

The cathedral of modern civilisation. The Teatro Real of Madrid and the definition of the respectable new elite, 1850-1895

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ABSTRACT: Opera was a spectacle reserved for the aristocratic elite during the Ancien Régime. However, the liberal revolution and the redefinition of the mechanisms of social class identity that brought with it significantly modified this space. As Théophile Gautier said, opera houses became in the nineteenth century “a radiating centre, a sort of worldly cathedral of civilisation” from which to spread progress. At the same time, they constituted a privileged social space for interaction between the old nobility and the new liberal elites. This article studies the Teatro Real of Madrid as one of the most important spaces for the sociability of the Spanish nineteenth-century elites. I aim to show how it contributed to redefining the profiles of the elite, facilitating the encounter between old and new aristocracies. For this purpose, I analyse the confrontation between the different social strata attempting to impose an aesthetic attitude, respectable behaviour, and modern taste inside the opera house. I propose to study this space as a social element that helped to modulate the patterns of distinction of the elites and to disseminate codes of conduct linked to civility.

KEYWORDS: Opera house; respectability; social rituals; aristocracy; bourgeoisie.

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Título traducido: La catedral de la civilización moderna. El Teatro Real de Madrid y la definición de una nueva élite respetable, 1850-1895.

RESUMEN: La ópera fue un espectáculo reservado para la élite aristocrática durante el Antiguo Régimen. La revolución liberal y la redefinición de los mecanismos sociales de identidad de clase que trajo consigo, sin embargo, modificaron significativamente este espacio. Como escribió Théophile Gautier, los teatros de ópera se convirtieron en el siglo XIX “en un centro radiante, una especie de catedral mundana de la civilización” desde la que se difundía el progreso. Al mismo tiempo, constituyeron unos espacios privilegiados de interacción social entre la vieja nobleza y las nuevas élites liberales. Este artículo estudia el Teatro Real de Madrid como uno de los principales espacios de sociabilidad de las élites del siglo XIX. Mi propósito es mostrar cómo este contribuyó a redefinir los contornos de la elite, facilitando el encuentro entre viejas y nuevas aristocracias. Para ello, analizo las confrontaciones entre los diferentes estratos sociales que trataron de imponer una actitud estética, un comportamiento respetable y unos gustos modernos al teatro de ópera. Propongo estudiar este espacio como un elemento social que ayudó a modular los patrones de distinción de las élites y diseminar unos códigos de conducta relacionados con la civilidad.

PALABRAS CLAVE: ópera; respetabilidad; rituales sociales; aristocracia; burguesía.

INTRODUCTION

In 1863, writer Theophile Gautier published an enthusiastic review in praise of the opera house that Charles Garnier had designed for Paris. In his opinion, the city urgently needed a new one “in line with its level of luxury, taste, and refined civilisation.”¹ Although some theatres had been rebuilt and others refurbished, he said, these works were not sufficient to encapsulate all “the art, science, and comfort” that characterised the modern society represented by Paris. Garnier’s project, however, enabled the city to “even transcend the present and become a contemporary of the future.” For Gautier, the opera house encapsulated the anxieties and hopes of the progress of the whole society. It was, ultimately, a sign of modernity associated with the highest peaks of civilisation. “Let us not forget,” continued Gautier, “that the opera is a radiating centre, a sort of worldly cathedral of civilisation” from which to spread the progress.

This comparison with religion was neither very forced nor very original. Many authors resorted to these similes in the nineteenth century to demonstrate the central role played by these arenas in the popular consciousness as signs of power. Like the cathedrals of the Middle Ages, opera houses were the ultimate external symbol of the authority of nations in an international context of cultural competition (Weber, 2007; Charle, 2009). For this reason, states devoted large sums of money and huge promotional campaigns to their construction (Bereson, 2002). The possession of an opera house had political and, in particular, social implications associated with the nation’s level of civilisation. However, this comparison with the religious transcended mere architecture. Opera attendance was equated with religious ceremonies at a key moment of sacralisation of music and secularisation of society. Thus, going to the opera represented more than the mere act of aesthetic contemplation of a piece of music. Attending these functions became a central social ritual in the shaping of national consciousnesses and in the definition of elites, their practices, and social profiles (Snowman, 2009).

This article analyses the Teatro Real of Madrid as a fundamental space of sociability for the definition of the nineteenth-century elite that emerged from revolutionary times. The process has been studied, albeit superficially, for the case of Barcelona (McDonogh, 1986, pp. 242-264). However, as yet, no work has addressed the Madrid opera house’s role in this respect, apart from the research proposal posited by Jesús Cruz (2017) and the general overview made by María Encina Cortizo and Ramón Sobrino (2019). I aim to show how the Teatro Real of Madrid, following its construction in 1850, contributed to redefining the profiles of the elite, facilitating the encounter between old and new aristocracies. The closing date is not coincidental either. In 1895, a change in Spain’s political and social cycle coincided with

the theatre’s first bankruptcy (Domínguez, 2015). There began a phase of decadence that would continue until 1925, when it was closed for the first time. To study this process, I first present a theoretical proposal that combines sociocultural history and the sociology of music. I then analyse the Teatro Real of Madrid as a space of definition of elites. For that, I examine the confrontation between the different social strata attempting to impose an aesthetic attitude and respectable behaviour inside the opera house. That is, how the poise and decorum should be in the Teatro Real for the elite behaviour. Finally, I consider how the architectural, aesthetic, and technological building improvements reflected the anxieties about displaying the progress of Spanish society and, particularly, of its elites. To this end, I make use of the debates that took place in the press and the popular consciousnesses described in the literature of the day.

