an overly-cheerful affirmation of the joys of earthly life. They clearly have little or no understanding of Seneca's philosophy, making us doubt his skills as a teacher.

Seneca seems to embody the famous aphorism, “I love humanity – it’s people I can’t stand”. He emerges positively from his confrontation with Nerone because he debates with him on high moral principles; these principles also allow him to accept his own death. But he lacks emotional empathy, which partly explains why his attempts to console Ottavia or affect Nerone’s behaviour fail utterly. His most dignified and lyrical music appears in his solitary monologues, or when he prepares to leave sordid humanity behind him.

Seneca’s deification vindicates Virtù’s claim that she can “teach human intellect/ the art of navigating towards Olympus”. Yet his fate also confirms Fortuna’s claim that Virtù’s followers, “if from me divided,/ resemble a painted fire/ that neither burns nor blazes”: Seneca indeed proves completely impotent, unable to change his fate or anyone else’s.

At first, Ottavia also seems to represent Virtù. Though full of anger, she remains steadfast in her virtue, refusing her Nurse’s recommendation that she should revenge herself on Nerone by taking a lover of her own. Yet, after Seneca’s death, she descends into base cruelty. Not only does she try to kill Poppea, but she uses extortion to do it – threatening the obviously-unwilling Ottone that she will ensure his execution if he does not obey.

Musically, Ottavia seems to have little sense of melody. Most characters in this opera – even Ottavia’s nurse and valet – have aria-like melodic passages; Ottavia’s role is almost entirely declamatory. Her recitatives are rich and characterful, vividly portraying her nobility, stoic suffering, vehement anger, cruelty and, finally, her mourning as she is forced into exile. But her music still seems to side with Nerone’s description of his wife as “frigid and barren”; she lacks the rounded, sensuous beauty that characterises Poppea, Nerone, Ottone – and Seneca.

The alternative lovers: Ottone and Drusilla

It is not clear who represents Fortuna in the Contest of the Gods. Only Poppea claims to have Fortuna on her side; yet Fortuna’s grand move might well be the attempted assassination of Poppea. On that dangerous night, Poppea decides to sleep in her garden, and asks her nurse, Arnalta, to admit no-one except “Drusilla or some other confidante”. This proves potentially fatal: her would-be assassin, Ottone, is now disguised as Drusilla. Arnalta falls asleep before the disguised Ottone enters.

Circumstances thus conspire against Poppea; she is only rescued by Amore's physical intervention.

Even if they are Fortuna's pawns, however, Ottone and Drusilla are not her followers; and their relationship with the other contenders are also ambiguous. Drusilla displays commendable virtues – most notably courage and loyalty. She falsely confesses that she attempted to murder Poppea rather than reveal Ottone's guilt. Yet there is also a cruel streak in her: in Act III we see her rejoicing the prospect of Poppea's death. Musically, she expresses herself in declamatory recitatives and in relatively brief, rapid and dance-like songs. Her phrases, often regular and symmetrical, lack the sinuous, sensuous lines of Poppea. This seems to reflect her role in the libretto. Though her actions are motivated by her love for Ottone, the God of Love ignores her: his sole goal is to elevate Poppea.

Ottone himself is, in a very clear sense, the slave of Love. In his mind, he clearly realises that Drusilla is more worthy of his affections; yet in his heart, he is unable to turn away from Poppea. His constant hesitations and conflicting emotions inspire some highly unstable, tormented recitatives. He has several lyrical outbursts, mostly inspired by Poppea's beauties; it is noticeable that, when he praises Drusilla, his music does not reach such an elevated level of sensuality.

The Incogniti contrasted true love – based on friendship and constancy – and mere physical attraction, based on deceptive appearances (Fenlon & Miller, pp. 33-44). Drusilla and Ottone clearly represent the former kind of love; and this love is not entirely defeated. Ottone might not fall in love with Drusilla, but he cares for her – enough to risk his own life for her. When Nerone banishes Ottone into exile, Drusilla volunteers to join him. This is her triumph: she now has him all to herself, removed from Poppea's alluring presence. In Ottone's parting speech, he announces himself blessed to be sent away with her. His music at this point might not be as sensuous as in his earlier paeans for Poppea; but it does present a sense of calm which contrasts markedly with his earlier recitatives, when he vacillated between his conflicting emotions for Poppea.

