

a variety of scholarly and community activities in Los Angeles.

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## OPERA

A composite art fusing words, music, and stagecraft, opera has flourished for five centuries. Although the lavish support the medium requires has, until recently, placed limits on overt representation of variant sexuality, careful scrutiny reveals significant homoerotic aspects.

*Origins.* Opera began in late Renaissance Italy with Jacopo Peri's *Dafne* (1597) and *Euridice* (1600), and homosexual themes and characters initially appeared during the form's first half-century or so of existence. In director Gerald Freedman's 1973 New York City Opera production of Claudio Monteverdi's *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* (1642), concerning the marriage of the bisexual first-century Roman emperor Nero to his mistress, Poppaea Sabina, the erotic nature of Nero's relationship with the poet Marcus Annaeus Lucanus—called Lucano in the libretto—was made explicit. In Pier Francesco Cavalli's *La Calisto* (1651), Jove, the supreme Roman deity, must disguise himself as Diana, goddess of the moon and the hunt, in order to seduce the nymph Calisto. Among the musicians of the seventeenth century, Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632–1687), court music master to King Louis XIV of France and composer of 20 operas, was homosexual. The poet Pietro Metastasio (1698–1782), the greatest librettist of the Baroque period, was erotically linked to several men of his day.

In her study *Sex Variant Women in Literature* (1956), Jeannette Foster characterized the heroic Bradamante in Ludovico Ariosto's epic *Orlando Furioso* (1531) as a "young Amazon in full armor" who finds, between martial exploits, that she attracts female admirers. In George Frideric Handel's *Alcina* (1735), Bradamante's loving champion is the eponymous enchantress' sister Morgana, who remains

unaware until the last act of her beloved's actual sex.

In 1974, Dominique Fernandez wrote a novel entitled *Porporino, ou les mystères de Naples*, about Italian castrati, many neutered as boys in order to preserve the treble timbres of their singing voices, and drawing on historical fact, depicting them as having hetero- and homosexual relationships. In 1979, the French Aix Festival presented a staged *Porporino* using dialogue from the novel and a pastiche of arias by Alessandro Scarlatti, Giovanni Battista Pergolesi, and other eighteenth-century composers, assembled by musicologist Roger Blanchard. Countertenor James Bowman and high *coloratura* tenor Bruce Brewer portrayed castrati Porporino and Feliciano.

Two of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's major operas concern homosexual monarchs from antiquity. **Alexander the Great**, the fourth-century B.C. conqueror of the Persian Empire (whose orientation is discussed in a biography by Roger Peyrefitte and in novels by Mary Renault), is a central figure in *Il Re Pastore* (1775). In *The Twelve Caesars*, the Roman historian Suetonius wrote that first-century emperor Titus, the protagonist of *La Clemenza di Tito* (1791), "owned troops of inverters and eunuchs" and had "relations with . . . favorite boys [who] danced . . . on the stage." The finales of both operas find the heterosexual lovers paired up while the rulers remain alone: eighteenth-century sensibilities would never have tolerated on-stage male mates for Alessandro and Tito. This situation parallels Hollywood's development of the "harmless sissy" image for films of the 1930s and 1940s, rendering gay male characters asexual to avoid provoking public outrage. In a Salzburg intermezzo *Apollo et Hyacinthus*, composed when he was eleven, Mozart had approached the forbidden theme more directly, though in the Latin libretto the love of the god for the boy is in part obscured by a female interest.

*Nineteenth Century.* Passionate letters Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) wrote to his nephew, Carl Obermayer, have led to speculation that the German composer may have been homosexual. In his only opera, *Fidelio* (1805), the fearless Leonore, who dons male clothing to penetrate prison walls in order to rescue her husband, Florestan, a political prisoner, attracts a female admirer, Marzelline, jailer Rocco's daughter. When Leonore reveals her true identity to all in the finale, Marzelline bewails her choice of love object. In Otto Schenk's 1970 Metropolitan Opera production, choristers made much homophobic merriment over Marzelline's discomfort.