OPERA HOUSES AND THE SOCIABILITY OF THE RESPECTABLE ELITE

Opera houses occupy a particularly interesting academic space. Although principally studied from the perspective of musicology, their potential transcends this discipline and touches upon others such as sociology or history. Independently of positivist studies, of formal and aesthetic analyses of music, the opera provides us with an insight into an extensive framework of social processes (Evans, 1999; Storey, 2003). Equally important as its internal evolution is the reception and uses made of it by individuals in each historical context. Thus, as an eminently cultural event, opera has political and social dimensions that significantly influence how we approach its study. Understanding it as a phenomenon of high culture, included within elitist social rituals, is the historical consequence of certain dynamics that are worthy of analysis (Müller, 2010).

Throughout the nineteenth century, the opera became not only an essential part of the sociability of the elites but also one of their main distinguishing features. In theory, the development of modern leisure and the logic of the free market made it accessible to everybody in exchange for a sum of money (Charle, 2008; Silva, 2016, pp. 75-94). However, the high price of tickets and, above all, a series of social and cultural restrictions, limited attendance. The opera became more elitist as the century progressed, precisely because the elites constructed it in this way as they evolved (McConachie, 1988). In the first place, it was separated from other forms of entertainment, with the construction of specific venues that symbolically marked cities (Hudson, 1995). In addition, codes of conduct were developed, a particular *habitus*, unique to these spaces, which not everyone could possess (Kassan, 1990). To the dress code was added a specific salon etiquette that was accompanied by a particular social and aesthetic conception.

The process, however, was neither unambiguous nor linear. The nineteenth-century elite underwent a radical

¹ This citation and the following ones in *Le Moniteur Universel* [LMU] “Le nouvel opéra,” 13 May 1863.

transformation, resulting from the encounter between the ruling classes of the Ancien Régime and the emerging social strata. Thus, the traditional aristocracy was joined by that of knowledge, of the sabre, or of money in a complex process of social integration and exclusion. Rather than a dichotomic paradigm between the aristocratisation of the bourgeoisie and the embourgeoisement of the aristocracy, I consider that this conflict created an original elite based on a new element: respectability. This concept eventually absorbed the traditional principles of social classification and redefined them, assuming the changes of the century, thereby generating an innovative social foundation. As Woodruff D. Smith (2018, p. VIII) has observed, “nineteenth-century social classes were defined by their members partly in terms of ascribed respectability.” This element was essential in the construction of class, connecting and giving meaning to “a wide array of practices, ideas, social structures, discursive conventions, and commodities” (Smith, 2018, p. 3). Thus, a social frontier was established between respectable and indecent people, which transcended notions of honour and money.

The concept, however, did not definitively resolve the problem. Respectability was the theoretical framework used by the elite to differentiate itself. However, this distinction was also the source of conflict between members of the same elite. According to Pierre Bourdieu (2001, pp. 296-297), class is a multidimensional social space formed by people “who occupy similar positions and who, being placed in similar conditions and submitted to similar types of conditioning, have every chance of having similar dispositions and interests.” This generates diverse factions within one class, which compete “to impose the legitimacy of their domination through their own symbolic production” (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 80). The emerging groups thus fought to impose their hegemony and redefine the very concept of belonging to the elite based on this new concept of respectability.

The opera was at the very heart of this cultural war. Ultimately, as Pierre Bourdieu (1979, p. 17) said, “nothing more clearly affirms one’s ‘class’, nothing more infallibly classifies, than tastes in music.” The opera is one of the main signs of social distinction because it succeeds in combining the transcendental in art with the mundane. It enables “a select audience to demonstrate and experience its membership of high society in obedience to the integrating and distinguishing rhythms of the ‘society’ calendar” (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 315). If one subject has occupied the attention of historians and musicologists in their studies of the nineteenth century, it was the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy socially to appropriate the opera (Hall-Witt, 2007). In particular, studies have emphasised how the middle class contrasted a different way of understanding music with that of the aristocracy. For the bourgeoisie, music should not only be enjoyed in a banal way. It should be understood in all its profundity, generating transcendental emotions and feelings (Weber, 1975). The opera should change from being a social event to another that requires

specialist knowledge and dignified conduct in keeping with the art being dramatized. Closely associated with the development of the concert and the spread of Wagnerian musical drama, this process of sacralisation of music changed the role of the opera house and its social rituals. For the new bourgeois spectator, music required an appropriate space and an attitude of almost religious contemplation, listening attentively, in silence, in the dark, and in seclusion (Botstein, 1985; Leppert, 2002).

This cultural shift has often been included within the process of civilisation theorised by Norbert Elias (2000, pp. 365-387), marked by the gradual imposition of self-control and the decline in spontaneous public expressions of reactions and emotions. However, this aesthetic and social conflict was also political, insofar as it involved the bourgeoisie’s battle to impose upon the aristocracy a way of understanding and conducting oneself at the opera. Without wishing to deny this process, my aim in this article is to present it as more complex. Opera houses were indeed a central space in the symbolic struggle between the factions of the elite for hegemony within their class. However, it was also a space of confluence, a meeting point where these social groups could differentiate themselves from other classes and define themselves. It is this double combat that I propose to analyse.

