

# Biagio Rebecca draws the London Opera House: London's King's Theatre in the 1790s

Two watercolours in the Royal Collection attributed to the Italian-born decorative artist Biagio Rebecca depict the auditorium of the home of Italian opera in eighteenth-century London, the King's Theatre in the Haymarket, and its adjacent Concert Room. Perhaps showing schemes proposed by Rebecca, they offer detailed evidence about these major interiors, destroyed by fire in 1867.

by MICHAEL BURDEN

LONDON'S ITALIAN OPERA HOUSE, the King's Theatre in the Haymarket, had a chequered history as far as its administration is concerned, a history that involved mismanagement, financial failure and arson.<sup>1</sup> This may partly account for the fact that for a building with such a public role, very little illustrative or even descriptive material has survived. In particular, there is considerable uncertainty concerning aspects of the building and its interior as it was developed and altered between 1790 and 1796. Two magnificent watercolours in the Royal Collection attributed to Biagio Rebecca (1731–1808) are therefore of particular interest, given that they are both highly detailed and very atmospheric (Figs. 1 and 5). The works are not unknown: they were catalogued and published by A.P. Oppé in 1950,<sup>2</sup> and that of the auditorium has been reproduced by Gillen D'Arcy Wood.<sup>3</sup> However, they have not been further discussed as works of Rebecca, nor – and perhaps more importantly here – have they been considered at all in the context of other materials on the building. Further, they have not been dated: Oppé simply notes that the auditorium shown is quite unlike that in Robert Wilkinson's *Londina Illustrata* (1818) and suggests that the watercolours perhaps represented a scheme that was not carried out,<sup>4</sup> while Wood dates the auditorium illustration to c.1792, a date that may be plausible for the drawing but is improbable for the building.

The drawings were probably purchased from Colnaghi and Co. by George IV when Prince of Wales. An invoice dated 9th July 1804 shows that the Prince paid £7 7s. for 'A Drawing of the Inside of the Opera House'

1. *The auditorium of the Opera House, London*, by Biagio Rebecca. c.1793. Pen and ink and watercolour on paper, 66.5 by 54 cm. (Royal Collection Trust; © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2019).

and £8 8s. for 'A D[itt]o the Inside of the Concert Rooms at the Opera House'.<sup>5</sup> Oppé suggests that the disparity in price can be accounted for by the presence of figures in the picture of the Concert Room.<sup>6</sup> Both views are unique. No earlier picture survives of the theatre's auditorium viewed from the stage and there are no extant interior views of the Concert Room as it was created in 1793–94. There are engraved sources for both spaces but none shows the complete structure; further, they have not been considered reliable representations of the building. In short, Rebecca's drawings allow us to reconsider these printed sources and together transform our understanding both of the auditorium and of the Concert Room.

Oppé's attribution of the drawings rested on a comparison of 'the allegorical figures carefully executed on the ceiling' with Rebecca's work.<sup>7</sup> No further evidence as to their authorship has emerged. Rebecca (1734/35–1808) was born in Ancona and studied at the Accademia di San Luca in Rome, where he met the Anglo-American history painter Benjamin West, who had arrived in Italy on a Grand Tour in 1760. In 1761 Rebecca moved to London – West followed in 1763 – and on 31st January 1769 he became one of the first students to enter the Royal Academy Schools, an institution that West had helped establish. Rebecca often assisted West,<sup>8</sup> and on his death in 1808 West gave directions for his burial.<sup>9</sup> Although elected an Associate of the Royal Academy in 1771, Rebecca seems to have been less than successful with the works he showed there.<sup>10</sup> Instead he

1 For accounts of the King's Theatre during the period under discussion, see 'The Haymarket Opera House', in F.H.W. Sheppard, ed.: *The Survey of London*, XXIX, *St James Westminster, Part 1*, London 1960, pp. 223–250, C. Price, J. Milhous and R. Hume: *Italian Opera in Late Eighteenth-Century London*. Vol. 1, *The King's Theatre, Haymarket, 1778–1791*, Oxford 1995; *idem*: 'The rebuilding of the King's Theatre, Haymarket, 1789–1791', *Theatre Journal* 43 (1991), pp. 421–44; M. Burden: 'Visions of dance at the King's Theatre: reconsidering London's

"opera house", *Music in Art: International Journal for Music Iconography* 36, nos. 1–2 (2011), pp. 92–116; and *idem*: 'Regular meetings: Gallini and Noverre in London 1756–1794', in *idem* and J. Thorp, eds.: *The Works of Monsieur Noverre Translated from the French: Noverre, His Circle, and the English Lettres sur la danse*, New York 2014, pp. 137–56.

2 A. Oppé: *English Drawings, Stuart and Georgian Periods, in the Collection of His Majesty The King at Windsor Castle*, London 1950, pp. 82–

83, nos. 486 and 487.

3 G. D'Arcy Wood: *Romanticism and Music Culture in Britain, 1770–1840: Virtue and Virtuosity*, Cambridge 2010, p. 134.

4 R. Wilkinson: *Londina Illustrata*, London 1818.

5 Invoice from Colnaghi and Co. to George, Prince of Wales, 9th July 1804. Royal Archives, Windsor Castle, RA GEO/MAIN/27269.

6 Oppé, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 82.

7 *Ibid.*

8 H. Von Erffa: 'Benjamin West at

the height of his career', *The*

*American Art Journal* 1, no. 1 (1969), pp. 19–33, p. 21, note 6.

9 *The Diary of Joseph Farington*, ed. Kathryn Cave, London and New Haven 1982, IX, p. 3230, entry for 27th February 1808.