The fifteenth-century transvestite and French patron saint, Joan of Arc, was given male lovers in Giuseppe Verdi's *Giovanna d'Arco* (1845) and in Russian homosexual Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky's *The Maid of Orléans* (1881), just as the Lesbian poet was in Charles Gounod's *Sapho* (1851). St. Joan's life was later dramatized in *Joan* (1971) by openly gay, New York-based composer and minister Al Carmines (born 1936), whose eclectic works, drawing on classical, popular, and liturgical music, are variously termed operas, oratorios, and musicals. In *Joan*, the martyred heroine's story is updated to the present and relocated to New York's East Village and Joan and the Virgin Mary are depicted as lovers.

Daniel Auber's *Gustave III ou Le Bal Masqué* (1833) and Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera* (1859) have as protagonist homosexual Swedish King Gustavus III (1746–1792), whose reign began in 1771, but stress his heterosexual amorous pursuits. Magnus Hirschfeld cited possible liaisons between the king and Adolf Fredrik Muell, Johann Aminoff, and Gustav Mauritz Armfelt, men to whom he gave the title of Count. In a production of *Ballo* at the Royal Opera in Stockholm (1959), director Göran Gentele suggested an erotic tie between the king and the page Oscar, who is played by a soprano. In his 1972 Met

production of Georges Bizet's *Carmen* (1875), realized posthumously by Bodo Igesz, Gentele had the smuggler Remendado played as gay on the basis of his rhapsodizing over the "distinguished" Englishmen he has seen in Gibraltar, and other passages of dialogue.

While *Eugene Onegin* (1879) and *The Queen of Spades* (1890) by Tchaikovsky show heterosexual love frustrated or in a cynical light, they offer no gay alternative. In an *Opera News* article (1986), American gay composer and diarist Ned Rorem contrasted Tchaikovsky, whose "homosexuality . . . was 'realized' though tragic," with his compatriot Modest Mussorgsky (1839–1881) who, Rorem opined, "was homosexual . . . [but] probably unfulfilled." Mussorgsky set his masterwork *Boris Godunov* (completed 1870, revised 1871–72) in the homosocial halls of government and the exclusively male environment of the monastery. The sole heterosexual liaison, between Marina and Dimitri, spurred by power, not love, was only added later to fulfill the Imperial Theatre's directors' demand that the opera have a *prima donna*. In *Khovanshchina*, on which Mussorgsky worked between 1872 and 1880 but left unfinished, the composer included gay-baiting among Prince Andrei Khovansky's other unsavory attributes. When his abandoned fiancée Marfa prevents his pursuit of the frightened Emma, Andrei snidely wonders if Marfa is herself "inappropriately attracted" to Emma. Dignified Marfa calmly ignores his charge.

French composer Camille Saint-Saëns (1835–1921) is best known to opera-philosophers as the composer of *Samson et Dalila* (1877). In a *Gay Sunshine* interview, Edouard Roditi recalled that Saint-Saëns, "a notorious homosexual," was trailed by plainclothes police bodyguards protecting him from "scandal" and harassment as he searched for sex partners. Though the Biblical spectacle and lush orchestration of *Samson* seem to hint at a gay sensibility, these also characterize works of the pre-

sumably heterosexual Jules Massenet and likely merely show Saint-Saëns to be typical of creative artists of his time.

A profound influence on late-Romantic and later composers was the German Richard Wagner (1813–1883). His principal patron was the homosexual King Ludwig of Bavaria (1845–1886), who had the court opera in Munich give the premieres of *Tristan und Isolde* (1865), *Die Meistersänger von Nürnberg* (1868), *Das Rheingold* (1869), and *Die Walküre* (1870), though it is questionable whether the king's ardor was requited.

Some directors of *Das Rheingold* have depicted as gay the gentle god Froh, who pines for his sister Freia when the giants abduct her and conjures up the rainbow bridge leading to Valhalla. Father M. Owen Lee, in *Opera News* (1987), and other writers have explored homoerotic themes in *Parsifal* (1882), concerning the youth who joins the homosocial society of the Knights of the Grail. In his 1983 film, director Hans Jürgen Syberberg found in *Parsifal* an androgynous duality and split his scenes between an actor and an actress.