DEFINING A SPACE FOR THE ELITES

Like other European capitals, Madrid quickly prepared to build its own opera house. However, the process took longer than usual. The Teatro Real began its life in 1817 when Fernando VII commissioned a remodelling of the surroundings of the Palacio Real of Madrid (Carmena, 1878, pp. 123-126). The new colosseum was to be erected opposite the palace and on the same axis, culminating the narrative of that space of power. In many aspects, the birth and the problems of opera houses were similar to those of public museums. Although conceived during the Enlightenment, they played an essential role in the process of relegitimization of monarchs during the Restoration (Blanning, 2008, p. 139). Born as hybrid institutions, as semi-private extensions of a solicitous monarch who promoted art and science, they then acquired their own entity, independent of royal palaces, and a nuclear cultural and urban presence among the elites. Spain’s perennial shortage of funds, following the Napoleonic Wars and the loss of its colonies, greatly determined the construction of the Teatro Real. After many economic difficulties, the ballroom and some adjoining rooms were completed in 1835. However, most of the theatre remained unfinished. To the financial difficulties were added, from 1833 onwards, the political problems inherent to the process of construction of the modern constitutional, Liberal state. As happened with other spheres, such as artistic (Afinoguénova, 2018; Gilarranz 2019) and patrimonial estate (García Monerris and García Monerris, 2015), a complex process began to determine ownership of and responsibility for the opera house

between the monarchy and the state. The conflict lasted until 1849, when the government finally assumed all the expenses and debts, thus taking on ownership and management. The end of this dispute lent new momentum to construction. Barely six months later, the Teatro Real was inaugurated. The Spanish capital was definitively established on the cultural map of the nineteenth century.

During the 33 years of construction, there was both criticism of the delays in the project and calls for its completion. There was particular urgency following the definitive establishment of liberalism in Spain. The Liberal elites demanded the nation's integration into the dynamics of modern civilisation. Paris was the "radiating centre" that served as a model of modernity and civilisation. This did not mean that the Liberal elites uncritically adopted the cultural premises that prevailed on the other side of the Pyrenees. Spanish national identity was shaped, to a large degree, in dialogue and confrontation with the movements, ideas, and stereotypes that arrived from France, music included (Nagore, 2011; Andreu, 2016). Therefore, the creation of a national opera that reflected the true character and spirit of Spain was a central issue in the nineteenth century (Ibèrni, 1997; Carreras, 2018). Its development, however, required a temple in which opera could be performed, its enjoyment promoted, and its cultural appropriation encouraged. Hence the importance of completing the Teatro Real. The centrality of the question led some individuals, like banker Gaspar Remisa, to advance money to the state, and others, like businessman José Salamanca, even offered to defray the construction costs in its quest for its own public legitimization (Turina, 1997, pp. 67 and 69; San Narciso, 2024).

The completion of the works constituted, thus, a milestone in Spain's entrance into modernity. As journalist Manuel Cañete observed, Madrid was one of the few European capitals "that did not possess a theatre worthy of the demands of these times."² The need for its construction, therefore, transcended the creation of a place "where people can find in their leisure time delectable and worthwhile entertainment." The Teatro Real was the ultimate "symbol of the transformation" that Spain had undergone: "distancing itself from insurrections and mutinies, the country has taken the path of civilisation." Consequently, its inauguration saw it rise to occupy one of the top positions "in the hierarchy of universal civilisation." In this process, the elite played a fundamental role. Included in transnational dynamics (Charle, 2015, pp. 182-189), it was the elite that was ultimately nourished by foreign influences and needed to manifest both its possession of cultural capital and its presence as a respectable social group. In this manner, the Teatro Real became its principal milieu. The elites gathered in its rooms and corridors to display themselves and exhibit their civility. Eight years later, in 1858, there was already a social convention according to which "until the Teatro

Real opens, Madrid is not Madrid."³ "Even if the Paseo del Prado, the Casino, or the salons are full," continued the article, none of these acts were of importance "until one officially enters Madrid; that is, until one appears in the Teatro Real." Thus, only after the opening session "can one say out loud that one has arrived, has danced, receives people, visits."

Various spaces encapsulated the definition of the elites in opera houses: the box seats and the stalls inside the auditorium and the lobby outside. Theodor Adorno wrote about it poetically in the 1930s in an exercise of historical sociology. Although impregnated with a Marxist slant vis-à-vis the bourgeoisie and a nostalgic air about what he termed the first crisis of the opera, his categorisation reflected the social consciousnesses associated with the spaces of the opera. Thus, the bourgeoisie was embodied in the auditorium. An adjacent space, separate from the box seats, characteristic of the nobility, where the tension of their gradual aristocratisation was reflected. Their seats, for instance, "with their red coverings [...] evoke the memory of the boxes" but "deprived of the dignity [...] attached to the conception of an immovable throne" (Adorno, 1998, p. 69). Similarly, the lateral exits are next to the box seats, so that "coming from this direction it looks as if you have come from there. So short and unprepossessing is the way which enables you to enter as a self-assured burgher and leave as proud charlatan" (Adorno, 1998, p. 70). The box seats, meanwhile, are occupied by "the ghosts" who "have not bought any tickets but are the owners of prehistoric subscriptions, yellowing patents of nobility inherited from God knows whom" (Adorno, 1998, p. 70). However, the fundamental social space of the elites in the opera house was the foyer. There, "the spectators are the players, presented to an imaginary public [...] In the intervals they act out their own drama" (Adorno, 1998, pp. 74-75).