10 M. Adam: 'Biagio Rebecca', in H. Matthew and B. Harrison, eds.: *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, www.oxforddnb.com, accessed 10th April 2019. See also M. Norman: *Biagio and John Biagio Rebecca: Artist and Architect*, London 2001, p. 2.







went on to make his mark as a decorative painter of schemes both large and small; these included cartoons for painted glass at New College, Oxford, work on the Royal Academy's new rooms at Somerset House, paintings at Windsor Castle,<sup>11</sup> and the drawing for the admission ticket for the first Handel Commemoration in Westminster Abbey, on 26th May 1784.<sup>12</sup> Rebecca worked as 'painter and machinist' on at least one Italian opera, Giovanni Paisiello's comedy *Il Marchese Tulipano*, which was expanded for London by the musical director of the King's Theatre for the 1785–86 season, Luigi Cherubini.<sup>13</sup> He was also employed by James Wyatt for decorative work at the Pantheon, Oxford Street, in 1772 and was responsible for panels in the decoration of the Drury Lane theatre when Henry Holland remodelled the auditorium in 1793 and 1794. Writing to Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Holland commented: 'In the centre panels in front of the boxes, are introduced paintings by Rebecca from antique subjects', but acknowledged that more might be done, for 'decorations and paintings seem intended to be added when opportunities offer'.<sup>14</sup> There were thirty-five panels in all, with subjects listed by Holland from the performing arts and classical mythology. Holland recorded a payment of £190 for the work.<sup>15</sup>

The King's Theatre, which was designed by John Vanbrugh and opened in 1705, burnt down in 1789. The staging of Italian opera in London was continued by John Gallini, who had been managing the theatre at the time of the blaze. He was given a licence by the Lord Chamberlain to perform opera in the Little Theatre (on the opposite side of the Haymarket) for the 1790–91 season only. In the meantime, the King's Theatre was rebuilt very rapidly by William Taylor, who as manager had run it into insolvency in the early 1780s and had been forced out of its administration. The fire offered him an opportunity to return to the business. The foundation stone for the new theatre, designed by Michael Novosielski, was laid by the Earl of Buckingham on 3rd April 1790 and the building was finished by 1791.<sup>16</sup>

In parallel to Taylor's efforts a consortium of noblemen was seeking to rethink the institution as a kind of court opera; they were fronted by a lawyer's clerk, Robert Bray O'Reilly.<sup>17</sup> Their plan was for an opera house in Leicester Square, a proposal which gained no traction, and the group hastily converted the Pantheon for use as their venue in time for the 1791–92 season.<sup>18</sup> The Lord Chamberlain awarded the licence for performing opera neither to Taylor at his new theatre (who was, however, able to have music, song and dance performed) nor to Gallini at the Little Theatre, who was refused an extension beyond the end of his season, but to the opera at the Pantheon, which was granted a five-year licence, and which now became 'The King's Theatre'. That institution lost large sums of money and just after opening its second season, that of 1792–93, the Pantheon burnt to the ground in suspicious circumstances.<sup>19</sup> The opera company moved to the Little Theatre in the Haymarket. Its administration subsequently merged with that of Taylor's, with the resultant company occupying his new building, which, now licensed, was once again 'The King's Theatre'.

2. *An Inside View of the Opera House*, by J. Page after R. Arnold, published in *Carlton House Magazine* (1792). Engraving, 12.4 by 20.6 cm. (Victoria and Albert Museum, London).

3. *The Opera House*, by A.C. Pugin after Thomas Rowlandson, hand coloured by J. Black, published in R. Ackermann: *Microcosm of London*, London 1808–10 (1809). Engraving with aquatint, 26.6 by 33.3 cm. (The Bodleian Library, Oxford).

The first public performance of Italian opera took place there on 26th January 1793.<sup>20</sup>

Taylor, who had been appointed the theatre's manager, undertook alterations during the latter part of 1793 to the almost-new building, and it was noted that after the 'very numerous' changes for the 1793–94 season, 'the *inside* as well as the *out* will wear next Winter a very different appearance'.<sup>21</sup> Taylor, it was remarked, 'has projected the alterations himself. If experience can shew what are the best accommodations, of operatical experience he has had enough'. It is these alterations that are represented in the watercolours in the Royal Collection.

Little is known about the auditorium of the King's Theatre as Novosielski left it in 1790; the surviving illustrations all show only the proscenium area. These prints are like many inexpensive engravings intended for eighteenth-century periodicals: somewhat vague, with large areas simply sketched in, presumably on the assumption that readers would supply details from their imaginations. The salient features, however, can frequently be verified from elsewhere and it would be perverse to dismiss them because of their crudity. As suggested by the artist of the drawing engraved for and published in the *Carlton House Magazine* (Fig.2), the auditorium as completed in 1791 appears to have had four tiers, three of boxes and the fourth a gallery apparently offering three boxes on either side nearest the stage; some of these details can also be seen in a second, apparently anonymous, print.<sup>22</sup> All the boxes are straight-sided and their divisions are aligned with the front of the balustrade of each tier. Both views also show a pair of columns either side of the stage at the back of the proscenium. The decoration is straightforward and conventional, with painted clouds and a royal cartouche; the curtain is drawn up in 'tableau' form, with the top swags being fixed and the curtains rigged to pull up from the centre bottom corner of each side. The print also shows the basic nature of the auditorium and the possibly primitive decoration, reflecting the speed at which the theatre was built in a flawed process that would come back to haunt the institution in 1795–96, and again about twenty years later.<sup>23</sup>

Rebecca's picture shows two distinct architectural features added as part of the changes in 1793–94. The first is an extra tier of boxes at pit level; as Fig.1 reveals, the level of the original first tier is the same as that of the stage, and the height shown in Fig.2 suggests there was more than enough room for the development Rebecca depicts. The second is that Rebecca's drawing illustrates the cut-back box divisions that were described in the *Morning Chronicle* in 1794:

11 E. Croft-Murray: *Decorative Painting in England, 1537–1837, II: The Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries*, London 1970, p.258.

12 See M. Burden: 'Metastasio, Shakespeare, and the idea of Opera at the Pantheon', forthcoming. There are numerous examples of the ticket, see, for example, British Museum inv. no.1977.U.654.

13 See M. Burden: 'Stage and costume designers working at the Italian Opera in London: the evidence of the librettos 1710–1801', *Theatre Notebook* 65, no.3

(2011), pp.126–51, esp. p.145. For a report of the performance, see *The Public Advertiser*, 26th January 1786.

14 Quoted in Sheppard, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.53.

15 *Ibid.* p.56.

16 *The Times*, 5th April 1790.