*The Earlier Twentieth Century.* Wagner influenced the compositions of Dame Ethel Smyth (1858–1944), whose lesbianism is well attested. Smyth wrote six operas, one of which is the only opera by a woman ever presented by the Metropolitan Opera, *Der Wald* (*The Forest*, 1902), given two performances there in 1903. A participant in the women's suffrage movement in England, Smyth wrote its anthem, "Shoulder to Shoulder" (1911), which has been sung by the New York City Gay Men's Chorus. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Opera* says that Smyth's "entertaining series of memoirs conveys considerable relish for the long struggle against suspicion of a woman who composed, and did so with a robust professionalism that took men's breaths away."

Ned Rorem, writing in *Opera News* (1978), wondered if the reticent Pelléas, protagonist of Claude Debussy's

*Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902), should be seen as gay and asked if the dying Marcellus, who lures him from his ailing father's side, is more than a friend.

Wagner's heir as preeminent German composer of his day was Richard Strauss. The earliest Strauss opera in the regular repertory is *Salome* (1905), a setting of the 1893 play by Irish/English homosexual writer Oscar Wilde (1854–1900). Lines of Herodias' page, which imply his intimacy with Narraboth, Syrian captain of the Tetrarch's guard—"He was my brother and nearer to me than a brother," and so on—were omitted from librettist Hedwig Lachmann's adaptation, but Herod's observation that Narraboth "was fair to look upon" remained. Other operas based on works of Wilde include Alexander von Zemlinsky's *Der Zwerg* and *Eine Florentinische Tragödie*, Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco's *The Importance of Being Ernest*, William Orchard's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Hans Schaeuble's *Dorian Gray*, Renzo Bossi's *L'usignuolo e la rosa*, and Jaroslav Kricka's *The Gentleman in White*. Wilde and the aesthetic movement were satirized in Sir William Gilbert and Sir Arthur Sullivan's operetta *Patience* (1881), but without mention of his homosexuality.

In Strauss' *Elektra* (1909), the outcast, rebellious heroine, who inspires the admiration and affection of one of the solo serving women, all but makes love to her timid, conformist sister Chrysothemis in her attempt to convince her to join in avenging their father, Agamemnon's death, and some performers have made their embraces quite graphic. Created in the spirit of Mozart's Cherubino, the pubescent pageboy in *Le Nozze di Figaro*, Octavian, in *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911), is a young nobleman played by a woman. Gender lines blur still more when, like Cherubino, this male character dons female clothes for a ruse. Early productions faced censorship problems not only because the first scene finds Octavian in bed

with or in close proximity to the Marschallin, but also because both performers in this erotic scene are women.

In a 1987 German production of Austrian composer Franz Schreker's *Die Gezeichneten* (*The Branded Ones*, 1918), hedonistic Duke Adorno and his close friend Count Tamare were played as bisexual.

The homosexuality of Polish composer Karol Szymanowski (1882–1937) is well documented. His *King Roger* (1926) concerns a historical twelfth-century Sicilian ruler who is torn between the Apollonian, represented by the intellectuals he summons to his court, and the Dionysian, personified by an Indian shepherd who leads a wild bacchanal. Staging *King Roger* for the Long Beach (California) Opera in 1988, director David Alden highlighted homoerotic themes he detected there. Szymanowski's earlier opera *Hagith* (written 1912–13, first performed 1922) was modeled on *Salome*.

Austrian composer Alban Berg's *Lulu*, based on Frank Wedekind's plays *Earth Spirit* (1895) and *Pandora's Box* (1901), had a posthumous premiere (1937). Its third act, long suppressed by Helene Berg, the composer's widow, was edited and orchestrated by Friedrich Cerha and first performed in 1979. The lesbian Countess Martha Geschwitz, who belongs to an exclusive society of women artists, has seen Lulu's portrait *en travesti* as Pierrot, and invites her to attend a ball dressed in male costume. In her masochistic devotion, the countess contracts cholera in order to substitute for her adored "angel" Lulu in a prison hospital. Called mad, mannish, and unnatural by her love, the countess never loses her dignity despite the sordid circumstances into which her love leads her. She declares her determination to attend law school and fight for women's rights but soon dies, with Lulu, at the hands of Jack the Ripper. It is never made clear whether or not the countess' relationship with Lulu develops into a physical one.