Yet ultimately, this virtuous love is of little interest to the God of Love. His wish is to celebrate the seemingly deceptive, appearance-based love of Poppea and Nerone; and he ensures that their love, too, will triumph.

Amore's representatives: Poppea and Nerone

Nerone's part was originally written for a castrato. Some modern productions and recordings retain the original tessitura, assigning the role to a mezzo-soprano; others transpose the role down an octave and assign it to a tenor. A third solution – using a countertenor – is rarely attempted; a notable exception is countertenor David Walker's stunning Nerone in the English National Opera's 2000 production.

It is easy to understand why some producers prefer to cast Nerone as a tenor: a male Nerone makes it easier to present direct physical interaction between the two lovers. Musical considerations, however, support the retention of Nerone's original, high-lying tessitura. "I can no more live apart from you", Nerone tells Poppea (act I, scene 3), "than a point can be dismembered". The two lovers' duets indeed often end on the same point (that is, in unison); their intertwining lines portray both the reality and the intense physicality of their love. The effect is lost when Nerone's role is transposed below Poppea's.

Such transposition also affects Nerone's own characterisation. He is not merely a ruthless, lustful dictator. There are moments when he is crazed with power – for example, in his confrontation with Seneca; yet he reacts with surprising clemency when he learns the full details on the assassination plot against Poppea. Alan Curtis suggests that Nerone can be viewed "as a pampered, impulsive, beardless late adolescent, but one who happens to hold the world in his hands" (p. xiii), and this characterisation is strengthened when the original high range is preserved. Conversely, René Jacobs argues that a tenor Nerone sounds "too 'adult', too 'macho', a sort of singing Richard Burton in a Hollywood musical production" (p. 40).

Nerone's most beautiful music is inspired by his love for Poppea. The most notable example is a love song in praise of Poppea (sung in her absence), which starts as a duet with the court poet Lucano but is clearly dominated by Nerone. Throughout, text and music alike suggest that Nerone's love for Poppea is intensely erotic – yet much deeper than mere carnal lust.

Poppea herself is perhaps the most maligned character in the opera. In the libretto, she is described as a "most noble lady, mistress of Nerone, raised by him to the seat of empire". Some modern commentators, however, refer to her as a courtesan; Harnoncourt (p. 149) even calls her a "streetwalker" and a "prostitute". These

misnomers help modern interpreters insinuate that her love for Nerone is feigned, and that she skilfully manipulates Nerone, pulling his strings like a puppeteer.

In my view, even the libretto presents a more complex picture. According to Tacitus, Sabina Poppæa had to compete both against Octavia and against another mistress; she constantly had to nag Nero about marriage. The opera, on the other hand, begins when Nerone had already fallen in love with Poppea, and it is therefore unnecessary for her to manipulate his feelings. She doesn't even have to remind him of his promise to marry her: it is Nerone himself who constantly brings up the subject.

The only time we see Poppea actively manipulating Nerone is in Act I, Scene 10, when she leads him into issuing Seneca's death warrant. She opens with a series of languid recitatives leading to a ravishingly sensuous love song, making Nerone fully susceptible to her erotic charms. Then she abruptly and frustratingly switches to a dry recitative and begins her lethal slanders against Seneca. The strategy works: Nerone is reduced to partially incoherent questions, leaving phrases hanging in the air (which Poppea duly completes); he then orders Seneca to die, and reaffirms his promise to marry Poppea and crown her Empress.

The libretto also gives us no clear answers with regards to the sincerity of Poppea's emotions for Nerone. Poppea frequently tells Nerone – in colourfully poetic language – that she loves him. In his absence, she neither confirms nor denies the sincerity of her feelings, though she does speak openly of her ambition to become Empress. Ambition and love are not mutually exclusive. Nonetheless, Poppea's unwillingness to speak of love in the beloved's absence counts against her; other characters in the opera are much more open about their own feelings.