17 R. Hume: 'The stage' in 'London (i), 5V: Musical life: 1660–1800', in S. Sadie, ed.: *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, London 2003, XV, pp.111–19.

18 C. Price, J. Milhous and R. Hume: 'A Royal Opera House in Leicester Square (1790)', *Cambridge Opera Journal* 2,

no.1 (1990), pp.1–28.

19 See C. Price: 'Italian Opera and arson in 18th-century London', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 42, no.1 (1989), pp.55–107.

20 W. Smith: *The Italian Opera and Contemporary Ballet in London, 1789–1820: A Record of Performances and Players, with Reports from the Journals of the Time*, London 1955, p.24.

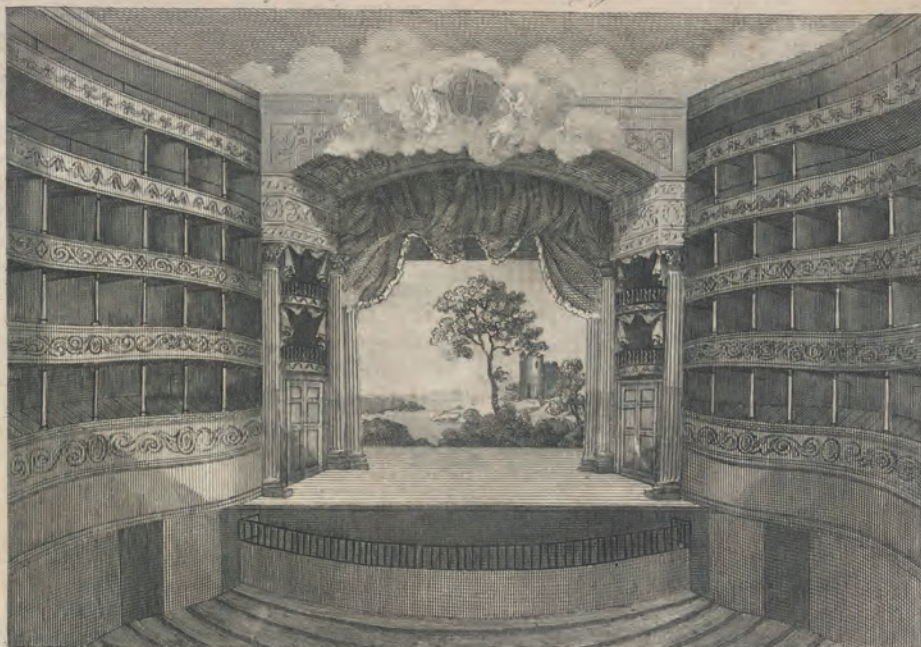
21 *The World*, 10th August 1793.

22 Victoria and Albert Museum, London, S.2879–2013, 'Inside view of the

Opera House, London'; undated (c.1792?).

23 Michael Kelly records in 1795 that 'part of the walls of the theatre were blown down', see M. Kelly: *Reminiscences of Michael Kelly of the King's Theatre*, London 1826, II, p.401. The theatre temporarily lost its license in 1825 with the Lord Chamberlain prohibiting any more performances 'until the building was surveyed and reported to be safe', see J. Ebers: *Seven Years of the King's Theatre*, London 1828, p.150.

*Engraved for the Carlton House Magazine.*



*Arnold delin.*

*Page 104.*

*An Inside View of the Opera House.*

*Published Feb. 1794, by W. & J. Grafton, N. 10, Holborn Hill, London.*



*Plate 34.*

*Engraving & Paper sold at auction.*

*J. Smith sculp.*

**OPERA HOUSE.**

*Engraving of the Opera House, with the interior of the Theatre, as it appeared in 1794.*



The partitions of the boxes are scooped backward in an elegant curve, with craved and gilt brackets at the top, which prevents the awkward appearance of pigeon holes, which they would have if brought full forward.<sup>24</sup>

These divisions are now shown as elegantly curved with decorative carvings, providing the boxes with improved sightlines to the stage, an alteration which can also be clearly seen in the illustration of the auditorium by Thomas Rowlandson and Augustus Charles Pugin in Rudolph Ackermann's *Microcosm of London* (Fig.3).

Rebecca also shows a central arch and a screen of four pairs of columns running across the middle of the gallery. This distinctive feature provides a link between Rebecca's drawing and an engraving showing the theatre's proscenium that appeared in the *Lady's Pocket Magazine* on 1st April 1795, that is, after the 1793–94 alterations (Fig.4). It was published by Harrison & Co., a publisher who produced sets of plays, images of players and scores of major works in the later eighteenth century. The artist was the Netherlands-born painter and engraver (Benedict) Anthony van Assen (c.1767–c.1817) and the engraver was James Sargent Storer (1771–1853), a printmaker who spent much of his career producing small-scale topographical and architectural works.

The engraving, titled the 'Opera House or King's Theatre at the Haymarket', shows a view from the back of the auditorium. An opera is in progress; the male character appears to be dead and the female character gesturing in despair. The performers are protected from possible audience incursions to the stage by two grenadiers; their presence in the eighteenth-century theatre is mentioned in numerous commentaries and includes the unfortunate tale of the grenadier at the Pantheon Opera who became so intent on the action that he suffered the 'whole curtain [. . .] to descend upon his devoted head, which very fortunately only knocked off his black-fur cap for the entertainment of the audience'.<sup>25</sup> The asymmetrical design of the set and long view of mountainous countryside of the back drop places it firmly in the fourth quarter of the eighteenth century, while the curtains are still gathered to the top of the proscenium in a tableau design.