*The Mid- and Late Twentieth Century.* French homosexual composer Francis Poulenc (1899–1963) wrote three operas. In the whimsical *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* (1944, first performed 1947), with a text by Guillaume Apollinaire, husband and wife exchange sexes. She grows a beard and moustache, while he gives birth to thousands of babies. In *Dialogues des Carmélites* (1957), after Georges Bernanos' play, set during the French Revolution in the single-sex environment of the convent, the relationship between the protagonist Blanche de la Force and young Soeur Constance is depicted as a particularly loving one. The monodrama *La Voix Humaine* (1959), a setting of a play from the 1930s by gay writer Jean Cocteau, consists of a woman's anguished telephone conversation with the male lover who has left her. *La Voix* has an air of autobiography, understandably transmogrified with an alteration of pronouns at a time when it would have been nearly impossible to gain acceptance for a dramatization of a breakup of a homosexual relationship.

Homoerotic themes, both overt and covert, figure prominently in the *oeuvre* of gay English composer Lord Benjamin Britten (1913–1976). Leading roles in most of his works were created by his long-time lover, Sir Peter Pears (1910–1986), one of the few opera singers to come out publicly during his lifetime. A number of writers, including Philip Brett—author of the Cambridge opera handbook *Benjamin Britten: Peter Grimes* (1983) and subject of an extensive *Christopher Street* magazine interview by Lawrence Mass (1987)—have probed the parallel between the composer's emphatic portrayals of oppressed and ostracized individuals and his own experience as a gay man living and writing in a hostile, repressive society.

In Britten's *Peter Grimes* (1945), based on George Crabbe's poem "The Borough" (1810), the protagonist, sensitive, poetic and deeply troubled beneath his gruff fisherman's exterior, is shown in a brief tender moment with his boy ap-

prentice. Grimes' attachments to John and to his late predecessor William Spode are definitely obsessive, if questionably erotic. Grimes' neighbors in the small fishing village suspect him of abusing his apprentices and galvanize into a lynch mob which drives Grimes to suicide. *Billy Budd* (1951), with libretto by Eric Crozier and gay novelist E. M. Forster, after Herman Melville's *Billy Budd, Foretopman* (1924), traces the disastrous effects of the repressed attraction of two British naval officers—one irredeemably evil, whose feeling turns to jealous hatred, the other good, but dutybound—for the handsome sailor Billy, who is falsely accused of inciting mutiny.

In *The Turn of the Screw* (1954), based on Henry James' 1898 novella, the ghostly servant Peter Quint, who "made free" with young Miles while living, continues to exert influence over the boy from beyond the grave, as the late governess, Miss Jessel, does over her former charge, Miles' sister Flora.

Britten's church parable *Curlew River* (1964), which incorporates elements of the Japanese Noh style, includes the first serious female role in Western music drama composed for male voice in modern times, that of the madwoman. (Stephen Sondheim wrote additional such parts in his 1976 opus about Japan, *Pacific Overtures*.)

*Death in Venice* (1973), which Britten based on Thomas Mann's 1913 novella, concerns the struggle of the intellectual novelist Gustav von Aschenbach with his erotic awakening, inspired by the ethereal youth Tadzio. The climax of the first act, preceded by a driving crescendo, is Aschenbach's realization and declaration, "I love you."

Slightly outside the realm of opera, but sometimes staged by opera companies, Carl Orff's scenic cantata *Catulli Carmina* (1943) is based on sexually explicit verses by bisexual Roman poet Gaius Valerius Catullus (87–54 B.C.) and concerns his love for the bisexual

Lesbia as well as their other same-sex amorous adventures.