Although somewhat stereotypical, his assertions reflect a degree of historical truth. It was these spaces that ultimately defined the elites of the nineteenth century (Sánchez and San Narciso, 2023). However, the process was neither so monolithic nor so unilateral. Opera houses were spaces of confluence that helped to establish the outlines of a new elite as happened with other places such as the gentlemen's clubs.⁴ The Teatro Real was attended by the traditional aristocracy formed by the monarchy and old noble titles. Also in attendance were the leading capitalists, politicians, intellectuals, and military officers who had prospered in the new post-revolutionary society and were seeking their place in society. Thus, for example, from 1857 onwards, the government had a box seat reserved for ministers, facilitating informal contact and exhibiting power. As one newspaper satirically reflected, political promotion required a series of changes in the conduct and appearance of those favoured. Relating the

² This citation and the following ones in *El Heraldo* [EH] "Apertura del Teatro Real," 20 November 1850.

³ This citation and the following ones in *La Discusión* [LD] "Teatro Real," 7 October 1858.

⁴ For Spain, the best-studied cases were the so-called Casinos. See Zozaya, 2007; Villena, 2018.

conversation between a recently appointed minister and his wife, the latter complains that they can no longer “appear in public in any old fashion.”⁵ His new position demanded “some new suits, a season ticket for the theatre, and riding in an elegant barouche.” Something similar occurred with businessmen and financiers: obtaining a season ticket or a box at the Teatro Real was one of the main ways of acquiring the necessary cultural capital with which to gain social legitimacy (San Narciso, 2022). No other space afforded such a combination of aristocratic honour, merit, wealth, and intellect. Uniting all of these, the Teatro Real helped to shape an elite based on a new element: respectability.

In its definition as space of elitist sociability, a central role was played by the revolutionary cycle between 1868 and 1874. Much of the elite opposed the new monarch, Amadeo I of Savoy, appointed by Parliament as an alternative to the Bourbon dynasty. This converted many of their social acts into clearly political demonstrations. As occurred with salons or parties (Prado, 2016; Sánchez, 2019), the elite used the Teatro Real of Madrid as a platform to exhibit their open rejection of the new political regime. In 1872, for example, the marchioness of Alcañices counter-programmed a party to coincide with a performance at the Teatro Real and “warned that those who were not present for the cotillion would not be invited again.”⁶ This use of the theatre had two not necessarily contradictory consequences. Firstly, it helped to unite an elite that, following the restoration of the Bourbon family in 1874, was more homogeneous and closed in its social contours than in the middle of the century (Seco, 1996; Sánchez-Carrera, 1989). Thereafter, novels assimilated the opera house with the purest sociability of the respectable elite, where the latter evinced its civility (Mercer, 2013, pp. 43-56). Torcuato Tárrega, for instance, told the story of Gil Alborno, a wealthy man from the provinces who comes to the capital in search of a wife. After being duped in several places by people claiming to be aristocrats, the millionaire decides to go to the opera, since those present here “undoubtedly belong to high society.”⁷

As well as serving to homogenise the elite, from 1868 onwards, the Teatro Real contributed to the elaboration of a far more complete and clearly anti-aristocratic discourse that contrasted the elite’s uses of and social customs at the opera with the purity of the so-called Gods. These, the highest and cheapest seats, were occupied by the middle classes and liberal professionals. All of them, as Roberto Robert observed, “impregnated to the core with passion for music.”⁸ There “the new symphony is heard in religious silence, from the Gods issue, as the curtain is raised, the shouts of ‘Quiet!’.” Though

employed as a narrative resource, the Gods emerged as the antithesis of the banal elite of the Teatro Real. Thus, the elite’s absence during the first session after the revolution of 1868 meant “that beautiful auditorium was not [...] the meeting point for sycophantic individuals who on the wings of ambition attended in great numbers.”⁹ Rather than frivolous spectacles based on appearance, this was “a reunion of enlightened patricians, of eminent statesmen, and of honest citizens.” In 1887, for instance, a newspaper protested at the lack of support in boxes and stalls for shows that “were not fashionable,” in other words, that were not Italian operas.¹⁰ The elite attended the Teatro Real “not for the art, for the music, or because of interest in anything aesthetic but to see and be seen, to show that they have or appear to have money.” In contrast, it highlighted “the hubbub, the liveliness, and the good taste of the Gods.” These seats had swiftly been occupied by “the young that worship ideals, the large number of fans and veterans for whom art is a religion.”

Once again, religious language merged with the opera to evidence the process of sacralisation of music and establish the image of the heretic, the person who interpreted in superficial and manifestly social fashion attendance of the new liturgy. This discourse was encompassed within that other anti-elitist vision that extolled the middle classes. In 1892, for example, Félix Borrell praised “the quality of the auditorium” in performances of Wagner at the Teatro Real.¹¹ For, as opposed to the performances of frivolous Italian opera, these were attended by “most of those who in Madrid earn a living working intellectually, all the musicians and painters, our most important men of letters, playwrights, novelists and critics, many university professors, many doctors, many lawyers, a vast number of students.” Although a few aristocrats went, these were “of good taste, who did not devote their entire existence to pigeon shooting or hare coursing” but who appreciated true art. They were, in short, those who could claim that they did not attend “to see or be seen,” connoisseurs of the new religion who had transcended the sensorial pleasure of opera and perceived its profound aesthetic meaning. A discourse, incidentally, that was still political, given its links with the ideals of modernity, often associated with Kraussism (Suárez, 2009a).