The audience visible in Van Assen's view consists of occupants of the boxes and the gallery, and a somewhat disparate group of figures in the foreground, a type of no-man's-land audience that seems well dressed but not particularly smart. They are gathered in an ill-defined area, which appears too large to be a central box. The pairs of columns and a central

4. *Opera House or King's Theatre at the Hay-Market*, by James Storer after Anthony van Assen, published by Harrison & Co. 1795. Etching, 10.5 by 14 cm. (Victoria and Albert Museum, London).



arch provide a cut-away aperture for a view into the auditorium, an arch which, were it not for Rebecca's drawing, might be thought to be a framing device of the artist's imagination. In fact, the vantage point is the old gallery, which after the alterations of 1793–94 was 'now divided into two, one at five shillings, the other at three'; as is clear from Rebecca's drawing, the arch and columns mark this new gallery division, hence Van Assen's emphasis on this development.<sup>26</sup> The arch and columns – probably a wooden insert – do not seem to have lasted long, for a drawing of the auditorium from the gallery by J.M.W. Turner (Tate) omits them; the drawing is undated and has been thought to show the space before it was altered again in 1796,<sup>27</sup> but in both the drawing and the Pugin engraving there are now more proscenium boxes, the proscenium appears to have been 'squared-off', and the stage curtain is newly sited at this line upstage rather than at a line further forward, all results of the 1796 changes.<sup>28</sup>

Other details that both Van Assen and Rebecca record were closely described in an otherwise unnoted report in the *Morning Chronicle* in 1794. The author includes a description of the ceiling roundel:

The ceiling is formed into a dome, which springs from the centre of the arch of the frontispiece, and from groins above the entablature of the pillars, so that part of it over the orchestra is considerably lower than it was. Within a bold cornice is a circle of roses and medals, gilt, and within that Apollo and the Muses, painted in chiaro 'scuro. The ground filled with allegorical figures.<sup>29</sup>

The description of the decoration on the front of the boxes, visible in Rebecca's drawing but not identifiable in its detailing, suggests an elaborate scheme of carving and gilding:

The first tier of boxes is supported by octagon columns of variegated glass, with gilt caps and bases; the parapet, grotesque ornaments, divided into compartments, painted in oil; on canvas, as are those of all the other tiers.

The second tier is supported by caryatides, winged syrens, gilt; the parapet, Neptune and Amphitrite, attended by sea gods and goddesses.

The third tier is supported by griffins, gilt; the parapet, grotesque ornaments.

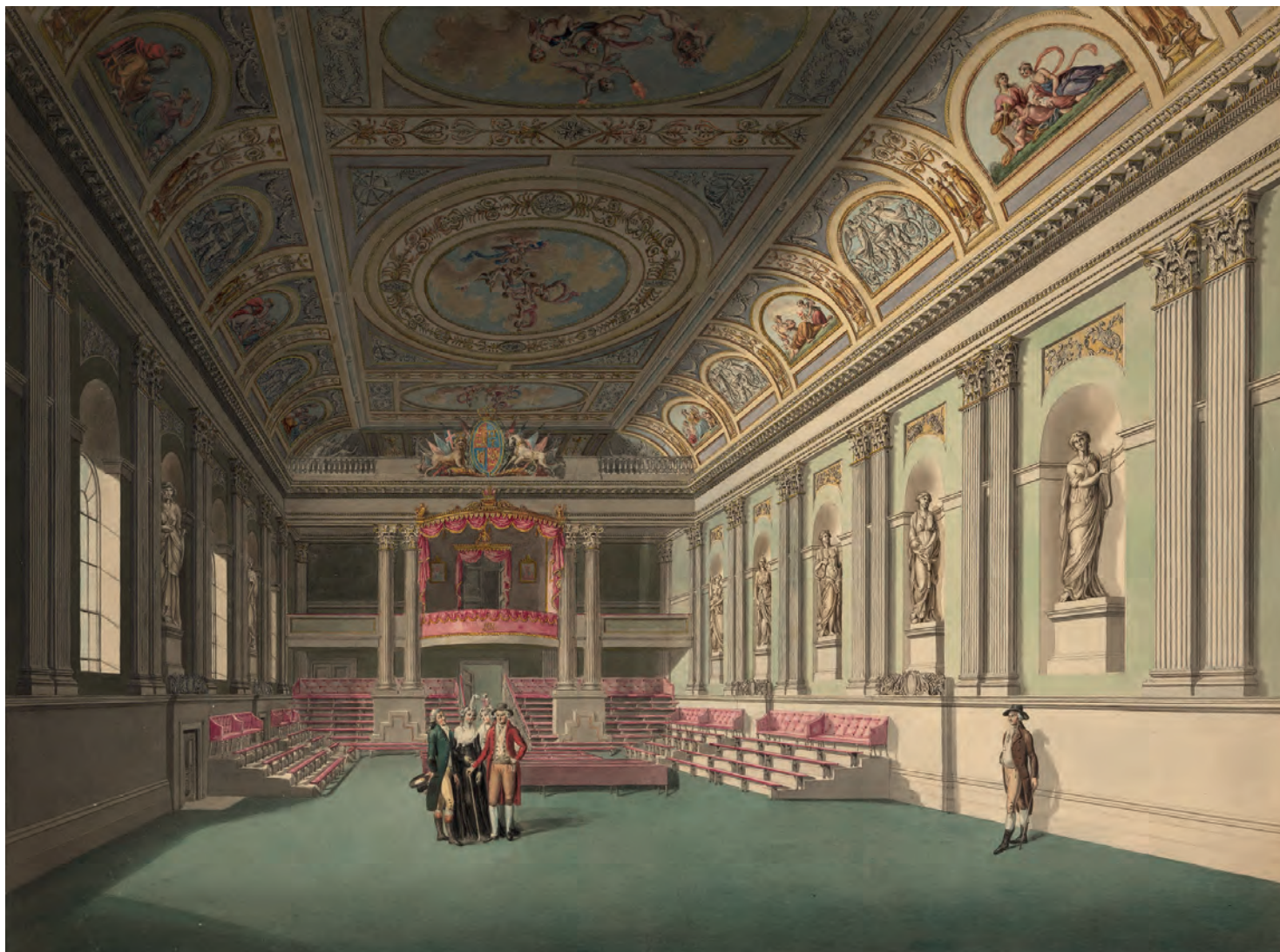
The fourth tier is supported by rams, gilt; the parapet, grotesque ornaments.

The parapet of the boxes on either side of the gallery, balustrades painted on canvas.