In a *Gay Sunshine* interview, openly gay American composer Lou Harrison (born 1917) said of his colleague Virgil Thomson (born 1896) that, though he "hasn't openly declared himself, . . . his gayness is an open secret." Thomson collaborated with lesbian writer Gertrude Stein on two operas, *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1928, first performed 1934), dealing with the lives of Spanish saints, and *The Mother of Us All* (1947), which had its premiere after Stein's death and has as its subject Susan B. Anthony's long crusade for American women's suffrage. Openly gay English conductor Raymond Leppard (born 1927), who led an American bicentennial production of *The Mother* in Santa Fe, noted in a public television documentary (1977) that the relationship of Anthony and her companion Anne Howard Shaw, depicted in the opera as devoted and mutually supportive, parallels that of Stein and Alice B. Toklas (1877–1967), which he called one of the great love affairs of the century. Thomson's third opera was *Lord Byron* (1961–68, first performed 1972). Other composers who have used Stein's texts as librettos include Ned Rorem, for the short opera *Three Sisters Who Are Not Sisters* (1968), and Al Carmines, who set her words in *What Happened* (1963), *In Circles* (1967), *The Making of Americans* (1972), *Listen to Me* (1975), and *A Manoir* (1977). As "Gertrude S." and "Virgil T." appear as characters in *The Mother of Us All*, so are Stein and Toklas, and Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas as well, in the cast list of Carmines' coming-out work *The Faggot* (1973).

As Britten, working in an era before gay liberation, made pacifism his primary cause, so did gay American composer Marc Blitzstein (1905–1964) channel his social consciousness into music theatre works dealing with laborers struggling against scoundrelly bosses, and with related issues, in *The Cradle Will Rock*

(1937), *Regina* (1949), and a 1952 adaptation of Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's *Threepenny Opera* (1928). At the time of his death at the hands of sailors in Martinique, Blitzstein was at work on an opus, commissioned for the Metropolitan Opera, about anarchists Bart Vanzetti and Nicola Sacco. Blitzstein's biographer Eric A. Gordon has pointed out a homoerotic touch in the original Broadway staging of the opera *Regina*. Two black male servants observe (through a window) a party given by their rapacious white employer and imitate actions of the guests. Among the targets of the men's mockery is an extravagant romantic scene, which they reenact.

In Samuel Barber's *Antony and Cleopatra* (1966), Antony and his young shield-bearer, Eros, have a tender farewell scene. On the verge of defeat by Octavius Caesar, Antony bids Eros to run him through with his sword. After words of affection and praise, the youth kills himself to avoid having to slay his master. The libretto, after William Shakespeare's play, is by Franco Zeffirelli (born 1923), filmmaker, and director and designer of many operas, who came out publicly in an *Advocate* interview. Zeffirelli was a protégé of gay film director Luchino Visconti (1906–1976), who also staged and designed opera. Other gay opera directors or designers have been the Metropolitan Opera's Bruce Donnell, actor Charles Ludlam, choreographer Mark Morris, photographer Cecil Beaton, and artist David Hockney. Gay librettists include lovers Wystan Hugh Auden and Chester Kallman, for Igor Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress* and Hans Werner Henze's *Elegy for Young Lovers* and *The Bassarids*; Langston Hughes for Weill's *Street Scene*; and William M. Hoffman, author of *As Is*, a play about AIDS, for John Corigliano's *A Figaro for Antonia*, commissioned by the Met for production in 1991.

Operas of Ned Rorem, who came out in his *Paris Diary* (1966) and *New York Diary* (1967), include *Miss Julie* (1965),

after August Strindberg, and *Bertha* (1973), about a Queen of Norway.

In Argentine composer Alberto Ginastera's *Bomarzo* (1967), Pier Francesco Orsini, the hunchbacked Duke of Bomarzo, is impotent with his wife, Giulia Farnese, and with the courtesan Pentasilea, but "dearly loves" his powerful male slave Abul. Orsini dreams that wife, courtesan, and slave compete for possession of him. At Orsini's command, the faithful Abul kills Maerbale, the Duke's brother, who dressed Orsini in female clothing as a child and later became Giulia's lover.