Even the fact that the God of Love is on her side is no guarantee that she herself is in love: the plot is motivated primarily by Nerone's love for Poppea, not vice versa. In a way, Amore's patronage counts against Poppea: in terms of the Contest of the Gods, it associates her with the wrong divinity.

Busenello draws attention to this through the construction of Act II, which opens with Mercurio's announcement of Seneca's apotheosis and ends with Amore's rescue of Poppea. Both divine interventions are dramatically gratuitous. Busenello's Ottone is hesitant and indecisive; his love for Poppea could have stayed his hand without the god's physical intervention. Mercurio only glorifies Seneca's death; he neither causes nor prevents it. The divine interventions could, however, serve to emphasise Seneca's and Poppea's positions *vis-à-vis* the Contest of the Gods.

Seneca's apotheosis connects him with Virtù; Poppea is protected by one of Virtù's rivals, who eventually ensures that she would be crowned a goddess in her life (unlike Seneca, who was only deified after his death).

None of this allows us to dismiss Poppea's love as a sham, especially when we take the music into account. Monteverdi's setting transforms Poppea into "a rather insecure woman in love" (Rosand, "Seneca", p. 55) – yet without denying the colder, ambitious aspects of her personality.

The use of song-like writing in *L'incoronazione* is often connected with intense emotion (this topic is discussed in detail in Rosand's articles). Whether those emotions are feigned or real is largely determined by dramatic context. Monteverdi could have insinuated that Poppea is not in love with Nerone by depriving her music of *cantabile* lyricism when she is alone. Yet in one crucial monologue, he chooses to adopt exactly the same style that he used for Poppea's seduction of Nerone.

When Poppea learns of Seneca's death, she responds with a prayer to Amore:

Or che Seneca e morto	Now that Seneca is dead
Amor ricorro a te	Love, I return to you
Guida mia speme in porto	Guide my hopes into port,
Fammi sposa al mio Re.	make me the wife of my king.

In this brief text, Busenello reminds us of Seneca's death (and of Poppea's role in causing it); the final word, "Re", also reminds us of Poppea's ambitions. Monteverdi, however, dispatches these incriminating words as quickly as possible: the word "Amor" cuts "morto" in mid-beat, and the word "Re" appears only on the very last note. On the other hand, he emphasises the words "Amor" and "Sposa" by repeating them and granting them long and sophisticated melismas. The combination of these textual emphases and the musical style draws the audience towards Poppea, and implies that she is genuinely in love with Nerone.

The excision of incriminating evidence is even more prominent when Poppea repeats her prayer after her dialogue with Arnalta. This repeat omits the reference to Seneca; the word "Re" is replaced by the yawn leading to her sleep. The remaining words – "Love, I return to you,/ lead my hopes into port,/ make me a wife" – could easily be described as the song of "an insecure woman in love".

In this scene, Poppea is not out to seduce or manipulate anyone. The composer, however, is clearly manipulating the text, and I believe that his aim is to seduce the

audience into identifying – at least for the duration of this scene – with Poppea. This seduction is continued through Arnalta’s lullaby. Busenello presents Poppea as a grown woman being sung to sleep by her nurse – an image that makes Poppea seem immature and lovable at the same time. Monteverdi’s setting of the lullaby, in its spellbinding beauty, draws the audience’s attention to Arnalta’s almost motherly love for Poppea, inviting them to share this sentiment. This, together with the danger Poppea is facing, strengthens the audience’s identification with her.

By implying genuine emotion on Poppea’s part, Monteverdi adds a further layer to her complex characterisation in the libretto. She emerges as ambitious yet loving, childlike yet ruthless. She displays love and affection towards Nerone and Arnalta – and callous heartlessness towards Ottone. She is responsible for Seneca’s death – yet she too is almost assassinated. She is thus less stereotypic and more interesting than Tacitus’s icon of ambition run amok, or the Incogniti’s “symbol of everything wrong about love and beauty” (Fenlon & Miller, p. 48).