On the top of the parapets, under each of the caryatides, is a sphinx, gilt.<sup>30</sup>

Both Rebecca and Van Assen show the open balustrade around the galleries to either side, each topped off with a rail that, in Van Assen's populated illustration, has figures standing beside it in such a way as to emphasise its function as a safety device. Van Assen also includes a number of substantial sconces, each with six candles.

Van Assen's image suggests another alteration that appears to have been made to the structure, but one that has not been recorded clearly. This is the re-organisation of the columns, the entablature of the proscenium and the stage boxes. The arch over the proscenium was retained: it can be seen in the Pugin engraving and Van Assen's vantage point at the top of the building suggests that he was looking down at the top of its curve. The tiers seem then to have been extended over the stage on both sides round to the second column, with the curtain line being left behind the



furthest column. Whether these columns are in fact new or represent a series of adjustments to existing fabric is unclear, but the net result is that Novosielski's three columns seen in the Page engraving have now become 'two Corinthian pillars on each side, painted in marble, with their entablature white and gold, supporting a grand arch painted with white ornaments on a blue ground. In the centre, his Majesty's arms, painted yellow, heightened with gold, and supported by Fame'.<sup>31</sup> From its different vantage point, Rebecca's drawing is consistent with Van Assen's; although the curtains obscure the columns, the boxes are shown running round to the new curtain line. The removal of the stage boxes would have led to a loss of income, but that would have been more than compensated for by the extra income from the new tier of boxes.

There has clearly been some embarrassment among scholars at Van Assen's representation of the auditorium; the illustration has rarely been reproduced – it is, for example, omitted from both the *Survey of London* and Daniel Nalbach's *The King's Theatre*<sup>32</sup> – and when it has

5. *The Concert Room, The Opera House, London*, attributed to Biagio Rebecca. c.1793. Pen and ink and watercolour on paper, 59.9 by 79.5 cm. (Royal Collection Trust; © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2019)

been included by others it has been treated as no more than a passing generalised reference to the building. Rebecca's drawing allows us to recalibrate our understanding of the print; instead of looking straight out across a round auditorium, Van Assen's view is revealed as one looking down towards the stage, to the top of the proscenium columns, and up a long auditorium.

Novosielski's auditorium was to be altered again in the summer of 1795, when it was noted that four boxes were 'added in the pit'. Just where in the pit these were sited is unclear for Rebecca's drawing shows it to be full, although it is possible that the phrase simply meant that some of the boxes were re-divided. The only commentary we have on the space at this time is a report that although published in 1809 purports to describe the theatre in 1795: 'The construction of the house was, however, neither

24 *The Morning Chronicle*, 13th January 1794.

25 Pantheon Theatre Scrapbook, Harvard Theatre Collection, Cambridge MA, TS 326.1F, p.109.

26 *The Morning Chronicle*, 13th

January 1794.

27 See <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/jmw-turner/joseph-mallord-william-turner-the-kings-theatre-haymarket-london-the-interior-seen-from-r1149806>, accessed

3rd April 2019.

28 For a discussion of these, see Burden 2011, *op. cit.* (note 1), pp.110–12.

29 *The Morning Chronicle*, 13th January 1794.

30 *Ibid.*

31 *Ibid.*

32 See Sheppard, *op. cit.* (note 1), plates 24–35, and D. Nalbach: *The King's Theatre 1704–1867: London's First Italian Opera House*, London 1972.



elegant nor convenient, and the boxes were so irregularly formed, as to render the appearance of the house by no means pleasing to the eye'.<sup>33</sup> It was these 'defects' that 'induced Mr. Taylor and Mr. Jewell to new model the interior of the building', and the additional boxes were replaced in the much more substantial alterations that were undertaken in the summer of 1796, when Gaetano Marinari (active 1764–c.1844) was employed to alter the building,<sup>34</sup> leading John Feltham to remark that 'every part of the theatre, except the stage, received all the improvements the genius of the artist could suggest'.<sup>35</sup> Marinari's work included the removal of the remaining proscenium columns and the stage picture frame, thereby creating the familiar and distinctive open stage and the suspended proscenium arch with the dramatically sweeping boxes depicted by Rowlandson and Pugin.

The second of Rebecca's drawings shows the inside of the Concert Room, or 'New Subscription Room' as it was originally described, a space that hosted many important events and was the venue for Joseph Haydn's concerts on his second visit to London in 1794–95. The room was not only a major addition to the theatre's amenities. It also involved the construction of a frontage to the Haymarket and the beginnings of a change in the relationship between the Opera House and the city.<sup>36</sup> The room was part of Novosielski's original scheme but was not completed during the original work of rebuilding. The *World* reported in 1793 that 'the houses in the Haymarket come down, to make room for the remainder of the stone front – and here the grand Concert Room is to be situated'.<sup>37</sup>

From Taylor's point of view, the room offered the possibility of an increased use of the building; as a rule, the Opera performed only on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, with the season running from late November to May. A concert room had the potential to provide a new income stream for the administration and at the same time add a new attraction for subscribers – if it was well managed. But it was not. The costs of the project, listed in an application from Taylor asking for permission to extend the building, were claimed as follows:

Construction	£19,900
Decoration	1,460
Furnishings	10,600
New organ	580
Smith's work	1,083
Chandeliers	1,400
	£35,023 <sup>38</sup>

It has been remarked that 'this is a staggering sum for a bankrupt proprietor who was running a money-losing opera company', which suggests that Taylor may have built the room on credit.<sup>39</sup> However, the figures are implausible; Rebecca's drawing suggests that the 'furnishings' were anything but elaborate and certainly could not have cost £10,600.

Under Taylor's management – or mismanagement – the room became a matter of controversy. As the name 'New Subscription Room' suggests, it would, as proposed, have had limited admittance on opera nights, becoming a coffee room that 'communicates with the boxes'.<sup>40</sup>



6. *The Opera House, Haymarket, London. After 1794. Watercolour on paper, 20.6 by 32.7 cm. (British Museum, London).*

When the room was complete, however, Taylor sent 'a circular to every subscriber at the head of a box, requiring them to pay six guineas subscription to this room, as a lounge or coffee room, or they would be superseded in their boxes'.<sup>41</sup>

The resulting outrage was such that a subscribers' meeting called at Willis's Coffee House resulted in various messages to Taylor, whose response was to reply grandly: 'Go, tell them I will throw open the room to them without any subscription'.<sup>42</sup> The result was that Taylor received no extra income from the opera boxes to support the 'Subscription room' – which might have been possible 'had it only been proposed in a decent manner' – while at the same time the Opera had to absorb the costs of the performers at the concerts.<sup>43</sup> It comes as no surprise to find that the name 'Subscription Room' was dropped in favour of the 'New Room' or the 'Concert Room'.