*The Seventies and Eighties.* The year 1970 brought the premieres of Ben Johnston's *Carmilla*, based on Sheridan La Fanu's novel, which influenced Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, and concerning Laura's seduction by the vampire Carmilla, and Sir Michael Tippett's *The Knot Garden*, in which interracial male lovers Dov, a musician, and Mel, a writer, undergo trials, including humiliation, and separation by heterosexual partners, before their reunion. Operas based on plays by gay writers Federico García Lorca (1899–1936)—*Yerma* by Heitor Villa-Lobos, a posthumous premiere—and Tennessee Williams' (1911–1983) *Summer and Smoke* by Lee Hoiby, with libretto by Lanford Wilson—were introduced in 1971. (A Williams short story, "Lord Byron's Love Letter," received operatic treatment by composer Rafaello de Banfield in 1955.) Conrad Susa's *Transformations* (1973) uses as a text Anne Sexton's poetic versions of fairy tales and includes a lesbian interpretation of the story of Rapunzel. The historical homosexual figure Henry, Lord Darnley (1545–1567), husband of the titular monarch, is a character in Thea Musgrave's *Mary, Queen of Scots* (1977). His enemies in the opera call him vain, ambitious, weak, and foppish. Slightly tangential, but pertinent to the topic of opera, is the oratorio *The Return of the Great Mother* (1977), by composer Roberta Kosse (born 1947) and librettist Jenny Malmquist. The work celebrates matriarchy and women's

relationships with women. *A Lesbian Play for Lucy* (1978), with music by Tamara Bliss and libretto by Eleanor Hakim, examines the relationships among Demeter, Hecate, Persephone, and Athena.

While during the 1970s, gay opera fans were spoken of with hostility and contempt in print by soprano Régine Crespin (*High Fidelity*, 1977) and actor and *aficionado* Tony Randall (*Opera News* and *After Dark*, 1972), the decade also found writers in the gay press, including the *Bay Area Reporter's* George Heymont and *Gay Community News's* Nicholas Deutsch, a director, and Michael Bronski, beginning to write about opera from a gay angle.

In *A Quiet Place* (1983) by Leonard Bernstein (born 1918), bisexual François is Dede's husband as well as her brother, Junior's former lover. While—to the consternation of gay activists—relatively few people who work in opera have openly declared their homosexuality (apparently fearing loss of prestige or employment in a profession heavily dependent on voluntary public subsidy), in the scurrilous, homophobic *Bernstein: A Biography* (1987), Joan Peyser discussed the homosexual orientations of numerous musicians who had not come out publicly, including the subject of her book, composers Aaron Copland, Virgil Thomson, Samuel Barber, and Gian Carlo Menotti; and conductor Dimitri Mitropoulos (Menotti later came out in an *Advocate* interview).

Homophobia mars Dominick Argento's *Casanova's Homecoming* (1985), also called *Casanova*, in which the Marquis de Lisle, described as asexual but depicted as a mincing stereotypical homosexual, is made the butt of the opera's climactic joke for his failure to indulge in heterosexual intercourse. Sam Michael Belich's *Laius and Chrysippus* (1986), with a text by *Opera Monthly* contributor Sam H. Shirakawa, depicts the love affair of Laius, father of Oedipus, and Chrysippus, son of Pelops, in music the *New York*

*Native* called "Straussian." A major character in Jay Reise's *Rasputin* (1988) is homosexual Russian prince Feliks Feliksovich Yusupov, one of the murderers of the mad monk Rasputin in 1916.

During the 1980s, opera lost many talented individuals to AIDS, including New York City Opera baritones and stage directors David Hicks and Ronald Bentley, Met tenor James Atherton, and *Opera News* editor Robert M. Jacobson. Singers and conductors have participated in AIDS benefit concerts, such as "A Gala Night for Singing" in East Hampton, New York (1985), organized by Jacobson and openly gay manager Matthew A. Epstein and featuring Aprile Millo, Jerry Hadley and others, and "Music for Life", at Carnegie Hall (1987), which benefited Gay Men's Health Crisis and starred Leontyne Price, Marilyn Horne, Luciano Pavarotti, Samuel Ramey, Leonard Bernstein, and James Levine.