POISE AND DECORUM IN THE TEATRO REAL

The discourse against the elite’s social uses of the Teatro Real overlapped, thus, with a lengthy process, accelerated during the second third of the nineteenth century: the sacralisation of music (Blanning, 2008, pp. 134-139). As occurred in other parts of Europe, there began in Spain a change of aesthetic paradigm driven

5 This citation and the following ones in *La Ilustración Española y Americana* [LIEA] “La casa de un ministro,” 25 January 1870.

6 [LD] “Fiesta de Alcañices,” 30 January 1872.

7 *El periódico para todos* [EPPT] “Un millonario,” 1 February 1880.

8 *El Museo Universal* [ELM] “El paraíso de la ópera,” 16 April 1865.

9 *El Imparcial* [EI] “Función nacional,” 10 October 1868.

10 This citation and the following ones in [EI] “Teatro Real,” 5 November 1887.

11 This citation and the following ones in *El Heraldo de Madrid* [EHM] “Notas musicales,” 1 February 1892.

by Wagnerism, which altered the way of understanding opera and of conducting oneself in opera houses (Suárez, 2009b). Through his works, Richard Wagner moved away from simple sensorial enjoyment and musical triviality to lend a sense of profoundness to musical drama. This involved a radical change in artistic direction but also in the attitude and preparation of spectators. The objective, therefore, shifted from the social elites to the specialist audience, to the *connoisseurs* and *dilettanti*, in open criticism of social rather than aesthetic enjoyment of art. Wagner's followers constituted a genuine pressure group in nineteenth-century Spain, in their attempt to impose this form of opera. They even interrupted a Teatro Real performance and released from the "Gods a shower of coloured papers" that read: "The audience wishes to hear *The Masters-Singers of Nuremberg*, before this season is over."¹² The "demonstration" in the presence of the queen regnant was mistaken for an act of anarchy and caused considerable unrest among respectable society.

This new attitude towards music evolved in the symphonic concerts promoted by private societies and spread with the bourgeois development of concert halls (Sobrinó, 2019). In 1891, Wagner enthusiast Luigi Mancinelli succeeded in combining the positions of director of the Teatro Real and the Madrid Concert Society. From his privileged position, he launched a vigorous campaign for the diffusion of Wagner's work and of his holistic conception of opera. As Félix Borrell would comment, "not long ago, Wagner was a musical maniac, an artistic anarchist."¹³ In 1891, however, "everything changed thanks to the efforts of Luis Mancinelli." Thus, "many aristocrats, who six months ago knew nothing of the existence of Bayreuth, organise outings" and "in the salons of high society the talk is of Wagner." The Wagnerian audience, an eminently bourgeois audience that occupied the cheap, high seats of the Teatro Real, imposed itself in the 1890s upon the affected elite, champions of *bel canto* (Suárez 2007).

This aesthetic war was accompanied by another much broader struggle to impose particular forms and customs in opera houses. Although in a negative way, the increasingly harsh criticism that these *connoisseurs* directed towards the attitudes of the elite in the Teatro Real from the 1870s onwards helps to profile the specific *ethos* and *habitus* constructed by the elite as of 1850 to differentiate itself and demonstrate its civility. As opposed to the semi-religious attitude—in silence and seclusion—of bourgeois music lovers, the elites had their own very distinctive ways of conducting themselves in the opera, very different from our current reverential conception.

First of all, the auditorium lighting was a central element. For a social group that attended the Teatro Real to "see and be seen" it was essential for the venue to be perfectly illuminated throughout the performance. A few days after its inauguration, a newspaper complained

bitterly that "the chandelier oil lamps were gradually extinguished" until the audience was left "in the dark," although "they were soon lit again."¹⁴ Furthermore, there are frequent references to the mirrors and opera glasses used to reflect the light and play with discreet glances. Candles were replaced in 1888 by electricity, so it was no longer possible to say that "the spacious hall was transformed into golden embers [...]" but rather embers of brilliant, dazzling silver."¹⁵ The following year they tried out semi-darkness during the performances of various works. The results, as Wagnerian Félix Borrell said with sadness in 1891, when the lights came back to the theatre room, "could not have been better" then as "this led the audience to pay more attention to the show."¹⁶ However, he pointed out, some subscribers "annoyed at not being able to inspect their peers during the performance [...]" complained about the experiment." Consequently, the auditorium was illuminated once again in 1891 so as to "look around with disdain and hold very loud and spicy conversations" during operas.

The attitude of the elites during opera performances responded more to social than to aesthetic parameters, which tend to prevail nowadays. The standard practice was that they entered their boxes when the performance had already begun and left before it ended. This served as a symbolic marker, to dramatize their presence in the auditorium, enhanced by the extravagance of their clothing and accessories. But also to show off their wealth. Rather than those who bought their tickets for each performance, the elites exhibited their capacity to maintain a subscription that allowed them to attend performances whenever they chose. Similarly, during the course of the opera, the boxes were a hive of activity, with people entering and leaving, meeting up to socialise. There was generally silence when a famous aria was sung, particularly by renowned divas and divos (Cowgill and Poriss, 2012). Thus, for example, Félix Borrell called for "the art of music to be taken seriously."¹⁷ This meant moving beyond "antiquated opera performances, with the sole purpose of flaunting outfits, jewels or, at most, applauding voices of divas that perfectly imitate the sound of a flute." José Múñiz Carro, meanwhile, highlighted how there were calls from the gods for silence during the premiere of *Lohengrin*, and this time "silence fell."¹⁸ However, he proceeded to criticise the attitude of the audience for applauding "noisily in the middle of an act or insisting on repetition of certain parts" after missing "interesting details." As he concludes in a lofty way, "it is a well-known fact that a certain type of music can only be understood by certain privileged intelligences."