The Opera House originally had no street frontage, with the exception of an entrance built in what was originally an alleyway from the Haymarket to the stable-yard formerly on the site. The entrance to the original theatre had been marked by a rusticated, three-arch arcade with a room above; this entrance was the only part of the building to survive the 1789 conflagration. In Novosielski's design for the new building, this room was replaced by the first part of a new façade; it consisted of two bays 'fronted by a stone basement in rustic work, with the commencement of a very superb building of the Doric order, consisting of three pillars, two windows, an entablature, pediment, and balustrade'.<sup>44</sup> The only pictorial evidence of the building in the Haymarket streetscape at this point can be found in *The modern Atlas* (Fig.7), a caricature of those involved in the Opera House administration in 1791. This shows the Prince of Wales as Atlas carrying the new Opera House on his back; the artist, Isaac Cruickshank, shows the building with two bays completed and with a row of houses in the Haymarket still standing to the left of the theatre's entrance. This row of houses, which can be seen on a map of the theatre's site made by Edward Vanbrugh in 1777,<sup>45</sup> had to be demolished in order to construct Novosielski's concert room. A comparison between a plan of the original theatre and a 1800 cross-section of Novosielski's (Fig.8)

33 J. Feltham: *The Picture of London for 1806*, London 1806, p.259.

34 Sheppard, *op. cit.* (note 1), pp.238–39.

35 Feltham, *op. cit.* (note 33), p.259.

36 M. Burden: 'London's Opera House in the urban landscape', in S.

Aspden, ed.: *Operatic Geographies*, Chicago 2019, pp.39–56.

37 *The World*, 10th August 1793.

38 National Archives, London, CRES 6/121, p.337, cited in J. Milhous, G. Dideriksen and R.

Hume: *Italian Opera in Late*

*Eighteenth Century London*, Vol.2:

*The Pantheon Opera and its Aftermath 1789–1795*, Oxford 2001, pp.236–67.

39 *Ibid.*, p.237.

40 'King's Theatre', *Thespian Magazine and Literary Repository*,

1 (September 1793), p.277.

41 'Veritas': *Opera House: A Review of this Theatre from the Period Described by the Enterpriser*, London 1818, repr. in M. Burden: *London Opera Observed 1711–1844*, London 2013, IV, p.308.



drawn by A.C. Pugin shows that the footprint of the new Concert Room also incorporated some or all of King's Yard, an area that ran parallel to the Haymarket and provided the side entrance to the pit at one end and access to the street at the other.

As a later anonymous watercolour (Fig.6) illustrates, the money ran out before the Concert Room was faced; had it been completed 'it would have contributed considerably to the splendour of London',<sup>46</sup> but as it was, the building was left an unfinished eyesore until the façade was completed by John Nash and George Repton between 1816 and 1818. What extra money was left was spent on the decorating the Concert Room's interior. As constructed by Novosielski, it measured ninety-seven feet in length and forty-eight feet in width with a floor area of 4,656 square feet, making it, according to the press, the largest concert room in England.<sup>47</sup> With these measurements and a full audience, a

7. *The Prince of Wales as 'The Modern Atlas'*, by Isaac Cruikshank, published by S.W. Fores. 1791. Hand coloured etching, 25.3 by 37.6 cm. (Victoria and Albert Museum, London).

reverberation time of 1.55 seconds in the middle frequencies and 2.4 in the upper ones has been suggested.<sup>48</sup> Reports describe it as a 'highly responsive and relatively reverberant' space, a quality that Haydn would exploit.<sup>49</sup> The room could seat around eight hundred in the audience and its orchestra regularly had around sixty members, large for the period.<sup>50</sup>

Pugin's cross-section shows the Concert Room from the opposite direction to Rebecca's drawing. It reveals that the composition of the end walls mirrored each other, with shallow galleries and pair of Corinthian columns flanking a central door. The coved ceiling's painted panels are also depicted. The creator of the decoration is not known, but the statues

42 *Ibid.*

43 The role this played in the finances of the theatre is further discussed in Milhous, Dideriksen and Hume, *op. cit.* (note 38), pp.236–40.

44 J. Malcolm: *Londinium*

*Redivivum Or an Antient History and Modern Description of London*, London 1802, IV, p.315.

45 Sir John Soane's Museum, London, SM (9) 61/5/1.

46 *Ibid.*

47 *The General Evening Post*, 25th–

27th February 1794.

48 M. Forsyth: *Building for Music: The Architect, the Musician, and the Listener from the Seventeenth Century to the Present Day*, Cambridge 1985, p.16.

49 *Ibid.*

50 Further discussion of the room's acoustical properties can be found in M. Barron: *Auditorium Acoustics and Architectural Design*, London 1993, pp.66–68.



## Biagio Rebecca draws the London Opera House

in niches may well have been *trompe l'œil* of the type described by Edward Croft-Murray in his account of the decoration of the Royal Academy's new rooms at Somerset House, in which Rebecca participated. Croft-Murray records that 'Reynolds painted the centrepiece, and Cipriani the cove panels of the ceiling of the Library; West, Angelica Kauffmann and Rebecca took charge of the ceiling of the Council Chamber; and Rigaud provided some feigned sculpture for the ante-room'.<sup>51</sup> The large statues Rebecca shows in the concert room seem likely to have been the type of 'feigned sculpture' of Croft-Murray's description, given that money was in short supply.