During the 1980s, gay choruses were formed and began interacting with the opera world. Opera singers Faith Esham and Jane Shaulis have appeared with the New York City Gay Men's Chorus, while the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus participated in San Francisco Opera performances of Wagner's *Der Fliegende Holländer* and *Parsifal*. In 1988, the Portland, Oregon, Gay Men's Chorus presented Lou Harrison's opera *Young Caesar*. While Handel's *Giulio Cesare* focuses on Julius Caesar's (102–44 B.C.) involvement with Cleopatra, Harrison's work explores the Roman general and statesman's affair with the Oriental king of Bithynia, Nicomedes IV. During this decade, Ira Siff, who sang tenor in Al Carmines' works, formed La Gran Scena Opera (1981), which presents opera parodies, blurs gender with transvestite diva portrayals (notably Siff's Madame Vera Galupe-Borzskh), and includes gay *double-entendres* in performances. Similar work has been done by David Clenny, who sang male soprano with the Handel Society in the 1970s and took the *travesti* title part in his own *La Contessa dei Vampiri* (1987), and by Eng-

lishman Michael Aspinall, who is billed as "the Surprising Soprano."

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*Bruce-Michael Gelbert*

## OPPRESSION, GAY

The concept of gay oppression was disseminated by the Gay Liberation Front founded in New York City in the summer of 1969 and by similar groups elsewhere that took GLF as their model and ideological paradigm.

*Early Statements and Background.* In a typical statement, the British Gay Liberation Front declared (December 1970) that its first priority was "to defend the immediate interests of gay people against discrimination and social oppression." It added that "the roots of the oppression that gay people suffer run deep in our society, in particular to the structure of the family, patterns of socialization, and the Judeo-Christian culture. Legal reform and education against prejudice, though possible and necessary, cannot be a permanent solution. While existing social structures remain, social prejudice and overt repression can always re-emerge. . . . GLF therefore sees itself as part of the wider movement aiming to abolish all forms of social oppression." Among the social groups suffering from one of the multifarious forms of oppression, its manifesto listed women, black people and other national minorities, the working class, young people, and peoples oppressed by imperialism.

This bill of grievances grew out of the experience and the thinking of the New Left in the late 1960s, which saw repressive practices at work in many areas of Western society where the inferior status of particular segments of the population had been taken for granted or justified as

necessary on utilitarian grounds. The analogies with the disadvantaged condition of the aforementioned social categories shaped the notion of "gay oppression" as a pervasive set of wrongs inflicted by an establishment that imposed a heterosexual norm on the whole of society. Obligatory heterosexuality, the need to conceal one's sexual identity, the social ostracism and economic boycott to which known homosexuals were subjected, police harassment and sporadic violence at the hands of hooligans, the entire structure of privilege which the Judeo-Christian tradition conferred on the patriarchal family—all these burdens that the homosexual had to endure in an intolerant society were ascribed to a system of oppression that the Gay Liberation Front aspired to overthrow, along with the rest of the injustices for which the capitalist order was held responsible.

An Italian writer appealing to the classical Marxist tradition, Mario Mieli, went even further, asserting that "the monosexual Norm . . . is based on the mutilation of Eros, and in particular on the condemnation of homosexuality. It is clear from this that only when we understand why the homoerotic impulse is repressed in the majority, by the whole mechanism of society, will we be able to grasp how the exclusive or at least highly predominant assertion of heterosexual desire in the majority comes about." He added that the process of repression began in childhood, when homosexual tendencies are branded as "feminine" and shameful, and the whole subject is treated as unspeakable.

*Realities of Oppression.* Such concepts were undoubtedly shaped in large measure by the personal experiences which many gay activists had to undergo at various times in their lives, when they confronted head-on the hostility of society and its relentless pressure to conform to the norm of heterosexuality. Still later, they were able to see how across centuries of European history homosexuals had been the object of persecution as ferocious as