Within this social function of the opera, it is worth highlighting the gender discourses that were manifested (Torres, 2019). Women generally appeared as passive be-

12 *La Iberia* [LI] "Teatro Real," 12 March 1893.

13 [EHM] "Crónica musical," 14 April 1891.

14 [EH] "Apertura del Teatro Real," 20 November 1850.

15 *La Época* [LE] "La apertura del Real," 2 November 1889.

16 [EHM] "La temporada de Teatro Real," 26 October 1891.

17 [EHM] "El concierto de ayer," 12 January 1891.

18 *Crónica de la música* [CM] "Lohengrin. La primera representación en Madrid," 30 March 1881.

ings whose function was to parade their families' wealth using their dresses and, in particular, their jewels. Furthermore, observations emphasise the gender relations that unfolded in these theatres. Few spaces of sociability offered the same opportunities for men and women to mix in such frequent and informal fashion. The increasingly sexualised development of social clubs in the nineteenth century hindered the mixing of men and women in informal spaces.¹⁹ As Emilia Pardo Bazán wrote, "the salons and their derivatives –such as the Teatro Real's boxes and the foyer– are the only places where, at least during the winter, men and women meet and converse."²⁰ The scenes of flirting in the Teatro Real certainly filled the newspapers and literature. However, there was increasingly differentiated treatment of romantic relationships depending on where one sat. In the Gods, there were allusions to innocence and purity, and it was a "pleasure" to see couples "exchanging their opera glasses," contemplating each other, playing footsie, and holding hands.²¹ The elite's boxes, however, were associated with moral perversion. The Teatro Real emerges as a key space in the search for a partner, for matrimonial arrangements, and a place of entertainment where licentious relationships were openly exhibited. As Adorno (1998, pp. 71-72) said, "two men in a box are either boring or not men at all" while "the woman with whom you share the intimacy of a secluded box [...] for this evening she is your mistress, even if you have never possessed her except in this dark." Thus, at the first performance after the 1868 revolution, newspapers underlined the contrast with other seasons, as "that beautiful auditorium was no longer a place for dates, for impure and disgusting love affairs."²² Shortly afterwards, a humoristic column described a conversation in a box between a man and a widowed marchioness. "Your dress is so low cut, marchioness, that one can almost see your heart," said he.²³ To which she replied, "when there is a body in the room, the balcony doors are left open."

The change in conception of the Teatro Real, as a musical venue rather than a place of social reunion occurred at the start of the 20th century. In 1910, for instance, a critic noted in a performance of *Aida* "that fewer people than before leave before the end."²⁴ A change of custom that reflected the fact, in his opinion, that certain aristocratic circles were beginning to "regard as tacky in the extreme those people who disturb the audience by filing out before the performance is over." Four years later, Eduardo Muñoz observed a complete change of paradigm. The premiere of *Parsifal* took place with "the theatre in the shadows" and amidst "a solemn silence, an invincible attraction, an impression of awe, of

respect."²⁵ It was, he included "a feast of art and a feast of Christian piety" in the Teatro Real.

A LUXURIOUS, MODERN, AND COMFORTABLE BUILDING

The construction of the Teatro Real was closely linked to the imperious need of the elites to show the high degree of civilisation that Spanish society had reached. Its erection, thus, went hand in hand with those forms of social behaviour considered respectable for distinguished people. The creation and implementation of these social norms helped to shape the unstable and conflicting contours of a new elite where the bourgeois and the aristocrats came together based on new criteria of selection and peer recognition. The building also was a sign of Spain's progress and development that would qualify the country and its elites to compete with the rest of the European nations. Therefore, this symbolic elitist space should appear physically as a modern place linked to the development of bourgeois culture (Cruz, 2014). For this purpose, it was essential to fill the building with elegant and luxurious furniture, which, in turn, epitomised comfort. But it also involved incorporating all the technical advances as soon as they were discovered, pondering the building over the increasingly prevailing hygienist assumptions, and including within it typical spaces of the consumer culture in full swing. I will briefly consider some of them, starting with the improvement projects carried out over the years.

I have already referred to the construction problems that the Teatro Real had for more than thirty years until its inauguration in 1850. Its structural stages, therefore, owed much to the tastes and fashions of each period. Its façade, as one newspaper described it at the time, was nothing more than "a great mass with no beauty or artistic taste to admire."²⁶ With a restrained aesthetic, its two fronts to the Oriente and Isabel II squares were decorated with allegorical figures and effigies of people related to the world of music and theatre (Diana, 1850, pp. 91-93). Thus, besides the god Apollo and six of the nine Greek muses, there were images of authors such as Mozart, Rossini, Garcilaso de la Vega, Meléndez, Iriarte, and Moratín. Lope de Vega and Calderón de la Barca, considered the founders of the national theatre, had a prominent place in the upper part. Finally, emphasising the monarchical nature of the building, the coat of arms of the Royal House surrounded by the figures of genius and fame crowned the composition.

The interior of the building, however, maintained "a luxury bordering on wastefulness," with "only velvet and gold carvings on a white field in the front of

19 For the difficult relationship between the sexes in the case of the Madrid casino, a gentlemen's club, see Zozaya, 2014.