The first recorded use of the Concert Room was on 3rd March 1794, when 'madeira, sherry, and port wines of the first quality' were served there during a 'Grand Masked Ball'.<sup>52</sup> Masked balls were regular events at the King's Theatre, and all the building's spaces were pressed into service:

Messrs. GOWS will provide and conduct the Band for the Country Dances in the Theatre; and the Band belonging to His Royal Highnesses the Duke of YORK's Regiment of Guards, will play in the Gallery, over the Great Entrance, the fore-part of the Night, and afterwards in the New Room during the time of Supper.<sup>53</sup>

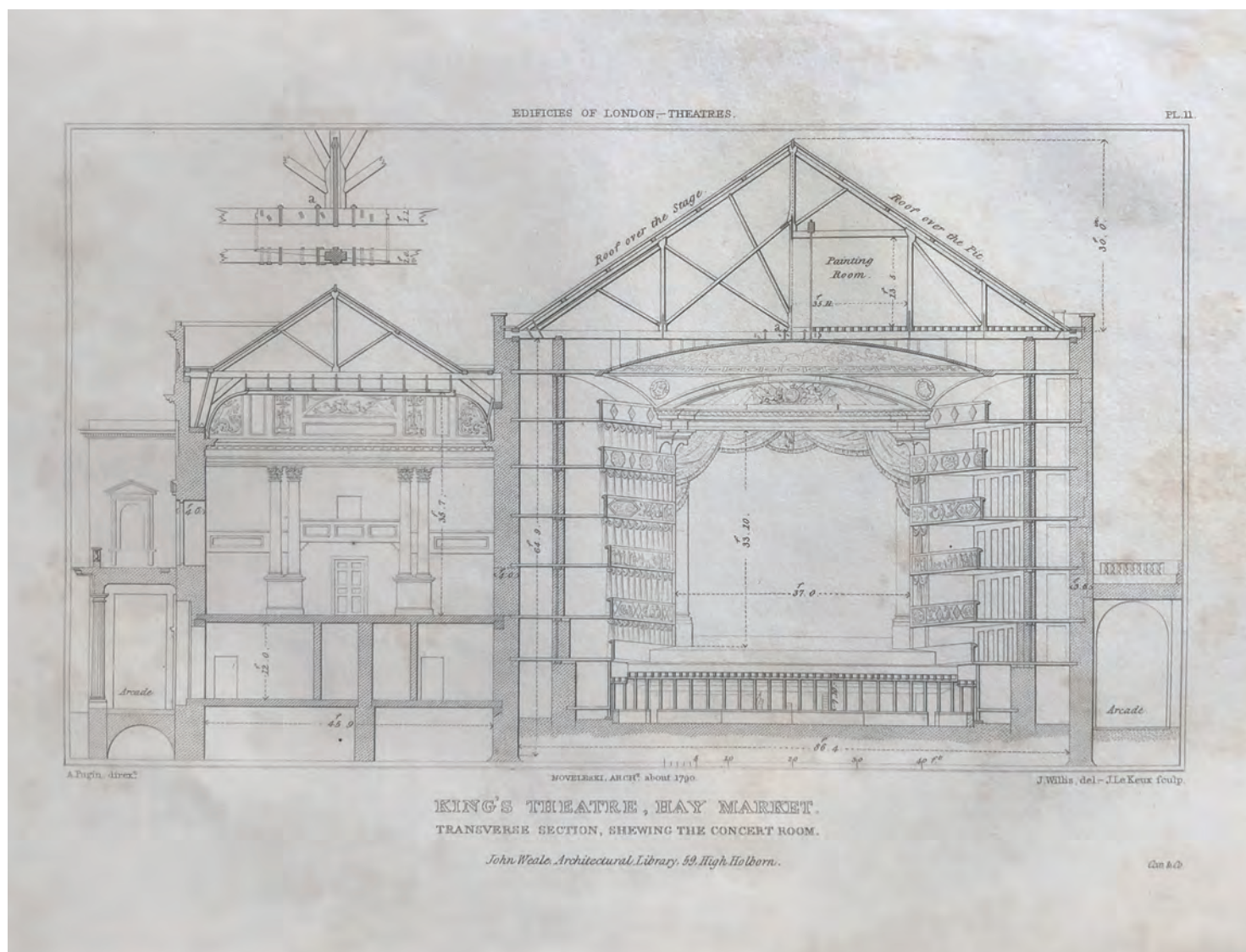
The Concert Room had already been touted as a venue:

It will be given on MONDAY Evenings, and will include several FRIDAYS in LENT, when CONCERTS of SACRED MUSIC, as well as ITALIAN ORATORIOS, by Handel, Paisiello [*sic*], and Guglielmi, will be performed.<sup>54</sup>

The music and performers would be chosen by 'a Committee of Professional Men, of whom Mr. CRAMER will be the principal, who would make the selection of the music to be heard'.<sup>55</sup> The involvement of Wilhelm Cramer (1746–99), the widely respected leader of the opera orchestra, was clearly intended to be a guarantor of quality.

The room initially seems to have been used as a venue for benefit concerts for a variety of theatre personnel, with, for example, those for Cramer, William Knyvett, Samuel Harrison, William Lee and Giovanni Giornovich all being recorded in May.<sup>56</sup> This was a month that also saw the installation of the room's organ, built by Samuel Green 'Organ Builder to His Majesty', which was inaugurated by Thomas Greatorex on

**8. The Opera House and the Concert Room, London, as completed 1794, by J. Willis after A.C. Pugin, published by John Weale, c.1800. Engraving, 13 by 22.3 cm. (Private collection).**



15th May 1794.<sup>57</sup> The room began to be used by musicians of distinction and for the 1794–95 season Johann Salomon, who ran the concert series at the Hanover Square rooms, claimed that he found it ‘impossible to procure the Vocal Performers of the first talents [...] in the present situation of affairs on the Continent’<sup>58</sup> and joined with the King’s Theatre to stage a new Opera Concert series. In fact, the King’s Theatre’s singers were not contractually allowed to perform outside the building, thus denying Salomon access to the best foreign voices available in the capital. His effusive announcement glossed over this, but it is the case that the first combined series has long been regarded as ‘one of the supreme moments in the history of the concert life of London’,<sup>59</sup> for it featured not only first-class performers but also Haydn himself, with the premieres of his last three symphonies, numbers 102, 103 ‘The Drumroll’ and 104 ‘The London’.