Summary: The operatic mosaic

The complexities and contradictions in Poppea’s character are typical of the opera as a whole; to some extent, they are probably intentional. Ellen Rosand (“Seneca”, pp. 52-54) emphasises Monteverdi’s preference for strong emotional contrasts within an individual scene, as demonstrated both by his own letters and by the testimony of some of his librettists. The Incogniti’s view of the human soul would support a similar aesthetic. Fenlon & Miller (p. 18) quote the following statement, from Rabbi Simone Luzzato, as typifying the Incogniti’s view:

The internal image of our soul is like a mosaic [...] our soul [is] made of various differing and conflicting pieces, any one of which can appear distinctly at various times. Consequently, describing the nature and condition of a single man is very arduous and difficult; and it is more difficult still to aim to explain a man’s actions in terms of a single norm or principle.

There are conflicts between text and music in *Poppea*; the libretto seems to be cynical, almost misanthropic at times, while the music makes the characters more humane. But libretto and music alike seem to confirm the mosaic theory. The opera exposes the difficulty of applying “a single norm or principle” to the judgement of the characters’ actions. Busenello, Monteverdi and the other composers of this opera present the sequence of unfolding events, making each scene dramatically cogent and forcing the audience to come up with their own judgements based on this deliberately

fragmentary evidence. The music seduces us into identifying with the villains – yet also forces us to confront the suffering they cause. Ultimately, it helps us acknowledge the humanity of “heroes” and “villains” alike.

- The author wishes to thank Prof. Ellen Rosand for her valuable feedback on an earlier version of this paper.
- English translations of quotation from the libretto are based on Derek Yeld’s translation, included in René Jacobs’s recording; and Avril Bardoni’s translation, included in John Eliot Gardiner’s recording. Quotations from the introduction to the libretto and from the original cast-list are based on Alan Curtis’s edition.

Sources and Further Reading

Cornelius Tacitus’s *Annals of Imperial Rome* (AD 109), is available in several editions and translations. In my research, I consulted Michael Grant’s translation (London: Penguin Classics, 1977). At least one English translation, by Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb, is available online (<http://classics.mit.edu/Tacitus/annals.html>).

I also consulted Gaius Suetonius’s *The Twelve Caesars* (c. AD 119), in Robert Graves’ translation (London: The Folio Society, 1964). At least two other English translations are available online: J. C. Rolfe’s 1913 translation (<http://tinyurl.com/efmzy>), and Alexander Thomson’s translation, revised by T. Forester (<http://www.globusz.com/ebooks/TwelveCaesars>).

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Selected Discography

Monteverdi: L'Incoronazione di Poppea

Sylvia McNair (Poppea), Dana Hanchard (Nerone), Anne Sofie von Otter (Ottavia), Michael Chance (Ottone), Catherine Bott (Drusilla), Francesco Eller d'Artegna (Seneca), Bernarda Fink (Arnalta), Roberto Balconi (Nutrice), Constanze Backes (Valletto), Marinella Pennicchi (Amore), and others

The English Baroque Soloists/ John Eliot Gardiner

3 CDs; Archiv Produktion 447 088-2; Recorded live at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, London, 1993

4 stars

In his notes, Tim Carter – like Alan Curtis (quoted in the article above) – argues in favour of minimal instrumental intervention: “With singers sensitive to language and drama, and with imaginative continuo players alert to the inflections of the singers’ utterances [...] the beauty and power [of *Poppea* and other 17th-century Venetian operas] strikes our ears afresh, awaking us to new sounds and new emotions”. A richer accompaniment reveals, in his view, “too musical a view of these operas, and also reluctance to rely on the sheer power – and dramatic effect – of the human voice”.

This performance bears out Carter’s points: the superb cast transmit the dramatic message through the beauty and power of their voices and their attentive, dramatic phrasing, supported by a small, flexible and sensitive continuo group. Sylvia McNair proves that Poppea’s voluptuous sensuality and her sharp-edged cruelty can be communicated vividly with no addition of rich orchestration. The cast has no real weak links; among its strongest features, besides McNair, are Anne Sofie von Otter’s Ottavia, Michael Chance’s Ottone and Catherine Bott’s Drusilla.

Ironically, however, I sometimes feel that Gardiner and some of his singers themselves adopt “too musical a view” of this score. They always sing beautifully – but, given the aesthetic ideals that explicitly guide this performance, I would have expected (and welcomed) a more speech-like rendition of some passages, in terms of vocal production and timing alike. This reservation notwithstanding, this beautiful, expressive performance can be strongly recommended.