20 [LE] "Los salones de Madrid," 22 March 1897.

21 [ELM] "El paraíso de la ópera," 16 April 1865.

22 [EI] "Función nacional," 10 October 1868.

23 [EPPT] "Varios," 7 January 1878.

24 This citation and the following one in ABC [ABC] "Las noches del Real," 14 November 1910.

25 [EI] "El estreno de Parsifal," 2 January 1914.

26 *La Ilustración* [LIL] "Descripción del Teatro Real, vulgo de Oriente," 23 November 1850.

the boxes.”²⁷ The hall had a very eclectic taste, mixing Greco-Roman, Renaissance, and Gothic styles, with the latter predominating, and had a particularly overloaded appearance. The walls were interwoven with crimson velvet and white silks, every corner had gilt details and decorations, and all the furnishings “belonged to the taste of the latest fashion.” The seating arrangement shows us the importance of the theatre’s social dimension. There were 468 seats in the stalls, which its pass cost 20 reales, 90 boxes distributed over four floors and five pass types, ranging in price from 110 reales for the stalls to 80 reales for the rest, and 788 much cheaper seats in the Gods (Diana, 1850, pp. XVII-XVIII). These boxes were “quite spacious” and had a private room separated “by a crimson damask curtain.” For greater privacy, the stall boxes “could be closed off with blinds.” These spaces were understood almost as home extensions and could be decorated according to their owners’ preferences. As in the rest of the opera houses, the object that stood out in the Teatro Real de Madrid’s boxes was the mirror, which was fundamental for seeing and being seen.

On the other hand, a host of luxurious objects imported from abroad and technical advances related to comfort showed the modernity of the building. The lighting, for example, was gas-fired and made “with the most tasteful arms and lamps from the leading factories of Paris and London” (Diana, 1850, pp. 107-108). The skylight in the main hall was “all dressed in the finest foreign crystal” and adorned with gold plates. Also, as newspapers constantly stressed as a great novelty, “English-style toilets were distributed all over the building” (Diana, 1850, p. 118). However, the opera house was not solely and exclusively focused on musical entertainment. The building also had a ballroom, smoking, and lounging rooms for socialising, “an elegant boudoir served by two dressmakers,” a florist, an eyeglass and glove shop, a sweet shop, and a café-restaurant. The staff required for its proper functioning numbered well over a hundred people, not counting the opera and dance companies and the orchestra.

Shortly after its inauguration, however, plans for improvements and building work began. Being the worldly centre of the Spanish elite demanded a constant update of its spaces and decorations to maintain its position as a guide to the aesthetic trends of the time. In some cases, changes were aimed at updating tastes. For example, the return of the Bourbon dynasty to the throne in 1874 preceded a comprehensive reform. The Teatro Real’s curator, Federico Correa, sent a memorial to the government pleading for an investment of about 1 million reales to reopen for the new season. The civil war situation in Spain made this expenditure more complex for the state. However, as a newspaper then remarked, the works were “also necessary because civilisation duties have their own needs.”²⁸ Consequently, the entire building was updated

in 1875, reducing the investment to 25,000 duros.²⁹ The first thing that improved was safety. Thus, new iron pipes replaced the existing ones for gas and water to prevent leaks, also installing keys to cut off the supply in case of an accident. In addition, the gilding was retouched, the wallpaper modified, and the paintings restored. The foyer changed its appearance completely, and a new arcade was added for coaches. But if one thing improved by far was the luminosity of the theatre by adding 80 lights to the main hall and one for each seat in the boxes. In 1880, in the same vein, the first two rows of seats were removed to save space, four new boxes were created, and all the wallpaper was changed.³⁰

Shortly afterwards, these reforms were no longer enough to maintain the prestige of the space. In 1884, the intervention was much more extensive as the opera house completely changed its façade. Thus, the terrace disappeared to enlarge the Royal House’s rooms inside the theatre, the decoration was completely modified, and the appearance of the front structure facing Oriente Square gained splendour. The resemblance to the Opéra Garnier in Paris, a theatre that opened in 1861, is rather striking (Fernández Muñoz, 1983). For the decorative motifs of the sculptures, the design this time also drew on Greco-Latin allegories—Tragedy, Comedy, Music, Poetry, Painting, and Dance—and more recent music notables such as Mozart, Rossini, Meyerbeer, Donizetti, and Eslava.³¹ Three years later, another space came to the public and architects’ attention: the foyer. The change in aesthetic taste was significant for this, as happened in other places of the building. But also, the opera house’s conception of the foyer and the main staircase changed progressively as a central social place to see and be seen. In 1887, both increased their size and importance, relocating the porter’s lodge to reorganise the whole entrance. Also, their decoration became more sumptuous and modern. For this purpose, “expensive red velvet curtains” and divans were placed there, and “three electric lights in porcelain pumps” were installed.³² In 1898 it was finally the turn of the principal hall interior. The neo-Gothic taste that prevailed since 1850 was plastered to impose the French taste on trend then (Fernández Muñoz, 1989, p. 213). So, as its façade, the overloaded and eclectic style that filled the Parisian opera house ended up being imposed on the Teatro Real’s interior.

The decoration and structure of the Teatro Real were not the only targets of the improvements. As in other elitist spaces, it also incorporated rapidly all the new technical and technological advances that appeared during the nineteenth century.³³ It was, in the end, a way

27 [LIL] “Descripción del Teatro Real, vulgo de Oriente,” 23 November 1850.