Rebecca’s drawing goes some way to elucidating a report that appeared in the *Morning Chronicle* after the first performance of Symphony no.102 in 1795, when it noted that ‘the last movement was encored: and not withstanding an interruption by the accidental fall of one of the chandeliers, it was performed with no less effect’.<sup>60</sup> Albert Dies later wrote of the incident:

When Haydn appeared in the orchestra and seated himself at the Pianoforte, to conduct a symphony personally, the curious audience in the parterre left their seats and pressed forward towards the orchestra, with a view to seeing Haydn better at close range. The seats in the middle of the parterre were therefore empty, and no sooner were they empty but a great chandelier plunged down, smashed, and threw the company into great confusion.<sup>61</sup>

If the *Morning Chronicle* is correct, the audience moved forward in order to see Haydn perform during an encore. Rebecca’s drawing shows the floor of the parterre – the area between the raked seating – as being un-raked, suggesting that the crowd was easily able to move out of their seats and up to the orchestra. The symphony in question was subsequently dubbed ‘The Miracle’ to mark the audience’s narrow escape, although the nickname was later attached to a completely different work (no.96).

How long this interior lasted is not known – theatres were regularly repainted and few schemes lasted long – but by the end of George IV’s reign, the Concert Room was clearly less than fashionable, and had come down in the world:

The darkness, however, of the great saloon is in favour of its present condition, for the dirt is not so visible as if the lights were more powerful. But the cold which attacks the feet is a more serious evil. We counsel the ladies to bring foot-muffs with them, and the gentlemen to come in French clogs, while the wintry winds continue, or they may be drawn into a more frequent intercourse with their physicians than is either desirable or profitable.<sup>62</sup>

There were certainly some structural alterations about this time, for the oboist William Parke recorded that

the room of the King’s Theatre, now styled the King’s Concert Room, which having recently undergone a variety of repairs and decorations, and being fitted up with boxes, &c., has assumed the appearance of an elegant little theatre.<sup>63</sup>

The ‘elegant little theatre’ in this form seems to have been short lived and was replaced by raked seating, which was removed in 1832.<sup>64</sup> The Concert Room itself was destroyed in the fire that gutted the theatre in 1867, several decades after it had ceased to be a fashionable adjunct to London’s house for elite opera and dance.

There is no doubt that Rebecca has left us with the most detailed and informative pictures that survive of the Opera House’s interior. But what purpose did his drawings serve? There are a number of possibilities. One is that the level of detail in both of them suggests that they may have been preparatory drawings for high-quality engravings, perhaps to mark the completion of the new arrangement of the proscenium, the new decorative scheme for the auditorium and the new Concert Room in 1793–94. Another is that Rebecca himself was commissioned to work up a decorative scheme for the theatre and Concert Room and these drawings represent his proposals for both spaces. He is a likely contender for the job, which was not attributed to anyone at the time, nor has it been since. This suggestion is perhaps strengthened by the resemblance of the decoration of the Concert Room to descriptions of the schemes for the Royal Academy’s rooms in Somerset House. If this is the case, then the proposals seem to have been carried out, at least in part; as discussed above, the panels depicted by Pugin appear to echo those seen in Rebecca’s drawing.

Why did the Prince of Wales buy these pictures? They may perhaps represent nostalgia for a scheme that did not come off. At the end of 1790 – with both the new theatre and the Pantheon Theatre constructed and the attempted development of two opera companies under way – the Prince chaired a committee of noblemen to effect a merger of the two enterprises, it being obvious that two competing companies in London was ‘lunacy’.<sup>65</sup> The committee met at the Prince of Wales’s nearby London residence, Carlton House, on 31st December 1790; further meetings followed on 6th, 16th and 19th January, but all were ultimately to no avail.<sup>66</sup> No agreement, however unrealistic, could be reached and the promoters at the Pantheon opened their venue while Taylor was left with his unlicensed theatre. From 10th March 1791 he managed to get dance, music and some unstaged opera scenes put on, which the Prince of Wales attended, occupying his double box, and on 5th April the Prince ‘gave a grand dinner to several friends at Carlton-House, after which he went to the Haymarket Opera House’.<sup>67</sup> So when, on the following day Forres published Cruikshank’s caricature of the Prince as Atlas, it is little wonder that he is shown struggling from Carlton House towards the Haymarket. Cruikshank’s Prince of Wales may well have said that he ‘would take it all on my own back’, but the unresolvable machinations of the opera companies – not to mention their enormous debts past, present and future – proved to be just too ‘dam’d heavy’.

51 Croft-Murray, *op. cit.* (note 11), p.68.

52 *The Morning Post*, 21st February 1794; 1st March 1794.

53 *The Morning Post*, 1st March 1794.

54 *The Oracle and Public Advertiser*, 13th January 1794.

55 *Ibid.*

56 *The Oracle and Public Advertiser*, 6th May 1794; *The World*, 5th May 1794; and

*The Morning Post*, 28th May 1794.

57 *The Oracle and Public Advertiser*, 5th May 1794.

58 *Ibid.*, 16th January 1795.

59 W. Lister: *Amico: The Life of Giovanni Battista Viotti*, Oxford 2009, p.202.

60 *The Morning Chronicle*, 3rd February 1795, also mentioned by ‘Veritas’, *op. cit.* (note 41), p.309.

61 A. Dies: *Biographische Nachrichten von Joseph Haydn*, Vienna, 1810, p.95; transl. H. Robbins Landon: *Haydn Chronicle and Works*, III: *Haydn in England 1791–1795*, London 1976, p.287.

62 ‘The Philharmonic Concerts’, *The Harmonicon* 7/1 (1830), p.67.

63 W. Parke: *Musical Memoirs*, London 1830, II, pp.280–81.

64 *The Morning Post*, 27th February 1832.

65 Milhous, Dideriksen and Hume, *op. cit.* (note 38), p.272.

66 *The Times*, 4th January 1791; *The Morning Chronicle*, 7th January 1791; *The London Chronicle* 15th–18th January 1791; *The Times*, 21st January 1791.

67 *The Times*, 6th April 1791.