Monteverdi: L'Incoronazione di Poppea

Danielle Borst (Poppea), Guillemette Laruens (Nerone), Jennifer Larmore (Ottavia), Axel Köhler (Ottone), Lena Lootens (Drusilla), Michael Schopper (Seneca), Christoph Homberger (Arnalta), Dominique Visse (Nutrice), Christina Högman (Valletto), Martina Bovet (Amore), and others

Concerto Vocale/ René Jacobs

3 CDs; Harmonia Mundi 901330.32; recorded 1990

5 stars

Carter mentions Jacobs as one of the conductors who take “too musical a view” of this score through their “significant additional instrumentation and editorial revisions”. Jacobs’ historical arguments in favour of his additions (which, it must be said, are much more modest than Harmoncourt’s – not to mention Leppard’s) are not always convincing, and Gardiner’s recording (among others) indeed proves that the opera can be very effective without extra instrumentation. However, unlike some listeners and critics, I find Jacobs’s approach – whatever its historical credentials – musically effective and convincing.

It has been claimed that additional instrumentation can disrupt the fluidity of Monteverdi’s vocal writing. But the singing on this recording is, if anything, even more flexible and theatrically vivid than on rival versions. Jacobs’ singers frequently adopt conversational pacing and speech-like vocal production that make even Gardiner’s version (which is hardly rigid or prettified in itself) seem anaemic and score-bound at times. The instrumentalists, far from constricting the singers, seem to egg them on, engaging in constant dialogue with them. Jacobs also has a more powerful Nerone in Guillemette Laurens and probably the best Nutrice (Dominique Visse) and Seneca (Michael Schopper) on record. His Ottone (Axel Köhler) and Drusilla (Lena Lootens), however, are somewhat under-characterised; their dialogues are more effective and convincing in Gardiner’s version.

Listeners who find Jacobs’ additional instrumentation distracting would probably prefer Gardiner’s version. To my mind, however, Jacobs and his team project a stronger sense of theatrical pacing, bringing the drama vividly to life.

Monteverdi: L'Incoronazione di Poppea

Cynthia Haymon (Poppea), Brigitte Balleys (Nerone), Ning Liang (Ottavia), Michael Chance (Ottone), Heidi Grant Murphy (Drusilla), Harry van der Kamp (Seneca), Jean-Paul Fouchécourt (Arnalta), Dominique Visse (Nutrice), Claron McFadden (Valletto), Sandrine Piau (Amore), and others

Les Talent Lyriques / Christophe Rousset; Het Musiktheater d'Amsterdam 1994

2 DVDs Opus Arte OA 924 D

4 Stars

My favourite production of *Poppea* was the English National Opera's live version in 2000. The director, Stephen Pimlott, emphasised the characters' humanity, presenting them as credible, fully-rounded human beings. Unfortunately, the opera was sung in English, and it is unlikely that this production will ever be made available. Michael Hampe adopts a similarly humanised interpretation in his 1993 Schwetzingen Festival production, conducted by Jacobs (available on DVD from Arthaus). His version is dramatically compelling and attuned to the work's subtle nuances; but it is marred by unfortunate cuts and casting weaknesses, especially the employment of a tenor (Richard Croft) as Nerone.

The Rousset/Audi production is more complete. The strong cast features a highly convincing female Nerone (Brigitte Balleys). Chance as Ottone and Visse as Ottavia's nurse are as effective here as in their audio recordings of these roles (for Gardiner and Jacobs respectively). Ning Liang gives a sympathetic interpretation of Ottavia, and Harry van der Kamp is a convincing, authoritative Seneca. Cynthia Haymon's Poppea, however, seems too cold and calculating at times.

Mehdi Mahdavi (GOLDBERG 37) wrote that the director, Pierre Audi, "elevates *Poppea* to mythical stature". For me, this constitutes the main weakness of this set. The presence of gods notwithstanding, this is primarily a human drama, and I prefer productions that adopt a more vividly passionate approach. That said, Audi and his team do not ignore the drama, and their stylish, thoughtful production is compellingly beautiful and moving even for viewers less convinced by their overall conception.