28 [LE] “Ecos de Madrid,” 30 April 1875.

29 Las siguientes citas en [LE] “Teatro Real,” 10 October 1875.

30 *Diario de Avisos de Madrid* [DAM] “Varios,” 2 September 1880.

31 [LIEA] “Nueva fachada del Teatro Real de Madrid,” 15 July 1885.

32 *La Correspondencia de España* [LCE] “Varios,” 18 July 1887.

33 The best-analysed case of the use of technical progress to display social prestige is that of the Casino de Madrid, see Zozaya, 2015, pp. 171-198.

of showing the power of the people who attended this space, projecting modern ways of life. The insertion of discoveries such as electric light, or advances in comfort such as heating, were among the first. But they were joined by other more interesting. In 1885, for example, the Teatro Real began broadcasting plays on the telephone. The previous year, the Spanish-American Electric Telephone Company connected the opera house with the Royal Palace.³⁴ The National Post and Telegraph Office also linked the Teatro Real with the ministers' homes by telephone. In 1885 the company extended the service to all subscribers who paid "500 pesetas for a telephone wire and two sets," and especially for "gentlemen's clubs and societies."³⁵ Thus, "Masini's voice, Meyerbeer's music, and the squawks of any Clodio or Puerari would be home delivery like a novel published in instalments."³⁶ Among those who subscribed to the first season was the Casino of Madrid, the marquis of Campo, the count of Esteban Collantes, and the architect Lorenzo Álvarez Capra.³⁷

Besides prestige, this innovation also concealed a kind of democratisation of classical music linked to technical progress. For this purpose, "a hall for musical auditions was installed in a central location in Madrid so that all social classes could enjoy the advances offered by the telephone," hoping to expand "the auditions to all the towns that demand it."³⁸ Writing in 1881 about what was happening in Paris, José Fernández Bremón predicted that "the telephone would popularise good music and opera."³⁹ For him, therefore, the Teatro Real would be "a music box [...] the centre of a network of wires spread out all over the city and accessible to all houses." Thus, the opera would experience "the same fate as the book, which was once a luxury item owned only by libraries that the printing press made available to everyone by multiplying print runs." In 1897, the Madrid Telephone Company had already lowered the telephone opera audition service's price to "5 pesetas for each non-subscription performance, 350 pesetas for all the season performances, and 60 pesetas for a subscription of any ten performances."⁴⁰ But the telephone was not the only technical development incorporated in the Teatro Real. Without wishing to be repetitive, in 1889, for example, a system of electric bells was installed to call coaches (Turina, 1997, p. 161). With these improvements, the Teatro Real proved to be also a modern space that displayed the progress and civilisation of the Spanish nation, the same or more than the respectable elites that filled their halls.

CONCLUSION

In 1903, two leading music critics engaged in a bitter controversy over the appropriate nature of the opera season in the Teatro Real of Madrid. As opposed to its conception as a space of sensorial enjoyment and elitist sociability, Félix Borrell again appealed for an improvement of musical content, reducing the number of Italian works and increasing those of modern German masters. He thus distinguished between "music lovers," true worshippers of the art of music, and "opera fans" devoted to banal and superficial enjoyment of the opera.⁴¹ With its programme, the Madrid colosseum maintained its commitment to the latter. However, despite this obstinacy, he argued that the advance of Wagnerism and the promotion of opera to the category of serious art was unstoppable.

This conflict formed part of the controversies generated throughout Europe by the introduction of the Wagnerian concept of opera. From the 1870s onwards, Spain witnessed a bitter confrontation between *dilettanti* and *connoisseur* –who viewed opera as something transcendental– and the social elite –for whom it was a sensorial, urbane experience–. Intensified with the turn of the century, this aesthetic struggle was accompanied by another, equally intense, about the ways of listening to music and the social uses of the Teatro Real. Rather than brightly lit performances, with little or no attention paid to the music –except for famous arias– and with a social conception of music, the middle classes advocated a reverential, semi-sacred, attitude towards a transcendental art. However, this confrontation should not conceal the central role played by the opera in the definition of the elite. The harsh criticism of the latter at the end of the nineteenth century shows us the *ethos* and *habitus* that the elite formulated and ultimately assumed as a mark of distinction. Following its inauguration in 1850, the Teatro Real served as a space of confluence for the elites, where the old-style aristocracy mixed with upwardly mobile sectors from business, politics, literature, or the military. The opera thus contributed to the definition of the outlines of an elite now based on respectability. Their form and conception of attending the Teatro Real, maintaining a subscription, moving around the boxes, or going to parties became key elements of their differentiation as elite. What was criticised, thus, in the 1890s, by the middle classes, was precisely what the aristocracies, in the plural, had constructed as defining features of their new status as respectable elite since the mid-nineteenth century.

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The author of this article declares that they have no financial, professional or personal conflicts of interest that could have inappropriately influenced this work.

41 [EHM] "El Teatro Real," 17 August 1903.

34 *El Liberal* [EL] "Más sobre el teléfono," 28 January 1885.

35 [EL] "La ópera por teléfono," 18 February 1885.

36 [EL] "La ópera a domicilio," 16 January 1885.

37 [LCE] "Correo de teatros," 4 November 1885.

38 [EL] "La ópera por teléfono," 18 February 1885.

39 [EL] "El desestanco de la música," 23 October 1881.

40 *La Unión Católica* [LUC] "Varios," 15 November 1897.

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